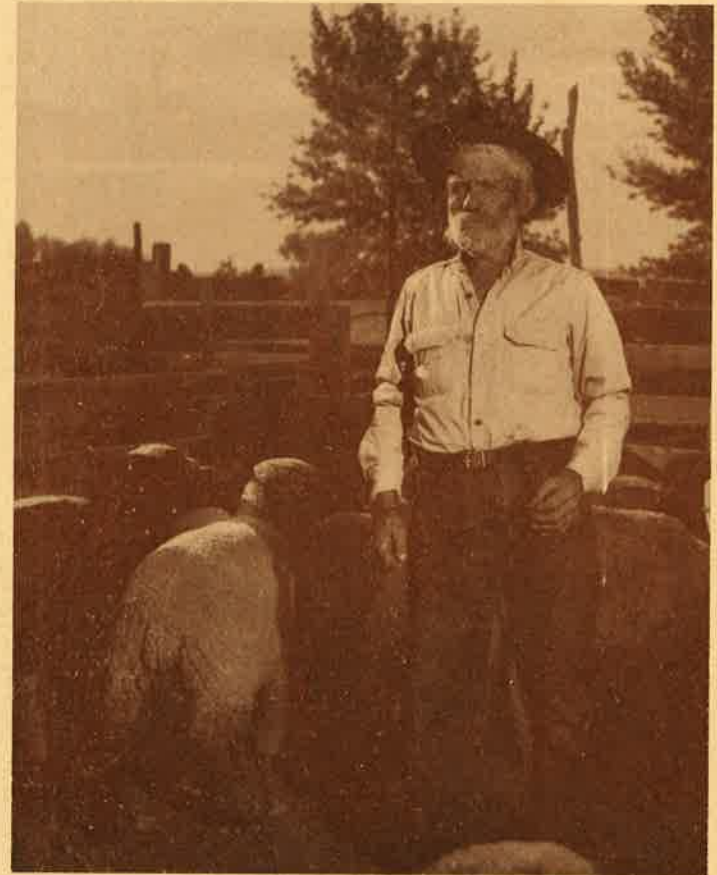


*My First Winter In California*



**Alfred R. Giraud**  
**INYO COUNTY SHEEPMAN**



**-1901-**  
**MY FIRST WINTER**  
**IN CALIFORNIA**



by

ALFRED R. GIRAUD

- FIRST EDITION -

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One winter, years ago, I was herding lambs on the desert. My camp was located by a road. It was customary for prospectors and other friends from around to stop at the camp for a short visit. Waiting for them would be a cup of coffee or a meal, which they enjoyed, and I enjoyed and was glad for their visit.

One day, along came an old bedraggled, tired and hungry looking prospector who turned out to be none other than Ira Brown of Cartago. He had been doing some prospecting around the Kramer Hills, but had not found anything worth while, he said, and was broke. He wondered if he could help me out for a while and get a few dollars to go on with. So it was that he stayed for a short spell, and during that time, he told me many wonderful stories of the early days and of happenings on the desert, which he seemed to know well. His story about the holdup at Mountain Springs Canyon interested me the most.

He had been, he told me, a stage station keeper or attendant at the Dry Bog Station on the old Remi Nadeau 20-mule team road about 14 miles from Brown. At this station, they had a stable where they changed horses. "Dry bog" describes it very well. There were many chuck holes of alkali dust as fine as flour, many inches deep. It was easy for a person to lug down a wagon.

They had dug a 30-foot well there by hand. On account of the wind and drifting sand, they had put in a stovepipe to fill the well with stones. After filling the bottom with stones, they covered it with dirt. The water was pumped with a hand pitcher pump. I remember seeing that old stovepipe standing there by the road, about two feet out of the ground, with many rusted tin cans lying around. The station and corral were 12 miles beyond.

At the time of the holdup, the stage was going in to old Coso Junction, from Ballarat and other points.

It had been held up and the Wells Fargo box stolen by a lone masked bandit.

Ira said someone next day at Little Lake had seen the lone rider coming down the east Indian trail below Red Hill, riding toward Little Lake, but he had skirted around and bypassed Little Lake, crossed the road and headed up toward Little Lake Canyon and disappeared.

At that time there was a small stream of water flowing at the lower end of Mountain Springs Canyon. It was carried in a small flume that had been constructed by nailing 2 by 4's and 1 by 6's in a V shape. The ends of the joints slanted a little down hill so that the water dropped from one joint to the other. It flowed into a large trough at the corral and furnished water for the camp. The teams usually stopped in there on their way in and out. On account of the convenience of the water, the teamsters filled their barrels to take along for the teams, for the long stretch to the next water supply. In those days, water was a problem on the desert, much more than today.



