

Pennsylvania's Camerons in Bloodshed on the Border

By Robert Cunningham

Colin Cameron rode roughshod and swung a big loop. Over twenty years at the turn of the century he built and bossed a cattle empire on both sides of the Mexican border. Younger brother Brewster worked with him. The enterprise belonged to a syndicate headed by Gen. Simon Cameron and Senator James Donald Cameron. All of the Camerons were of southeast Pennsylvania. More than other ranches on the Arizona side, the Camerons' was branded with violence.

"Colin Cameron and three of his men came to my place and set fire to the house and tried to kill my hired man." So the *Arizona Star* quoted John Jameson on January 15, 1885. On July 15, 1892 the newspaper, then and for long edited by Philadelphia's Louis Cameron Hughes, noted "an indignation meeting" in Nogales where "two stuffed figures were hung upon a telegraph pole and burned in effigy. A placard on one indicated it was a Cameron. The other was placarded: 'Would-be King Cameron.' "

Over two columns headed "Colin Cameron's Cruelty" on March 18, 1898 the *Star* related the plight of a 65-year-old farmer who for fourteen years had worked his place nine miles east of Cameron's border base. "Colin Cameron wrote that my ranch was on his land and I must get off. Afterward he. . .demanded one-third of my crops. Neighbors were being killed or scared away, and sometimes. . .their houses were burned down. Last December I saw coming to my house Colin Cameron, Campine and



Colin Cameron about 1905, age 55, having lost San Rafael, living in his personally designed Tucson townhouse, directing operations of his ranch in Mexico and serving the cattle industry in Arizona. Dying in 1911, he left a close-knit family: wife, namesake son, and two daughters.

Courtesy Arizona Historical Society Library/Tucson.

Sydney Thomas (they were Cameron's men) and Broderick, a constable.' ” Threats failing, Cameron filed a complaint that cost the farmer \$400 and weeks from work before it was dismissed. The *Star* commented: “Colin Cameron, you and your hirelings have gone far enough. Let your neighbors live in peace. No more of these vexatious arrests. No more harassing of old pioneers.”

According to several sources, charges against Cameron ranged from legalistic theft to murder by lynching or shooting; thirteen are documented in the records of a single U.S. court.¹ Yet he was indicted only once — for fencing public land as his own — and, after the fence was removed, he was acquitted. His innovations in the cattle industry won respect from the large operators. But most people of southern Arizona saw him as a ruthless land-grabber, using the Camerons' political power to foil justice. The reader is invited to judge.

It is neither feasible here nor necessary to investigate each of the accusations. A few proved to be overblown or malicious, but most had merit. These boil down to Cameron's forcibly taking over land that was not his and muscling people from using property that was their own. On the Mexican side he so harshly handled ten times more than he owned that "the governor of Sonora issued a warrant for the arrest of Colin Cameron and made a demand on the governor of Arizona for his delivery."²

To the late 1870s the cattle "industry" of southern Arizona, plagued by marauding Apaches, had been confined to virtually fortified patches. Longhorns and near-wild scrub cattle scarcely dented the heavily grassed range. Then convenient markets appeared: regenerated Army posts, Indian reservations, and handy California welcomed leathery beef. Men could profitably sell all the cattle that they could collect, protect and deliver. In 1880, given the Southern Pacific's introductory freight rates based on head count rather than weight, proto-ranchers began to sell only older cattle and let the younger (and the market) improve. Word of this bonanza, and the prospective land boom as railroads opened the country, appealed to Gen. Cameron back in Pennsylvania's Lancaster County. President of two regional railroad companies, Secretary of War under Lincoln, U.S. Senator for eighteen years and a power in the Democratic, Peoples, Republican and Loyalist parties, he could count on support. His son, James D. "Don" Cameron had followed Simon through Secretary of War under Grant to the same Senate seat. Meanwhile Colin Cameron, born December 10, 1849 in Danville of Montour County, had grown through managing the Elizabeth Stock Farms to directing the whole Coleman Estate of Lancaster County, where he married Alice Smith in 1877. She kept up their Brickerville home when, in 1882, he went to Arizona as agent for the other Camerons.

