

**CALIFORNIA MILITARY DEPARTMENT HISTORICAL PROGRAM  
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# **The Camel Experiment in California**

**By George Stammerjohan**

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# The Camel Experiment in California

By George R. Stammerjohan

*We are pleased to be able to present another interesting story researched and written by George Stammerjohan, long time historian for the California Department of Parks and Recreation.*

The victories and settlements of the Mexican-American War increased the size of the territorial United States. To control and protect this new territory and the citizens encompassed within its boundaries, the government deployed the vast majority of the U.S. Army. Quickly, Congress and the War Department became appalled at the unexpected cost of simply supplying the outposts scattered over the new region. The transportation cost of the Quartermaster Department alone was more than the entire pre-war budget for the whole of the United States Army.

Distances were great, and often now through arid or semi-arid country. The Army posts, once conveniently established along waterways and supplied cheaply by contract steamboats, were now hundred of miles from water. This meant expensive civilian contracts with drayage companies or even more expensive government owned wagon trains managed, operated and maintained by large numbers of employed civilians, paid at the prevailing wage - which out west was several times higher than eastern wages. The expense seemed never to stop. Army wagon trains, using mules or oxen, needed regularly spaced repair, water and feed depots. Water and feed points were necessary at least a day's journey apart and had to be resupplied either by Army contract or supply trains. If local farmers could not deliver forage, hay and grain, to given points, then the Army had to buy it at one point and stock the feeding points or it had to carry feed for the animals that were pulling the freight wagons. This often meant a ratio of two forage wagons to every freight wagon. If a train was outbound for a destination which could not supply livestock feed for the return journey and grazing along the route was minimal, then empty wagons (actually partially loaded wagons, for the animals pulling them had to be fed) would start back for a depot point, to load up with forage to meet the homeward bound wagon column. If timely contact was not effected, costly government mules (or oxen) would die. And the feared auditors in Washington, D.C. would want to know why.

Despite the motion picture image of the western Army on the frontier, the biggest problems were not "wild Indians" or "renegade Mexican bandits." They were transportation, forage, live drayage animals and a constant demand for economy.

Spurred by a hope for improved and economical transport across the more arid sections of the west, the U.S. Government dusted off an old plan to experiment with camels as freight animals. Some 75 Mediterranean camels were imported in the



EDWARD F. BEALE

mid-1850s and delivered to an Army quartermaster at Camp Verde, Texas.

Fanciful legend has overshadowed the real story of the camel experiment. There never was a "Camel Corps"; Edward F. Beale was never appointed to command a camel corps, and Fort Tejon, California, was never the headquarters of the non-existent "camel corps." There is myth and reality about the Army's camels, and the truth is a more interesting story than the fiction which surrounds the story. Over developed romantic fiction has the Army using the camels to haul freight, carrying the mail regularly, and for active patrols against bandits and hostile Indians. In reality, very little of this actually happened.

On trips west across the Great American Desert, Gwin Harris Heap, one of the proselyting converts to the idea of camels as a cheap transportation methodology for the American west, foisted upon Edward F. Beale the recently published book by the Abbe Huc, *Travels in Tartary, Thibet and China, During the Years 1844, 1845 and 1846*. While Beale later claimed he was immediately captivated by the journal, at the time the opposite was true. It seemed to have made no impression upon him. In fact, Beale may have considered Heap a somewhat pushy zealot of a relative, for they later parted ways under less than happy circumstances.

Gwin Heap became a serious proponent of camel transportation and ultimately assisted in buying camels when the U.S. Navy was ordered to acquire camels from Turkey and Egypt and bring them to Texas. Nowhere in government correspondence of the time is to be found any advocacy for the use of camels originating with Edward F. Beale. In fact, when Beale won the contract for a re-survey and road development along the 35th Parallel, Secretary of War John B. Floyd ordered Beale to take 25 camels to California (and return with them) as part of the expedition. Beale exploded in anger and in ink to the Secretary. He protested mightily and insisted that Floyd was wrong to order him to use the camels. Secretary Floyd stood firm; he wanted to see what these expensive forage burners, lounging about Camp Verde outside of San Antonio, Texas, could do. Reluctantly Beale, who had no choice, traveled to Camp Verde and picked up the 25 camels.

The majority of the foreign laborers hired by the U.S. Navy to work with the camels were Greek urbanites from the streets of Constantinople (modern day Istanbul) who had no experience in the employment of camels. They had seen a free ride to the United States, where it was rumored the streets were paved with gold and it was a true land of flowing milk and honey. The two or more Turks who were hired by the Navy, and actually knew how to handle camels were soon disillusioned by the flat Texas praries. They wanted to go home. The Navy contract specified that all foreigners associated with the camels coming to Texas were to work six months and then, if they wished, be discharged, given a bonus, and transported home for free by the Navy. Two Turks went home, while one stayed in Texas and prospered. This meant that the Greeks and Turks available to Beale were absolute novices in handling the camels.

