

CAMEL CARAVANS OF THE AMERICAN DESERTS

BY J. M. GUINN.

[Read May 6, 1901]

The story of the experiment made nearly fifty years ago, to utilize the Arabian camel as a beast of burden on the arid plains of Arizona, New Mexico and the deserts of the Colorado is one of the many unwritten chapters in the history of the Southwest. A few fugitive locals in the newspapers of that time and the reminiscences of some of the camel drivers who survived the experiment are about the only records of a scheme that its progenitors had hoped would revolutionize travel and transportation over the American deserts. The originator and chief promoter of the project was Jefferson Davis, late president of the Southern Confederacy.

During the last days of the session of Congress in 1851, when the army appropriation bill was under consideration, Mr. Davis, then Senator from Mississippi, offered an amendment providing for the purchase and introduction of 30 camels and 20 dromedaries, with ten Arab drivers and the necessary equipage.

In advocating his amendment, Mr. Davis alluded to the extent to which these animals are used in various countries in Asia and Africa as beasts of burthen; and among other things stated that they are used by the English in the East Indies in transporting army supplies and often in carrying light guns upon their backs; that camels were used by Napoleon in his Egyptian campaigns in dealing with a race to which our wild Comanches and Apaches bear a close resemblance. Mr. Davis thought these animals might be used with effect against the Indians on our Western frontier. Drinking enough water before they start to last for one hundred miles; traveling continually without rest at a rate of ten or fifteen miles an hour, they would overtake these bands of Indians, which our cavalry cannot do.

They might be made to transport small pieces of ordnance with great facility; and in fact do here all that they are capa-

ble of doing in the East, where they are accustomed to eat the hardiest shrubs and to drink the same kind of brackish water which is stated to exist in some portions of our Western deserts. Ewing of Ohio expressed the opinion that our climate was too cold for the camel. Mr. Rantoul of Massachusetts had no doubt the camel might be useful, but thought \$200 apiece sufficient to pay for the animals.

The amendment was lost—19 yeas and 24 nays. The appropriation of \$30,000 to buy camels with was a reckless extravagance that the Senators could not sanction.

This was long before the days of billion dollar Congresses. The total appropriations for all purposes by that Congress was \$41,900,000—eight millions less than the appropriation of the River and Harbor bill alone that Senator Carter of Montana talked to death in the last Congress.

Then the newspapers of California took up the scheme, and the more they agitated it, the mightier it became. They demonstrated that it was possible to form a lightning dromedary express, to carry the fast mail and to bring eastern papers and letters to California in 15 days.

It would be possible, too, if Congress could only be induced to import camels and dromedaries to have fast camel passenger trains from Missouri River points to the Pacific Coast. The camel, loading up his internal water tank out of the Missouri and striking straight across the country regardless of watering places, and boarding himself on sage brush the plains across, would take his next drink of the trip out of the Colorado River; then after a quiet *pasear* across the desert he would land his passengers in the California coast towns in two weeks from the time of starting. No more running the gauntlet of Panama fevers and thieving natives on the isthmus. No more dying of thirst on the deserts. No freezing to death in the snows of the Sierras; no more shipwrecks on the high seas. The double-decked camel train would do away with all these and solve the transportation problem until the Pacific railroad was built.

Although beaten in his first attempt at camel importation, Jefferson Davis kept his scheme in view. While Secretary of War under President Pierce from 1853 to 1857 he obtained reports from army officers stationed on the Southwestern frontier in regard to the loss of animals on the plains—the cost of transportation of army supplies and the possibility of utilizing the camel in hunting Indians. These reports were laid before Congress and that body authorized the sending out of a commission

from San Antonio, Texas, to Arizona to ascertain the military uses to which camels could be put in the Southwest. The commission made a favorable report and Congress in 1854 appropriated \$30,000 for the purchase and importation of camels.

In December, 1854, Major C. Wayne was sent to Egypt and Arabia to buy seventy-five camels. He bought the first lot in Cairo and taking these in the naval store ship "Supply," he sailed to Smyrna, where thirty more of another kind were bought. These had been used on the Arabian deserts. They cost from seventy-five to three hundred dollars each, somewhat more than had been paid for the Egyptian lot. The ship "Supply" with its load of camels reached Indianola, Texas, on the Gulf of Mexico, Feb. 10, 1857. Three had died during the voyage, leaving seventy-two in the herd.

About half of these were taken to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where an expedition was fitted out under command of Lieut. Beale for Fort Tejon, California. The route lay along the 35th parallel, crossing the Mojave desert. The expedition consisted of 44 citizens, with an escort of 20 soldiers, the camels carrying the baggage and water.

The expedition arrived safely at Tejon and the camel caravan made several trips between Fort Tejon and Albuquerque. The other half of the herd was employed in packing on the plains of Texas and in the Gadsen Purchase, as Southern Arizona was then called.

The first caravan to arrive in Los Angeles reached the city, Jan. 8, 1858. The Star thus notes its arrival:

"A drove of fourteen camels under the management of Lieut. Beale arrived in Los Angeles. They were on their way from Fort Tejon to the Colorado River and the Mormon country, and each animal was packed with one thousand pounds of provisions and military stores. With this load they made from 30 to 40 miles per day, finding their own subsistence in even the most barren country and going without water from six to ten days at a time."

Again, the Star of July 21, 1858, makes note that "the camels have come to town." It says: "The camels, eight in number, came into town from Fort Tejon, after provisions for that camp. The largest ones pack a ton and can travel sixteen miles an hour."

It would seem that a beast of burden that could pack a ton, travel sixteen miles an hour, subsist on sage brush and go from six to ten days on one drink would have supplied most effect-

ally the long-felt want of cheap and rapid transportation over the desert plains of the Southwest. The promoters of the scheme, to utilize the camel in America, made one fatal mistake. They figured only on his virtues; his vices were not reckoned into the account.

