

*Diary of Arizona Pioneer Relates
Thrilling Tale of Driving Cattle
Overland to California in 1896*

[Diary of a Desert Trail

By Edward L. Vail
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One of the oldest ranches of Pima county, around which much romantic interest is woven, is the Vail ranch northeast of Tucson and better known among ranchers today as the Empire Ranch.

It was from this old ranch that Edward L. Vail began a memorable trip across the desert to California in 1896, taking the trail known as the overland route to southern California, leading through Florence and the old ruins of Casa Grande.

Accompanying Mr. Vail on the trip, made to drive a herd of cattle to the coast of California because of the high freight rate at that time, was Tom Turner, foreman of the Empire Ranch, several Mexican boys and a cook.

During the trip, Mr. Vail spent some little time in writing a diary of the experiences which he has recently given to The Star for publication under the name of "The Diary of the Desert Trail."

The diary story is rich in thrilling adventures of the cowboy life of 1896 and to those who are interested in early experiences on the desert trails in Arizona and California, the diary will provide a wealth of first-hand history of the ranches of that day.

Mr. Vail will contribute to the columns of The Star in a series of articles clipped from the diary. The first is appearing today.

Diary of a Desert Trail

By Edward L. Vail

The idea of driving a herd of cattle across southern Arizona to California was by no means an original one. After the gold discovery in California many emigrants crossed southern Arizona and the Colorado desert to San Diego, California with oxen and mule teams.

In the sixties and early seventies, cattle become scarcer on the big ranches in California and many herds were driven over the Southern trail. This route came through Tucson, led to the northwest to the Gila River, then followed that river to Yuma and from that point crossed the Colorado river to the more dangerous desert beyond.

It must be remembered that the early cattle drivers and emigrants who took the southern trail to the Pacific coast had to be prepared at times to defend themselves, their horses and cattle from the wily Apaches along the trail through New Mexico and Arizona as well as from Yuma, who were not always friendly in those days.

Some years after, when the old Butterfield stages were still running, graves might be seen at many of the stations and along the trail with the simple inscription cut on a simple board. "Killed by the Indians."

In 1889 the Southern Pacific railroad reached Tucson. It was several years after that, however, before there were any surplus cattle in Arizona to be shipped out. Walter L. Vail and C. W. Gates, then the owners of the Empire Ranch in Pima county, were among the first to use the railroad and up to 1898 had probably shipped as many as any other of the large ranches in Arizona.

In the fall of that year, the S. P. company concluded that the cattlemen in southern Arizona would stand a freight raise, so they accordingly increased the rate to certain California points about 25 per cent. Cattle were low in price, and hard to sell at that time, especially stock cattle.

A vigorous protest was made by the ranchmen – on the ground that the cattle in question were not beef, but young steers that had to be grown and fattened after reaching the California ranches before the owners could expect to get any return for them.

The railroad officials in San Francisco decided however, that they would make no reduction, probably thinking that the ranchers would be compelled to accept the new rate or keep their cattle in Arizona and then ship them over the only railroad there was in the country at this time.

In Thursday's Star Mr. Vail will tell the interesting experience in which the owners of the Empire Ranch outwitted the S.P. railway and drove their cattle to California by the old immigrant trail; reaching the southern California coast in safety after taking a chance in one thousand of losing their own lives and the lives of the cattle.