Colin knew cattle, notably the self-sustaining character as well as the premium beef value of blooded lines. Like them he was stocky and "thrifty," also perceptive and resolute and thorough. He investigated the then largely catch-as-catch-can methods of growing beef in Arizona and the area's promising land. Acting on his reports, the Lancaster Camerons expanded their syndicate. Stockholders included: William W. Ker, then Assistant U.S. Attorney General and a continuing political force; Alexander Fulford, prominent cattle breeder-dealer of Maryland; Col. Oliver Payne,

son of Ohio's Senator Henry Payne. Rollin Rice Richardson, a Pennsylvanian from Franklin, wrote that he took his oil profits "to Arizona in 1880 and went into the cattle business, buying the San Rafael Land Grant (getting an option on it) and bought all the cattle on it from the squatters who were there. I invested \$40,000 and in 1883 sold to the Camerons of Pennsylvania."³

The full name of the grant was San Rafael de la Zanja. "Zanja" referred to the ditch-like Santa Cruz River as it flowed south across the border and so distinguished that tract from others called San Rafael. Title to and bounds of such grants in the Gadsden Purchase were cloudy. Those of the parcel that the Camerons bought were significantly so. For it is important to us to know what property Colin might reasonably have believed to be theirs. Title seems sound despite a late challenge by Dr. A.A. Green. He detailed at court how he had secured title from the Romero successors to the 1822 grantee. Then he claimed that his September 12, 1884 conveyance to "Jones" was only a device to help his agent Richardson get a better price than noted in Colin's 1883 purchase agreement, and that Green retained right of refusal. But Richardson conveyed the piece to the Camerons' San Rafael Cattle Company on the same day at the agreed price and included Green's conveyance. Beyond title, the scope of the conveyed land was variously defined.

A mortgage agreement by Green of April 16, 1880 — before Richardson or Colin appeared — stated that the San Rafael grant "embraces 16 square leagues" but did not define its bounds. Later in 1880 John Wasson, Surveyor General of Arizona, determined that the grant contained only four square leagues or 17,324 acres, three leagues stacked North-South and one to the West. (This determination reflected the 1821 Bustillo request of the Mexican government for "three square leagues plus one square league" and the 1822 survey of the issued grant as "four square leagues." It was complicated by the October 22, 1791 directive for grant surveys, which could be interpreted as either "four square leagues" or "four leagues square," meaning sixteen leagues.) Colin's purchase agreement recognized that anomaly and Wasson's determination by providing for a lower price if Congress confirmed title to any less than sixteen square leagues.⁴ Both Green's conveyance and that of "Jones" specify 140,000 acres "defined by the monuments, whether more than sixteen leagues or not." But monuments left by Mexican surveys were neither unique nor gridded; they could be shifted by being duplicated elsewhere. Also, "leagues" were elastic by Anglo measure.

Thus, until the bounds of the San Rafael grant would be fixed beyond appeal, that core of the Cameron's Arizona domain reasonably could be claimed as any undivided area from 17,324 to 140,000 acres with corners at any number of points between the Huachuca and Patagonia mountains of

Pima County. Further, in 1885 Cameron added "overplus" land bordering the presumed grant area by paying the county \$1359 for the land and \$200 for its survey. The available record does not show precisely what land he so added. (Pima County tax rolls continued to list "Rancho of San Rafael de la Zanja, containing about 140,000 acres.") Based on the estimated value of the land when the grant was conferred in 1822 and so, like the tax rolls, open to friendly manipulation, it might have been as much as 4,000 acres. Company records claim 152,890 acres before the addition and then 156,104 acres. Finally, apart from land, Colin assayed to take over mines and such improvements as Tom Jefford's smelter. He must have known that Mexican land grants did not include mineral rights and that title to removable property ran separate from that of the land. Yet a brief to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1892 states that Cameron sought confirmation of title to "30 square leagues" which he figured at "274 square miles" or 175,360 acres.

