Will C. Barnes

Noted Historian Led Eventful Life In Arizona

Arizona Days

With

Roscoe G. Wilson

A way back in the Dark Age of Arizona's history, presumably in the 1840s, occasional bands of roving trappers worked the Little Colorado and its tributaries for beaver and other skins.

Along the course of a deep-canyoned branch coming in from the Southwest, one of these parties found plenty of beaver and some otter.

It was said that while this band was camped there, a member named Chevalon, or Chevelon, ate the roots of a poisonous plant, and died and was buried there. In consequence the stream became known as Chevalon Creek and is so shown on our maps today.

Digging in my files recently I resurrected a batch of notes and memoranda, made by Will C. Barnes. His widow, Mrs. Barnes, turned them over to me shortly after I began writing this column, nearly 10 years ago. Among them were several pages of notes about his experiences on Chevalon Creek where he pioneered a cattle outfit in 1883.

But first I will briefly tell something of the life of this remarkable man, whose book, "Arizona Place Names" (now being revised by the University of Arizona) is one of the most valuable of reference works in Arizona, and a "must" for those interested in its history.

Coming to Arizona from California in 1880, at the age of 22, Barnes served as a telegrapher in the Signal Corps at Fort Apache, where he won a Congressional Medal of Honor for making a daring ride through hostile Apaches to bring relief to the beleaguered garrison.

In 1883 he joined several army officers in establishing the Esperanza cow outfit on Chevalon Creek, which at one time ran around 7,000 cattle.

During his range days Barnes served on the livestock sanitary board 11 years. As a member of the territorial legislature from Apache County he fathered the bill creating Navajo County in 1895.

Heavy winter snows, followed by serious drouth conditions, eventually put the Esperanza out of business. In 1907 Barnes entered the forest service and soon became chief of grazing, serving until 1928. For the next three years he served as secretary of the U.S. Board of Geographic Names, final arbiter on geographic names.

During his government service Barnes wrote a number of books, "Apaches and Long Horns," "Western Grazing Grounds," "Cattle" and others, and innumerable magazine articles and stories.

A genial character, a fine pianist and storyteller, Barnes mixed with the best minds in Washington during his stay there.

But will Barnes loved Arizona, and having married a Phoenix girl, Edith Talbot, in 1897, he came to Phoenix on his retirement.

With a notebook already full of data on Arizona's geographical names, he then concentrated on "Arizona Place Names," and he and Mrs. Barnes traveled all over the state gathering material for it. I recall his telling me he thought it would be invaluable to writers in Arizona, and that he was anxious to complete it before he died.

At last it was finished and the University of Arizona published "Arizona Place Names" in 1935. It is a monumental work, covering the origin of the names of thousands of Arizona's towns, mountains, streams and other natural objects.

The following year Will C. Barnes died, and was buried with military honors in the Arlington National Cemetery. For some unknown reason there is no bronze tablet in the hall of the Capital Building in commemoration of Mr. Barnes outstanding work for Arizona. There should be one.

But to get back to his experiences on Chevalon Creek.

In the year 1883, he states, in searching for a suitable location for a cattle ranch, with good grass and water, and free from marauding Apaches, he found the ideal spot.

It was about 20 miles west of Holbrook and five miles south of the Little Colorado and not far from Chevalon Creek. There were natural meadow-like cienagas on the range and Chevalon Canyon formed a natural barrier to prevent cattle drifting to the west.

Here the Esperanza ranch headquarters was established, cattle were brought in and soon the range work became routine.

At the mouth of Chevalon Canyon a small, but deep lake, had formed, enclosed so tightly by the steep canyon walls that it was impossible to get to the head of the lake, even on foot.

As soon as range work permitted, a small boat was built and hauled over to the foot of the lake. Then Barnes and two companions set out on a voyage of discovery.

They found the water alive with "honey tail" fish up to 24 inches long, but could not induce them to rise to a fly. Later on they caught them with a crude net.

Toward the upper reaches of the three-mile lake they saw water animals, swimming and diving about, that were unfamiliar to them. They were quite tame and swam, unafraid, about the boat. They afterwards learned the water creatures were otter, descendants of those that had escaped killing by the earlier day trappers.

They were much taken with the disporting of the otters, which were from two to four feet long, and agreed they would not molest them.

However, for fear some cold-blooded trapper might come along and kill them, Barnes later brought up a chain and padlock and secured the boat safely, as he thought, to the canyon wall.

This saved the otters for a year or two, but one fall when they were all on roundup a couple of what Barnes called “fur and feather men” came along. They discovered the boat, shot the lock off the chain, and within a few days had killed every otter in the lake and disappeared with their booty.

“They murdered—there is no other way to speak of it—our little colony of otter that we had done our very best to protect,” wrote Barnes.

“When we heard the trappers were in the neighborhood,” he continued, “I sent a man to the ranch. But he was too late. The miserable deed had been done and our otter were completely exterminated, as well as most of the water fowl that made the lake their home.

“There were no game laws then, protecting either otters or beavers, and it was not long until the beavers in the mountains streams were almost wiped out. Only in the most inaccessible areas did they escape killing.”

In Chevalon Canyon, which is first spoken of by Captain Sitgreaves in his report on a wagon road survey across Northern Arizona in 1857, Barnes also found a number of small ruins and camping places, where prehistoric people had at one time lived.

In a this-is-one-on-me style he relates that in 1886, a party of “bug hunters,” as most scientific parties were called by the natives in those day, camped at a spring below the ranch.

Barnes went to see them and found they comprised a geological survey party, sent out from Washington, and headed by a one-armed man.

Not knowing much about the business of the survey, he concluded, however, after some conversation concerning rocks and formations, that they were not “bug hunters.”

Since the party was headed for the Grand Canyon, which Barnes had just visited, he asked how they thought the Canyon had been formed.

The one-armed leader explained that it was caused by erosion. “In my ignorance,” wrote Barnes, “I contended it was caused by volcanic action, or earthquakes.

“They soon finished me off on this and the one-armed man gave me a lecture on the powers of erosion that I shall never forget.

“I also argued that Chevalon Canyon was created by volcanic action, but, the leader soon convinced me it was created by erosion.”

Next day the party moved on.

“Several years later,” Barnes wrote, “I read Maj. John Wesley Powell’s volumes on exploring the Grand Canyon and realized I had displayed my abysmal ignorance before one of the world’s greatest geologists of the period, the man who had led the first expedition through the Grand Canyon, in 1859.”

Fortunately, Will Barnes got a lot of fun telling jokes on himself, a quality that made him a most genial companion.

From Arizona Days And Ways Magazine, February 24, 1957