Alfred Giraud in 1960

The holdup occurred in this area, about dusk when the stage was going toward Coso Junction. There were no big teams in that night and no attendant either, and the stage had gone on its way toward Coso Junction. That night the only sound was the little trickle of water dripping in the big trough in the mule corral where the manure was packed three feet deep.

As was well known, the Wells Fargo steel boxes were hard to break open without using a heavy hammer, a pick, bar, or even dynamite. So, when the man suspected of being the robber was seen, and didn't have any box on his saddle, many people thought he had buried it.

He had. But where?

As the news of the robbery had already reached most places, everyone agreed that the lone rider must have



Giraud Ranch in Bishop in 1955





Goat milk was always fresh for the shepherd's morning coffee.

been the robber, but no one had seen him close enough to recognize or identify him. They all figured he must have hidden or buried the box in the rocks of Black Canyon. They talked of tracking him down, but after much discussion, realized that the terrible roughness of the country was a hardship they didn't care to face. There wasn't much hope of finding the box, so they decided to give up the idea of a search.

For years this tale had been going around, and people wondered if anyone would dare to follow the track of the lone rider, and perhaps find that hidden Wells Fargo box.

That was about where Ira Brown ended his story, and I have always remembered it.

When I first came up with sheep from Delano to Inyo and Mono counties in 1901, people all along the stage road from Mojave to Keeler still talked about that Wells Fargo box full of gold hidden in Black Canyon over east of Little Lake.

I had not been in the United States more than four or five months, and I neither spoke nor understood English. Some shearers who had been here for years and spoke English had heard people talk about the robbery and repeated the story in camp. That was where I first heard of it and I was as fascinated as any 18-year old would be. So it went on and on for several years, and no one knew either who the robber was or where the box lay.

In the year 1901 in the summer time, I was herding sheep on Coyote Ridge near Bishop. During the late summer and in the early fall there had been heavy rains in the mountains, valleys and deserts. Sheepmen knew that years like that often caused the desert to green up and bloom like Spring. So they kept eyes and ears open for reports that were eventually heard in the small valley towns.

These reports were brought by the many prospectors,



Alfred Giraud on Coyote Ridge with lambs 1901

who came in to spend the winter.

Some had made a stake. Some hadn't. They came to get supplies, some with their pokes bulging with gold dust and their heads swollen. They would buy new clothes, new boots, and step a little high. Of course they liked a drink or two or even more. The ones with pockets full of gold would take up any challenge, thinking it would be easy to clean up at a poker table. Then, as haziness from the booze settled over them, from the warmth of the atmosphere, the drinks coming too often, they would lose the light of defiance they had when they first came in. The sharps or professionals in the town would soon see to it that fools and their money parted company. Late in the night, after snoring for a while on the floor of the saloon, they were dragged out feet first through the back door into the alley. Of course only some behaved that way. Others who hadn't been successful would sit around and talk about the possibility of working on a ranch harvesting crops, cutting wood, plowing, driving wagons - anything to make a little money.

These were the kind of people the sheepman depended on to bring news of any green feed out in the desert.

Bishop, California in 1902



The lonely shepherd's camp



We had brought the sheep down off the mountains and had them on some ranch feed for a while when it was finally learned that there was lots of green weeds, brush and feed out toward Cactus Flat, Coso, Haiwee, and all around that part of the desert.

So the first thing to do was to throw the pack on a mule with some grub and bedding, saddle a horse, and armed with the best information available, go and see and then turn around as soon as possible to get the sheep started on the way to all that green feed.

We started the sheep southward about mid-November. When we reached Haiwee Meadow, we joined two bands of sheep and cut out the lambs from the two bands and mixed them. We made one band of them - about 2,000 head - and they were the ones to stay on the desert



Al Templeton in Monache Meadows  
Summer of 1895



Pete Giraud - aged 12  
Alfred Giraud - aged 4  
Frances Giraud - aged 9  
(picture taken in France 1886)



