

What Has Happened to the Promised Land of Arizona's Oldtime Cattlemen

By Will C. Barnes

Sometime along in the early fall of 1882, I set forth from Fort Apache, in Arizona, seeking a suitable location for a modest bunch of cattle. There was plenty of unoccupied range then in the Southwest, but being enthusiastic about the cattle business, I wanted nothing but the best, a "top notcher".

An old Army officer who had chased Apaches from one end of Arizona to the other, advised me to look over the San Simon Valley, on the east side of the Graham Mountains. I had heard of the Valley from stories related to me, even when it was known as Valle de Sauz, meaning "Willow Valley", because of the willow thickets along the upper reaches. So I set out in that direction, full of hope.

A ten-day cruise over San Simon proved the old Army officer was an excellent judge of a stock range. My only disappointment was that the willows were gone. The Valley was found to be practically unoccupied, a well watered, well grazed area about sixty miles long and forty miles wide, including the long mountain slopes on each side. It contained, I reckoned, about 750,000 acres of grazing land.

San Simon joined the wide valley of the Gila River near where a store had been established as early as 1872, and around which settlers had located their homes for safety from the Apaches. Their farms were irrigated by means of small brush and rock dams which turned the Gila waters onto their fields. The place eventually became Solomonville, a thriving little farming settlement.

The stream in the San Simon Valley was an intermittent affair, flowing quietly over the gravelly bottom for a mile or two before becoming lost in the sand only to reappear again farther along. Here and there along the stream great "water holes" had been scoured out by the current. This guaranteed stock water when the streamflow fell away in the dry season.

On its lower course were many beautiful grassy meadows, spangled with wild flowers of every hue. Great cottonwood trees--the pioneer's best friend---and willow thickets lined its banks. In the widespread branches of the cottonwoods yellow and orange blackbirds, goldfinches and other birds of brilliant plumage made colorful pictures. Farther back, and extending clear to the foot of the mountains, mesquite, ironwood, palo verde and other desert trees were plentiful.

The meadows were covered with soft lush grasses, almost untouched by animals, except for the horses and mules of an occasional traveler and the deer and antelope that came to the stream for a drink. Everywhere on the more open areas those fine stock grasses, black, blue and hairy grammas, grew luxuriantly. Here and there along the wash were tracts of alkali land on which sacaton touched my stirrups. A little

farther back large areas were covered with another useful forage plant known to the Mexicans as galleta, botanically hiliaria, one of the earliest to "green up" in the spring.

There were then practically no banks to this stream. It simply flowed softly and quietly on top of the ground, except at its lower end where it entered the Gila, a much larger and deeper stream. As I remember it, the banks of the San Simon at the junction were then not over three feet high and the wash itself measured not over twenty feet from bank to bank.

Running back to the foothills on each side the grama grasses covered the whole range with their rich growth, while several sages, especially one called estafietta by the Mexicans, grow in dense bodies, furnishing splendid forage in winter when the range was covered by snow, or in dry seasons when grass was short.

To an embryo stockman this San Simon Valley was indeed a promised land.

The old-timer with me summed it all up when he said: "What more do you want, Here's grass of every kind, some for good seasons an' some for dry ones. There's plenty of sage an' other browse for winter an' trees full of mesquite beans for the hungry old cows every fall. There's water, but not too much of it, which is a good thing for any range."

He told me how the old cows would get down on their knees and crawl under the low overhanging mesquite branches and lick up the long white mesquite beans lying thick on the ground. In later years when feed was scarce, many an old range cow got fat as a seal on these beans.

Here, in San Simon Valley, was the new grazing range I was seeking. Along with two other cattlemen, I picked out a special tract to which I meant to return and claim for my very own. But alas for the plans of men. Shortly after I left the Valley, Apaches from the San Carlos Reservation, sixty miles to the west, swept up the Gila Valley leaving behind them a series of burned ranches and murdered settlers.

This was something of which I had no desire. Life even in those days was sweet. The Gila River was the Indian's main highway from the Apache Reservation down to Old Mexico, so I decided I did not crave a ranch in their vicinity. I sought farther for a new location.