"Ned" Beale soon discovered this flaw, to his anger as his correspondence to the Secretary of War points out. The foreign employees seemed untrainable and totally incompetent, but in time several mastered their new chore and went on to a long historic association with the camels which came west. The others departed the scene upon arriving in California, leaving a confusing trail for the historian to follow. Three of the men had names similar to George (Georgias, Georgious and Georges) and only one emerged out of the confusion as "Greek George": Georges Caralambo.

Two of the others, one Turk and one Greek, also had similar names: Hadji Alli the Turk and Hadagoi Alli. While Hadji Alli became historically known as "Hi Jolly," the other Alli disappeared after leaving behind a total confusion caused by the numerous ways his name could be spelled. All five floated through the story of the camels until about December 1859, when government records clarified only two were still in view, "Greek George" and "Hi Jolly."

Despite his initial outrage, Beale did develop an appreciation of the camels' ability, docility and temperament. He gained trust in the animals' patience; camels would not stam-pede, while mules scattered to the four winds. The camels did have to be watched. While they would not run in fright, they

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would amble about for miles to feed. By the time Beale's expedition reached California, Beale was a believer in the camels' worth.



**THIS UNDATED PAINTING BY ERNEST NARJOT DEPICTS A CAMEL TRAIN THOUGHT TO BE LT. BEALE'S EXPEDITION FROM FT. DEFIANCE TO THE COLORADO RIVER.**

This did not mean, however, that Beale was totally honest in his report to the government over the camels' usefulness. He failed to report that he had lost three camels, the expense of which would have been deducted from the contract's final financial settlement. And he failed to report that the Mojave Desert's rocky soil nearly crippled the animals soft hooves. The animals were bred for work in the softer sand-gravel deserts of the eastern Mediterranean.

Beale also ignored orders to bring the camels back to New Mexico. Using the lame excuse that the camels would be invaluable if the troops in California were to become involved in the "Mormon War," then seeming to be a reality on the Pacific Coast, Beale left the camels with his business partner, Samuel A. Bishop, and hurried home in early January 1858.

This homeward journey created another myth, whereby in later years Beale adopted a heroic leadership which does not match the historic correspondence of the time. Once again Beale had outlived the other participants and this allowed him to tell his version of the story without eyewitness contradictions. So "the story" became "history."

As Beale remembered it, he departed Los Angeles in early January 1858, with a group of dragoons to protect "him" to the Colorado River. When he reached the river, "he" stopped a river steamer and ordered it to ferry him and his men across the river. "He" had brought along ten camels to carry forage for his mules and then "he" sent the camels back to Fort Tejon in case of war in Utah. It is a great heroic tale and you can find it in all the biographies on Beale, but it only happened that way in Beale's imagination, in his final report, and 28 years later, in the various speeches he made claiming he created and led the Camel Corps.

While Beale was moving west in the early fall of 1857, the U.S. government was moving troops westward against the Mormon colony in Utah. In California, the Mojave and Salt

Lake Road connected Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Salt Lake City. The majority in southern California harbored strong anti-Mormon attitudes. While pending "war news" filtered into California along the Salt Lake Road, a fantastic set of rumors emerged that the Mormons departing California were smuggling tons of firearms toward the Utah colony. The newspapers reflected these rumors by playing them to the hilt, often with wild embellishments. Added to the gunrunning rumor were others, particularly that Mormon special agents were organizing the desert Indians to attack "Gentile" parties crossing the Mojave Desert into southern Utah (now southern Nevada).

While the Army in San Francisco did not put much faith in these rumors, it decided to launch an investigation. Major George A.H. Blake, then senior 1st U.S. Dragoon officer in California, was ordered to take a large patrol out along the Mojave Road and to examine these rumors. His orders also included closing the 1st Dragoon headquarters which had been at Mission San Diego since August of 1857, and relocating them at Fort Tejon at the end of the expedition. The Department headquarters also informed Blake that on the way he should meet Beale, who was returning east, at Cajon Pass and escort him as far as the Colorado River. Blake received his orders in mid-December of 1857 and immediately wrote an order to 2nd Lieut. John T. Mercer, commanding Company F at Fort Tejon, to join him at Cajon Pass.

Major Blake's orders reached Los Angeles in the midst of a driving rainstorm, a freak break in weather during the two year old drought torturing southern California. First Lieut. William T. Magruder, the commanding officer at Fort Tejon, was doing Army business in Los Angeles when the correspondence from San Diego arrived. Despite the miserable weather, he attempted to return to Fort Tejon. It took him four muddy days and a broken wagon to get across the San Fernando Valley. Then, once in the mountains, he was caught in a wind-whipped blizzard and nearly lost his way in a world of blowing snow. On January 2, 1858 he finally managed to reach Fort Tejon, buried in snow, where he informed Lieut. Mercer of the task before him.

