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## CAMELS IN THE MINES

By DAN DEQUILLE<sup>1</sup>

THUS far the camel has never proved a success in any mining region on the Pacific Coast. One would suppose that the animal could be employed to advantage in many of the desert sections lying westward of the Rocky Mountains, but such seems not to be the case. Camels can only be used in level and sandy regions for transportation purposes. In the mountains they soon become footsore. Owing to the peculiar formation of their feet they cannot withstand the sharp rocks of the mountain roads, and it is in the mountains that the work of the mines lies. For packing ore over the rocky trails of mining regions one good mule is worth half a dozen camels.

The only use to which camels can be put in the Pacific Coast country is in packing salt, soda, borax and similar mineral products of the desert regions to the railroad lines. They have been tried in Nevada in transporting salt from the desert marshes to the reduction works of the Comstock, but were found unprofitable. The camel may be fast enough for an Arab, but he is too slow for an American. Wherever a camel can travel in comfort one may go with a wagon. In the business of salt transportation in Nevada, trains of wagons and big mule teams soon ran the camels off the track.

Originally twelve camels were brought to Nevada. It was before there was a railroad anywhere in the Great Basin region. The animals appeared to be as much at home here as in their habitat in the Old World. They found here the artemesia and many of the same bitter and prickly shrubs that are native to the desert regions of Asia. When the occupation of the camels as packers of salt was gone they

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1. Dan DeQuille was a resident of Virginia City, Nevada, and author of *History of the Big Bonanza* (Hartford, 1876).

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The basic story of the importation of camels for service in the Southwest can be found in Lewis Burt Lesley, ed., *Uncle Sam's Camels*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1929.

were sold to some Mexicans who used them for a time in packing wood down out of the mountains. The Mexicans took them up rocky trails into the rugged hills and used them the same as they use a mule—unmercifully. They soon killed three of the poor animals and would have killed the remainder had not a Frenchman who owned a big ranch on the Carson river taken pity on the poor abused creatures and bought the whole of them. This Frenchman had been in Algeria with the French army, where he had acquired an affection for the camel—probably owed the animal a debt of gratitude for saving his life on some occasion. He had no use for the beasts and therefore turned them out to roam the desert plains at their “own sweet will” and enjoy themselves.

The animals soon waxed fat and increased and multiplied. In a few years the herd numbered thirty-six, old and young. The Frenchman then sold the whole lot to be taken down to Arizona to be used in packing ore down off a big mountain range. It was said there was a good smooth trail, but the animals found all the rocks and soon became foot-sore and useless, when all were turned adrift to shift for themselves. They wandered away until they reached a region on the borders of the Gila. There they found a climate and pasturage suited to their habits and taste, and there they have been running wild for many years. It is said they have broken up into several herds as they multiplied, and these herds are scattered in various directions. Of late it is reported that the cattlemen have been shooting the animals for some reason; perhaps because they frighten and stampede their horses. No one knows how many camels are now running at large in the wilds of the Gila country, but there must be a great number. One is occasionally caught. Three years ago one was caught near Gila Bend that measured over nine feet in height. It was supposed to have strayed from one of the herds roaming that region.

#### *The Dutchman Who Killed A Camel*

When the camels were first taken down to Arizona to be used in packing ore one of them was shot and killed by a

German miner. The man who did the deed suffered about as much distress of mind as did the sailor who killed the albatross. The German was working for a mining company at a place about three miles from where were located the men who were trying to use the "ships of the desert" as "prairie schooners" in carrying ore down from the mountains. The man did not know there was such an animal as a camel on the American continent—probably in all his life had never seen a camel.

The German had a "jager" which he had brought from the old country. With this rifle he had brought down many a chamois in his native land. Every Sunday he was out with his tremendous old "jager." He brought home no game, but always came in loaded to the muzzle with stories of the bear, deer, mountain lions and other animals he had seen and desperately wounded.

One Sunday Hans came tearing into camp about ten times as wild-eyed as usual. "Poys," cried he as soon as he could get his breath — "poys, I haf shooted a hel-ak." (elk.)

"A what?" asked one of the men.

"A hel- ak— a hel-ick!" cried Hans—"Mine Gott, es war de biggerest, moas' grosseren hel ak das in all Arizona ge-was!"

