

An 1865 Visit to Ammi White's Flour Mill

By Tom Sanders

Editor's Note: Prescott's location, remote from all established trade routes, created regular shortages of essential goods in its early days. Flour for bread making, for example, would go from hard-to-come-by to non-existent. The following article was written by one of Prescott's earliest residents about his experience on an expedition to obtain the precious stuff when he was barely out of his teens.

Going back to my story from where we left me in the employ of the Miller brothers, I continued in their employ until October 1864 and then I quit and entered the employ of Robert Postal who came in and began freighting too.¹ The demand for supplies had become so great that the Miller brothers alone could not begin to take care of the business and Postal was the first one to come to their relief.

About the middle of February 1865 the settlement was threatened with another food famine. This time it was flour. Postal rigged up with a man by the name of Charley Beach and another named Johnson for transporting some flour from the Pima Indian Villages by ox team. There was a man by the name of White who operated a new steam gristmill at the Villages where he bought and ground much of the grain the Indians raised nearby.² We had been informed that the mill had been in operation but a short time and that we would be able to get all the flour we would be able to haul away by going down there after it. We rigged up five bull teams with wagons and trailers and I went along to drive one of Postal's teams.

Going out of Prescott over the mountain trails then was a difficult and hard job, but we managed to get to Wickenburg without any mishap. When we arrived there we learned that the waters of the Agua Fria and, further on, the Gila, were up so high we would be unable to cross them. That meant that we would be compelled to lay-over for a few days to give the water a chance to go down. We did not like the

idea of being idle, so we all drove out to the Vulture Mine some miles southwest of Wickenburg. We thought we could get to haul a load of ore from the Vulture Mine on up to the treating plant above the town of Wickenburg.

The management at the mine allowed us to load up the rich gold ore, which we shoveled into our wagon boxes from the loose dumps at the mine entrance. Then we strung out along the road for the plant on the Hassayampa and there we shoveled the ore all out again. I remember I was driving six yoke of oxen in my team and I weighed out three and one half tons of the valuable stuff. The rock was so rich in free gold that one could see it very plainly without a glass. The ore was processed by the old Mexican method of arrastering³ and was afterwards put through the sluicing process. This primitive method of treating the ore gave way afterward to the quartz mill and cyanide plant.

The town of Wickenburg was a very lively place in those days and Peoples' Saloon⁴ was a popular gathering resort for people of all classes. There was a big general store and other saloons, blacksmith shops and dance halls and pretty

much the general make up of all other mining camps I had seen. We only made the one trip from the Vulture Mine and, thinking the water would be down in the other rivers, we set out. Crossing the treacherous Hassayampa about seven miles below the town without any particular trouble we came into the desert on the opposite side.

As we gradually left the mountains and came into the rolling country between the Agua Fria and the Hassayampa, the wild grass on the commons waved in the gentle spring wind like a wheat field back east. We went by White Tank and when we got to the Agua Fria, found it still so high from the water coming from melting snow in the mountains, brought about by spring rains, that we were compelled to pitch camp and remain there for a week. Beach and Postal, the two main men of the outfit, went up and down the stream in hopes of finding a place that would be safe to cross. As they were thus occupied they found some men camped about four miles above us who had a boat. It was a rowboat about four feet wide in the bottom and from 18 to 20 feet in length.

Postal and Beach brought it back with them and we all set about to take our wagons apart so we could ferry them across the stream. We took the beds apart and, leaving the wheels on their respective axles, we took out the reach poles and the tongues and, with one man to row the boat and another to stabilize the load, we then began the tiresome labor of transporting our outfit across. The running gears were placed across the boat with a wheel on each side and set in perfect balance before we would start the boat across. It required careful manipulation in the swollen stream to keep the boat righted and safely piloted across, which also afforded some risk of life in the event the boat should capsize with its unwieldy load. It consumed three

days' time from the day they brought the boat down for us to get our stuff dismantled and floated across and to swim the oxen over and get set up again and ready to go on.

The boys decided to carry the boat on through to the Gila River for it was bound to be impassable. It was well that they did so for we found the Gila even higher than the Agua Fria. Here we repeated the performance that we gave at the Agua Fria and fortunately got through without mishap. Knowing that there were no more rivers to cross, we left our boat at the last crossing and proceeded on the twenty-mile stretch from the Gila to the Pima Villages. All the way we waded through waving grass and flowers. We trudged into the mill about nightfall and put up for the night. The next morning we looked up Mr. White and found that we could get all the flour we could haul that trip.

After driving our wagons to the mill and warehouse attached, it did not take long to load our teams with the fifteen tons of flour they figured should be their capacity after considering the conditions of the roads and the size of the heavy freight wagons and the motive power of the oxen. All loaded and ready to make the return, we took a general survey of the country and the settlement.

The village was made up of Pima Indians, representatives of a very peaceful and industrious tribe of the south and a few Maricopas of a similar nature. Their village was considerably scattered and composed of a few adobe structures with square holes for windows and doors and I would say fifty or more round wickiups, characteristic of Indian buildings everywhere. These Indians farmed hundreds of acres of fertile soil in the immediate vicinity of the mill, which was located somewhere near the present location of Mari-

copa about 40 miles south of Phoenix. The Indians owned bands of cattle that waxed and grew fat on the sacaton and other thrifty grasses. The men in the settlement were nearly naked except for a breech cloth and the squaws wore some sort of a short skirt and most of the smaller children ran around the camp stark naked. The Indians were very thrifty and each year raised great quantities of corn and wheat. The owners of the mill operated a large general merchandise store in connection with their mill and besides trading with the Indians, furnished the travelers who came that way with provisions. Aside from the store and, as I remember it, a blacksmith shop and the mill, there were no other buildings except for those belonging to the natives.

