



Camels in Texas?

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

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(Date) Decades ago, our family took a quick trip to the Davis Mountains State Park. While my brothers and I were out “hiking”—I guess boys walking around the countryside is some form of hiking—we engaged with a park ranger. We talked about many things such as old Fort Davis that lay just over the hill from the park, the lodge in the park, and some of the many flora and fauna one could find if one looked deeply enough. As we left he gave us a good piece of advice—watch out for rattlesnakes—and then said something that at the time sounded strange to me and that I did not understand. As he walked away he said, “You might just see some camels if you look hard enough.”

At the time, I thought to myself that there were no camels in Texas, but years later I learned that, yes, there were once camels in Texas and that a legend still persists that some of the descendants of a U.S. Army experiment to bring camels to Texas in the 1850s still roam the lands in far West Texas. Like many legends, the presence of camels in present-day Texas is just part of the passing-down of myth and folklore, but the military test of using camels as transport animals in the region is all too true.

The story of camels in Texas begins with Jefferson Davis when he was a senator from Mississippi before he became the president of the Confederate States of America. Davis was an avid supporter of western expansion of the United States, especially into the vast interior region of the Rocky Mountain interior and—particularly—the desert Southwest. Both of those regions served as somewhat of a barrier to reach the goldfields and ports and harbors of California. The Chihuahuan and Sonora Deserts were a specific obstacle due to their heat and lack of water and vegetation. But Davis had a plan: on two different occasions Davis took to the Senate floor and pitched his idea of using camels as pack animals for the army and eventually migrants moving west. After all, camels were the preferred animals in the Sahara, Gobi, and deserts all over the globe, so why not use them here?

Davis' fellow senators did not agree with his plan and voted it down both times, but in 1853 President Franklin Pierce made Davis his Secretary of War. As the head of the War Department, in 1855 Davis used \$30,000 appropriated to his department for road building to buy more than thirty camels. He then tapped Major Henry Wayne to trek to North Africa to acquire the camels. Wayne traveled to Egypt, Algeria, and Tunisia from April 1855 through early 1856. He then loaded thirty-four camels, as well as seven native "wranglers" to help train soldiers to care and ride the animals, onto a transport ship and set sail. He landed in Indianola with the first shipment of camels headed for Texas, and his initial number was later joined by a second ship that off-loaded forty-one more camels for the same purpose.

The "camel corps," along with their native handlers and the infantry company assigned to the project, marched overland to Camp Verde near present-day Kerrville in the southern region of the Hill Country, which would serve as the headquarters for the experiment. The primary duty for the camels was to haul supplies between Camp Verde and San Antonio, a duty for which—by all reports—they performed with great skill. They were also used to make long-distance treks in support of Army expeditions to survey and map roads into West Texas. The first came in 1857 when they were part of the establishment of the 35th Parallel Wagon Road that stretched from Fort Defiance, New Mexico to Fort Tejon, north of Los Angeles. The bed of this old road would eventually become part of the path of historic Route 66.

The camels also became the primary pack animals for Army expeditions into the Trans-Pecos region. According to the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo that ended the U.S.-Mexican War, the Army was charged with protecting the Mexican border from Indian and outlaw raids. That meant the Army Topographical Corps had to survey roads and scout sites for possible fortifications. The expedition left Camp Verde and marched overland to Fort Stockton (it was only Camp Stockton at that time and was essentially little more than a waystation with temporary buildings), and then overland through the rough Chihuahuan Desert to Fort Bliss. This journey proved the camels' worth and viability for such travel. The army had to haul feed for their horses and mules, but the camels ate whatever they could find such as prickly pear, ocotillo, and creosote. The soldiers also had to load water for their horses, but the camels subsisted on drinking only when the excursion came across infrequent streams. The troop lost over thirty mules and horses, but every camel made it through. Expedition commander Lt. William Echols wrote in his report that, "If it were not for the camels, surely our expedition would have failed."

The Camp Verde camels became the property of the Confederate States of America with the outbreak of the Civil War, and the southern soldiers continued to use them to haul supplies to San Antonio and the occasional trip into the Trans-Pecos to haul provisions to Fort Davis. When the war ended the United States Army once again took control of the camels, but ultimately determined that the experiment was not a long-term practical solution. Camels have soft feet and thus were ill-suited for the rocky outcroppings that dotted much of the American Southwest. They are also notoriously ill-tempered beasts and the American soldiers could never quite learn the tact of handling their dispositions. Besides such difficulties, the current Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, came to despise any part of the War Department that had to do with former Confederate Jefferson Davis—including the camel experiment. He declared an end to the project in 1866 and ordered the camels sold to private owners. Some of the camels, both before and after the trial, escaped into the wild and camel sightings were reported through the 1950s, becoming the basis of the “legend” I learned about decades ago. So, there really were once camels in Texas.

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