"He means to say that he has shot a monstrous big elk," explained some one.

"Yaw, a hel- ak," said Hans—"So wahr mir Gott helfe, es ist biggeresten hel- ak das in all dese mountains sall wohnen!"

"Big horns like this?" queried an old miner, drawing his neck down into his chest and spreading his arms abroad.

"No horn at all," said Hans—"She was a frau hel-ak, she vas der grandmother of all der hel-aks in the worltd!"

As Hans was able to show blood on his knife, gun and hands, the men concluded that he had at last really killed a beast of some kind. Horses were caught up and two men sent with Hans to bring in the meat—of which he said there was "more as a vagon-load."

Hans insisted upon all hands taking guns, as he said he had seen a large drove of the elk just across a little valley from where he had downed his victim. As the men rode along with him across the country, Hans honestly owned that he had never before seen an elk. He had heard so much said about the elk, however, that he thought he knew the build of the animal.

Probably Hans dashed up to the spot where lay stretched the dead camel. Dismounting he threw his beloved "jager" across his game, then as the others came up he laid a finger on his lips and pointed in the direction of a range of low hills. He wanted no noise made for he was in just the right humor to creep over the hills and slaughter the whole herd.

In his anxiety to make sure of his game, Hans had nearly sawed off the head of the poor camel. When his companions came up they were for some moments at a loss as to just what kind of huge creature Hans had stretched upon the plain.

Presently one of the men who was a Comstocker cried out:

"By the holy poker, he has killed one of the camels that belong over at the other camp! Here is a nice mess! I have no doubt the animal is worth all of a thousand dollars."

"Gott in himmel, wort a tousand dollar!" cried Hans—"Ah mein lieber! Ah, Gott, if we could only kill dem all it is more as twenty tousand dollar in our pocket!"

It was long before Hans could be made to understand that the "boot was on the other foot"—that the owner of the camel would demand \$1000 for it.

"Ach der teufel!" cried Hans. "Potz wetter! Das kameel! das kameel! Is it den one kameel I have killed?"

"Yes, a camel," said one of the men, "and the men who own the camel will be after you."

"Donner wetter!" cried Hans.

As the men with Hans did not wish to be caught near the dead camel all hands beat a hasty retreat for home.

When they got back to the mine and told of Hans' latest exploit with his old "jager" the whole camp was in a roar.

For three or four days Hans endured being pointed out

to all comers as "the man who shot the camel," then he came up missing, and his old "jager" with him.

At meals, and on all occasions when Hans appeared among the employes of the mining company, the killing of the camel was made the topic of conversation. The atrocity of the act would be enlarged upon, and the value of the slain beast gravely discussed. Several had held that for show purposes—for use in a menagerie—the animal was worth \$1500, and the lowest estimate was \$800, which was for his use as a pack animal. This talk did not serve to give Hans an appetite—it was poor sauce to his victuals. Then the men always went through the ceremony of placing some one on guard as a picket, that the owner of the camel might not come and catch them all in a bunch at meal-time.

All this so worked upon the mind of poor Hans that one night he "folded his tent" and in imitation of the Arab, "silently stole away."

Five months later the Comstocker—a millwright named Tom Alchorn—went to a camp about a hundred miles away, in another part of Arizona, to work upon a set of hoisting works. At the first meal, when all hands about the mine were seen together, Tom recognized among them Hans, his former fellow-workman.

"Well, by the holy poker!" cried Tom—"here is Hans! Here is the man that shot the camel!"

Tom Alchorn was then, of course, called upon for the story of the killing of the camel and before it was half finished Hans had slipped away from the table. That night the poor fellow disappeared from the mine. The after history of Hans was unknown to my friend Alchorn, but it is probable that he is still occasionally recognized by some one in some camp of Arizona or New Mexico as "the man who killed the camel."

#### *The Result of an Attempt to Shear a Camel*

With the herd of camels when it was owned by the Frenchman on the Carson river was a huge old bull camel that was known as "old Heenan." He was a giant and the patriarch of the herd. He had hair on parts of his body that

was from a foot to eighteen inches in length. The animals ranged down the valley of the Carson nearly to old Fort Churchill. At Sam Buckland's ranch, a mile above the fort, several Mexican vaqueros were employed. These men had often seen the big camel and had looked with covetous eyes upon the long silken hair that hung from his huge frame. They thought this hair might be spun into beautiful riatas and braided into many handsome forms of reins and ornaments for bridles.