Independence in the early days

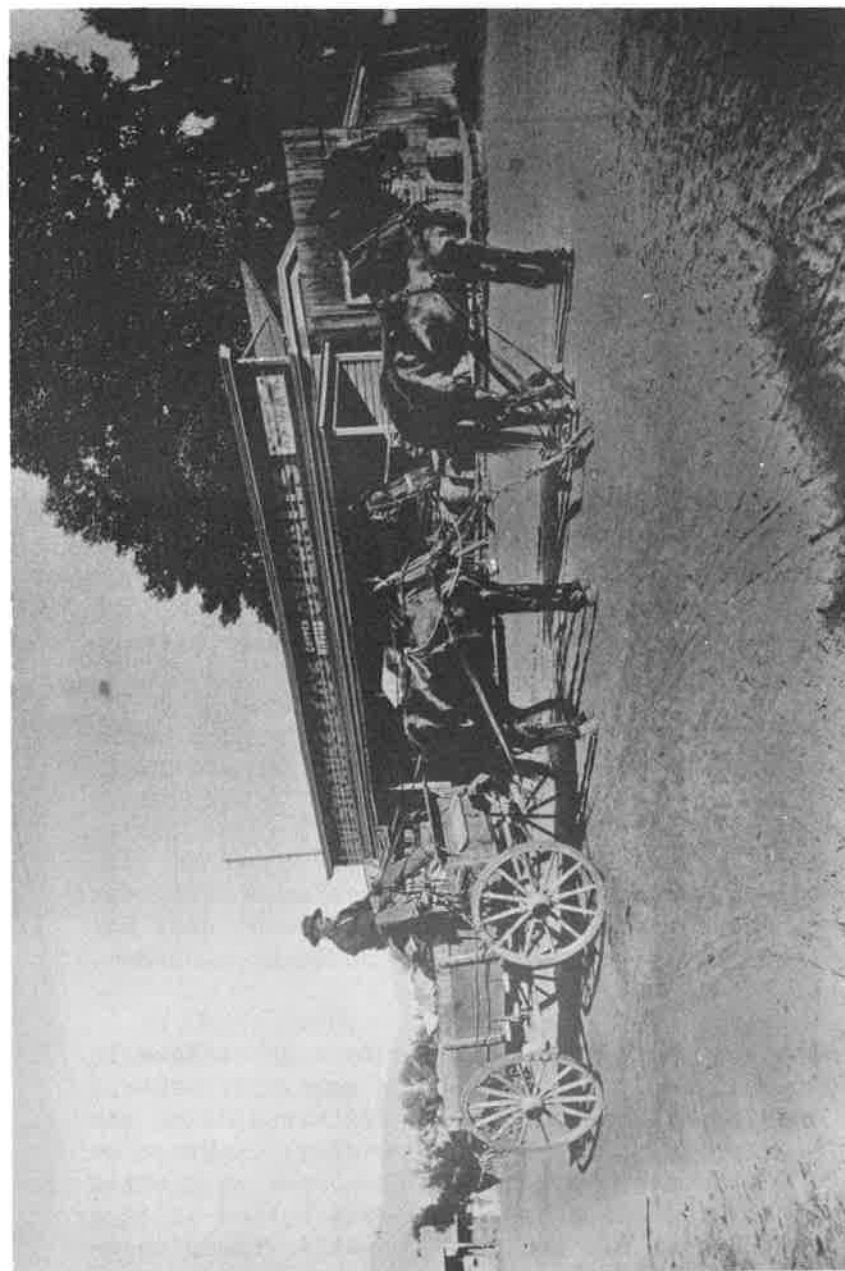


for the winter, or as long as that green feed would last. The ewes were made into another band and sent on their way to Delano, where they were supposed to arrive a few days before the sixteenth of the following January, which was the start of lambing time.

Being the youngest, the least experienced, and the most likely to stand the hardship of the winter on the desert, it was my job to remain with the band of lambs. My partner, who belonged to the other outfit, was a tough, hard-working French sheepherder twice my age. We took off eastward with our band of lambs and three pack burros loaded with food, flour, etc. It was my hard luck to be camp tender: cook meals (mostly soup), make bread, and keep a constant supply of water for our camp.



Giraud on the way to desert pasture with 2500 yearlings in 1923. The picture was taken by a lady from Ventura traveling to Bishop.



Alfred Giraud in the summer of 1907, coming in to Bishop from the Benton sheep camp to leave the wagon for the summer.