Meanwhile, Beale was in Los Angeles organizing his return trip. He had brought ten camels to the pueblo to haul forage for his mules, leaving the other twelve at Bishop's Ranch - not at Fort Tejon. At Mission San Diego, Major Blake immediately organized his part of the expedition and, despite the weather, moved out with Dragoon headquarters staff and part of the escort detachment of Company F troopers left behind when the company had relocated to Fort Tejon in late August. To guard company and regimental property at the old Mission, Blake left a small detachment of Company F troopers. He hurried on his way, assuming that Mercer would also be on the move. Blake was an impatient, headstrong martinet, who listened only to his own opinion. He reached Cajon Pass on New Year's Eve 1858, and gloweringly looked northward for Mercer's approaching column. As Blake stood on the eastern flank of Cajon Pass, Mercer had not even heard yet that

he was ordered to join Blake.

Lieut. Mercer took his time obeying the orders from Blake. The weather was impossible. It snowed and snowed and, driven by terrible winds, piled up ten foot drifts along the route to Antelope Valley and Los Angeles. Finally, four days into the new year, Mercer moved his men out. He did not take the direct route across Antelope Valley and Apple Valley to Cajon Pass. Instead, he directed his men into the Los Angeles Basin and came around the long way to San Bernardino and Cajon Pass. He joined a very angry Major Blake on January 10, 1858.

Edward F. Beale was also detained by the weather and by the afternoon of January 10, had not reached Blake's camp at Cajon Pass. The next morning, Blake took up the march over the Mojave Road for the Colorado River. Beale was at least thirty hours behind Blake and never caught up. When Blake reached the river he hailed an exploring river steamer and requested it to wait. Beale finally arrived, ferried his men and mules over the Colorado and sent the camels back with Samuel Bishop to Bishop's ranch in the lower San Joaquin Valley. Blake, moving fast, led the way back and took his own command on to Fort Tejon.

During 1858, Bishop continued to use the camels privately. He hauled freight to his own ranch and to the developing town of Fort Tejon located three-fourths of a mile south of the Army post. He did not haul Army freight, for Phineas Banning of New San Pedro had won the quartermaster con-

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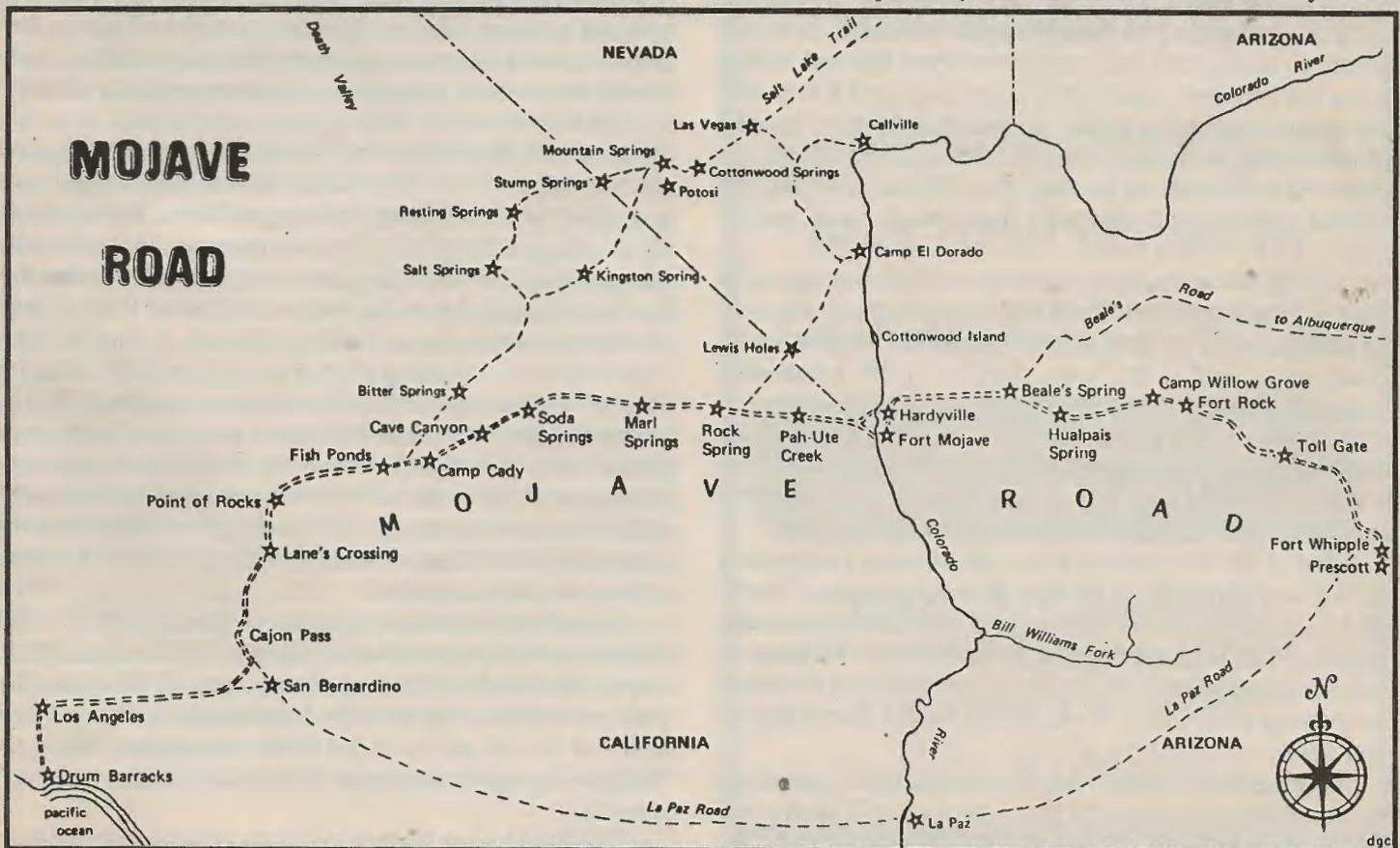
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Map Courtesy of Dennis Casebier, author of *The Mojave Road*