Another mistake they made was in not importing Arab drivers with the camels. From the very first meeting of the camel and the American mule-whacker who was to be his driver there developed between the two a mutual antipathy.

To be a successful camel driver, a man must be born to the business. Indeed, he must come of a guild or trade union of camel drivers at least a thousand years old; and, better still, if it dates back to the days of Abraham and Isaac. The first disagreement between the two was in the matter of language. The vigorous invective and fierce profanity of the quondam mule-driver irritated the nerves and shocked the finer feelings of the camel, who never in his life, perhaps, had heard anything more strenuous than "Allah, el Allah" lisped in the softest Arabic.

At first the mild submissiveness of the camel provoked his drivers. They could appreciate the vigorous kicking of an army mule in his protest against abuse. But the spiritless dejection and the mild-eyed pensiveness of the Arabian burden-bearer was exasperating; but they soon learned that in pure meanness one lone camel could discount a whole herd of mules. His supposed virtues proved to be his worst vices. He could travel 16 miles an hour. Abstractly that was a virtue; but when camp was struck in the evening and he was turned loose to sup off the succulent sage brush, either to escape the noise and profanity of the camp or to view the country, he was always seized with a desire to take a *pascear* of twenty-five or thirty miles before supper. While this only took an hour or two of his time, it involved upon his unfortunate driver the necessity of spending half the night in camel chasing; for if he was not rounded up there was a delay of half the next day in starting the caravan. He could carry a ton—this was a commendable virtue—but when two heavily laden "ships of the desert" collided on a narrow trail, as they always did when an opportunity offered, and tons of supplies were scattered over miles of plain and the unfortunate camel pilots had to gather up the flotsam of the wreck; it is not strange that the mariners of the arid wastes anathematized the whole camel race from the beast the prophet rode, down to the smallest imp of Jefferson Davis's importation.

The army horses and mules shared the antipathy of the drivers for the Arabian desert trotters. Whenever one of the humpbacked burden bearers of the Orient came trotting along past a corral of horses and lifted his voice in an evening orison to Mahommed or some other Turk, every horse of the caballada was seized with fright and broke loose and stampeded over the plains.

All of these little eccentricities did not endear the camel to the soldiers of Uncle Sam's army. He was hated, despised and often persecuted. In vain the officers urged the men to give the camels a fair trial. No one wanted anything to do with the misshapen beast. The teamsters when transformed into camel drivers deserted and the troopers when detailed for such a purpose fell back on their reserved rights and declared their was nothing in army rules and regulations that could compel American soldiers to become Arabian camel drivers. So because there was no one to load and navigate these ships of the desert their voyages became less and less frequent, until finally they ceased altogether; and the desert ships were anchored at the different forts in the Southwest.

It became evident to the army officers that the camel experiment was a failure. Every attempt to organize a caravan resulted in an incipient mutiny among the troopers and teamsters. No attempt, so far as I know, was ever made to utilize the camel for the purpose that Davis imported him—that of chasing the Apache to his stronghold and shooting the Indian full of holes from light artillery strapped on the back of a camel. Instead of the camel hunting the Indian, the Indian hunted the camel. In some way poor Lo's untutored appetite had learned to love camel steaks and stews. So, whenever an opportunity offered, the Apaches killed the camels; but the camel soon learned to hate and avoid the Indian, as all living things learn to do. Some were allowed to die of neglect by their drivers; others were surreptitiously shot by the troopers sent to hunt them up when they strayed away—the trooper claiming to have mistaken the woolly tufts on the top of the twin humps of the camel as they bobbed up and down in the tall sage brush, for the top-knot of an Indian, and in self-defense to have sent a bullet crashing, not into an Indian, but into the anatomy of a camel.

At the breaking out of the Civil War, some thirty-five or forty of the camel band were herded at the United States forts—Verde, El Paso, Yuma and some of the smaller posts in Texas. When the Eastern forts were abandoned by the government

the camels were turned loose to take care of themselves. Those at Yuma and Fort Tejon were taken to Benicia, condemned and sold at auction to the highest bidder. They were bought by two Frenchmen who took them to Reese River, Nevada, where they were used in packing salt to Virginia City. Afterwards they were taken to Arizona and for some time they were used in packing ore from the Silver King mine down the Gila to Yuma. But even the Frenchmen's patience gave out at last. Disgusted with their hunch-backed burden bearers, they turned the whole herd loose upon the desert near Maricopa Wells.

Free now to go where they pleased, instead of straying away beyond the reach of cruel man, the camels seemed possessed with a desire to linger near the haunts of men. They stayed near the line of the overland travel and did mischief. The apparition of one of these ungainly beasts suddenly looming up before the vision of a team of mules frightened the long-eared quadrupeds out of all their senses; so they ran away, scattering freight and drivers over the plains. The mule drivers, out of revenge, shot the camels whenever they could get in range of them. In 1882 several wild camels were caught in Arizona and sold to a menagerie, but a few have survived all enemies and still roam at large in the desert regions of Southern Arizona and Sonora, Mex. The International Boundary Commission that recently surveyed the line between the United States and Mexico, reported seeing wild camels on the alkali plains amid sage brush and cactus. These are probably descendants of the imported ones, as those seen appeared to be in their prime. Occasionally the soldiers in the garrisons of New Mexico and Arizona catch sight of a few wild camels on the alkali plains. All reports agree that the animals have grown white with age. Their hides have assumed a hard leathery appearance and they are reported to have hard prong hoofs, unlike the cushioned feet of the well-kept camel. Whether these are some of the survivors of the original importation brought into the country nearly fifty years ago, or whether their descendants are gradually being evolved to meet the conditions with which they are surrounded, I do not know.