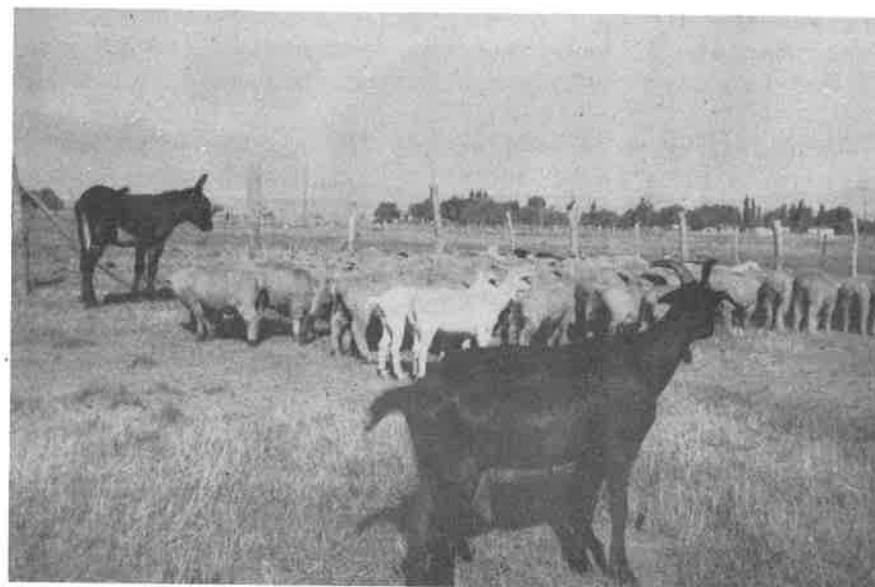
Sometimes I had to go miles to find water, and it would be just a puddle. I would go over a high ridge, to Haiwee Springs, a trip that took from daylight to dark, for 10 or 12 gallons of water. One special hole was coyote-dug, the water underground in a small "tank" in the rock. To get the water, I had to dig out sand first with my cupped hand. As the hole was obstructed by sharp boulders, I could only reach the water with the long handled soup ladle I would bring along. It took several hours to fill my two 5-gallon barrels. When through, I had to cover the hole with sand again to keep the water from evaporating.

That water never tasted very good. In fact, it tasted very bad. The chemicals in it made it very unpalatable. It was rumored that in the long run it might be bad for one's liver. But what could one do when there was nothing else available? There were times in the desert when one who was thirsty reached an alkali seep and found nothing but a cow track full of alkali water and cow urine, and considered himself lucky to find it and save his hide.

Anyway, the feed for the sheep was very good there for quite a while. Finally came cold and strong wind.

We looked around for thickets of yucca as shelter for our camp. We had no tents and wouldn't want any. For such things could not be used and would be a burden, so we slept out under the stars.

One night, we hugged our little fire until late in the night and saw it had clouded up some. We went to bed, each in his own bedroll on either side of the band of sheep to scare off the coyotes. Or so we thought. But coyotes are wise. They once in a while had a sheep for lunch while we were curled up in a ball in our bedrolls, the dogs usually sleeping on top of our beds by our feet which they helped to keep warm. Next morning it had snowed a foot and we welcomed it. Now we could melt snow for water instead of going miles for it, and the burros could have a restful holiday in the meantime.



The Giraud Ranch at Bishop in 1962

The weather kept growing colder. I used to tie my bandana under my chin and cover my ears as best I could, but they froze anyway. For years after, when cold weather would come they would swell up, ooze, then dry up and itch a while, and I would pick the scab. After 60 years, I mean until this very day, every winter the tips of my ears sting a little, then the skin dries and makes a little scab, which reminds me that after so many snows I have to be thankful for something to pick at.

In those days, Bert Rhine had a grocery store in Independence, and arrangements had been made by the sheep owners for Rhine, who spoke and wrote French to fill orders for our sheep camp, to be sent down by the stage. I sent him, as needed, an order for groceries, and he would dispatch it by stage to Haiwee or Little Lake. On such a day I would go with the burros to pick them up.

The days were short in December and January so I had to make a two-day trip and spend a night at the stage station where there were accommodations for travelers. I stayed at Haiwee where Frank and Mary Orr

owned the place, or at Little Lake where the owner was Charles Wittaker and the housekeeper Mrs Mudget. I got two warm meals and a bed which I paid for.

I picked up my groceries off the stage. In them was always a note in French from Bert Rhine and a bottle of whisky not charged on the bill, for which we were thankful. I would then get back to the sheep camp by the most direct route possible, by trails through the canyons, over ridges and flats. It sure was hard on the burros. I carried some grain feed for them and had a few groceries wrapped up in canvas for emergencies.