With a smart report of a bullwhacker's whip and a shout, we were on our way back to where we had left the boat on the banks of the Gila. We necessarily had to travel more slowly, but for the most part the roads from the Hassayampa were solid and mostly level. When we got to the river at the place we crossed, we halted, unloaded the flour, took our wagons apart, ferried them across, swam the oxen over and then ferried the flour over, set the wagons up again and reloaded the flour. After four days occupied in doing so, and with the additional burden of the boat, we left the Gila. Our five six-yoke teams of oxen strung along the level stretch, each hauling three tons of the precious flour. We continued on to the Agua Fria where we repeated the entire performance we had put on at the Gila and lost another four days. When we were all set to hit the road for home again, the boys returned the borrowed boat and going on we crossed the Hassayampa without mishap. Yet, in eight days from the time we left the Agua Fria, we were to witness the result of an

Indian raid and realize how close an escape we had from extermination.

At the time of our starting out for the Indian villages to get the flour in February 1865, a number of Prescott merchants had some kind of a foreigner named Manassa engaged to pack exclusively for them. Unknown to us, he was just returning from a trip to La Paz where he had been to load supplies for his people and passed us with a train of 18 mules, all heavily packed with merchandise. Just a short time after his outfit passed us, we pushed on with our heavy loads.

Now, it seems to have reached the ears of the Indians in some manner that we were coming into the settlement of Prescott with a lot of flour and the Indians determined, if possible, to attack our party and get the flour. This of course we did not know, neither did Manassa's outfit know anything about the plan of the Indians. About two and one half miles away was a place we called Willow Springs, which was a very rough place and was a sort of a pass between rocky hills. Great boulders hedged the road close on both sides as it came into the little valley. Brush grew thick around the rocks and afforded an excellent hiding place for an ambushade. At this point no one will ever know the number of Indians that lay in wait for us, but Manassa was unfortunate enough to go in ahead of us and, without knowing what their cargo consisted of, the Indians swooped down on them as they entered the little valley. They seemed to swarm out of the hills and rocks and brutally killed the boss packer of the outfit and began to appropriate the mules and their packs. In the excitement ensuing two packers escaped and rushed back down the road to tell us the terrible news.⁵

Postal and Beach were riding along on horseback ahead of the train and immedi-

ately rushed on ahead of us to the scene of the attack. Coming upon the redskins so quickly with additional help, the two packers affected a surprise that caused the Indians to drag the packs they had taken from the animals into the brush after them and, driving all of the pack animals with them, they disappeared into the mountain fastness. The country was so rough it would have been suicide for our party to have attempted to follow them as every evidence showed they outnumbered us many to one.

Owing to our heavy loads and the roughness of the roads, we were compelled to travel very slowly from where Manassa had passed us to the spot the Indians jumped the train and we arrived there a little after sundown with the bull teams. We halted the outfit and lingered long enough at the spot to dig a shallow grave and bury the boss packer. The brutes were not satisfied that they had killed him, but had crushed his head in with big rocks. Pulling out from there a short distance and off the road a piece, we camped for the night. We tied the oxen to the wagons and built no fires. We satisfied ourselves with a cold lunch and then a portion of our party stood guard while the remainder got a little sleep. Then those on guard retired and those who had slept took the guard until daylight. In that manner someone was on guard all night long for we did not know but what the redskins would attack us.

The next morning we were all up and stirring about at daylight and, without building a fire, we yoked up the oxen and pulled on toward Prescott. Leaving the scene of the tragedy a mile and a half behind us we came to a place where the road led up onto an open ridge where we stopped and cooked our breakfast. At this point we could keep our weather eye open for signs of attack. We were soon on the

road again and, with a slight apprehension regarding another bad place in the road known as Bell's Canyon where a man named Bell was attacked and killed, we were glad to be so close to our destination. It was a very treacherous spot and large boulders flanked the road on each side. We were very fortunate however and the fact that the Indians had made a pretty good haul as it was and did not know how soon a party of whites would be after them, served to keep them from making a second attack and for which we were thankful.

It makes my hair stand up yet to think of what would have been our fate if Manassa's outfit had not preceded us that fatal afternoon. On May the first 1865 we pulled back into Prescott after an absence of two and one half months in getting the flour. Can you guess why flour was so costly?



ENDNOTES

¹ Sam and Joe Miller, original members of the Walker party. See *Territorial Times Vol. 1, No. 2*, for background on the Walker Party.

² Ammi White's Casa Blanca trading post and flour mill at the Pima Villages south of today's Phoenix was a stopping spot on the emigrant trail across southern Arizona and the site of a bloodless incident between Union and Confederate forces during the Civil War.

³ Arrastering was a crude method of crushing ore by dragging a heavy boulder over the ore in a circular, rock-paved bed. Animals harnessed to an arm extending from a center post provided power.

⁴ Abraham Peebles and Henry Wickenburg were organizers of the second prospecting party to reach Central Arizona in 1863.

⁵ There are no records of this specific incident; newspaper files of 1865 are incomplete. A similar Indian attack on a wagon team from White's mill was reported earlier that year by Judge Joseph P. Allyn. Two men were killed, the animals were run off and sacks of flour that could not be carried away were destroyed.