

CAMELS . . .

. . . third in a series of articles by Mr. Warne based on his observations in Iran during his work there as Point 4 Administrator. "The Ghanat" (horizontal well) appeared in the February issue, "Natural Ice Factories" in March.

By WILLIAM E. WARNE

. . . ships of the desert

"THE CAMEL," a wag once said, "is an animal that might have been put together by a committee."

In the deserts of the Middle East the ungainly appearance and the notoriously bad disposition of the camel are ignored. The great beast is seen with a more poetic eye. Camels there are "the ships of the desert"—they have opened overland trade routes to distant and mysterious lands. Caravans have bound countries and people together in ways that have had strong influences in history.

The caravan routes from the Mediterranean to India and from the Persian Gulf to China, east of the Himalayas and west of the Caspian Sea, made ancient Persia the crossroads of the world. The cultural interchange along these routes decorated the Blue Mosque in Isfahan with a Chinese flourish, and placed the Taj Mahal in Indian where Islam's greatest architectural triumph embellishes foreign soil. This interchange scattered Greek coins in bazaars in towns whose rubble even now sometimes gives them up intact.

The horse teamed up with man in prehistoric times, but the camel first appeared as a domesticated animal relatively recently. When he did arrive, the way of life in the Middle East was changed. While it was the horse that made the Persian armies formidable, it was the camel, according to Hejrodotus, that spelled the difference between success and failure when Cyrus defeated Croesus, the Lydian, thus swinging eastward for the first time the pendulum or power in the conflict between East and West.

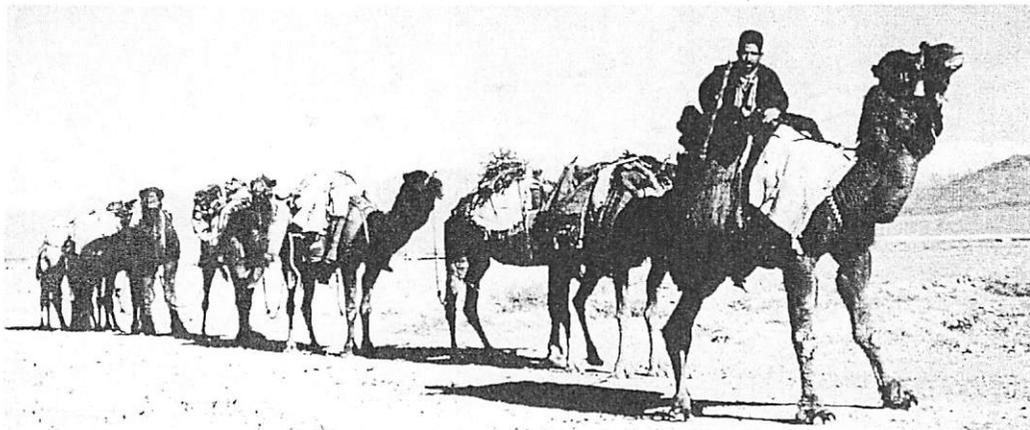
Marco Polo followed to Cathay the caravan route through Persia. Silks, spices, jewels and precious metals were moving over the caravan routes, from China to wealthy cities of Europe, centuries before the Portuguese learned to navigate and started their earth-shaking chain

of explorations. These voyages led to the disappointing discovery by Columbus of a land barrier between Europe and China to the west.

In Asia and Africa, "modern times" have far from eliminated the camel as a carrier, although his "day" may be passing. In Iran one-third of all goods that move in commerce more than 20 miles are carried by the camel. The railroad, truck and bus cannot follow him over the sand trails to the remote villages. In addition to his ability to go for long periods without water, a camel requires only a feeding of straw and to be grazed now and then on seemingly barren hillsides. These beasts can carry great loads 40 miles a day.

Southwestern United States missed most of the romance that the camel might have brought to the American deserts. The great age of the camel was passing before the white man came to the Southwest, and the railroad and automobile soon left the zoo as the only logical place for this beast in all this region. Yet at least four attempts were made to establish the camel here. The most colorful and dramatic left the Hi Jolly marker near Quartzsite, Arizona. The plaque there reads: "The last camp of Hi Jolly, born somewhere in Syria, about 1828, died at Quartzsite, December 16, 1903. Came to this country February 10, 1856. Camel driver, packer, scout. Over thirty years a faithful aid to the U. S. Government."