3500 ewes and lambs on the trail in 1938

I remember that around Coso Hot Springs I sometimes met many people and I was glad of the chance to talk with them, although I hardly understood English. I was learning words here and there. It was there at Coso Springs I met rugged characters like Bill Grant, Rube Spear, prospectors, Indians and others, most of them there to take the hot baths or to enjoy the mild climate around the Spring. There was a certain funny smell around the spring. Everybody drank the water, however, and it was supposed to cure anything from VD to constipation. Perhaps it did.

About five miles east and north of Coso was Haiwee Spring. There was good water there. I used to go there from the second Cactus Flat. For the two of us it was a long trip and there was a steep ridge to climb, but a good horse and a good wild burro, of which there were many, could make it. We once took the sheep there by trail thinking maybe they would drink a little water, but they would not. They just sniffed at it. I remember there were many traces of Indian camps that we noticed but in those days nobody bothered picking up artifacts in far away places.

We moved southeast of Coso Hot Springs to put more distance between us and the upper fumerole or sulphur spring at the west end of the canyon. Then we pushed



Two burros, one water bucket

on south into some nice flats and from there I would walk back to Coso Hot Springs for camp water. At other times I went to Little Lake for water. I took the same trail by the high red hill that the Wells Fargo robber had followed almost to Little Lake before he turned off north and headed up Little Lake Canyon. He was seen in the hills around, and especially north of that high red hill.

The weeds were real good in the canyons sloping east toward the dry lake which once had been the drainage of Coso Hot Springs. On the higher slopes of the canyon short, scrubby pines used to grow. There were yellow flowers and other good green brush for feed. Eventually, as the feed was grazed off and the cold froze the green weeds, the wind blew them away and only the roots were left. Of course the sheep had learned to paw and dig the roots. Scattered far and wide, you could see the sheep raise the dust from the dried up ground. Before long, some of our sheep began to limp a little and after examining them, we found they were getting the toes of their hooves worn out, and were in danger of getting sorefooted. My partner and I, after talking it over, decided to move them west to the foothills of the Sierra, where there was some running water, before they got too bad.

So we packed the camp on the burros. We now had four, having captured a nice wild one in the hills. We started out with the whole outfit, sheep and all, traveling all night to cross the flat three or four miles north of Little Lake. At dawn we were at the lower end of Sacator Canyon. We saw no tracks of other sheep having been there, though the north wind, which was blowing most of the time, could have wiped them out. We spent almost a week in Sacator. There was a sheep corral there made of brush and willows, used by the sheepmen going by in the spring or fall.

We took a day off in the corral to spot scab on our sheep. At night on the desert to the east the coyotes

howled, but in the Canyon the hoot owls were more noisy than the coyotes.

The next week we moved over into Little Lake Canyon camping at a place where the canyon forked. The water ran plentifully in this place as it had in Sacator. When the quail came down from the hillsides to roost in the willows, it sounded almost like airplanes do.

After ten days, we returned eastward, by night, to the high red hill north of Little Lake. On the north slopes was some hard, frozen snow, almost ice. This was my water supply. I'd chop some of that icy snow, fill the bread pans with it, build a brush fire all around them, let the ice melt and pour it into the two 5-gallon barrels. In three or four hours, I would have every container filled, have the burros watered, and the water packed on them, and make for the camp, about a mile away. By that time my partner would have the sheep on the bedground. I would then unpack the burros, and turn them loose. By night, soup would be made, we would eat and turn in.

We were out under the stars and in the open all the time. We had all the meat we needed, by butchering our own sheep. We were working for wages then, getting \$30 a month and board. We had hobnailed, square-toed boots with wide flat heels, no underwear, a pair of 75¢ levi's, a 50¢ light shirt and a 75¢ denim jacket, and a slicker in case it rained hard. We were hardy, healthy and tough. We could take almost anything in the line of work day or night.

While there seems to be a good deal of rambling in my story, it all connects up with the Wells Fargo box stolen off the stage at the old Remi Nadeau 20-mule team corral below the mouth of Mountain Springs Canyon by one lone bandit, years ago. You will see what I mean, later on.