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tract once again. Banning held the contract until the Los Angeles Quartermaster Depot was finished in mid-1859 and then the Army hauled its own freight, often with Banning contracted to make up the shortages in mules and wagons.

The few immigrants to use the poorly developed 35th Parallel wagon road were harassed by Mojave Indians at the Colorado Crossing (Beale's Crossing). None of the immigrants were able to cross and they turned back. To protect the new route, the government ordered a fort to be established near the northern crossing of the Colorado River.

Major William Hoffman, 6th U.S. Infantry, led a reconnaissance in January 1859. He was escorted by dragoons of Companies K and B from Fort Tejon. There was trouble with Mojaves at the river; the dragoons killed perhaps a dozen and Hoffman recommended to San Francisco a full scale campaign from Fort Yuma against the Mojave Indians. Hoffman requested a quartermaster depot be placed at Los Angeles to haul supplies for his expedition across the desert; the War Department approved and ordered Captain W.S. Hancock to Los Angeles. Knowing it would take Hancock time to organize his wagon trains, Major Hoffman requested that the Army take charge of the camels and use them to haul supplies on the desert. The Secretary of War refused Hoffman's request, stating that the camel experiment was in the hands of civilians in California and would remain so. Hoffman's expedition went forth without the camels.

In the meantime, Beale had been ordered by the government to improve the 35th Parallel wagon road and to do it right this time. Immigrants had complained about the road, saying it was not in reality what Beale's propaganda said it was. For this second expedition, Beale was assigned 25 more camels, which worked well along the route. These 25 camels did not cross into California. At the same time, Bishop was using the original camels to haul freight for Beale's work crews, and his own.

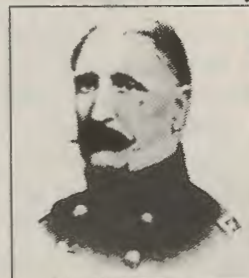
Bishop had several large skirmishes with the Mojave, who were willing to attack civilians but not the soldiers. Possibly the skirmish with the dragoons had taught the Mojave a mild lesson, or it could be they were surprised by the numbers of soldiers along the river. The civilians were fewer in number. Hoffman, having fought no Mojave, concluded peace, established his fort (to become Fort Mojave) and withdrew, leaving many warlike Mojaves still out in the desert, eager to kill a mail carrier or immigrant.

East of the river, Bishop's men encountered a large force of Mojaves who showed all signs of wanting an open battle. Bishop mounted his civilian packers and laborers onto the camels of this party and charged. They routed the Mojaves. It was the only camel charge staged in the west and the Army had nothing to do with it. Then Bishop moved on eastward to find Beale.

On their march home to San Bernardino, Hoffman's troops ran out of food and allegedly broke into one of Bishop's buried desert food caches. Three thousand pounds of food was

stolen. Beale was outraged, demanded compensation and opened a major breach between himself and the Army. This breach widened and, beginning in the late summer of 1859, the Quartermaster Department began to demand that the camels under Bishop's control be turned over to the Army at Fort Tejon. What exact pressure was put on Bishop is unknown but the Army wanted the camels, and it was slow in settling the claims of Beale-Bishop over the disrupted food cache. In the early fall, possibly influenced by either General Clarke, commanding the Department of California from San Francisco, or from Brevet Major J.H. Carleton of Company K, 1st Dragoons, who apparently considered Beale a fraud, Lt. Col. Benjamin L. Beall, 1st Dragoons, at Fort Tejon, told the post

California State Library



COLONEL BEALL

quartermaster, 1st Lt. Henry B. Davidson, to take in the camels "provided Mr. Bishop was willing to transfer them." Knowing Davidson's fiery temper and his sometimes violent way of getting things suggested to him accomplished, the Colonel, who was about to depart the post on a leave of absence for a month, fully expected to see the camels at the post when he returned. Colonel Beall rejoined Fort Tejon on December 2, 1859 and must have noted with pleasure the camels were in the recently completed quartermaster adobe corrals.

