



Ghost Camels of the Southwest



Life in the Southwest in the pioneering days was tough and often filled with new and frightening experience. Strange and spooky rock formations abound throughout the area. The land in some places is as desolate as the moon, and in others, the vastness of the open spaces is intimidating. Spanish and Native American legends and superstitions crept into the pioneer history, along with the goblins, boggarts, pixies, demons and devils they brought with them from various European countries. Then sometimes, legends sprang up around real historical events.

A perfect example is the Red Ghost. One day in 1883, a woman was found trampled to death. Huge tracks and clumps of red fur were found at the site. A few weeks later, a large creature blundered into the tent of two sleeping miners, again leaving behind giant footprints and red hair. More sightings occurred in the area and finally the locals recognized the beast as a camel. They named the creature the Red Ghost. But the strangest incident occurred to a group of prospectors. They spied a camel grazing along a dusty draw. As they watched, something fell from the camel's back as it

ran away. When the prospectors went to investigate, they discovered that it was a human skull that had fallen from the back of the camel. For years afterward, people would catch sight of the camel with its headless rider, sending chills down many spines. In 1893, a farmer finally shot and killed the camel while it was raiding his garden, and although the beast had finally shed the skeletal bones of its rider, it still wore the saddle and tack.

This incident has a basis in real historical events. In the early 1850s, as the military was attempting to develop a supply route from Texas to California, but found mules and horses did not fare well in this rough terrain. They sent an officer to the Middle East to learn about and buy a large group of camels. The military then tested the beasts on the Texas to California run. They were very pleased with the result, but the Civil War intervened before more could be done and the camels were turned loose in the desert. For as many decades afterwards, settlers were startled by visions of camels in the deserts of southern Arizona and California and even into Nevada

So who was the headless rider carried by the Red Ghost? Some legends say he was one of the soldiers who tested the camels on the first expedition. The story goes that he was afraid of the beasts had a hard time learning how to ride one. His fellow soldiers supposedly tied him to the saddle to help him learn. Then they smacked the critter on the rump sending him plunging off into the desert. Though his fellow soldiers pursued him, they never caught up with their unlucky comrade, who died still tied to the saddle. It seems unlikely that a camel turned loose in 1861 would carry its skeletal rider for more than 30 years. It is more likely is a prospector or trapper, seeing a free mount, captured the beast and met some misfortune while aboard the creature.

The last documented sighting of a camel in the Southwest took place in 1934 (the Oakland Tribune) who stated that the last American camel was dead. However, unverified sightings continue today, including visions of the Red Ghost and his headless rider, who still roam the deserts of the Southwestern U.S.