



Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge

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History

(Buenos Aires NWR Photo of Pedro Aguirre 1864)

In the 1800's, the Altar Valley was an open grassland teeming with large herds of pronghorn. Masked bobwhite quail calls filled the early morning summer air.

In the 1850's, Pedro Aguirre, Jr. started a stagecoach and freight line between Tucson and the mining towns of Arivaca in Arizona, and Altar in Sonora, Mexico. He added a homestead in 1864 and named it Buenos Ayres, or "good air," for the constant winds found there.

Pedro Aguirre drilled the first well in the Altar Valley. He built earthen dams near the homestead, and the water that was retained created Aguirre Lake. New deep wells assured a water supply for cattle in the Altar Valley.

As railroads opened new markets, cattle numbers in southeastern Arizona exploded. Then came a horrendous drought from 1885-1892. Fifty to seventy percent of each herd lay dead on the range, and their bones littered the landscape. The remaining cattle stripped the land bare. When the rains returned, no grasses were left to absorb the water. The rain eroded the land, creating the washes and gullies we see today.

Not enough vegetation remained to support wildfires. Without fire, brush and mesquite trees invaded the formerly treeless landscape. Some ranchers planted mesquite trees in the washes to provide shade and food for livestock, and these

spread over the valley. By the end of the 19th century, the masked bobwhite was gone from Arizona.

Between 1909 and 1985, Buenos Aires Ranch changed ownership several times. It became one of the most prominent and successful livestock operations in Arizona. From 1926 to 1959, the Gill family raised prize-winning racing quarter horses. During the 1970's and 80's, the Victorio Land and Cattle Company specialized in purebred Brangus cattle, which are well suited to hot, dry climates.

In 1985, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service purchased the Buenos Aires Ranch, and it became a National Wildlife Refuge. Conservation strategies are now restoring the grassland and bringing back the native pronghorns and masked bobwhite quail. For more information, E-mail: Bonnie.Swarbrick@fws.gov or call 520-823-4251, ext 116.

U.S. v. Millis, No. 09-1019 (CA9, 9/3/10)