

Diary of a Desert Trail

By Edward L. Vail

Installment No. Eleven

Arizona Daily Star. Vol. XLIV (291) Sunday, AM Ed.
Section 2, p. 11 column 2 & 3 March 5, 1922.

Diary of a Desert Trail

By Edward L. Vail

Preceding chapters in The Diary of Edward Vail, written while crossing the desert driving a herd of cattle to the coast of California have been descriptions of the desert trails in 1890 and the experiences which travelers of that date had with the Indians.

The story today tells of the meeting with a member of the old Camp Grant massacre, on which ten Americans participated in because of the constant raids of the Apache Indians against the settlers on the San Pedro and Santa Cruz rivers.

Brothers Join Party

We decided that Mr. Carter was probably right about the water on the desert and what we saw afterwards confirmed that opinion. We did not travel very far down the river before we were overtaken by two young men with four or five very thin horses. They said their name was Fox, that they were brothers, and that they had been following us for some time and were anxious to cross the desert and heard we were driving the cattle across to California and asked if we could not give them a job to help drive our cattle. Tom Turner told them we had plenty of help as the cattle were getting very gentle and we had all the men we needed. Tom and I then had a talk and we decided to let them go with us as they said they were afraid to cross the desert alone as they knew nothing about the country. We told them if they were willing to help us we would let them go along with us. Tom told them that they could turn their horses in the "Remuda" (loose horses) and he would let them ride some of our mules which came from the Warner Ranch.

We were close to the line of Lower California and soon after we crossed it we came to an Indian Rancheria. I believe they were Cocopah Indians. The men wore breech cloths and the women wore aprons made out of the bark of willow trees. They were fine specimens of Indians, the men looking like athletes. I have been told that they came up from the Cocopah Mountains south of the desert to farm during the summer, raising mostly corn, pumpkins and melons, then during the winter migrating back to the mountains. We had not been around their camp long before we got a message from the chief who sent us word that we were on their land and had no right to pass through there with our cattle and that "all good people" who passed through gave them two steers.

Pow-Wow with Chief

We sent word to the chief by his messenger, who could speak Spanish that we would have a conference with their chief, so the meeting was arranged and we went to the chief's home. After a parley in Spanish, we told the chief that we were considered

“good people” where we came from but that we did not own the cattle we were driving, therefore we would have no right to give any of them away. We told him we would be glad if he would send one of his men to our chuck-wagon to give him some sugar and coffee. We were sorry that we did not have much more to spare, but as we had a long way to go and no stores along the road where we could buy more, we could not give them more than we did.

We followed the old stage road down to where it left the river. I have forgotten the exact distance but it could not of have been over 20 miles. In this place there was quite a lagoon of water, so we camped there. Next day Tom and I followed the old road out into the desert looking for water for our next camp. I never saw so many rattlesnakes in my life as we did that day. They seemed to be of two varieties, the large ordinary diamond-back and a little rattlesnake that we called “side’winders,” which has little horns over its eyes. We rode a good ways that day and came back to camp late quite discouraged as owing to the poor condition our cattle we were afraid of driving them a long distance without water. When we reached camp we were surprised to find several tents pitched close to us on the lagoon. We immediately inquired of our men as to who the people were. They did not know but thought they were engineers of some kind. Tom and I went over to see and introduced ourselves to the head man.

Meet Engineers

He proved to be D. K. Allen a civil engineer who told us he was making a preliminary survey for a railroad from Encinado, Lower California to Yuma and he had been out in the desert all winter. We then told him our anxiety about finding water and he assured us there was plenty of water on the desert and that the first water we would find was only 17 miles from our present camp. This he said was not sufficient for all our cattle, but further on about 10 miles just across the line near the boundary monument on New River there was quite a large charca in the channel of the New River which would probably water all the cattle for a week.

While we were at his camp the cook was preparing supper and we asked him what he was cooking. He said it was rattlesnake and he invited us to partake of it. We passed it along to all our crew who had called on Mr. Allen, as people were so scarce in that country they were as much interested in meeting someone as we were. The only man among us who tasted it was Jesus Maria Elias, who told us that when he was with General Crook as his chief trailer he had frequently eaten it. I knew Elias and his family well, but I never knew he was so celebrated a man as he really was.

I afterwards learned that he was the leader of the celebrated so-called “Camp Grant Massacre.” He with William Orey, eight Americans, quite a number of Mexicans and a large number of Papago Indians marched over to the mouth of Aravaipa Canyon, which was right in sight of the old Camp Grant but then occupied by American troops and nearly exterminated that band of Apaches. They killed all but the children whom they brought to Tucson as prisoners. The cause of this expedition was the constant raids of the Apaches against the settlers on the San Pedro and Santa Cruz rivers. A full account of this interesting expedition can be found in the second volume of Farrish’s History of Arizona.

(To Be Continued)