

The status of the camel in the United States of America

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Abstract:

This paper presents an overview of the development of the camel industry in the United States. Areas to be covered include camel ride and petting-zoo operators (the largest segment of the industry), camel breeding and sale aspects, and the burgeoning camel milk market.

1. History

Camel importations to the American colonies/USA

Fifteen to twenty importations of Old World camels (*Camelus bactrianus* and *Camelus dromedarius*) have been made from the early 18th century through the late 20th century.

The first modern camels in North America arrived at the beginning of the 18th century. Two camels, presumably the more common Arabian camel, had been imported into the Virginia Colony in 1701, by a slave trader, for an unknown purpose. No records remain of those animals. About the same time a wealthy Massachusetts sea captain named Crowninshield imported another pair solely for show. A handbill of the venture described their display as the “greatest natural curiosity ever exhibited to the public on this continent”. In 1748 Arthur Dobbs, governor of North Carolina, imported several camels for use as burden animals on his farm. These, too, passed on with no further, apparent record.

In the mid-19th century, the US government imported camels for military use. The first shipment of thirty-four arrived in May of 1856, with a second load of forty-one arriving in February of 1857. These camels came from the modern countries of Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Turkey. Many were given as gifts from the Ottoman Pasha in Cairo. Roughly five-dozen were Arabian camels, the balance being Bactrian or hybrid crosses. In October 1858, a private shipment of camels arrived in Galveston, Texas. Included in the manifest of the *Thomas Watson* were around forty camels, owned by a Mrs M.J. Watson. The ship’s owner, J.A. Machado, was suspected of carrying slaves in the ship and the vessel was denied entry. Watson’s camels, however, were off-loaded. Future Texas governor Francis R. Lubbock, a local rancher at the time, agreed to take the camels and he kept them on his ranch on Sims Bayou, near Houston, Texas, for a year’s time, but Lubbock didn’t record the camels’ final disposition.

The Federal government used their imported camels as pack animals for routine hauling between San Antonio, Texas, site of the US Army Quartermaster, and their home base of Camp Verde, some fifty miles to the northwest. Camels were also used on three expeditions in the Western deserts of America prior to the US Civil War. 1857’s Beale Expedition left San Antonio, Texas, for California, surveying the 35th parallel wagon road (later Historic Route 66, now modern Interstate 40). The 1859 and 1860 Echols/Hartz Expeditions traversed the northern reaches of the Chihuahuan Desert, searching for more practical routes to the Rio Grande border of the US and Mexico. The US Civil War saw the camels’ Texas home switch to Confederate

control, which put them hauling salt and cotton between the Texas Hill Country and Gulf Coast where trade with the British had not been blockaded by the Union Navy.

After the War, the Federal government put the camels up for auction. Beale's twenty-five camels in California were bought by Samuel McLaughlin for hauling salt to the newly discovered mines in nearby Nevada; the sixty-six remaining camels in Texas (the herd had increased after arrival on US shores) were bought by Bethel Coopwood who used them in a freighting business from Laredo, Texas to Mexico City, Mexico for three years, but Coopwood sold out after suffering depredations at the hands of bandits. All the camels subsequently went through a handful of owners, ultimately being put out of work by the coming of the railroad, ending up in traveling menageries and shows.

From 1859 to 1861, the German immigrant Otto Esche imported fifty to sixty Bactrian camels from Russia. These were put to use as McLaughlin's camels had been, hauling salt, necessary for extracting silver from ore, to newly opened mines in the Nevada territory. The camels worked for a few seasons, covering a four-hundred mile route in thirteen days. Some of Esche's camels were sold to a businessman from the Canadian province of British Columbia who used them similarly for hauling supplies to mining camps. Many of those camels were returned to the US due to conflicts with horse owners and horses, which predictably spooked on the shared trails upon each encounter with the camels. From the US Pacific Northwest, these camels made their way to the state of Arizona where they were put to work hauling building materials for the railroad. The other camels in the Esche herd were sold to immigrant French brothers, Marius and Louis Chevalier, who had experience with camels in North Africa. These two used Bactrians for better than fifteen years in Nevada, ultimately moving to Arizona to put their camels to work building the railroad, ironically the very machine that would spell demise for camels in the US desert Southwest.

It is assumed most of the camels imported into the US in the 19th century died out without breeding in significant numbers or were sold to traveling circuses or menageries where they lived out their days. Few records exist from that period. Anecdotal and occasional newspaper accounts tell of US-branded Army camels appearing from time to time in cities around the country in traveling exhibitions. General Douglas MacArthur, a young boy at Fort Selden, New Mexico where his father was commanding officer, recounted the tale of a feral camel on the frontier. In 1931 he wrote, "My recollection of the incident... dates back to 1885. At that time I was a boy of five years old living at Fort Selden. My father then commanded K Company, 13th Infantry, which was the garrison at Fort Selden. While hunting, some of the men of the garrison discovered a camel wandering on the plains. At first it was thought he might be indigenous to Texas, but it was afterwards learned that he had been imported there in some manner which I do not remember." Sixty years after the governmental camel importations, it seems the curiosity was already fading from public memory. Infrequent sightings of feral camels throughout the Southwest occurred up until the 1950s.