After our sheep being away from the range for a bit it had recuperated; the brush at least was greening up again. But we found that two other outfits had





Sheep belonging to Giraud-Escalier partnership  
on the Bert Squires Ranch in West Bishop in 1905

## **SHEEPMEN**

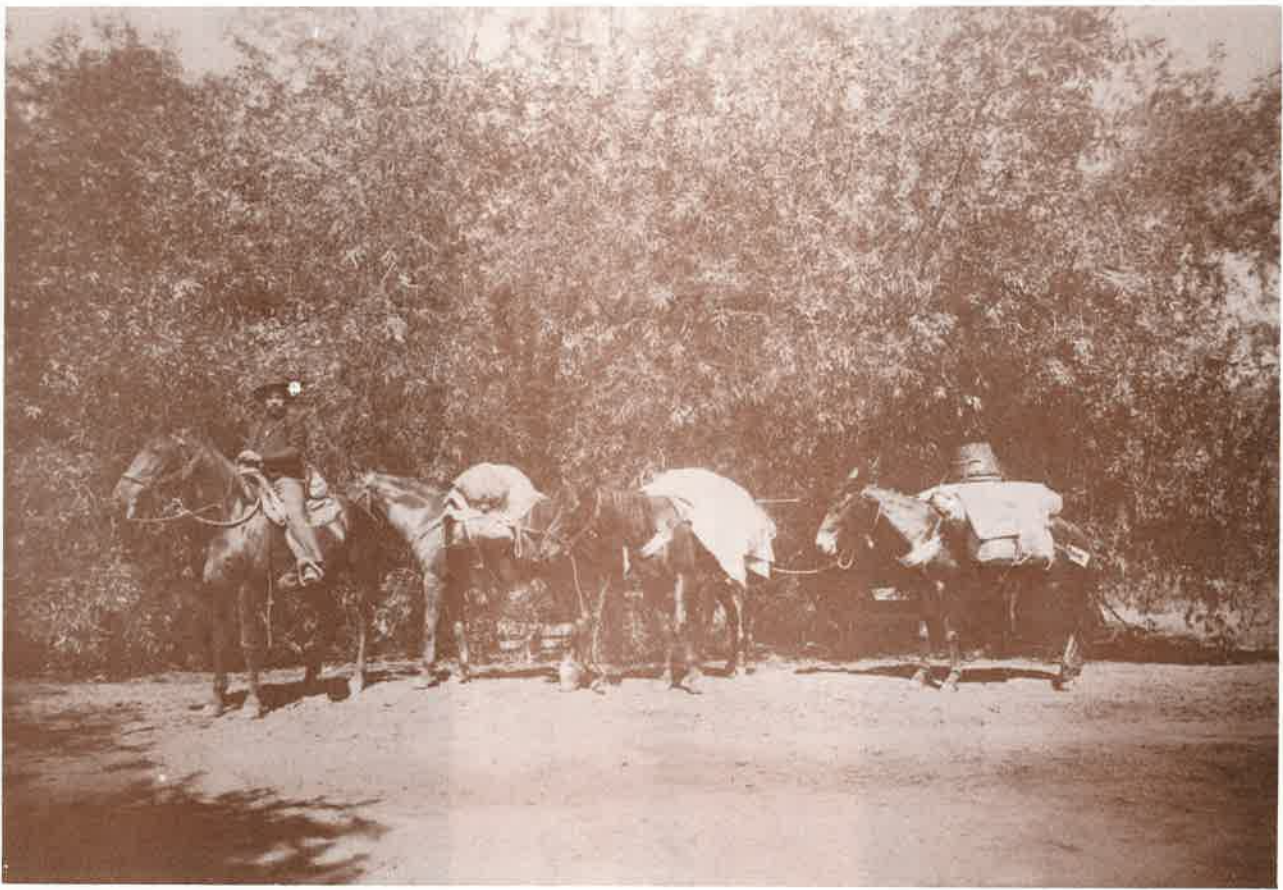


## **IN 1905**

Escalier cooking lunch at our camp at Squires Ranch in

1905. This tree is still there, after all these years.





Alfred Giraud leaving for White Mountain sheep camp with pack animals in 1907



THE CIGARETTE The tobacco . . .



The shaping . . .

