

by Stan Brown

When the modern Hashknife Pony Express rides into Payson on January 27th, they bring with them a hybrid of western history. These modern trail's men (trekking from Holbrook to Scottsdale with saddle bags of U. S. mail, have combined two adventures in one. The Pony Express was an 1860-61 race against time from St. Louis, Missouri, to San Francisco, California, far to the north of Arizona. (See last week's *Back When*.)

The Hash Knife Outfit was something else.

One of America's largest cattle raisers was the Continental Cattle Company, which had been formed in 1880 and owned two large outfits, one on the Brazos and one on the Pecos Rivers in Texas. Cowboys would trail the herds from Texas to Montana, where the cattle were fattened and sold. As the company grew its owners had an eye on land grants along the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad in Arizona. These untouched grazing lands formed a swath 100 miles wide from border to border across the northern section of Arizona Territory. Such sections of land had been given to the railroad by the government, to be sold as a way of financing the cross-country line. A deal was cut, and the Continental Cattle Company spun off a new enterprise known as the Aztec Land and Cattle Company. In 1883 they purchased a million acres of land from the railroad for \$500,000, and quickly placed 33,000 head of cattle on it in Arizona. Their land extended from Mormon Lake to Holbrook, and soon carried up to 60,000 head of cattle.

The Aztec Land and Cattle Company was known as the Hash Knife Outfit because its brand looked like the cooking utensil chuck wagon cooks used to chop hash in a bowl. The headquarters ranch for the Hash Knife Outfit was on the Little Colorado River opposite St. Joseph, west of Holbrook. It was one of the largest cattle companies that ever ranged in the Southwest, but by the end of the 1880s there had been so much overgrazing that the land was depleted. At the same time over-production brought down the price of cattle. The Aztec Land and Cattle Company faded into oblivion with financial downturns.

The Indian threat was still very real in the 1880s, both from reservation and non-reservation Apaches. If the Hashknife cowboys came upon an Apache butchering one of the Aztec's cattle, they knew it was because the Apaches were hungry and would usually ignore it, calling the cost of the animal "insurance" against Indian revenge. During their heyday, Hash Knife branded cattle drifted as far south as the Tonto Basin, and while the company was not involved in the Pleasant Valley War, some of its cowboys could not stay out of a good fight. For example, Tom Pickett had been a member of Billy The Kid's gang, but after the Kid was killed and the gang scattered, Pickett left New Mexico, and in 1884 appeared in Arizona to work for the Hash Knife. Other killers and hit men drifted in and worked for the Outfit, showing their true colors when trouble brewed. But this was a small percentage of the Hash Knife men.

Most of the cowboys tended to their business, like Walter W. Durham a Texas youth who ran away from home and learned to cowboy. He joined the Continental Cattle Company, but was transferred to Arizona with the newly formed Hash Knife Outfit in 1884. He had many adventures with the Aztec Land and Cattle Company, mostly peaceful, and came to know the Mogollon Rim and Colorado Plateau like the back of his hand. While riding for the Hash Knife, Walter met Mary Deta Neill, whose family was homesteading Stoneman Lake along the trail that led to the Verde Valley. Her stepfather was Tom Drumm. A courtship followed between Walter and Mary Deta, but the long trips to Stoneman Lake from the Hash Knife range were getting to him. He quit the outfit, and in March of 1892 they were married, settling on the Drumm Ranch at Stoneman Lake and continuing his cowboy career as he raised a family.

When the Hashknife Pony Express boys come riding through Payson this year, we'll cheer their efforts. But we'll know the moniker they carry is their very own and its history dates back four decades, not a hundred years.

RIM COUNTRY MUSEUM

1001 W. Main St. • (520) 474-3483

Hours: Wed-Sun Noon-4 p.m.