

Diary of a Desert Trail

By Edward L. Vail
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Preceding Chapters in the Diary of a Desert Trail have told the story of the difficulties of finding water for the cattle which Edward L. Vail, Tom Turner, foreman of the Empire Ranch in 1890, and eight Mexican cowboys had during the trip across the desert with a herd of cattle.

Mr. Vail tells of the experience with quicksand and the trouble in finding a place to swim the cattle across the Colorado River. Today's story is a description of the trip down stream.

Finally we found an island near the west bank of the river where the landing was better. The water was not very deep from the island, with a good landing on the other side. We then returned to the Arizona side of the river and found it was impossible to drive the cattle into the river, there as the bank formed a 10-foot perpendicular wall above the water. We hired a lot of Yuma Indians with picks and shovels. They graded a road to the water. This work occupied a day or two. We were then ready to attempt taking the cattle across.

The herd had not been watered since the day before in order to make them thirsty. The current was very strong and the river very deep. We found it would be impossible for men on horseback to do anything in guiding the cattle across so we hired the Indians and three or four boats. We placed them so as to keep the cattle from drifting down stream. The idea was not to let them turn back for land so far down as to miss the island. We got the cattle strung out and traveling as they had on the trail with the big steers in the lead and men on each side to keep them in position to go down the grade which we had made to reach the river. Most of the large cattle reached the island all right. Then our troubles began!

Two or three hundred of the smaller steer got frightened as the current was too swift for them and they swam back to the Arizona side. About this time the sheriff from Yuma showed up and said he had orders from the district attorney to hold our cattle until we paid taxes on them in Yuma county. I told him I thought the district attorney was mistaken but we were too busy to find out just then. Cattle were scattered all along the river on the Arizona side and as they could not climb the banks and get out, many of them were in the water just hanging to the bank with their feet. We hired all the Indians we could get and with the help of our own men we pulled all excepting two or three of the cattle up that steep bank.

It was then about 10 o'clock at night. The Yuma Indians quit and they were hungry and tired. We did not doubt them a bit as we had eaten nothing since a breakfast before daylight. So we made it unanimous and all quit and went to Yuma. We were all

terribly dirty so we went to the hotel at the depot, got a bath, some supper, a bed, and a deep sleep!

In the meantime here is the way we were situated. Our chuck wagon, cook and blankets were across the river: our 600 cattle were loose on the island in the river where we could not herd them: nearly 300 steers were loose in the thickest I have ever seen and on the Arizona side: and we were in the hands of the sheriff of Yuma county.

The next morning Mr. C. W. Gates arrived on the train from Los Angeles. He went down with us to the scene of yesterday's operations. The first thing we did was to pull out the two steers we left clinging to the river bank. Then we told Mr. Gates that if he would take what men we could spare and start to gather the cattle we had turned loose in the brush that Tom and I would go over in a boat to the island and swim the cattle over to the California side of the river. Throwing our saddles into the boat leading the horses, swimming behind, we soon reached the island. The cattle seemed to be all right. We did not have any trouble in getting them over as we found the big steers could wade across, but most of the younger ones had to swim a short distance. When we got them all across we looked up the best place we could hold them and made camp.

(To Be Continued)
