

The Origin of the Burro

Sage and Tumbleweed

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by *Inyokel



A line in fine print in this guide (*The WPA Guide to Death Valley*) answered a question I had never asked, "Where did our burros come from?" The writer credits these ships of the desert to the Spaniards, who also brought the horse to California. I must tell George Francis about that. George is our district attorney, and I have mentioned him in relation to wild asses before. Hearsay, perhaps, but it is rumored abroad that he championed the cause of the lowly companion of Balaam in a weak moment, and has since had to bear the slings and arrows of outrage unfortunates like Bill Reid. Bill is still standing guard over his mulberry trees at Panamint Springs, torn between desperation at the quadrupeds which kick over his garbage every night and fear of the tourists who think the stony-faced beasts just darling."

I wonder whether George has heard that the Death Valley Monument boys are having a tough time keeping the valley signposted? Where trees are forty miles apart a firm white pole is a boon to itchy burros, besides providing an occasional bite or two of breakfast food. Or has it filtered through to him that the Great White Father in Washington has sent two or three experts to us to discover (a) if there are really wild burros here, (b) how many? and (c) what to do? Without doubt two or three White Papers, or perhaps Pinto Papers, in re: "Donkeys" already repose on the President's desk. Donkeys should interest our Chief Democrat. I look for the asses to reach the floor of congress any day. Wouldn't it be a strange prank of fortune if Inyo's young district attorney should ride to Washington on his burros' Stevenson, Sancho Panza, St. Francis, Balaam-the list of donkey lovers grows. Ride 'em, George!

A miner springs to defend the tradition that nobody has ever seen a dead burro by explaining that Old Red, the ancient beast whose demise was recorded herein a month or so ago, did not die from natural causes. It appears that the prospectors at the Minnietta were in the habit of leaving a tub of water outside the door of the cook-shack for Red's use when he felt a thirst coming on. The old hand whose duty this was moved away for a spell, the newcomer forgot it, and the ancient brute was forced to drink of the waste water in the tank by the Little Johnny Mine half a mile below. But the tank contained cyanide of potassium, which dropped him in his tracks. Thus another desert legend remains unsullied. Nobody has ever seen a burro dead from disabilities that would ordinarily be included in a wild ass's life insurance policy.

The Death Valley Chuck-Walla in March, 1907, printed the following: "Elegy Written in the Desert." Since the editor made no apologies, I presume none is called for.

The burro tolls the knell of parting day,
And with his tall shoos one lone fly away.
Then nods his head, and pricks his ears the while
And wonders shall he walk another mile.

The silent herd winds slowly o'er the sand
The man behind-he will not understand
That burros do not wish to climb a hill
When they might just as well be standing still.

And so the outfit plods its weary way
Into the hills, where precious metals may
Lie buried; and the hills are just ahead,
But tired burros might as well be dead.

So, as the sun behind the hill drops down,
The burros cease their toil and turn around,
And with one last despairing bray
Lie down to rest until another day!

On re-reading the troubles of District Attorney Francis with burros, I am afraid I have been a little hard on him. He probably had secret reasons for being kind to dumb animals. He may even have remembered the time he clashed with the all-powerful Church of Rome on the rights of brute creation. And remembering he probably shuddered. For in those days Juan De la Cerda and his wife and a houseful of children lived in the shack at the desert's edge behind the Keeler roundhouse. Because of the children, or because he was a fancier, De la Cerda kept goats. Or rather, he didn't keep them. For they wandered all over town, seeking such tidbits as they could find on clothes lines, in garbage cans and dumps. This was bad enough, but when a particularly playful old billy hid in the post office and played Chinese checkers with stooping patrons peering into the mail-boxes somebody complained to the district attorney. He reported it to the sheriff, who could not corral the goats, but warned the owner. But the "Button, button, who's got the button" business continued, so George was forced to indict a stiff epistle to De la Cerda. That gentleman promptly replied that "the district attorney had better watch his P's and Q's, that De la Cerda had no intention of keeping his goats at home, and if the law mentioned the matter again he would tell the Padre about it, and then where would George Francis be?" So you see how things are.



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