Senator Don Cameron and his cohorts initially urged Congress to certify San Rafael at sixteen square leagues. But that body, fazed by a growing backlog of such cases, failed to act on the Cameron deal. So in 1884 attorney Brewster Cameron, having secured federal appointment to an influential post in Pima County, moved to Tucson and sided with brother Colin in closing the grant purchase for the San Rafael Cattle Company. Brewster also asked "his friend, Lewis Wolfley," soon governor of Arizona, to help secure Congressional approval. "Friends" were handy. One, a postal worker, intercepted a harrassed nester's complaint to the U.S. Land Commissioner. James A. Zabriskie, U.S. Attorney for Pima County; Henry Jeffords, later Pima County Attorney and then U.S. Attorney for Arizona; Thomas Tidball, U.S. Marshall. . ." all had close ties with Colin (who) in May, 1886 boasted to (stockholder and company attorney) Rochester Ford that he had managed to have his friends appointed."

Arizona's "Supreme Court was of prime concern. Cameron intended to place his friends there. Richard E. Sloan would be appropriate for Chief Justice. Brewster traveled to Pennsylvania in July to see his cousin, Don Cameron. . .and Matthew S. Quay, the other senator from Pennsylvania. Sloan was appointed and Kibbey, another friend of the Cameron interests, was given the post of Associate Judge. When Sloan assumed office (in 1889) he immediately appointed Brewster as Chief Clerk," a powerful position. In 1893 Louis Cameron Hughes was appointed governor, at least partially due to the Cameron clan, and both Brewster and Colin "Cameron exerted considerable influence upon him."

Clearly, Colin had a broad base for maneuvering. He also had pleasures and problems. In 1883, even before completing the San Rafael purchase, he brought breeding stock from the East — Durhams and Herefords — to up-grade his leathery range cattle. His pleasure in the blooded stock multiplied as they dumfounded old line ranchers by season-



Second of four San Rafael ranch headquarters built by Colin Cameron. First was on the border (Lochiel for Loch Isle in Scotland), the others a few miles northeast. This second construction, burned in the 1890s, was replaced by a more formal central house with well separated outbuildings, in turn replaced by two more luxurious household structures.

Courtesy Arizona Historical Society Library/Tucson.

ing well, making good cross-bred calves and gaining weight at above average rates on the same range. He also took pride in setting up headquarters near La Noria on the border, which he called "Lochiel" after his ancestral home. He built an adobe main house, associated structures and corrals, and dug two wells. But he saw that even this was rough compared with Pennsylvania manors; to welcome his wife, he added a grove of fruit trees. Alice was so pleased that she penned two articles for the *Star* about the scent and shade and sound of the trees and putting up and sharing their fruit. Soon the couple moved to a 26-room home overlooking the Santa Cruz and then added a Tucson "town" house. Between the two they raised Colin Jr. and three daughters; records show that the family stayed heart-warmingly close.

Colin's problems centered on profitably marketing enough cattle. Moving into a seemingly inexhaustible sustenance, he ran short of grass and water. Billowing southern Arizona became overgrazed: too many cattle kept too long on the range. Re-growth was clipped goat-short by hungry mouths and stunted by drouth; hundreds of grassy acres were lost by resultant erosion. Cameron took head-on measures. He sold marginal head from the standard stock and added more blooded cattle. He even sowed forage! He turned to midwestern markets which would pay more for better beef than the traditional California market valued. He set as policy using the

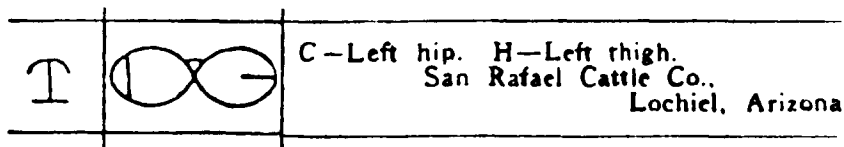
range only for breeding, calving and brief nurturing: let them be finished more efficiently elsewhere. As the price of feeders drooped, Colin pre-finished his yearlings on rented pastures in Oklahoma and Wyoming. Later, when recurring drouth wiped out whole herds, he sold the older half of his entire count and spayed every remaining heifer! Still, after raising enough cattle at cost low enough to permit profit, he was confronted with newly high transport costs. When the Southern Pacific raised its rates, he joined an outmoded cattle drive until the railroad charges were cut back.

