

CAMELS IN THE SOUTHWEST

By COLONEL C. C. SMITH, U. S. Army Retired,
in Army and Navy Courier

One day while standing in one of the rooms of the Natural History Exhibit, at Exposition Park in Los Angeles, looking at the skeleton of a prehistoric camel taken from the La Brea tar pits on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles, I remembered that I had considerable data on the later day camels that were brought from north Africa and the region around Smyrna in Asia Minor, for army use in 1856. And included in this data were several newspaper clippings which had been taken from papers at various times. And then, too, the sight of the La Brea skeleton recalled an incident of my boyhood days in Arizona—the time when a schoolmate told me one day in the year of 1880, that in the summer of the preceding year, he and some other boys were swimming in the Gila river, near the town of Florence, when they saw a lone animal, the like of which they had never before seen, stray down to the river for water—an old bull camel, which alarmed them to such an extent, that they left the water hurriedly, donned their shirts and pantaloons and streaked it for town, where they told of what they had seen, only to be laughed at for their pains. This was perhaps the last of the army camels—turned adrift after their usefulness had been condemned, about the beginning of the Civil War—ever seen in the Southwest.

Who was responsible for the introduction of the camel as pack transportation for the army in the Southwest is a moot point. It has generally been accredited to Jefferson Davis, later president of the Confederate States, but at the time of the advent of the camel Secretary of War. That Mr. Davis had much to do with bringing camels to the United States for army use it is true, but from what I have been able to glean in a study of the matter it seems that the first man to advance the idea of their use on the arid plains of the southwest was Mr. George R. Gliddon, who had served many years as United States Consul in the Levant. Mr. John R. Bartlett, United States Commissioner on the American-Mexican Boundary Survey, in 1850, noted that camels ought to be used in the Southwest, though he states he was reiterating Mr. Gliddon's idea.

About this same time Lieutenant Edward F. Beale, U. S. Navy, who with Kit Carson, and an Indian, were the hero mes-

sage carriers, of the battle of San Pascual in California, recommended the use of camels in the Southwest. As a matter of fact Beale's idea was made known before 1850. After the battle of San Pascual, Beale and Carson were sent overland from California to Washington, with dispatches from General Kearny, and it was on this trip, in the Spring of 1847, that Beale hit upon the camel idea, and it came about, because in his saddle bags he carried a book of travels by Abbe Huc, entitled "Travels in China and Tartary," in which the camel was often mentioned. This book, which he would read aloud to Carson in their various camps, and the type of country they were traversing, caused him to report upon arrival in Washington, the camel as the beast of burden for the Southwest. But, as before stated, Gliddon was the first to give out the idea, which appeared in one of his Consular reports.

The facts as to the obtaining of the camels, for use of our army in the desert country of the Southwest, are about these: In 1851 when the army appropriation bill was before Congress, Jefferson Davis, then a senator from Mississippi, proposed an amendment providing for the purchase of camels, with the necessary equipment, for use in the Southwest, together with the importation of ten Arab drivers. This was during the days of the gold rush to California, but the Davis amendment was lost. The California papers then took the matter up, clamoring for a "Lightning Dromedary Express," and their persistence resulted in 1854, in an appropriation of \$30,000—then a huge sum—for the purchase of camels.

The next step was to procure them and bring them to the United States. Major Henry C. Wayne of the Quartermaster's Department of the army was detailed to proceed to North Africa and Asia Minor for this purpose. His orders specified that he was to go to Spezia in Italy, and there find the U. S. Ship "Supply," commanded by Lieutenant D. D. Porter (Admiral during the Civil War) which was to sail along the coast of North Africa and to Smyrna picking such camels as were deemed serviceable and take them to the port of Indianola, Texas. It is here proper to say that in 1851, when the camel question first came up in Congress, Major Wayne had been detailed to make a study of the camel, and so interested did he become that, in spite of the failure of the bill in Congress, he kept adding to his camel knowledge by all sorts of study and inquiry on the beast. And this knowledge was further added to by visiting zoological gardens in London and Paris prior to joining the "Supply" at Spezia.

