

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Government Camel

The reference to camels and Arabs in California led us to an acquaintance with Hadji Ali, one of the native drivers, an excellent man of Greek and Arab blood who had been invaluable to Edward F. Beale, a former Navy lieutenant, employed by the Secretary of War to head the camel expedition to California.

In 1855, when the camels were being taken to Fort Tejon from San Antonio, Texas, Beale apparently did not deem it necessary to take all the animals directly to the fort. Ali, who did his best to train the utterly unresponsive soldiers to pack and guide the animals, came through Cajon Pass with two of the camels en route to Los Angeles.

On the outskirts of the city, which was then a sleepy pueblo, Hadji Ali paused long enough to don his native camel driver's costume with the tiny bells, in order that he might make his entry in proper style, relates George William Beattie in "Heritage of the Valley," a historical account of San Bernardino's First Century.

The camels created a sensation among men and beasts, especially among the aristocratic Spanish caballos, who reared and plunged and ran away at the sight of such strange, humped creatures. Amusing tales are told of Hadji Ali's stay among the "Angelenos." He and his charges were as good as a circus, and wherever they went they were followed by small boys and Indians clamoring for rides, so historians tell us.

In the years that followed after his services as camel driver were ended, Hadji Ali remained in the West and became widely known throughout the country, his name being corrupted to "High Jolly." During the Civil War days he rendered valiant service as a carrier of dispatches between desert posts. He died in 1902, in Arizona near the Colorado River, on the desert he knew and loved so well.

Motorists traveling from Blythe to Wickenburg on Highway 60-70 will observe off to the left a monument, which upon closer observation they will discover was erected to Hadji Ali, affectionately marked "High Jolly."

Beale was enthusiastic over the behavior of the camels in his 1200 mile trek, in midsummer, over barren country where water and forage were scarce, with passes and dangerous trails. They could go from six to

ten days without drinking, and grew fat on the coarse desert shrubs where mules and horses would have starved. Beale dubbed them the "noblest brutes on earth."

But the camel experiment as a whole was a failure. Every historian we have contacted, relates that the American soldiers simply would not work with them, and the camels were used less and less. Some were sold—some were turned loose to forage for themselves – a procedure which seems to have been perfectly acceptable to them—but most of them were kept on at army posts to consume expensive forage until the post officers grew desperate.

In 1862, after Lincoln signed the bill for the construction of the transcontinental railroad, the camels then remaining were ordered sold at auction. But even then they did not disappear from the picture at once. As late as 1900 a few of these ships of the desert that had been set adrift were sighted now and then by scouts in the isolated parts of Southern Arizona and Northern Sonora in Mexico, white with age, and with sharp, pronged hoofs.

In 1934 the Los Angeles Times announced the death in Griffith Park, of a one-time government camel, at the age of nearly 100 years. Today probably the sole reminder of this experiment in transportation in California is a skeleton in the Smithsonian Institute of a camel that was killed in a battle with one of his fellows at Fort Tejon, according to a story told in Gray's "Camels in California."