Rose-Baley Wagon Train 1858

Too impatient to wait for the “new” Beale’s Wagon Road to be completed, two wagon trains of emigrants left Santa Fe in 1858 to try it out, one headed by L. R. Rose, and following it another led by Gillum Baley. One member of the Baley train, John Udell, who had had previous experience traveling in the west, opposed the choice of route, but was overruled. The trains' leaders unfortunately hired as a guide a man who had guided both Whipple's and Beale's expeditions and had been found incompetent by both.

It was late August and the heat was intense. By the time the two wagon trains had reached the summit of Sitgreaves Pass in the Black Mountains of Arizona, they were exhausted, hungry, and thirsty, and had been harassed for some time by Yavapai and Havasupai in the Peach Springs area. One small group of them, including L. R. Rose, who wrote the only eyewitness account of the next few days, pushed onward to the river, which they could see from the mountain tops. On the way to the river, the party encountered Mojave’s, who seemed friendly, and at first gave the party directions and other help; however, when the wagon train reached the river, set up camp about a mile from it, and drove the livestock to the river to drink, the Mojave’s, who had learned that yet another party would be coming through, began to kill and drive off cattle, cook and eat them, and "when caught in the act would laugh and treat the matter as a huge joke" (Rose 1859).

In the meantime, on August 27, the Baley party had passed through Sitgreaves Pass in its turn and had camped at the edge of the valley. The young men in the party drove the party's cattle down to the river to drink, intending to return later for the wagons. When the Rose party moved to the banks of the River on August 29, two Mojave chiefs, probably Cairook and Sickahot, visited the camps in turn with their retinues. Gifts were exchanged. The chiefs asked if the travelers were planning to settle on the river, and were told that the emigrants intended to go to California (Rose 1859).

On August 30, the Rose party moved its camp down the river about a mile to the crossing place, noting with pleasure the "grass" for grazing, and the cottonwood trees that would be useful for constructing their camp and building rafts for crossing the river. They apparently did not realize that the cottonwoods were considered valuable property by the Mojave. The trees provided shade from the sun, lumber essential for house poles, and material for clothing (the inside of the bark was used for women's clothing). Moreover, the grass that the emigrants' cattle tramped over and grazed on constituted Mojave fields, which were, of course, not laid out in rectangles nor surrounded by fences. Many Mojave’s began to appear in the vicinity. Because they thus far had been friendly, the Rose party took no alarm as the afternoon wore on, but in the evening the Mojave’s attacked, surrounding the camp, and coming within 15 feet of the wagons to discharge their arrows. Of the 25 men in the party, one was killed in the battle at the camp, and 11 were wounded. The Mojave’s, subjected to bullets rather than arrows, lost 17 within sight of the emigrant camp, and possibly more (Rose 1859).

Panic struck the emigrants. Added to their distress over the results of the battle, was the fact that in the midst of their own battle, Rose got word that Miss Bentner, a member of a family from his party who had stayed in the mountains, had been killed.

The emigrants had lost all but 17 of 400 head of cattle, and all but 10 of 37 horses in the battle by the river. They also retained two mules, but they had lost their equipment and supplies, and they feared that all their friends left in the mountains had been killed. Despite the fact that San Bernardino was only 200 miles away and Albuquerque, 560 miles, they decided to turn back. Fortunately, the Baley party had not been killed and turned back with them, and they met two other westbound parties following behind who also turned back and shared supplies with them. Before the combined parties reached Albuquerque, they were in a destitute state, but managed to get word to Major Backus, in command of the U.S. Army post there, who sent them sufficient food and supplies that they were able to reach the city.

All four members of the Bentner family had been killed by Hualapai Indians, among whom were seven renegade Mojave’s. The murder of this family was interpreted as a massacre, and news of it touched off a round of misunderstanding that resulted in the establishment of Fort Mojave and the U.S. military control of the Mojave.

News of these events in late August, 1858, spread across the continent, first as exaggerated rumor, later in published versions. The eyewitness account written by L. J. Rose on October 28, 1858, was published by the Missouri Republican on November 29, 1859, more than a year later. Colonel Bonneville, the officer in charge of the U.S. Army's Department in New Mexico reported to the General of the Army in Washington, and probably sent word to General N. S. Clarke, commander of the Military Department in San Francisco. General Clarke reacted promptly by sending Lieutenant Colonel William Hoffman and an escort to the Colorado River to arrange for a military post at "Beale's Crossing" to protect emigrants as they came through.

When Lt. Beale arrived back in Albuquerque on March 3, 1859 he was shocked to learn that several emigrant trains had attempted to travel his proposed wagon road. Considering that the route had little to no roadbed over much of it, since the initial trip had been for surveying purposes only, he had been back in Washington to secure more funding for the road, including bridges and dams to secure a more reliable water supply.
He had a special compassion for the Udell and Hedgpeth families due to their advanced ages, and he personally financed the rest of their trip to California.