

Diary of a Desert Trail

By Edward L. Vail

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Earlier installments of the story of "A Desert Trail" appearing in The Star have told of the trail across Arizona to southern California, its curios and the experience which Edward L. Vail, Tom Turner and eight Mexican boys had in driving a herd of cattle to San Diego.

This morning Mr. Vail tells of the finding of human skulls and the wrecked wagons that indicated the tragedy of people who tried to cross the desert years before.

Find Old Tracks

While camping at New River we found many things of interest. Most of the country was covered in very small snail shells. They were so small that I first took them to be seeds of some weed. However, they were perfect shells although not larger than the size of the head of a pin. I gathered some of them as curios. In exploring around we found many signs of cattle herds which had crossed the desert years before. At one place, I remember well, we found where the cattle had been bedded for the night and the tracks of the cattle, horses and wagon were distinct. The soil was a sort of heavy clay, which must have been wet when the cattle were there. I should judge from the size of the bed ground and in front the bones of cattle that we found scattered around there, (some of the skeletons being complete) that it was quite a herd. We followed the wagon tracks a short distance and found mesquite trees growing up between wagon tracks.

We sat on our horses reading the story of the trail those old cowboys had left in the desert spaces. We could see from the number of cattle they lost the night they camped there, that their cattle were in bad shape. I should judge that the tracks had been made 20 years before as the trees were probably that old by their size, since trees make a slow growth on the desert.

Story Written in Clay

Later we found a human skull which we put in the wagon and carried the rest of the way with us. We also found a wrecked wagon with the axle broken apparently abandoned. Afterwards I hear that it probably belonged to some people who had perished in the desert. I believe if the history of that desert could be written it would prove very interesting reading for anyone who cared for real tragedy.

From our camp at New River we drove to Indian Wells, north of Signal Mountain. Late the next day we started for Carrizo Creek which makes the western boundary of the desert. This was the longest drive without water we had to make crossing the Colorado desert. I think it was 40 miles. Our cattle had done well while camped at New River as

there was more pasture for them there than at any place on the trail since we left the Empire Ranch. The country was open so we loose herded them. Strange to say the only steers we lost on the desert were drown in the charco at New River. The reader may remember we turned our cattle loose the night we arrived there. The two steers were young and very weak and probably got their feet fast in the mud in the middle of the pool. We drove frequently at night as the days were warm on the desert. We hung a lantern on the tall board of our wagon and our lead steers would follow it like soldiers. Before we reached Yuma only one man was necessary on guard so we changed every three hours which gave the men more sleep, but it was rather a lonesome job for the fellow that had to watch the cattle.

The road had a decided grade as it approached the mountains and there was much heavy sand most of the way which made it very tiresome. I am not quite sure how long we were making that part of the drive, as we had to rest the cattle every few hours. When we reached Carrizo we found a shallow stream of water in a wash the banks of which were white with alkali. Not only the stream but the hills, barren of all vegetation, were full of the same substance. I never saw a more desolate place in my life. In all of Arizona there is nothing to compare with it that I know of.

The next morning the cattle were scattered up and down the creek most of them lying down and a few of them eating what little salt grass they could find. They had come through all right from our last camp, except one young steer that could not get up. We tried to lift him on his feet but he could not stand so I told the boys I was going out to see if I could find bunch grass along the hills and the youngest of the Fox brothers offered to go with me. He was a good looking young man, nearly six feet tall and about 20 years old I should think. His brother was a rather short and heavily built. These boys had worked cheerfully since they met us and were on good terms with all our men.

(To Be Continued)