Meanwhile Cameron used a different approach to improve his cattle: forage/water ratio. He expanded his range, particularly taking over the relatively lush grazing pockets and water sources occupied by nesters and miners. In 1885, until called off by the Surveyor General, he used a prospective survey as a front. At other times he may have shifted the shape of his presumed range to overlap their holdings. Thus in 1887 he claimed Igoe's ranch, twenty-five miles east of Colin's headquarters, and Lt. O'Connor's mine and mill which had been patented in 1880. He told the occupants that they were on his land and ordered them off. Some had titles, some homestead entries, some Interior Department authorization, some were long established squatters. No matter. "We cannot get justice because their (the Camerons') money is too much." Colin's men moved in on the heels of his warning, confident of legal support. If he preferred to win peacefully, his men were not constrained. According to Postmaster David Allen's affidavit, a Mr. and Mrs. Fritch and one Rafferty were killed and homes burned. Still, some occupants refused to be bullied. One was Fort Huachuca. Cameron claimed part of is pasturage, perhaps to cloak demands on neighboring sites. He retreated from that one but managed to make deals with other defenders. Such would pay him, in lieu of rent, grain or vegetables or wood and care for San Rafael cattle using their farms or water sources. He also fenced off as his own pieces of public land, some blocking roadways. Colin so controlled one aspect of his operating problems.

Another was the incursion of settlers onto land that he claimed or at least used but that the federal government showed as public domain, open to settlement. Some staked mining claims, more went into farming, some as homesteaders and the rest as squatters. The farmers multiplied after the 1884 Interior Department ruling. Some were sound, some shifty ne'er-dowells. They not only cut into the range that Cameron used; some were not above butchering "stray" cattle or blocking off a water source, cutting Colin's fences that protected his costly blooded stock or trading on their nuisance value by offering to sell their "rights" for exorbitant prices. He applied the tactics used to expand his range, with a few changes. He withheld the "rent" arrangement made with more established farmers. To hold down violence, he or a friendly lawman often accompanied his men.

He took some newcomers to court and even bought off three, but he would not be gouged. Both sides made armed threats and Colin was not always successful.

His third major problem was rustling. As it could throttle small ranches, the insidious thievery could make the difference between profit and loss for the largest operators. It was particularly rife along the Mexican border, where "the other side" offered both a market and a haven. Like the Camerons' on a smaller scale, John H. Slaughter's ranch straddled the border. As sheriff of Cochise County he gave public notice to any rustlers: Get out or be killed. Anyone found branding, butchering or hazing cattle without obvious authorization could expect short shrift. Anticipating violence, predators were apt to shoot first. Unless they were exceptionally tolerant, Cameron's riders probably did away with more than one rustler. A letter to the President of the United States charged that they murdered and left hanging "a boy scarce 18 years old" moving a few San Rafael cattle. On the other hand one report held that in early 1890 "Cameron trailed two men who had butchered one of his yearling steers and so brought Cozme Solano and Santos Encina to trial." And, the *Arizona Enterprise* of October 27, 1892 noted that the Camerons remanded one S.L. Parks for trial as a rustler.



San Rafael Cattle Company's cattle brand (left) and horse brand (right). Other brands were registered in the names of Colin, his wife Alice, Colin, Jr. and daughter Mary W., brother Brewster and Brewster, Jr. Courtesy University of Arizona Library.

If not an operating problem, a continuing distraction and frustration for Colin was the delay in federal certification of his San Rafael purchase as all that he claimed. Eight years after the transaction which allowed for a lesser allocation by Congress that body had not decided the case. Instead it was referred to a new tribunal — the U.S. Court of Private Land Claims — set up to adjudicate claims of Spanish/Mexican land grants. The independent court, with its system of regional examinations and hearings, gave new hope to the dozens of communities and hundreds of settlers who tried to develop without sound titles. As U.S. Land Commissioner Sparks had observed: "It has been shown that, in terms of claims, the original grants have been expanded to enormous proportions," The new judicial process, still leading to the U.S. Supreme Court, ultimately would shift from claimed grants to the public domain more than 12,500,000 acres.