Commercial importations to serve the zoo and circus trade represent the largest numbers of camels imported into the US and these took place throughout the 20th century. In the early to mid-20th century, Bactrian camels were imported from Eastern Europe. The largest portion of importations, however, was made up of Arabian camels from Australia over perhaps as many as ten shipments, each averaging one hundred camels. In the mid-1990s a group of roughly three-dozen pied

camels, originating in Morocco, arrived via the Canary Islands and Holland. These have been used to cross breed with camels of normal coloration in the hope of commanding higher prices for the more unusual spotted patterns unique to the breed. Success has been of varying degrees.

2. Current Status

Camel Census

A little over two thousand Arabian camels and three to five-hundred Bactrian camels reside in the US. Many are zoo or circus stock, but most are privately held by perhaps as many as twenty or thirty individuals who breed, sell or work camels. Herd numbers range between eight and eighty camels and significant numbers dwell piecemeal around the country on private game ranches.

No registry or organizations exist due to infighting among the various camel interests in the US. With a limited market, competition is fierce, but clinics and symposiums are held at various times throughout the year in an effort to promote education and veterinary training aids/resources. The clinics are sponsored privately by three or four different camel owners around the country.

Description of working camels in the US

An estimated one to two hundred camels in the US are actually trained for work. Most of these give short rides at fairs and festivals. Some of these also see commercial media employment in TV/film production and photo shoots. Most engage in Christmas time, live Nativity scenes or dramatic religious productions. This seasonal work may only require a camel to stand as part of a static display or to be led or ridden in the production. Two camel safari operations exist in the US, in the states of Texas and Tennessee. In Tennessee, camel safaris last one hour; in Texas overnight and three-day treks are available. Three companies offer camel races in the US. These spectator events are usually staged as entertainment at fairs and festivals and generally end in dubious, laughable results. Minimal use of camels as draft power is seen in the US, most of which is by three or four private owners on farms or for exhibition.

Camel breeding

Camels tend to breed well in the US, calving year-round. Most are sold to zoos and circuses, the aforementioned commercial outfits or to hobbyists. A handful of breeders, perhaps only a half-dozen, have herds bigger than fifty camels. Hand-rearing, utilizing commercial milk replacers, is common in order to imprint the calves at an early age. Given the proliferation of Australian bloodlines, most camels in the US are diluted versions of the various breeds of the Indian Subcontinent. The exception would be the aforementioned group of pied camels, imported in the 1990s.

Camel prices (USD)

Camel prices in the US are based on species, age, whether mother-raised or bottle-raised, temperament, level of training and color. Bactrians are more expensive than Arabians. Females of either species are more expensive than males (intact or castrated). Geldings are more expensive than intact males. Lighter coloration is highly sought. A trained, white Bactrian female would bring the highest sale price in the US.

Yearling male Arabian, mother-raised: \$3,000–5,000
Yearling female Arabian, mother-raised: \$5,000–7,000

Yearling male Arabian, bottle-raised: \$4,000–6,000
Yearling female Arabian, bottle-raised: \$6,000–8,000

Yearling male Bactrian, mother-raised: \$4,000–6,000
Yearling female Bactrian, mother-raised: \$7,000–9,000

Yearling male Bactrian, bottle-raised: \$5,000–7,000
Yearling female Bactrian, bottle-raised: \$9,000–11,000

Mature, trained Arabian gelding: \$10,000–15,000
Mature, trained Arabian female: \$12,000–18,000

Mature, trained Bactrian gelding: \$12,000–18,000
Mature, trained Bactrian female: \$18,000–30,000

Camel meat

With such a limited number of camels and consequently high prices, a domestic camel meat industry is not financially viable in the US. Australian camel meat has been imported for consumption in states where sizeable immigrant populations from the Horn of Africa exist. Public misperception and ignorance, combined with potential apprehension from the powerful beef industry, would likely inhibit any real inroads that could be made in this area.

Camel exports

Some breeders and brokers have exported camels for safari ride operations at tourist resorts abroad. Eleven camels were air freighted to Jamaica in 2006. In 2009 and 2010, a total of two-dozen camels were ground transported to two different resorts in Mexico. Perhaps two to three hundred camels have been exported to Mexico for zoos and circuses in the last ten years.

3. Future

Limited sale/purchase market

With the few breeders of large herds (over fifty camels) sustaining the limited market in the US, future importations seem unlikely. The US camel market will likely remain a hobbyist endeavor.

Potential camel milk market

With recent US Federal provisions allowing for antibiotic residue testing of camel milk, there is a potential market where imported stock could be required. The current domestic camel population simply could not provide the quantity of milk necessary to sustain a viable camel milk industry. Increasingly restrictive animal health laws and animal rights lobbying, however, could create difficulties for future importations. Importation from anywhere other than Australia is forbidden due to Federal restrictions regarding countries testing positive for zoonotic diseases.

4. Summary

The history of camels in the US, being primarily limited to amusement, does not bode well for future growth in this author's opinion. The novelty-based aspects of the US camel business will likely remain at current levels. Still, as a teaching tool, the camel offers much in the areas of natural science and anthropology education.

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