

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Monterey County Buffalo

One of the most colorful episodes in the history of Monterey County and the coast country south of Carmel, concerns the raising of buffalo, both as a pure strain and crossed with ordinary beef cattle. In my research after hearing this story, I came across an article in an old Issue of The Herald, unsigned, but amusing, which told of residents down the coast who had experienced the reign of the buffalo.

The late Cecil Gretter, well known Pacific Grove pharmacist, was the authority for most of the true story of an old buffalo, called Bonito. As a youngster he had been "nurse maid" to Bonito, one of the most ferocious bull buffalo ever to leave the prairies. Old Bonito once leaped into the bay off Pacific Grove and swam all the way around the point, before coming ashore to hunt down the cow hands that were after him.

He demolished buildings, derailed the Southern Pacific engine, and all together proved himself unsociable.

Frank Post of the Post ranch below the Big Sur, told a story about the experiences they had there with buffalo, including an experience driving a herd of them north along the coast.

The buffalo never proved much of a success because of their cantankerous disposition, either pure strain, or crossed with domestic cattle. Finally, their culture was abandoned.

But the story is one that will grow into legend.

According to Frank Post: "It was sometime in 1892 when Mr. Molera brought the first buffalo on the ranch. The animal had a reputation for having killed "one or two men" already.

That one died but soon after Mr. Molera had another bull and several buffalo cows sent down the coast. How they behaved is best told in the words of Frank Post.

"One morning, Lizzie, Joe's wife, drove the cows in from across the Rio for milking. From the hill the buffalo saw the cows and down he came, tore through everything—caught the bottom of the corral gate with his horns and threw the gate high in the air over his back—marches in and clears everybody out of the corral.

"Manuel Amesquita and Sylvester Gilkey, who were giving a hand in milking, cleared a 7-foot board wall. This was the side of the barn which formed one side of the cow corral. The hay was even with the top of this board siding.

"Vester (Sylvester) as we called him, got the hay fork jabbed several times into the buffalo's nose. This, however, did not better the situation.

"The beast, with all his weight and bulk, made a lunge and leaped clean over this seven-foot barrier and on the top of the hay. Manuel and Vester shinnied up on the uprights of the barn and took refuge on the crossbeams.

"The buffalo, seeing that he had them all well treed, lunged off the hay to the ground with the cows, then tore the end off of the corral large enough to admit a freight engine. Of course, he was then in the lot by the dwelling house.

"The women folks who were cooped up in the house didn't dare to open the door and step out. The buffalo was strutting around emitting that peculiar but familiar grunt common among the bulls of this species. All day and all night the cows were not milked.

"Next day, Joe, my brother, goes down, to see Cooper's foreman, Juan Artillan, for help and to see what could be done. Juan says: 'This is just what I have been waiting for. I'm just itching for a round with that buffalo.'

"He calls on the men on the ranch, Abalardo Cooper, John Pate, Solomon Orantes and Juanito Artillan. Up they came riding the best saddle horses on the ranch.

"When they arrived on the scene Juan says 'ond esta.' The bull all this time was on the farthest end of the lot herding the cows. Juan say a 'afora beras.' Then he takes his riata, but by the time he got near the bull, who had been watching him all the time, the bull left the cows and just flew over the ground after Juan or Juan's horse — the bull was not particular.

"Let me tell you Juan soon found out a lot of two or three acres is not big enough ground for to tackle a bull buffalo. At every thrust the horn of the bull would comb the hair of Juan's horses' tall.

"While the bull was taken up after Juan, two or three riatas from the other horsemen fell short. Finally, Joe swung and threw his riata with all his strength. It, too, fell short, but in some way or other the bull got his hind

foot in the loop. Joe gave the riata a terrific yank, the noose tightened around the shin.

“Joe, having only the bare end of his riata to take two or three turns around the horn of his saddle, he then yelled for the others to hurry. A tremendous kick on the bull’s part nearly knocked Joe’s horse off his feet. By this time the other ropes were on the bull and in short order they had him sprawling on the ground.”