On November 17, 1859, Bishop, who seemed to have a confused idea about how many camels he controlled, delivered all "the camels" to Lt. Davidson, the regimental and post quartermaster at Fort Tejon. Bishop told Davidson there were 29 camels all told and only one was missing. In reality, four were missing. Three of the camels were found by civilians at San Bernardino and were returned to a surprised Lt. Davidson who had no money to pay for their delivery. It took almost a year before the civilians collected on their claim for locating three of the lost camels. The fourth animal was finally found, in starving condition, near Whiskey Flats in the Kern River gold country after the Christmas season of 1859. The desperate animal had been raiding garbage dumps and kicking in stable doors seeking forage while scaring the daylights out of miners and their families who thought they had a fiendish monster on their doorsteps.

Lt. Davidson hired, at first, one civilian, the Turk Hadji Alli to supervise the camels and planned to hire a second man, one of the Greeks. The first Greek, named Georgias, the youngest of the foreigners, only eighteen years old, was hired first but he did not last. So a few days later, Georges Caralambo, was hired to act as a herder and carekeeper of the camel herd.

Davidson wrote his first report concerning the camels to

his supervisor, Lt. Col. Thomas Swords at Benicia Depot on November 24, 1859, having had a week to observe the camels which he had in his possession. "The camels," he noted, turned over to me (he gave the number as 28) are in very poor condition. Many of their backs are very sore. There is one deficient and can no where be found." He also noted his gratification that General Clarke had approved the employment of the two civilians who would take charge of the animals. (Clarke's endorsement was on the letter sent by Major Carleton, as acting post commander, to Colonel Swords: Approved by Order of Brig. Gen. Clarke, (Signed) Major W.W. Mackall, AAG, Dept. of California).

Davidson soon discovered that it was very expensive to feed the very hungry animals, worn and haggard by Bishop's working demands on them. They ate expensive oats, barley and cured meadow hay at alarming rates, devouring \$1000 in oats alone in 90 days. In early March 1860, the animals were moved to a rented grazing area, on Bishop's Ranch, 12 miles from the post, under the care of the two herders, Hi Jolly and Greek George.

One of the government projects for the western experiment of the camels was to see if they would breed and procreate in the far western territory. The camels, with males and females intermixed, proved to the Army that they could procreate, and produce young, strong, healthy animals. The herd continued to grow, if slowly. There is a great deal of nonsense written about the brutality of Army camel herders to their charges. Camels were reputedly shot dead, bludgeoned to death, or stabbed to death by their herders or packers. The Army took a dim view of herders or packers destroying government property. Camels were expensive, and if a herder, camel packer, or soldier had killed a camel, he would have paid for it by deductions from his salary. An examination of the salaries of herders, packers, and soldiers in government employment records revealed no such incident. The death of each camel (those few that died before 1864, when they were sold) is documented in government quartermaster records in the National Archives. However, Beale managed to lose a total of 13 camels and also managed to escape from paying for the animals. In 1861, the Army at Fort Smith, Arkansas, was still trying to get back 10 of the camels sent with Beale on the second expedition.

There is also a great deal of undocumented story-telling on how Army camels frightened and routed herds of government horses, overturning wagons or dumping troopers on the hard ground. Attempts to confirm these stories have not proven fruitful. Rather, Army reports indicated how regularly the animals blended in the same corrals or fields, and tolerated each other with natural ease. When the camels were introduced to the government mule corrals at the Fort Tejon Depot in November 1859, the quartermaster reported no panic, no tumult; in fact, he was surprised at how easily the animals adapted to one another. The camels, showing effects from hard labor, primarily wanted to eat.

Brevet Major James H. Carleton of Company K, 1st

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Dragoons, refused to use the camels for his Mojave River expedition in the spring of 1860. The camels, having only joined the Army in November 1859 and moved to a grazing camp in March 1860, had not yet recovered from the hard usage of Samuel Bishop, who had worked them to haul supplies to Beale's road expedition, his ranch, and to merchants in the civilian town of Fort Tejon from New San Pedro and Los Angeles. The camels remained at the grazing camp 12 miles east of the fort under the care of two civilian herders, and a small detachment of soldiers to protect the herders, until September 1860.