It was about fifteen years after this first visit that I returned to San Simon Valley. In the meantime, southwest Arizona had been discovered by west Texas ranchers, crowded from their own State through the leasing of the State-owned lands to more far-sighted stockmen. The trail across southern New Mexico to Arizona was all cluttered up with herds of longhorns, slowly but steadily grazing their way

west. Under the old "open range" conditions, these great herds of cattle were devastating the San Simon Valley. It was a mad race to get the grass first. No one was there to say them nay; no one seemed to care what results of this overgrazing and overstocking process might be. Nor were the stockmen wholly to blame. No one sounded a word of warning; none could foresee the rapidity with which these glorious ranges would pass out of the picture, victims of Man's carelessness and lack of understanding.

About this time, in 1895, it was generally estimated that fully 50,000 head of cattle were grazing on the San Simon ranges. It was a situation reminding one of the man Mark Twain told about, who complained that, "everybody talked about the weather, but nobody did anything about it".

A few years later the end was in sight and nearly all of the big San Simon outfits shipped their herds to eastern markets and went out of business. Since then the range has improved considerably as to forage, but the matter of erosion has grown by leaps and bounds until today the San Simon Valley is a shining example of what uncontrolled, unrestricted grazing will do to the best of ranges.

My last visit to the Valley was in the fall of 1934. Many of the old valuable grasses and forage plants were gone. The green meadows were replaced by wide expanses of drifting sand. Of running water, except during the summer rains when floods occurred, there was almost none. The ranges on both sides of the Valley--it is now called the Solomonville Wash--were criss-crossed with deep trails first worn by the feet of the restless herds and then dug deep into the loose soil by the storm waters. On both sides of the main wash side washes headed into it from the mountain slopes, each doing its very best to drain off every drop of water that fell from the summer rains or came from melting snows on the mountains in the spring.

The lowering of the bed of the stream began almost at the head of the Valley, and for sixty miles, ending at the Gila River, the flood waters had scoured their way. Moreover, settlers living along the wash near its junction with the Gila found these floods were cutting away many acres of their farm lands. To meet this situation they attempted to straighten the stream by means of a long canal. The scheme was a grand failure. Instead of improving matters it made conditions worse. The flood waters came down faster, their scouring propensities were greatly increased, and in the end the huge "island" made by the canal was washed down stream to fill the irrigating canals and dams of the settlers lower on the Gila.

Where it entered the Gila River the San Simon wash was originally not more than ten feet wide. In 1935 it was fully a hundred feet wide, and thirty feet deep. In some places above the junction the San Simon today has widened out to more than two hundred feet.

Naturally, the first question to be answered is: Can this ruinous loss be stopped? Can forage plants and shrubs be brought back to

once again cover and protect this and other like areas? Finally, can the damage already done be repaired?

The loss can be stopped, forage plants can be brought back, but only with time and proper methods of control and supervision. Nature works slowly in repairing such damage. A valley area that has been centuries in forming cannot be restored except through years of systematic control, supervision and rest.

The stockmen of Arizona, as well as those of most western states, are today feeling a crisis that must be met with the whole-hearted cooperation on their part with the government in managing these grazing areas so that they may be saved from greater destruction and restored to use.

Naturally, the thousands of acres of valuable farm and grazing land already washed away by the rivers of Arizona and deposited in the Gulf of California cannot be brought back. But there is no doubt that further losses can be stopped by means not beyond the professional ability of irrigation and erosion engineers.

As for the livestock business, that, too, can be taken care of. For over twenty-five years now grazing men and the scientists of the United States Forest Service have been working on this matter of Grazing livestock in large numbers on the open ranges of the National Forests. It is an established fact, one that cannot be honestly denied, that but for the wise policies of the Forest Service in handling grazing on these public areas, every western mountain range, and the foothills below them, would today be in almost the same unfortunate shape that comparable mountain ranges in China have been for centuries past.

The present emergency offers a vast field for true conservation. But remember this,--it will not be accomplished in a year, or a dozen years. And most of all, to succeed it will require conscientious cooperation by every stockman using these lands. In no other way will it be brought about.

In conclusion, the foregoing picture is not that of an isolated or unusual area. All over the West similar areas are now going through the same destructive process of erosion.