Hi Jolly was originally Hadji Ali, and the man who bore that name was the most colorful among the group of camel drivers brought along by Major Henry C. Wayne, U.S.A., and Lieutenant David D. Porter, U.S.N., aboard the stores ship "Supply," to tend 33 camels on their voyage from Egypt to Texas. The idea behind this expedition, which was sponsored by Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, was to form an Army Camel Transport Corps. The camels



Camel Caravan in Iran. In background are the snow-clad Elburz Mountains.

had been obtained in Smyrna, Alexandria, Tunis and Constantinople.

Once the camels had been delivered and acclimated, Major Wayne turned them over to Lieutenant Edward F. Beale, former Superintendent of Indian Affairs in California, who had been commissioned to open a wagon road from Fort Defiance to Southern California. It is interesting to note in Major Wayne's meticulous reports to the Secretary of War that he had packed a mature male camel with a load of 1256 pounds.

Despite the excitement that surrounded the passing of Beale's camel caravan all along the route from San Antonio where the train departed June 25, 1857, to the Colorado River where it arrived October 14 and on to Los Angeles, the venture failed.

In 1863 the Army ordered the camels sold, and they were auctioned and soon lost sight of, excepting some that Lieutenant Beale, later General Beale of the Rancho "El Tejon" near Bakersfield, kept on his place. It is recorded that he made a striking figure "in a sulky behind a tandem of camels."

It was the order of President Lincoln in 1862 to start work on a transcontinental railroad that sealed the doom of the camel caravans. But, the Army's experience with camels did not go unnoticed. A merchant in San Francisco, Otto Eschp, imported three shipments of camels from China in 1860 and 1861. These and the remnants of the Army group were reported seen at various mining camps and on expeditions and at work as far north as British Columbia. Some of these animals found their way into zoos, and as late as 1934 newspapers carried reports of the death of the last of them in a zoo in Los Angeles.

Inevitably, legends grew about the camels. More than 40 years ago, around the campfires on the East Mesa in Imperial County, California, we children used to be regaled with stories of the camels that had been seen. Borrego Valley was a favorite place for having seen a camel, as were several isolated palm oases in northern Baja California, even whose names are now forgotten. The Chocolate Mountains, then somehow more mysterious and romantic than now, also were a fitting locale.

Old Mr. Benton had found one there, he said, after hearing a camel bell in the night. Old Mr. Benton certainly was the most authentic prospector of that place and during that day. He spent most of his time following his burro in remote canyons looking for gold and finding it—well, almost finding it. But even the children sensed that sometimes old Mr. Benton embellished a story. Most of the adults were as skeptical as their perceptions of the feelings of old Mr. Benton would permit.

"He thought he heard a camel bell," my mother explained afterward, "and then it was easy to see a camel in the moonlight out there in that shadowy canyon."

"Humpf!" was all that my father would say.

When old Mr. Benton came by a day or two later, one of the ranch hands climbed to the first limb of a cottonwood tree. He shaded his eyes and peered out toward the desert. "Yeah, here they come!" the lout yelled. "Six of 'em coming over the Mesa, and Omar's driving 'em too!"

Old Mr. Benton walked on, looking straight ahead. I felt so embarrassed that I followed him to his camp, though I had set out with a different plan in mind. I sat

on my heels on the ditch bank while old Mr. Benton made a fire and put the coffee can on to boil. It was a long time before he seemed to notice me.

Even at that time in our community, the story of Hi Jolly was not unknown. Generally, the people did not believe there were any camels left-over from the Beale attempt, however, and they considered anyone who did think so a hopeless romantic. Much later the story of wild camels was periodically revived, but there has not been an authenticated instance of the appearance of a camel in our desert in many, many years.

It is good to think, in a quiet hour, that somewhere north of Kerman bound for Mashed, a caravan swings along through the Iranian desert, bearing a bundle of rugs, some sacks of sugar, tinned tea, and perhaps a Hadji—a pilgrim—returning from Mecca, his turban nodding in the sun; the brass water jug dangling from his wrist clanging now and then against the harness and waking the old man from his drowse. Perhaps this too is shortly to pass, for a railroad recently has been completed to Mashed. It connects with Khoramshar at the head of the Persian Gulf making for a much faster journey to Mecca. The railroad is already having difficulty meeting the competition of planes that fly directly to Mecca from Mashed, Teheran and Isfahan.

There is no improvement without change, say we, in justification of all that we have wrought. Ah, comes a question faint as conscience: but does change always improve? When it is easy to get to Mecca, will a pilgrimage be so sure a guarantee of Paradise? It has always been understood that those were most certain of reward who, tried beyond endurance, left their bones by the caravanaries in the desert beyond the gates of the Holy City.—END



Camel Driver in traditional coat. Sleeves are ornamental.