The first official test for camels by the Army in California was conducted by Captain Winfield S. Hancock, Assistant Quartermaster in Los Angeles, in an attempt to cut the expense of messenger service between Los Angeles and the recently established Fort Mojave on the Colorado River. This trial, in September 1860, featured the camel herder Hadji Alli ("Hi Jolly"), riding a camel like a Pony Express rider, carrying dispatches for Fort Mojave. One camel dropped dead from exhaustion at the Fishponds (modern-day Daggett), while a second attempt to use an "express camel" killed it at Sugar Loaf (modern-day Barstow). The Army discovered that while camels died, and it was cheaper, the camels were no faster than the two-mule buckboard in service under contract to haul the mail to Fort Mojave. They also discovered that these camels

were not express animals; they were not bred for speed, but to slowly carry heavy weights.

At the end of September 1860, Hadji Alli and Georges Caralambo were dropped from Army payrolls, and two former soldiers were hired as "camel herders" at Fort Tejon, at a higher salary. Hi Jolly was fortunate that he had been ordered by Captain Hancock to race a camel to Fort Mojave. He was not held accountable for the two dead camels and received his full month's pay of \$30.00 for the last month of his employment. Greek George was fired "for causes," which translated as stupidity, being unable to read or write, and a too-frequent fondness for American whiskey.

The second experiment, during the early months of 1861, was again by a government-contracted civilian party. They were to survey the California-Nevada boundary, under the leadership of Sylvester Mowry, a former Army officer and currently a citizen of west New Mexico Territory. Mowry stayed in Los Angeles fighting a bitter war with the California State-surveyor and turned the field work over to J.R.N. Owen. Owen had charge of four of the camels and hired "Hi Jolly" to care for them. The expedition went forth to Fort Mojave with only three camels.<sup>1</sup>

The survey was a fiasco, poorly led, poorly organized, and hopelessly confused. The group was often lost and never found the coordinates for the new Nevada-California boundary line. Instead the expedition drifted into the northern Mojave Desert and faced disaster in the barren wilderness. Mules died, equipment was abandoned; it was only the steady plodding of the camels which saved the expedition from becoming a fatal exploration statistic. When they finally struggled over the Sierras to the village of Visalia it was obvious that the camels had saved the day.

At the end of the survey, the three camels were returned to Los Angeles. On June 17, 1861, the camels, 31 in number, of which three were still at the Los Angeles Quartermaster Depot, were transferred from Fort Tejon to Captain Hancock at the Los Angeles Depot. There is no further documentable association of camels with the later Civil War period at Fort Tejon.

William McCleave, a former First Sergeant of Company K, 1st Dragoons, delivered the camel herd to Captain Winfield S. Hancock on or about the 19th of June 1861. The camels were placed in the government corrals at the Los Angeles Quartermaster Depot, where once again they easily mixed with the government mules. McCleave continued as chief herder until early August, when Brevet Major James H. Carleton lured the former sergeant away from Los Angeles to accept a commission as a Captain in the forming 1st Battalion of California Cavalry. Emil Fritz, another former dragoon first sergeant, also traveled to San Francisco with Carleton to accept a captaincy in that same battalion. To command the battalion, Carleton, who would become Colonel of the 1st California Infantry, gathered in Captain Benjamin Davis of Company K, who would receive the grade of Lieutenant Colonel of California Cavalry. Carleton, who was expected to lead an expedition along the California Trail, wanted his developing cav-

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alry force commanded by former dragoons. Much to Carleton's disgust, the Governor appointed a number of men to be officers in the battalion who did not have mounted experience. <sup>2</sup>

When Carleton and comrades boarded a steamer for San Francisco in early August 1861, they were joined by Captain Hancock who had turned over the Los Angeles depot to Second Lieutenant Samuel McKee of the Dragoon regiment. Hancock, rumored to have received a staff promotion to the rank of Major at the San Francisco Quartermaster Department headquarters, took along his chief clerk, leaving his office and paperwork in disarray. At San Francisco, Hancock discovered he was authorized a leave of absence with War Department permission to seek an Ohio senior officer's commission. Hancock soon had his general's star and a command moving from Ohio to western Virginia.

When McCleave departed for San Francisco, Charles Smith also gave up his position as assistant camel herder. McKee then sought out Hadji Alli and Georges Caralambo and hired them as camel herders for the depot. When McKee departed for the east with his regiment, the camels were left in limbo with Alli and Caralambo looking out for them. They were moved to Camp Latham, in what today is Culver City, in early December 1861.

The next two years were a period of frustration for the Army on what to do with the camels, which continued to eat while some of the females produced healthy young. When the Los Angeles depot was transferred to Camp Latham and then to Wilmington on the establishment of Drum Barracks in February 1862, the camels went along. For a short period they were the concern of George C. Alexander, the former sutler or post trader at Fort Tejon, who was the first senior clerk and financial accountant at Drum Barracks. Alexander soon gave up the clerkship, and the post quartermaster office.

First Lieut. David J. Williamson, regimental quartermaster, 4th Infantry, California Volunteers, then became the guardian of the camels. Hadji Alli ("Hi Jolly") and Georges Caralambo ("Greek George") continued to be in charge of direct supervision. The question was: what to do with the growing and useless herd? No one wanted, or had time, to bother with them.