In the American Legion Monthly for January 1928, is a fine article by Robert Ginsburgh entitled, "The Camels Are Coming," and from this is quoted how the first camel was obtained by Major Wayne:

"The vessel dropped anchor off the Geoletta, port of Tunis, August 4, 1855, on a market day and Wayne and Porter went ashore. The natives eyed the American Army and Navy representatives with mingled feelings of curiosity and suspicion as they marched through the crooked lanes leading to the market place. Veiled Mohammedan women risked the curse of Allah to peer at their military figures. A swarm of small children followed at their heels and every Oriental with an eye for business offered them all the bargains in the city's trading center.

"Camels were selling cheap that day but no sooner did Wayne seek a question when the prices jumped miraculously. The Arab auctioneer muttered something unintelligible, but a kindly self interpreter, with the aid of his hands and feet, explained to Wayne that the price asked was the equivalent of twenty dollars.

"Sold. I'll take one."

"Wayne raised his arm and nodded his head. As he began to fumble in his pockets for the necessary cash, a cheer broke forth in the market place. Never before in the memory of those who gathered daily on the "Camel Exchange" had an animal been sold on the first quotation. The surprised auctioneer offered to escort the beast to the American's lodging, and as he started, flanked on one side by the camel and on the other by representatives of the American Army and Navy, the motley crowd followed. The triumphal procession marched to the water's edge and stopped while the camel was invited to get aboard a Tunisian craft.

"The beast refused. He was coaxed, cajoled and finally whipped, but he held his ground successfully. Several enterprising sailors of the "Supply" had rigged up a block and tackle and were about to hoist him aboard when a Tunisian custom official arrived and stopped the proceedings.

"Camels could not be taken out of Tunis without a permit. Wayne and Porter had overlooked the little formality. While they debated as to their next step, the disinterested camel sat down in its tracks and blinked at the entire performance.

"The American Consul-General, W. P. Chandler, was appealed to but even he could not get the embargo lifted without special permission of the Bey of Tunis. An interview was ar-

ranged with Mohammed Pasha, the Bey, and after the usual diplomatic formalities were exchanged the Americans informed the ruler of their mission. He listened attentively and volunteered to go down to the docks in person to expedite the immediate shipment of the camel. As soon as he saw the beast which required his personal intervention, a broad grin broke over his bronzed countenance. He cast a glowing glance at his subjects who were still assembled in large numbers at the water's edge, and formally authorized the exportation of one camel beyond the continental limits of the realm of Tunis.

* * *

“By this time the patient camel, unaccustomed to such formalities, had grown restless and it required a number of natives to control him. With the entire crew of the “Supply” and a number of Tunesian volunteers, the first of Uncle Sam's publicly owned camels was finally placed on the native craft, rowed alongside the “Supply” and hoisted aboard. He was stowed in a stall below decks.”

On Feb. 15, 1856, the “Supply” left Smyrna for the United States with thirty-three full grown animals and one small calf; and with them were some Arab attendants. During the voyage four camels died, but six had been born on the trip, so thirty-six beasts were landed at Indianola.

Camp Verde near Kerrville, Texas, was selected as the eastern end of the camel route, Fort Davis (Texas), as an intermediate station, and Fort Yuma, California, as the western terminal point. Shortly after landing at Indianola the camels were taken to Camp Verde, with their Arab drivers. At Camp Verde a regular Asiatic caravansary was built at considerable expense to the government, and the route was then inaugurated. Six months after the arrival of the first batch, forty more were landed at Galveston, and sent to Fort Davis and thence west, so that at one time it was not an uncommon thing to see detachments of soldiers with camel pack transportation in El Paso and Tucson.

The American camel experiment was doomed to failure, for a reason which even in their own native countries, they have been known to be rendered useless, and which is best described in the quotation below from Lawrence's “Revolt in the Desert”, (page 80, last paragraph) a most entertaining work only recently published—Lawrence says: “Camels brought up on the sandy plains of the Arabian coast had delicate pads to their feet; and if such animals were taken suddenly inland for long marches over flints or other hard-retaining ground their soles would burn and at

least crack in a blister; leaving quick flesh two or more niches across, in the center of the pad. In this state they could march over sand; but if, by chance, the foot came down on a pebble, they would stumble, or flinch as though they had stepped on fire, and in a long march might break down altogether unless they were very brave."

