

Cholla Cuts Cattle On Overland Drive to Coast in 1890

Edward L. Vail in His Diary tells of Early Cowboy Days

[Diary of a Desert Trail

By Edward L. Vail

Installment No. Two]

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Today appears the second installment of a series of stories entitled "The Diary of a Desert Trail," from the diary of Edward L. Vail, foreman cattleman of Arizona, who made a trip across the desert by the old southern California immigrant route in 1890, driving a herd of cattle from the Empire Ranch, southeast of Tucson, to the coast of southern California.

The first installment, which appeared yesterday, told of the high freight rates imposed on the cattlemen of that period, and the motive that prompted Mr. Vail and Tom Turner, foreman of the Empire Ranch at that time, to make the trail trip to deliver the cattle in the California market at San Diego.

"The owners of the Empire Ranch, after considering the matter, decided to drive a herd of steers from the Empire Ranch to the Warner Ranch near San Diego," writes Mr. Vail in the diary.

"Tom Turner, foreman of the Empire Ranch, had worked on the trail from southern Texas to Dodge City, Kansas, when he was a boy and he and I decided that if men drove cattle from Texas to California 15 or 20 years before, and fought Indians nearly all the way, we could do it again.

"So we told my brother, Mr. Walter Vail, that if he would take a chance on our losing the cattle, we would do our best to reach the destination safely. The herd was gathered and ready to start the latter part of January 1890. We had six Mexican cowboys from the ranch and a Chinese cook, whom we called John, who had worked for us for some time. He had cooked on many a round-up and could drive a four-horse team, brand a calf, or make a fair cow-hand if necessary.

"We left the ranch the 29th of January and after watering and camping at Andrada's that night, we drove on and found a dry camp on the desert about 15 miles southeast of Tucson. Our cattle were still steers: there were over 900 in the bunch and as most of the big ones had been gathered in the mountains, they were very wild and none of them had been handled on the trail before.

"The part of the desert where we made camp was covered with chollas, a cactus that has more thorns per square inch than anything that grows in Arizona. Cowboys say that if you ride close to a cholla, it will reach out and grab you or your horse, and as the thorns are barbed it is very difficult to get them out of your flesh. They also leave a very painful wound.

"About midnight, our cattle made a run and in trying to hold them, cattle, horses, and men got pretty badly mixed up in the chollas. A cholla under a horse's belly is

probably not the most comfortable thing in the world. Consequently we had our hands full riding bucking horses and trying to quiet a lot of wild steers at the same time.

“Most of the night was devoted in picking out thorns, and therefore none of us slept much. It was fortunate that we did not lose any cattle as they were not yet off the range, and any that escaped would have lost no time in getting back to their usual haunts, which might have been miles from our last camp.”

(To Be Continued)

In Friday's Star, Mr. Vail will tell of the early part of the journey on the old trail and will describe the camps along the way, beginning at Rillito creek just below Fort Lowell.