

Families Reacted To Troop Presence

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The Ledger

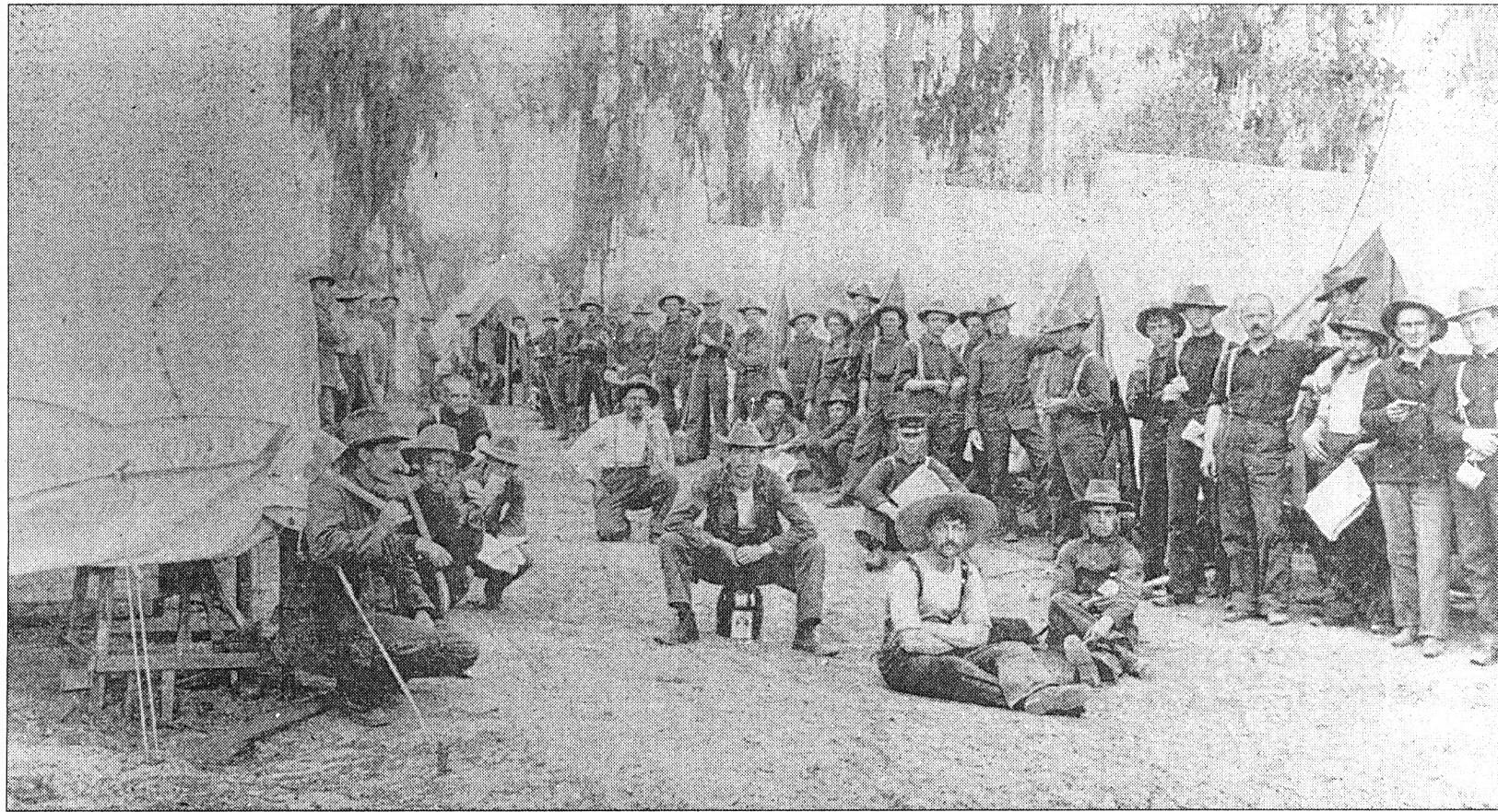
LAKELAND — “Mother, they’re coming! Millions of soldiers riding beautiful horses,” the little girl screamed as she jumped down from the large, white fence surrounding her parents’ plantation-style home overlooking Lake Hollingsworth.

The excited youngster and her brothers and sisters raced to the veranda, where their mother waited for the cavalry to enter the yard.

It was mid-May 1898, and it was warm. The horses kicked up dust on the clay Nevada Road.

A tall, handsome officer, according to the little girl’s memories, dismounted, walked to the veranda and bowed graciously. He wanted to rent a pasture for target practice, but the woman granted the officer use of the field without charge. It was the patriotic thing to do, she told her daughter later.

The memories belong to Gracia Saunders Riley, who shared them with The Ledger in 1961, some 63 years after the 1st U.S. Caval-



Members of the 2nd Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry camp on Lake Morton in May 1898.

Provided to The Ledger

ry rode into her family’s yard.

Thomas and Alice Saunders were better off than most families in Lakeland in 1898. Thomas Saunders was an executive for Henry Plant’s Railroad, and their home was “way out in the country.”

The family encountered many more soldiers during the next month. Alice Saunders, her cook and her daughter Gracia would

have fresh bread or cookies and fresh milk ready for homesick young soldiers who stopped by on liberty for something to eat or just to sing songs. They also entertained the regiment’s officers at dinner parties.

Many families in Lakeland opened their homes to soldiers.

Others set up lemonade or food stands to supplement meager in-

comes centered around agriculture. The northern press criticized them, calling them hucksters.

In a soon-to-be-published study on Spanish-American War troops stationed in Lakeland — “Splendid Lakes, Lovely Groves and Quaint Dialect: Lakeland, Florida, and the Spanish-American War” — Hal Hubener concluded that writers’ descriptions during

that time were not exactly accurate.

Because of the shortage of supplies and the almost continual hunger of many young soldiers many Lakeland homemakers turned their kitchens into restaurants. Others offered nursing care, said Hubener, head of special collections at the Lakeland Public Library.