Schemes were proposed by the Wilmington Depot Quartermaster officers. A mail express was proposed for the San Pedro to Fort Yuma run; it was not tried. Then in late 1862 and again in early 1863 there was a proposal, by Major Clarence Bennett, 1st Cavalry, California Volunteers, to carry mail from San Pedro to Tucson, Arizona. Nothing happened. An irregular mail express was attempted from San Pedro to Camp Latham (Culver City) and from Camp Latham on to Los Angeles. A few trips were made, but then the service was dropped. Bennett then suggested a mail run to newly reopened Fort Mojave on the Colorado River. The express was tried, but the camel foundered and died 65 miles from Los Angeles and "Hi Jolly" once again carried the mail packet on his back across the desert on foot to reach the fort on the far

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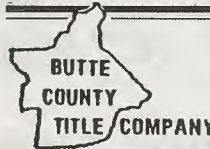
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**The Camel Experiment in California** From page 49

side of the Colorado River.

Major Bennett then proposed sending the camels to Fort Mojave but Lieut. Williamson, the former acting Assistant Quartermaster at Camp Latham and Drum Barracks, rigorously protested the move. He could barely feed his own mules, which were necessary for the operation of the desert fort. He had no extra forage to feed a small herd of camels. Furthermore, the camels were unsuited for the rocky desert roads of the Mojave. The camels' hooves were too tender, they became lame and were useless. Williamson declared that Edward Beale had learned this years ago, but had not reported the truth about his use of camels on the California desert floor.

At this point Federal Surveyor-General Edward F. Beale of California and Nevada, from his San Francisco office, again appeared on the scene. He requested the use of the camels in order to conduct land surveys of the uninhabited portions of the new State of Nevada. Brigadier General George Wright, then in command of the Department of the Pacific, endorsed Beale's concept and Lieut. Colonel Edwin B. Babbitt, the Department's quartermaster, pondered the suggestion and then agreed with Wright's opinion. In reality, Babbitt felt the camels would never be "used profitably" and as early as November 1862, had recommended that the experiment be cancelled and the camels sold. However, Beale's request and the Army decision to turn the camels over to another federal agency were kicked upstairs to Washington, D.C. The Quartermaster General in Washington endorsed Wright's proposal and Wright was then about to take action when two separate developments delayed his decision.

In mid-July 1863, Captain William G. Morris, Assistant Quartermaster at Wilmington, penned a letter to Colonel Babbitt. Beale, Morris stated, only wanted part of the herd and the camels from his experiments had developed a personality problem. The camels did not like being used in small groups away from the herd. They became sulky when separated, refused to eat or drink, and on reaching a stream of water a camel would suddenly lie down in it, throwing the rider and refusing to move. On rocky or gravelly roads their feet became tender, and very sore. They became cranky and refused to take commands and often upon nearing a creek dumped their riders into the water.

In the meantime, Beale was accused of misusing government funds and of irregularities in conducting surveys. It would appear that Beale was only surveying property in which he, or his friends, had a financial interest. The main charge was that Beale had spent a great deal of his federal budget on redecorating his own office in San Francisco. The amount of \$30,000 spent on new carpets and furnishings was bandied about in anti-Beale circles. Beale was suddenly in disfavor and General Wright withdrew his support.

In early September 1863, the Quartermaster General in Washington, D.C. wrote to Colonel Babbitt that the Department of the Pacific should sell the camels. Babbitt requested

*Continued page 62*

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## The Camel Experiment in California From Page 61

opinions from his quartermasters. Lieutenant Williamson wrote that the camels were of no use. Again, he stated the failures of their use at Camp Latham and at San Pedro. And he reminded Babbitt that the experiments by "Lieutenant Beale and his partner Samuel Bishop" showed that mules were superior. The roads when rough and rocky crippled the animals. They were only good on sandy ground. Williamson reminded Babbitt that the recent trial run of a camel to Fort Mojave had foundered the animal just 65 miles from Los Angeles, and the mail carrier had to walk on to Fort Mojave. The express mail could be carried by "horses or mules with regularity and with much less expense to the government." Babbitt was convinced; the camels would be sold at auction as soon as possible.

A decision was made to sell the camels at auction at Benicia Arsenal. Obviously too many people in the Los Angeles area knew their weaknesses and there was an import market for camels in the San Francisco area where, after several false starts, a merchant had been bringing in Siberian camels since 1860.

Captain Morris was informed to prepare to send the camels northward at the earliest moment, but by the cheapest method. On November 19, 1863, Morris replied to Babbitt that the camels, apparently 35 or 37 in number, were "in first rate condition for the trip to Benicia Depot." However, he was delayed in forwarding them due to the heavy winter storms along the coast route. After two years of terrible drought, it was raining. Morris also considered that the current storms would produce grass along the coastal road, allowing the animals to be fed cheaply in route.

