

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Camels vs Mules**

Numerous accounts have been written about the government's experiment in transportation with camels in California but still that bit of early history is unfamiliar to many persons. We find in Edward F. Beale's "Wagon Road From Fort Defiance to Colorado River." this reference to the camel train dated Nov. 1857: "The expedition in charge of Lt. Beale sent out to examine a mail route from some point in New Mexico to San Francisco arrived in Cajon Pass Saturday night last. There were 24 camels and dromedaries, a few Arabs, mules, etc."

The reasons for importing these animals into California goes back to the peace treaty signed at the close of the war between the United States and Mexico, when the United States was given the stretch of territory embracing what is now California, Nevada, Utah, Western Colorado, Arizona as far south as the Gila river, and a bit of Western New Mexico—a territory that had constituted nearly half of the Republic of Mexico. The control of this vast area fell to the United States Army, and it brought new and difficult problems.

Aside from the army's duty to protect travelers from hostile Indians, to explore and survey, lay out roads, provide safe and expeditious transit for the mails, the problem of transportation was the important one. How could supplies be carried to the inland posts and how could the thousands of army mules and cavalry horses be kept in forage in that arid region? It was then that men conversant with the conditions in the Southwest ventured the opinion that camels might meet the needs for the situation.

Jefferson Davis in 1853 became secretary of war under President Pierce and at once began a campaign to have a number of camels brought in from the Near East, remembering how the English had successfully used them in India, and how Napoleon used them in his Egyptian campaign. Congress appropriated \$30,000, with which to secure a specific number of the animals, brought from the Near East, along with a few native drivers and the necessary equipment. Two different lots were purchased, at an average price of \$250 a head, brought to this country in a naval vessel, and landed off the coast of Texas. They were kept at a post near San Antonio for a time and were used for packing, scouting,

and hauling of heavy loads, according to an article written by A. A. Gray, "Camels in California," appearing in the California Historical Quarterly.

When Beale was starting his undertaking to open the 35<sup>th</sup> parallel road across Northern Arizona to the Colorado, he was ordered to make use of some of the camels, and deliver them at Fort Tejon. He was willing to try them and gave them a thorough test. He encountered many difficulties. Most of the imported drivers were unreliable; the United States soldiers did not like the beasts, and neglected them and even abused them; and they terrorized the horses and mules they encountered. But Beale was steadfast in his regard for them, and declared that in certain ways they were superior to the much-vaunted mule.

(More on Monday)