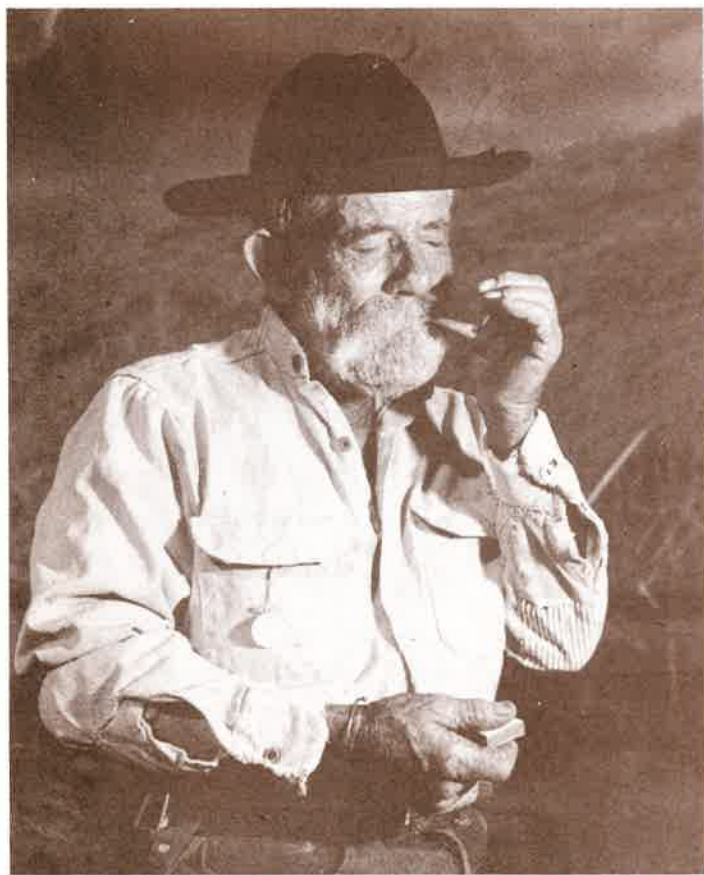




The gluing . . .



The completion . . .



The lighting . . .



The enjoyment.

moved in with their sheep. They had heard we had been in that part of the desert and that our sheep were doing well, so they thought they would come take a look. In a way, we were glad, as it meant some company to visit with. And that we did. Every night we would gather at one or the other of the camps which were near and talk for several hours and discuss many subjects, then go back to our own camp to sleep the rest of the night.

We traveled so much with the burros that finally, one of them got tenderfooted and had to have shoes. Around the campfire one night, my partner and I discussed the project. I had sent to Rhine for some horseshoe nails which had come. The next thing was to get some old horseshoes. There were many on the most traveled desert trails. I went out and found several and from among those old, worn, twisted, rusty horse shoes I picked out the best one to work on.

That night our camp was in the lee of a good bunch of yucca. There we tied the burros so they wouldn't drift away in the dust, for the west wind was blowing like a hurricane.



Alfred Giraud in Bishop 1960



A few garden seeds struggle to grow in the desert

While talking with my partner about shoeing that burro - which was his burro - I said that likely he would have to help me hold and nail the shoes, that I had tried and had been kicked.

He said to me, "What? That burro kicks?"

I said, "Yes, it does."

To prove to me that it didn't, my partner walked over to the burro and stooped to pick up a hind foot as he would have on a sheep. The old burro raised his foot, but mercilessly, to kick the herder on the knee. He rubbed it with his hand and moved back limping. And how I laughed.

"I thought you said he wouldn't kick!" I guffawed.

But I realized I couldn't take any risk of my partner being hurt or disabled, and I stopped laughing. Our work needed the two of us, and I was truly happy that he was a dependable and hardworking man.



Besides the shovel, the only other implement or tool we had in camp was a sturdy little camp hatchet with a hammer head and a strong blade which I kept sharpened. We used it to chop our meat, which was frozen at that time of year. Finding a flat rock, I pounded the shoe on one side and then on the other with the hammer side of the hatchet, until the iron became thin enough to bend and finally break at the place I wanted to fit the burro's foot. It had to be narrow and round. A couple of nail holes were left on each side of the shoe to tack it to the burro's foot. I had to hogtie him for this. I looped pack ropes around him till he was belly up and helpless.

Those awkward shoes helped him a lot, especially when he was loose with the others. He could travel faster, which meant more and faster steps for me when I went to look for him.



Frank Seglie of Big Pine, A French shepherd, and Alfred Giraud in front of 40 tons of wool, packed in sacks branded "AG", which was shipped to Boston by way of the Panama Canal, picking up 6000 pounds of moisture on the way. Giraud was paid by total delivered weight.

There were many coyotes on the desert and they came around the sheep on the bedground at night. We had an old sheepdog that smelled them at night and barked. Then we would shoot a rifle shell and that scared them away. For, if there is anything the coyote respects it is the sound of a rifle shell. We shot many shells.

We always saved the copper shells. We would punch out the used cap and put in a new one in its place. I would add a thimbleful of powder from the cap of the powder horn, fill in the shell and press the bullet in with a little squeeze. Our ammunition was made by melting lead in a little cast iron kettle for that purpose. We poured the melted lead into small molds, and so made our own bullets.