The camels were started north in late December 1863. For a brief period Morris thought of shipping them by sea, but the cost of feeding them was unreasonable and so Morris decided the final answer was to drive them overland.

The camels reached Santa Barbara on December 30, 1863 and the herders held them there while they celebrated the coming of the New Year. Then they crossed the mountains and moved on to the Salinas Valley and progressed to Mission San Jose. They skirted the south end of the bay and traveled up the east road of the shoreline of the Contra Costa, arriving at the landing site for Martinez on January 17, 1864. The next day the camels were ferried across the lower Carquinez Straits to the government wharf at Benicia Arsenal and were then moved to the corrals behind the stone constructed buildings at the Benicia Quartermaster Depot. They were placed in the open corrals; they were not stabled in any of the recently constructed buildings at the depot.<sup>3</sup>

Auction notices were published and on February 26, 1864, the gavel came down on each camel as a separate government item. The high bidder for almost all the camels was Samuel McLenaghan, who reputedly had worked with the government camels earlier. However, nowhere in government employment hiring records was McLenaghan's name found. The 37 camels brought only \$1,945, much to the grief of the Benicia

Depot's quartermaster, for he had expected more active bidding and a higher sales profit. Apparently McLeneghan was the only bidder, and the auctioneer had trouble getting any response from the meager crowd that showed up. McLeneghan got the whole herd for \$52.56 each.

The next day, the Benicia quartermaster wrote a report to his senior in the Department of the Pacific headquarters in San Francisco. He expressed his regrets that the total amount was so low, explaining that few of the people who attended were interested in putting forth money for camels. He had hoped for more; the auctioneer had tried mightily to encourage the group of interested or curious spectators, but at least the camels were sold. The experiment in California was over. As consolation he offered a thought of relief: "They have been but a source of expense for years past."

**Author's Note:** For years I have worked on the fascinating, if disappointing, story of the camel experiment in the west. I have plowed through clouds of myths and good stories, and have been supported by the ongoing humor of my colleagues in this business. My friends have sent numerous new clues, or badly interpreted or footnoted tales of the camels. But there is one last tale. Humboldt Lagoons State Park has been one of my history projects with the Department of Parks and Recreation and the lagoons are located in Humboldt County, far away from Fort Tejon, Drum Barracks and Benicia Arsenal. Yet, the camels haunt me.

In mid-1865, two camels of government vintage were sold by McLeneghan, or his associates, to the Portland, Oregon, Zoo. They were placed aboard the ocean going steamer, the *Brother Jonathan*, in the same compartment where General George Wright's big black riding horse was also stabled, and the ship steamed out of San Francisco for the Columbia River. Off Crescent City the *Brother Jonathan* struck a submerged rock and went down, with only a few of the human passengers surviving. All the animals aboard were lost. Several weeks later, on the long sandbar which blocks Stone Lagoon from the ocean, the bodies of General Wright's horse and a "Fort Tejon camel" washed ashore. The local ranchers were forced to bury the stinking carcasses. One just cannot get away from the Army camels.

**Footnote #1.** Four camels were delivered to J. Owen in Los Angeles, two males and two females. One of the males was the older "Seid," a term for a grayish camel and not its name as some have written. It was rutting season and the younger male challenged the Seid to battle over control of the two females. In a noisy confrontation on the banks of the rain swollen Los Angeles River, where Owen had foolishly camped, the young camel threw the whitish camel with a neck lock and then tromped on its head, crushing the skull of the older beast. The "Seid" was skinned and the meat boiled off its bones and the hide and skeleton was sent to the Smithsonian Institution of Natural History in Washington, D.C. It was put together and there, today, the "Seid" stands, the lone survivor of the California Camel Experiment -- its skull slightly lop-

sided. Mowry, the survey's absent leader, finally and reluctantly paid for the dead camel out of his contract funds.

**Footnote #2.** Captain Benjamin F. Davis only remained with the 1st Cavalry, California Volunteers until November. Toward the end of September the Governor talked about raising the Battalion to a regiment at the urging of Colonel Carleton. Carleton requested Davis to be elevated to the grade of Colonel. The Governor stalled. Davis appealed, stated his case to the Governor, received no satisfactory reply and learning his regiment, now the 1st U.S. Cavalry, was going east to Washington, D.C., resigned his state volunteer commission, and rejoined his unit. Davis later gained the Colonelcy of the 8th New York Cavalry and was killed at the Battle of Brandy Station, Virginia in mid-June 1863.

**Footnote #3.** The "Camel Barns" at Benicia Arsenal are not Camel Barns. The elongated double tiered stone buildings were "construction buildings" where the Quartermaster Department manufactured equipment or altered civilian items purchased on the open market prior to delivery to the troops in the field. Later, the buildings were used for storage as warehouses.

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