Meanwhile, parrying pressures from both sides, it would not be hurried. One example of red-herring tactics was mentioned by H.O. Flipper, first black to graduate from West Point and then Special Agent aiding U.S. prosecution of the San Rafael case. "The attorneys of the great Cameron family filed (false) charges against me."⁶ In 1900 the court ruled that the San Rafael de la Zanja grant was confined to a certain 17,324 acres in Arizona, as the Surveyer General had determined twenty years earlier. The Camerons, possibly shocked, appealed while continuing to use ten times that area. In 1902 the U.S. Supreme Court closed the case by upholding the decision of the Court of Private Land Claims.* Brewster had returned East. Colin supervised the dissolution of an empire, including sale of the core land and the handsome headquarters to Col. W.C. Greene, and retired to Tucson. He kept personal ranching on the Mexican side up to his death on March 6, 1911.

It seems clear that Colin Cameron commandeered 20,000-170,000 acres that he knew were not his. One complaint registered with the court stated that "us settlers are being bulldozed by the Camerons, claiming an area about 25 miles long by 20 or more miles in width," 320,000 acres!⁷ That he also snatched at other property is equally established. When he failed at driving miners from their claims, he pushed "to collect 'royalties' on the large amounts of ore being taken out of the mines."⁸ Moreover, his grabbing was heavy-handed. In the 1890s, when his grant claim was before the court, his usual methods were modified "to avoid violence for fear of influencing land litigation."⁹ Still, perhaps there were mitigating circumstances; maybe he was no more rapacious and ruthless than were his peers.

His next northwest ranching neighbor, Walter Vail, began with only 160 acres "controlling the stream flowing through Empire Gulch (and so) commanded the use of nearly 1500 acres."¹⁰ "Vail filed mining and millsite claims on all available springs and seeps. All but one cost simply a dollar filing fee." He bought the "Happy Valley Ranch, a 360-acre spread (essential) to over 3,000 acres of public range." By buying Sanford's Ranch, strung five miles along Cienega Creek, he added "control over 28 square miles of grassland." Buying "lieu" rights to one thousand acres of forest land at only \$4.25 per acre "gave him control of almost 3,600 acres." So the Empire Ranch grew, each patented parcel providing him practically exclusive use of several times its area.¹⁰

East of Vail's Empire lay Col. Henry Clay Hooker's Sierra Bonita. From 1873 he exploited "a range roughly 27 miles in width and 30 miles in length."¹¹ That exceeds half a million acres. Only after two generations of

**The Camerons were not alone in being denied most of their claims; of more than 35 million acres adjudicated by the Court of Private Land claims, scarcely two and one-half million or 7% were approved to grant claimants.*

buying did the Hooker family own a mere 35,000 acres. "The Hookers protected their range. Cattle belonging to other ranches were not permitted to water."¹² Don Sanford and Rollin Rich Richardson each had small, patented ranches north of San Rafael and also took the water route to dominate range they did not own. Sanford, noted in the Empire accumulation, protected Cienega Creek so thoroughly that he was accused of rebranding others' cattle found there. Richardson wrote of himself that he "secured with script and mining claims every watering place outside (his 5,000 acres) until I controlled nearly all of 15 miles square (some 144,000 acres)."¹³

Evident are critical differences between these leverage operations and Cameron's. He formally claimed property to which he had little color of title; they did not. Vail, Hooker, Sanford and Richardson achieved their outreach, not by muscling other users, but by excluding them from patented and essential-to-grazing water points. And, their methods did not incur the recorded repercussions that Cameron's did. Those ranchers were not timid. Their hands always rode armed and never alone. Vail's first partner, Herbert R. Hislop, wrote that a neighbor had permitted stock to water at Cienega Creek, reserved for Empire. "I hope no shooting will occur. . . but my partner means war to the knife. Let (intruders) keep it up and they may find themselves in a funny kind of box."¹⁴ Although later Empire manager Harry L. Heffner supervised 1,500,000(!) acres, he wrote: "Squatters did not bother us."¹⁵

