

The Soldier’s Life

Early military presence in the Bay Area began in 1776 with the fortification of the Spanish post *El Presidio de San Francisco*. When Mexico gained independence from Spain, the Presidio was all but abandoned as General Mariano Vallejo moved his troops north to a post in Sonoma. Today, remaining features of the original post can be found within the Officers’ Club on the Presidio’s Main Post, while the stories of the soldiers who lived and worked during these early years are interpreted through archaeological excavations.

Recreation and Leisure

Athletics played a large role on post. Baseball, golf, and football were especially popular sports for soldiers during their free time. During the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in 1915, the United States Army and Navy played a football game for the visitors, a tradition that still continues. In the 1960s and 1970s, softball fields and volleyball courts were added to Fort Winfield Scott accompanying the already existing bowling alley and tennis courts.



Soldiers of the 51st Iowa football team pose with a Spanish-American War camp in the background, 1898.

When soldiers were not performing their military duties, they participated in events on and off post. Soldiers attended dances and balls, and frequented enlisted service clubs. Strict Army policy stated that officers, non-commissioned officers, and enlisted soldiers could not socialize together, therefore individual clubs for the different ranks were made available.

Off post, the soldiers stationed in the Bay Area could use day passes to go into the City, often enjoying the sites and local taverns within San Francisco. Nearby locations such as the Sutro Baths and Cliff House were especially popular amongst soldiers looking for places to visit.

Family Life

In the earliest days on the Presidio’s Main Post, the U.S. Army only allowed the families of senior non-commissioned officers to live on post. The few families that did reside within the boundaries lived in laundry units or other unoccupied buildings. Sheila Brownlee Delaney, whose father was an Army Colonel, remembers living in special housing for officers located in the Presidio. Delaney recalled, “[The house] looked out on the Bay, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Bay Bridge. You could see Oakland, you could see Marin, you could see some of the ocean, and you could see San Francisco.”

For families living in less central locations, such as Fort Barry and Fort Baker in the Marin Headlands, life was slower and more isolated. As families became more prevalent on post, efforts were made to include spouses and children in activities at these sites. In the early 1960s, the Presidio’s Main Post offered such amenities as lounges, bars, a ballroom, a game room, a teen club, an 800-seat movie theater, and even a photography lab.



Left: Soldier showing a child an artillery gun on the Presidio Parade Ground, 1930. Top: 1st Sergeant Shramar showing his daughter a machine gun in front of the Montgomery Street Barracks, 1931. Below: Children at Fort Barry.