I did this on the days when I didn't have to go for water.

And every five or so days I had to bake a big loaf of sourdough bread. The weather was cold. To make the dough rise, I would build a little fire in a hole about 14 inches deep in which I would set the dough in round bread pans, the dough in the bottom pan and the other pan on top as a lid or cover. I would then take the coals out and while the hole was nice and warm, set the pans in and cover them all with a sheep skin and some pack saddle blankets on top. In three or four hours the bread would be raised and ready to bake.

Meanwhile I would prepare another hole and burn much brush in it to assure me of a good bed of coals when my bread was sufficiently raised. I had to peek at it now and then so I could tell. Using the shovel which had a short handle so as not to interfere with the load on the burros, I shoveled the live coals out of the baking hole, leaving a layer of three or four inches on the bottom. Into this baking hole I quick-



Pete Giraud in Monache Meadows in 1895 with the big grizzly bear he killed.

ly transfered the pans from the rising hole. I had to do it fast. It was hot on the hands and face on account of the short shovel handle. When the wind was blowing, I had to find some dry dirt or sand to use as a layer of covering over the coals and thus prevent the bread from scorching or even burning outright, as did happen sometimes when I had to go away someplace for a couple of hours. Usually, under normal conditions, the bread would be thoroughly baked in two hours, and it came out with a nice brown crust - a little hard, so it wouldn't crush or crumble in the pack.

We had no canned goods of any kind. Nevertheless, we had sufficient food. We carried it in sturdy canvas sacks. There was rice, beans, lentils, pearl barley, garlic, cheese, onions, potatoes, sugar, coffee, honey, syrup, flour, salt, pepper, and salt pork as well as all the fresh mutton we needed.

A soup kettle of about two gallons was cooked full of soup every night. As my partner needed a good lunch, he took the boiled meat from the soup, and with bread and cheese and a canteen of water, he lunched heartily. He did plenty of hard work and needed the energy.

Controlling those 2,000 yearlings, spread out over the rocks and hills, required a man to be alert at all times. My partner would check every bit of land carefully before bringing the sheep in at night - (le devoir avant tout) - and that meant many fast steps, for if a bunch should be left out over night, the coyotes would scatter them all. But that entire winter, we did not lose even one bunch that cut itself off from the band. True, we lost a few that died from eating poison plants, or getting caught among boulders in some canyon, and one or two were killed by coyotes, but that was to be expected.

The feed had been exceptionally good until the cold wind froze it and dried it down to the roots. It was nearing the time to bring our sheep back to Delano. We counted our markers - black sheep and sheep wearing bells - and then we counted all the sheep. We wanted to show we had not failed in our duty and responsibility, even though we were just two hardlooking herders wearing hobnailed boots.

I thought about this those last days as I remained in camp, tending to my duties. I would cook a frying pan full of lamb meat, and when ready, set it on the ground between my legs. I ate up all that meat with bread and maybe a raw onion and some dried apples or dry prunes. Then, I would be ready to work again. Work meant to have those lambs ready to be sold or if the sheep owner was keeping them, to be sheared when we returned to Delano in March.

In the mornings, we made and drank a big dish full of coffee and ate bread, sugar and cheese. Our only other drink was water, which at times was hard to find and very precious. This life agreed with us. We were in the best of health, tough and rugged, never an ache or pain. Sure it was sometimes lonely. But where else can one find peace of mind, learn much of the secrets of nature, and realize that a human being is a very small and insignificant speck on this earth and that by living with faith and humility, the good Lord will reward us.



A band of 2,500 ewes with Giraud in Long Valley in 1951



Typical brick and clay oven for baking French bread

And so you will see from this story that I had come to know the desert well. I knew it as I knew my pocket. And I passed many years on it, doing some mining and a lot of herding.

One day I set off across the desert to look it over for some green feed where I could take my sheep for a while.

I drove along that rutted, dusty wagon road toward Mountain Springs Canyon. Near the old 20-mule team corral at the mouth of the canyon, I thought perhaps, there might be good feed. I followed the little flume in a westerly direction, taking me right to the manure pile behind the corrals.

And there, cut in the old manure, was the corrugated imprint of the old Wells Fargo box, FRESHLY DUG OUT. It must have lain there 20 years.

It was plain enough to me now what the thief had done with the box, that night so long ago when he held up the Mojave Stage at Mountain Springs and later was seen, riding alone, along the Indian trail north of Little Lake, unidentified.