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J Ross Browne in the Apache Country

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J. ROSS BROWNE: SELF-PORTRAIT
INTRODUCTION

J. Ross Browne's Adventures in the Apache Country is the account of his experiences on a trip he made in 1863-64 with his good friend, Charles D. Poston, through the almost completely unknown new Territory of Arizona. There was at that time not even a territorial form of government over this piece of valuable property which, with its approximate present boundaries, had been in the possession of the United States since the Gadsden Purchase of 1853. Congress, indeed, seemed scarcely aware of it as a part of the Union, and beyond dispatching a few federal troops for the protection of the settlers, had paid it little attention.

Browne had been in Arizona in 1860, reporting to the government on Indian affairs, and he states that by then the rumors of Arizona's great mineral wealth had attracted capital and miners to the new land, machinery was being brought in, mines were operating, and ore was exported, all with incredible difficulty and risk. But with the outbreak of the Civil War in April 1861, "the only Federal troops in the Territory shamefully and without cause abandoned it." The few remaining loyal citizens and traders were thus left with no protection whatever against the murderous Apaches and Sonorans and fled from the country as fast as they were able. "The hostile Indians, ignorant of our domestic disturbances, believed they had at length stampeded the entire white population. . . . It was their boast, and is still their belief, that they had conquered the American nation."

This was the country into which, on a few hours notice, Browne had agreed to accompany Poston. Where most men might, perhaps, have considered this a journey to be undertaken only with time to ponder carefully and at length, it was typical of Browne that he was able to make the required immediate decision. He was certainly not
unmindful of his responsibilities toward his large family, nor of the dangers involved; but he had always considered, “just enough danger to add spice”* to his adventures, to be a desirable ingredient rather than otherwise. As one inducement to accompany Poston, as he mentions in Apache Country, there was “a chance for locomotion on a grand scale.” Locomotion on any scale had always proved well-nigh irresistible to Browne. It had taken him over a large part of the then-habitable globe, and gained him his considerable reputation as a “great traveler.” On this occasion, however, the chance for “pecuniary compensation” may have provided an even stronger incentive.

From 1860 to 1863 the Browne family had been living in Frankfort, Germany, from which base Ross had traveled extensively—from Africa to Russia to Iceland, and to such parts of Europe as lay between. He sent letters and articles on his travels back to Harpers in New York, to the San Francisco Bulletin, the Sacramento Union, and other publications. However, by late 1862, with the Civil War in progress at home, Browne became concerned lest the American market for his European travel sketches should disappear. With this in mind, in the winter of 1862-63 he made a trip to New York with ambitious plans for a lecture tour—a venture which proved, however, a nerve-racking and expensive failure. So in the spring of 1863 he decided he must return to California with his considerable menage consisting of his wife, Lucy, their seven children, and a Digger Indian servant named Sally. To finance this trip he was forced to mortgage his Oakland property; and he also secured an advance from the government for services he was to render the Indian Department. Worry over these debts had evidently affected his health and accounts for the tone of his letters to Lucy.

Browne’s fears about his European articles may have been justified, but, in his otherwise disastrous sojourn in the East the previous winter, he had found himself better known and more popular as a writer than he had realized—something of a literary lion, in fact. The Harpers were extremely cordial, both socially and editorially; and with the failure of his lecture tour, he recognized that he must continue to rely primarily on his pen to make a living. One cannot doubt that he also saw, in adventuring through Apache country, that here would be practically untouched literary riches for him, which, whatever his luck in any other kind of “feet,” he knew he could turn into gold. Adventures in

* "Washoe Revisited," Harpers, 1868.