At first, the imported animals were found to be very hardy, and the first practical test made to find out if they were as good as pack mules and wagon mules was a success. On one occasion a train consisting of wagons drawn by army mules and a caravan of six camels were sent a distance of sixty miles, over an average frontier road. The result was much in favor of the camels. Two wagons with a combined load of $1\frac{1}{2}$ tons, each wagon drawn by six big army mules, took four days to make the trip. The six camels carrying the same load made the trip in two and a half days. On another occasion the camel was tested over a rough, stony road during time that it was raining, and wet and muddy, and again beat the wagons.

But the real test had not come. As summer came, there were long droughts accompanied by hot winds and sand storms. Typically Saharan. The camels carried more than the mules could pull, and needed less water and food, but the camels began to lag behind the mule trains—what was the cause? The staunchest friends of the camels acknowledged that they could not stand the small, flinty rocks in the Texas, New Mexico and Arizona soil. These igneous rocks literally cut the soft padded feet of the camels to pieces when the soil was dry. When the soil was wet from the rain the beasts could travel with absolutely no discomfort. As the Southwest is very dry most of the time, the camels proved useless.

Reference to the use of a camel in Price's "Across the Continent with the Fifth Cavalry," in the second paragraph on page 61, reads, "On Captain Whiting's arrival at Camp Verde, Texas, (August 1857) en route to his station (Camp Sabinal) he exchanged his pack mules for a camel, which proved an unmitigated nuisance, as it was always late getting into camp. The cavalry in Texas did not take kindly to camel transportation, and the experiment was soon abandoned."

There was another drawback to the use of camels, and that was that they frightened the horses and mules traveling with them. Horses ran away and mules turned over their wagons; and, too, the soldiers had no patience with these beasts from foreign parts. At the beginning of the Civil War when Camp Verde

fell into the hands of the Confederates, the camels proved a burden to them, and some were sold and others turned loose. This action was followed at other camel stations, accounting for the few that later were seen from time to time in a practically wild state.

A mining company in Nevada—after the army experiment—tried them, but this company also concluded that they were useless, and thus passed from the scene of worldly endeavors the use of the camel in the Southwest. These animals, in small numbers, seem now to be used to good advantage in motion picture desert scenes, but this is because they are used in a strictly sandy country where there are no flinty pebbles to injure their feet, and besides, these camels are never subjected to the long marches under varying weather conditions as were the old army camels which demonstrated fully that they were not a beast of burden for the Southwest.

Addenda

The foregoing article was written about April 1st, 1928. On the 15th I was in Tucson, Arizona, and while having dinner at the Old Pueblo Club with Mr. Ed Vail, of the Vail Cattle Company, we got to talking of the army camels in the Southwest. Mr. Vail, a splendid young old man of about 80, told me that when he first came to Arizona in 1878, he remembered that people often spoke of a small herd of camels running at large in the Gila valley in the region of Florence. He further said he knew Hi Jolly, who at that time was living in Tucson, well, now Hi Jolly was the head cameleer brought over from Asia Minor when the first camels were brought over; and he got his name from the soldiers at Camp Verde who preferred Hi Jolly to Hadji (one who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca) as the Arab was respectfully called by the other Arabian cameleers under him.

Historian's Note—Colonel C. C. Smith sends the following clipping from the Los Angeles Times of May 6th, 1928, which shows that they still plan to make the camel a useful beast of burden in our arid southwest, as they did seventy years ago.

CAMELS SERVE AS TAXICABS TO DESERT RESORT: Arrangements are being made by the Southern Pacific Railroad to provide accommodations on its Indio station grounds in the Coachella Valley, for a herd of camels, which will carry travelers to nearby points of interest in the desert. Last week a caravan of four camels met the Sunset Limited and gave sight-seers a thrill, carrying them on camelback across the desert sands to the palm-shaded oasis of Biskra, a few miles distant.

The test showed the camels are very popular with Easterners and Californians alike. Charles H. Jonas, who obtained the cooperation of the railroad officials, is negotiating with Sherman I. Horne, one of America's chief importers of foreign animals, for the purchase of a camel herd, which will establish a permanent caravan service between Indio and the Biskra oasis and other near-by points of interest.