It might be argued that Cameron's peers were relatively free from charges of abuse because they did not get into litigation. But two other ranches, near west of the Camerons' are also on the records of the U.S. Court of Private Land Claims. One combined the Calabazas and Tumacacori grants "in mesne conveyance" to the Santa Rita Land and Mining Company. Its record as Docket 7 shows no complaints of harassing settlers or fencing public land. The record of the other — Rancho de San Jose de Sonoita, Docket 8 — is equally silent as to misdoings. So, "peer practice" does not excuse Colin's grabbing. Perhaps, as a last ditch defense, his public contributions might be found redemptive.

He did help Arizona's cattle industry. The innovations which he applies, as noted earlier, did more than reward the shareholders of the San Rafael Cattle Company. Its cash position was the envy of other ranchers, and they emulated his beef-growing practices. The industry became beset by heavy taxes and unrealistic regulations, organized rustling and epidemics stemming from "foreign" cattle. Even county-wide cattlemen's associations lacked the political power to solve such problems by legal means. Cameron prominently helped to organize the territory-wide Stock Growers Association which secured remedial legislation, including the still active Live Stock Sanitary Board. He held executive posts with both the Associa-

tion and the Board. It might be said that he so improved the lot of many families which depended on Arizona ranching.

Company files show that all of the Camerons kept in close touch with San Rafael operations by two-way mail, visits and wires. Only Colin rode the point. Will C. Barnes, who worked with him, expressed large ranchers' respect in a eulogy carried by the national *Breeder's Gazette* on March 22, 1911.

"It was a time when cattle and horse thieves flourished as never before or since. (Colin Cameron) prosecuted them with dogged persistence and absolute fearlessness. . .No one ever doubted where he stood. No threats would keep him from telling a suspected thief just what he thought of him. . .Arizona has lost a man whose place will be hard to fill."

Barnes did not mention thievery of property other than stock. The Camerons long laid claim to and used land they had no rights to. They were not victims of delay in deciding the bounds of the San Rafael grant; indeed, they took advantage of it. For they also grabbed at mineral rights, personal property, even goods and services. And, the Camerons methods drew more complaints than did their peers'. Company files show that, by two-way mail and telegraph visits, all of the associated Camerons were in close touch with San Rafael operations. Colin rode point, so he must bear any brunt. Allowing for the expansive spirit of the early West, this observer reluctantly turns thumbs down.

Notes

¹U.S. Court of Private Land Claims, Docket 9; T.D. Harris ed. *Negro Frontiersman* (El Paso: Texas Western College Press, 1963); George McCarthy Bio file, Arizona Historical Society (AHS), Tucson; Jane Abigail Wayland, *Experiment on the Santa Cruz* (University of Arizona 1964 thesis); *Arizona Daily Star*

²"History of San Rafael," U.S. Court, Docket 9

³R. R. Richardson Bio file, AHS

⁴San Rafael Cattle Company records, Box 3, University of Arizona Library

⁵Wayland pp. 37, 41, 76-77, 107-108 and (same author) Jane W. Brewster, "The San Rafael Cattle Company", *Arizona and the West* VIII/2 Summer 1966 p. 155

⁶Harris p. 24

⁷U.S. Court, Docket 9

⁸Wayland p. 72

⁹*ibid* p. 41

¹⁰Gregory Paul Lowell, *History of the Empire Ranch* (University of Arizona 1978 thesis) pp. 15, 58, 59, 115

¹¹Richard J. Morrissey, "The Early Cattle History in Arizona", *Agricultural History* July 1950, p. 152

¹²Mrs. Harry Hooker, "Five Generations of Hookers," *Arizona Cattlelog* December 1949, p. 34

¹³R.R. Richardson Bio file, AHS

¹⁴Herbert R. Hislop, *An Englishman's Arizona* (Tucson: Overland Press, 1965) p. 70

¹⁵Harry L. Heffner 3/Feb/1954 letter to "Mary" (Pickrell transcript file, University of Arizona library)

About The Contributor

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