

Dragoon Graves

TROUBLE AT THE START

The graves at Dragoon Springs have an interesting and bloody history. Up until 1858, passengers and mail going from the east coast to the west coast of the United States usually traveled by ship around the dangerous end of Cape Horn, at the southern tip of South America. An alternate route was through the disease infested jungle of the Isthmus of Panama. In 1857, John Butterfield accepted a contract from the United States government to deliver mail from St. Louis to San Francisco. His route went from St. Louis down through Texas to El Paso. From there it crossed the New Mexico Territory (which included Arizona), then up to the Colorado River. From there it went to California, into Los Angeles, and then up the California coast to San Francisco. In order to get the \$600,000 contract, Butterfield had to make the trip in 25 days. From 1857-1858, frantic construction of stations took place all along the 2800 mile route of the Butterfield Overland.

In August, 1858, a construction crew arrived at Dragoon Springs to build a stagecoach station near the spring. Butterfield had made arrangements with the Apache chief Cochise to purchase passage rights through the area. At the time, Cochise was at peace with the United States, and viewed Americans as lukewarm allies in his traditional struggles with Mexico. The station was built about a mile from the springs themselves, to minimize friction between the newcomers and the Apache who also used the springs. Still, Butterfield decided to construct the Dragoon Springs station out of rock instead of adobe. Only ten of the 139 stage stations were made of rock, as a defense against Indian attacks.

The station was built of rough-hewn mountain rock held together with clay. It measured 45 by 55 feet, and was 10 feet high. There was only one door, with a small office on the near left and a storeroom at the far left corner. The rest of the station was divided in two, one room for humans and the other for animals. The construction crew moved on in late August, leaving four company men and three Mexican laborers to complete the roof. The

Butterfield men were led by Silas St. John, and their names were James Hughes, a blacksmith from New York, James Laing of Kentucky, and William Cunningham of Iowa. The Mexicans were Bonifacio Mirando and two Ramirez brothers, Guadalupe and Pablo.

On the night of September 8, 1858, James Laing was posted as guard for the first watch. At midnight, he was relieved by Guadalupe who took the second watch. Silas St. John slept in the near office, with Bill Cunningham in the storeroom at the back. Jim Hughes was outside with the other two Mexican laborers.

At about 1A.M., Silas was awakened by the frightened stomping of the mules, followed by the cries of someone being beaten. He tried to get to his rifle, but was attacked by the three Mexicans before he could get it free. They were armed with two axes and a sledge hammer. One of them swung his axe and cut St. John at the hip as Silas freed the rifle from its holster. He tried to swing the rifle like a club at his attackers, but the other axe came down on him, and completely severed his left arm just below the shoulder. Using his good hand, he dropped the rifle and grabbed his pistol and fired a shot, which caused the Mexicans to flee.

St. John made a tourniquet from his handkerchief and a stick and managed to stop the flow of blood from his severed arm, but the axe wound on his hip continued to bleed. He dragged himself to his companions, though there was not much he could do for them. Hughes had been the first to die, his skull crushed by a blow from the sledge hammer. Jim Laing had a deep gash in his skull, through which his brain matter could be seen. Bill Cunningham had also been attacked in the head by one of the axes, and he was conscious, but died by midnight the next night. Laing lasted a few days, but the station had no water, and St. John was in no condition to drag himself to the spring almost a mile away.

Four days after the attack, a reporter coming from the west entered the station and ran to the spring to

get water. Upon his return, a road building crew approached from the east, including an army Colonel and Major. They revived St. John and dressed his wounds, and sent for a doctor from Tucson. The surgeon, Dr. Irwin, arriving more than a week after the attack, cleanly amputated St. John's arm. Silas St. John was only 23 years old at the time, and recovered fully, to the astonishment of the medical community. He continued working for the Wells Fargo company and died peacefully in 1919 at the age of 84 in San Diego. A plaque honoring his remarkable service can be found at the Wells Fargo museum there.

Jim Hughes, Bill Cunningham, and Jim Laing were buried where they died, at the Butterfield Station in Dragoon Springs. Hughes and Cunningham are buried in the same grave. Laing, who died several days later, is in the grave next to them. Their murderers fled to Mexico and were never caught.

CONFEDERATE MASSACRE

There are many graves at Dragoon Springs, two belonging to Hughes, Cunningham, and Laing. Four of them can be found together, decorated with Confederate flags.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, the territory of New Mexico (which included Arizona) was contested by both the North and the South. In light of this fighting, the Butterfield Overland stopped running in 1862, having been taken over by the Wells Fargo company two years previously. The stage stop at Dragoon Springs was abandoned, although it was in decent shape, and it was still used as a camping and stopping point for westward migrants.

The peace between Cochise's Chiricahua Apache Indians and the various forces of the United States had been broken in 1861, the result of a disastrous series of miscommunications, lies, hostages, broken promises, attacks, and counter-attacks which triggered 25 years of bitter war between the Apache Indians and the United States.

In the middle of this Apache War, the skirmishes and battles of the Civil War also took place. The Apache were uninterested in the difference between the Union and the Confederacy, and attacked the soldiers of both groups with equal ferocity.

In May of 1862, Captain Sherod Hunter and a detachment from Company A of Colonel John Baylor's Arizona Rangers, members of the Army of the Confederate States of America, left Tucson to scout the territory to the east. This was done in light of the possibility of the Confederate troops facing superior Union numbers marching from California. On May 5th, a foraging party went out looking for stray cattle to feed the troops, and camped at the abandoned station near Dragoon Springs. As they entered the box canyon in which the spring itself is located, they were attacked by Cochise and about 100 of his Apache warriors.

The warriors carried off 25 horse, 30 mules, and killed four from the Confederate party. Sergeant Sam Ford, a youth known only as Richardo, and two unknown soldiers were killed in the skirmish. They were the westernmost Confederate battle deaths to happen during the war, and the only ones to occur within the current borders of the state of Arizona.

MORE GRAVES AND MORE HISTORY

Two months later, the Union army moved from Tucson towards new Mexico, driving the Confederate forces eastward. Along the way, they fought also with Apache warriors, who cared little for the color of the soldiers' uniforms. More bodies were added to the graves at Dragoon Springs after the battle of Apache Pass.

After the Civil War, travelers again stopped at the old station, since it offered both protection and nearby water. Stagecoach and freight lines were established and once again the station at Dragoon Springs revived to service them.

In 1872, the area became part of a reservation set aside for the Cochise and his Chiricahua Apache, although the land was taken back in 1876 as the Apache were moved to other reservations.

In 1886, Colonel J. F. Stone was transporting gold in a stagecoach from his mine in the Chiricahua mountains past the old station at Dragoon Springs. His party never made it to Tucson. They were killed by a party of Apache braves, and their gold was never found.

An earthquake in 1887 stopped the flow of water from the spring, which is hardly a trickle now.