One fine spring morning two of the Mexicans—Antonio and Gedonio—equipped themselves with a pair of sheep-shears and a lasso and set out to catch and shear "Old Heenan."

Usually the "ferocity" of a camel is on a par with that of a sheep, despite all hissing, showing of teeth and venomous looks. There is one season of the year, however; when the old bulls are really very vicious. The Mexicans had sallied forth in the midst of this season, but were unaware of the fact.

Old Heenan was found guarding his harem on a greasewood plain near the river. The Mexicans were mounted upon mustangs and dared not go near the herd on horseback. The sight and smell of a camel sets all ordinary horses wild; for some reason terrifies and stampedes them. Gedonio dismounted and taking with him the lasso, left Antonio to hold the two horses and the shears.

Gedonio found the big camel easy to approach. The old fellow stood stock still, dreamily chewing his cud with half closed eyes. The lasso swished through the air and in a moment was about Old Heenan's neck. Then, as the patriarch felt the rope tighten about his neck, the fun began.

Alongside the giant beast the Mexican looked a mere pigmy. When Old Heenan realized that the small two-legged creature was actually trying to "gather him in" his little eyes turned green with rage. Hissing like a red-hot locomotive, he charged Gedonio.

The little Mexican held to the rope for a time, thinking to choke the camel down, but found the animal apparently able to subsist as long without "wind" as without water. Be-

sides, Heenan made for him so rapidly that he could get no square pull on the beast. At last Gedonio was so hard pressed that he was forced to drop the lasso and take to his heels.

By this time Heenan was thoroughly enraged. The Mexican tried to dodge the irate beast among the bunches of greasewood, but these being only two or three feet high afforded poor cover. He then struck for the river, intending to climb one of the cottonwoods on the bank of the stream, but Heenan was so close at his heels that there was no time for climbing and he was obliged to plunge into the river.

Not being able to swim Gedonio was obliged to halt when the water came up to his chin. Heenan charged down to the water's edge and there stood on guard. Though the old fellow would not enter the water he made the Mexican very unhappy by spitting showers of acrid saliva into his face and eyes.

Meantime Antonio, who had witnessed his partner's inglorious retreat, became uneasy. He feared he was either drowned or killed, as he could see neither man or camel after they plunged down the bank toward the river. Leading his mustangs he ventured near the bank of the river and shouted: "Gedonio! Gedonio!"

Gedonio heard and begged Antonio to come to his relief, explaining the situation. He told Antonio to tie the two mustangs together and leave them, then slip down the bank, get hold of the trailing end of the lasso and tie it to a tree.

All went well until Antonio was about to pass the end of the lasso round the tree. It would not reach by a foot or two and he hauled upon it. That attracted the attention of Old Heenan and he went for Antonio open-mouthed.

Up the bank went Antonio with the big camel at his heels. He tried to reach the horse to mount and ride off, but at the sight of the camel the mustangs gave a snort of terror and dashed away.

Heenan's attention being attracted to the horses he gave chase to them, much to the relief of Antonio who had plunged headfirst into a bunch of sagebrush to conceal himself from the enemy.

Presently the two men got together and went in search of their horses. Half a mile up the river they found both animals drowned in a deep hole, with Old Heenan upon the bank, standing guard over them. It was only after infinite trouble that the two Mexicans were able to recover their saddles and bridles, and as they sneaked home to Buckland's that evening they were sadder and wiser men. They "went for wool and came back shorn"—even their shears were lost.

The pair told all manner of lies to account for the drowning of their horses, but as it happened the Frenchman who owned the camels had climbed a tree to watch the Mexicans, not knowing what they were after, and had witnessed the whole affair. When the true story reached the ranch there were a thousand jokes among the men about the fun to be had in performing the feat of "shearing a bull camel in the rutting season."

Sam Buckland, himself, was the boss joker, and almost laughed himself sick over the business. The two Mexicans stood the joking about a week, then disappeared between two days; two of Buckland's best and fastest horses disappearing at the same time. Then Sam's merriment was turned to wrath. He would hear no more of the jokes in which his heart had formerly delighted. He told his men that there had already been "too much said about shearing camels."