

[Diary of a Desert Trail

By Edward L. Vail

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Vail tells How Herders Escaped Flood on Gila

Luckily They Did Not Take Camp Selected by Cook

Today's article is a continuation of the stories from the diary of Edward L. Vail, written while driving a herd of cattle across the desert trail in 1890, in the company of eight Mexican cowboys and the foreman of the Empire Ranch, Tom Turner. – Ed. Note.

The Diary of a Desert Trail

By Edward L. Vail

We grazed our cattle and horses at Gila Bend for several days and gave them a chance to rest. Turner or I generally did some scouting ahead to find a good watering place for our cattle and the next day's camp. We found a trail along the south side of the river, about 30 feet above it, with a steep mountain on the other side and only wide enough for a man on horseback to pass. We followed it for about a mile and it brought us out on the Oatman Flat., a nice piece of land named for the Oatman family, the members of which were killed there by the Apaches in 1850. The way of reaching this place was over a very rocky mountain road and much longer. We decide to drive the cattle over the trail by the river. The cattle were started in that direction with a rider leading them as usual. As soon as we had a few lead steers on the narrow trail the others followed like sheep and all reached Oatman safely. So many cattle walking single file was an unusual sight. The wagon had to go by the longer road. At the Oatman Flat we met the Jourdan family, with whom we were acquainted. Turner and I spent the evening very pleasantly at their house. The Jourdans were doing some farming and also had cattle.

Gila Bend is about half way between Tucson to Yuma, and from what I saw of the Gila Valley I did not think much of it as a cattle country. We had some trouble with quicksand when watering cattle in the river. If a steer got stuck in the sand the only way to get him out was to wade in and pull out one leg at a time and then tramp the sand around that leg (this gets the water out of the sand which holds it in suspension). When all the legs were free we would turn the animal on its side and haul it to the bank with our riettas.

I never saw so many quail in my life as in that country. John the Cook would take my shotgun and kill a lot of them. At night when he called us to supper he would say, "All the boys come, plente quai to-night." He could not say quail.

There were very few incidents of particular interest on the trail down the Gila Valley to Yuma. One evening when we were ready to camp for the night John drove his

team down on a little flat near the river where there were quite a number of willows and cottonwood trees. When Tom rode over and saw the place he told the Chinaman to hitch up his team and drive up on the higher ground near where the cattle were to be held that night. The cook said, "See what a pretty place this is Mr. Tom." Tom replied that it was pretty all right but too far from the cattle in case of trouble, and too far for the men to go in the night when the guards changed. The next morning when we awoke we heard a great roaring from the river. We lost no time riding over to the river to see what had happened. The Gila was a raging flood and the place John had picked out to camp was eight or ten feet under water. If we had slept there that night the men would have been the only survivors of our outfit. Afterwards we heard that the Walnut Grove dam, many miles away, had given way and quite a number of people were drowned in the valley below the dam.

We were compelled to leave some of our cattle before we reached Yuma as there was scarcely any grass or weeds, and the mesquite and other forage had not yet budded out. Some steers died but most of them gave out and we turned them loose.

(To Be Continued)