

CALICO PRINT

Tales and Trails of the Desert West

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**When the sun went down I sort of waked up. I felt I was going to die.
And then . . .**

MY BURROS BROUGHT ME LIFE

By Adelaide Arnold
June 1952 – CALICO PRINT

I do not remember his name now. Shorty something. We met him on the Mojave Desert in September, 1928. We were off the Copper City road, in our old Franklin touring, cutting across the desert toward a colored peak when we saw him, a short, elderly man with three burros.

At first when he saw us coming he turned his back and walked slowly off with his burros behind him – Babe, Daisy and Sue, in that order. But Babe kept turning back and looking at us. Presently he stopped and we shouted at him. Then, very slowly, he came over toward us.

We asked him how he was and where he was going. At first he answered with little more than grunts. We asked if he would like something to eat. He said he wasn't hungry, but we gave him tea and some of mother's buns and he ate like a starved man. He still had little to say until my husband asked

him if we could get through to Stoddard's Well this way. Of course we were way off the track, as we found afterwards. He asked had we water and we said yes, we had plenty.

He was silent for a long while after that and then he said: "You're the first folks I've seen in seven weeks."

I said: "Were you out looking for gold?"

He shook his head. "Nothing you've ever heard of. I'm looking for bismuth."

Nobody said anything for a little bit. Then he began: "I've had a funny time. Met a man in Barstow. He said to stop looking for gold. What good was it for anybody? He showed me bismuth. He told me that if I went up to Aztec Spring, in the Ords, and went on a certain ways by, there was an outcrop of the proper sort of stone. And he said: 'You'll have water there at Aztec Spring. It's on the south end of a sort of rocky shoulder that comes out, and you have to climb ten or fifteen feet to it. I've prospected through there 20 years, and I've never seen the water even low there. It's good water, and always there.'"

So the prospector had a little rough map he fished out his pocket – it was almost worn out – and he showed that to us and said that was where he went. But it was awfully hot (July or August) and he began to feel queer early in the morning. But he was sure of that spring, so he kept drinking, and he gave the burros the last of their water at noon.

It got hotter and hotter, but he got to the shoulder where the spring should be, and went back and forth. He couldn't find water, and finally he found that strange things that he knew weren't there were coming before his eyes. He took out his shovel and stuck it in the sand under a bush (he showed us how he had done it), then he lay down in the little shadow it made, with his head in as far as he could get.

"Then," he said, "I guess I must have gone out, because nothing was clear to me."

Presently the shadow grew longer and he waked for a bit and then he slipped off. He worried once about his burros and then he didn't worry and more.

"Then I didn't remember until the sun went down in the hills," he went on, "and then in a way I just waked up. I felt I was going to die. I thought of water, but nothing mattered much."

His eyes closed again. Suddenly he felt something cold and wet against his cheek. It brought him to, and it was his burro, Babe, and her muzzle was wet. He said wet sand rubbed off on his cheek.

He showed us then, on the sand, how he managed to sit up. And there were Daisy and Sue, and they were all nuzzling him. And as he sat up, his hand went back and touched Babe's hoof – and it was wet and muddy. He hauled his hand back and stuck the wet mud in his mouth. He said that just acted like magic. It cleared his head.

He looked around and Babe and Daisy and Sue all had wet feet. And he rubbed the wet off and onto his head, and hanging on to Babe, he pulled himself up. Still hanging on, he started them off and they fell in the way they always die – Babe and Daisy and Sue. And in the dusk they went on and on and on.

He looked down once, and there were all the tracks he had made in the daytime – back and forth, back and forth. Before those tracks had ended, Babe turned right up into the rocks and he hung on. And there in the rocks was Aztec Spring. They'd been round and round it. Made a circle around it.

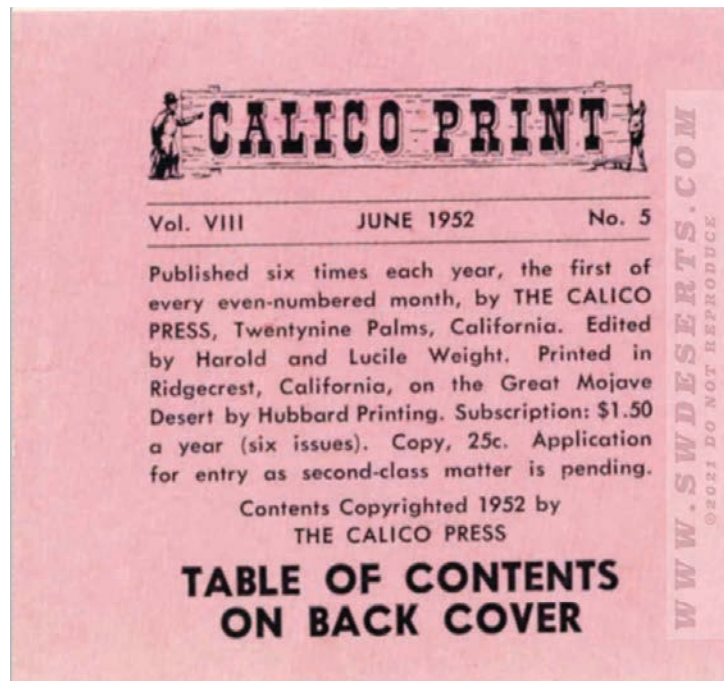
He dropped down to the water and started to drink his fill. But by that time he had enough mind to stop and wait and drink a little more and stop and wait. And he said Babe and Daisy and Sue made little sucking sounds in the water near him, and Babe splashed the water with her hoof. Then he lay there until he was rested and everything was all right.

And when he had told the story he looked at the burros and then at us, “So you understand,” he said, “why if any of us goes hungry – tain’t going to be Babe or Daisy or Sue.”



Adelaide Arnold, Twentynine Palms, is working on “Storyteller’s Moon,” sequel to her Indian book, “Son of the First People,” published by Macmillan. “Wreck of the Gaviota,” a collection of her short stories, was published in England. Macmillan’s short story collection, “Under Stars and Stripes,” includes her “Storm on Navajo Mountain.” Her poem “Wild Horses of the Mojave,” will soon appear in an English poetry anthology. Her verse, articles and stories also have been in Atlantic Monthly, Blackwoods, Colliers, Yale Review and others. Her children’s stories total more than 200.

“Son of the First People” is available for reading on Hathi Trust Digital Library at: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b4087183&view=1up&seq=253>



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