

[Diary of a Desert Trail

By Edward L. Vail

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Drives Cattle Fifty Miles Across Desert Without Water, Writes Vail

Horses and Mules Become Tame As Journey Continues West

(Two routes leading to the southern coast of California following the desert trail from Maricopa, Arizona are described by Edward L. Vail this morning in a portion of a diary written by him in the year 1890 while making the journey across the desert in company with Tom Turner, foreman of the Empire Ranch. The Star is publishing parts of the diary concerning the driving of a herd of cattle through to San Diego, leaving the old Vail or Empire Ranch, in January 1890 – Ed. Note.)

From the Diary of a Desert Trail

By Edward Vail

The next day we reached Maricopa. At this point there was a choice of two routes; one went north and then followed the Gila River, which makes a big bend to the north here. This route would give us plenty of water, but would be much the longest. The other way was to follow the old stage road along the S. P. railroad to a place near Gila Station and then drop down on the river. This meant a drive of 50 miles without water, but was about half as far as the other and gave us a chance to find a little more grass for our cattle, as well as our horses which needed it badly. As we expected, our trail ran through a very poor country to find grass or other feed for either horses or cattle. We had two horses to each man and a few extra. In case some died or went lame. Although on a large cattle ranch each cowboy has 10 or 15 horses, we took as few as possible with us, because of the scarcity of grass.

Broncos become Tame

We hauled barley in our chuck wagon and fed all our horses twice a day. We had several young saddle mules and some of them were very "bronco" when we left the ranch, but became gentle soon, especially about feeding time. There was one little roan mule in particular that was wild as a hawk when we started, but soon got acquainted with John the Cook, and came to the wagon for pieces of bread. There was also a little brown yearling steer the boys called "Brownie" and said he was "muy valiente" (very brave) because he always travelled with the leaders of the herd when we were on the move. When camp was made, "Brownie" would pay us a visit and eat as many scraps he could get, as well as any barley or corn the horses had spilled. The boys agreed that if "Brownie" gave out, we should put him in the chuck wagon and haul him to California.

I must say a few words about our Mexican cowboys; most of them were very good hands and some of them as fine ropers as I have ever seen. They knew how to handle cattle on a ranch and in a roundup. Driving cattle a few miles to a corral, or throwing them together in a rodeo is a very different thing however, from driving them 500 miles on the desert with water 50 miles apart in some places. Practically the only trouble we had with our men was to keep them from driving too fast. Travelling behind a herd, day after day, on a dusty trail is certainly a monotonous job, but we knew the only possible way we could expect to reach the Warner Ranch with our cattle alive, was to hurry them only when it was necessary.

Cattle Short of Grass

After the cattle got used to the trail at night we usually had two of them on guard at a time. When camp was made, the first guard had supper and was relieved in four hours by the men who, in their turn, went off duty when the last guard went on about 2 a. m. As soon as it was light, the latter would start the cattle grazing on the direction we were traveling, and most of the day our steers wandered along, browsing on the mesquite, sage, and sometimes a little grass. Even traveling that way they did not get much to eat and I often wondered what kept them alive. When we reached Maricopa, the only water we found for our cattle was in a ditch near the railroad and it was probably an overflow from the water tank or from the recent rain. We finally got all the cattle and horses watered and let them rest awhile.

(To Be Continued)