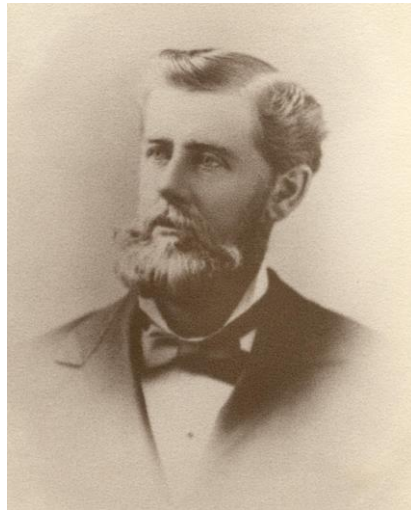


# WALTER VAIL

By Betty Barr

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Walter L. Vail, owner of the Empire Ranch, at age 30. Ca. 1881.  
Photo courtesy of Laura V. Ingram and the Empire Ranch Foundation

“There’s a big ledge, and the whole dammed hill is a total wreck with quartz boulders of ore,” Jerry Dillon told his employer Walter Vail as the two were riding the range on the Empire Ranch in the early 1880s. Vail and his brother Ned along with Dillon immediately staked out a mine. They called it the Total Wreck, filed a claim and set up a stamp mill to extract the silver at the mine, located in the Empire Mountains about eight miles north of the ranch headquarters.

Ned’s hobby before he came west to join his brother Walter, was assaying. He was fascinated by the process to determine the value of precious metals and frequently visited an assay office in New York and assisted with calculations. He became the assayer for the Total Wreck. They built a house nearby for the mill man and Ned wrote, “He said he slept fine as long as the mill was running, but if for any reason it stopped, he was up there in a minute – anyone who has ever heard a quartz mill running would not consider it a lullaby to induce sleep.”

The Vails laid out a townsite near the Total Wreck and sold lots. During its heyday there were about 50 houses and 300 residents, three stores, three hotels, four saloons, a brewery, butcher shop, bank and a lumberyard. The Vail Post Office was established there in 1881.

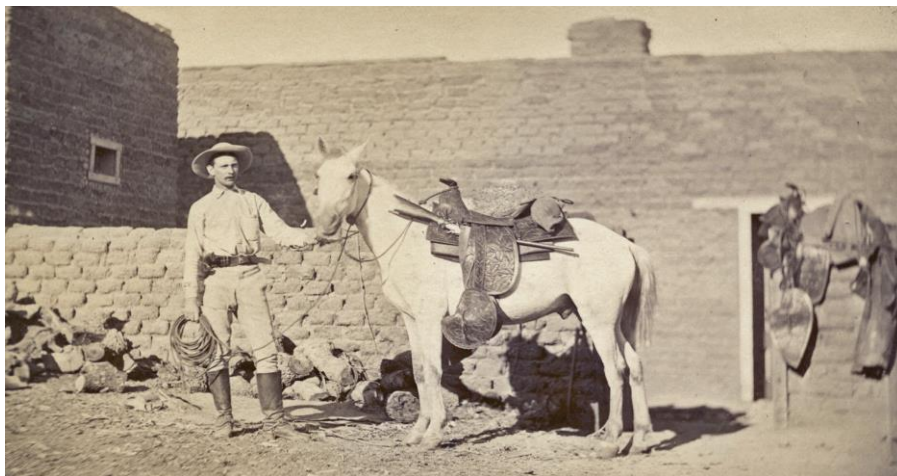
By 1883 the mine was at peak production, with Nathan Vail acting as general manager. Southern Pacific put rails to the new town to bring in supplies and carry out the

ore. Nathan eventually set up a profitable toll road through the area that controlled the cattle trail to the Southern Pacific loading chutes at Pantano. They extracted \$2,000 worth of silver a day and had brought in \$500,000 in total revenues by the time the mine closed in 1887.



Miners on scaffolding loading an ore cart for transports at the Total Wreck Mine. 1887.  
Photo courtesy of Julia Scribner Ruch, Laura V. Ingram and the Empire Ranch Foundation

Walter Vail and his partner Herbert Hislop had purchased the first 160 acres of what was to become the Empire Ranch in 1876 from E. N. Fish and Simon Silverberg for \$2,000. Hislop was a native of England and when John Harvey, another Englishman, joined the venture a few months later, locals dubbed the enterprise “The English Boys Outfit,” despite the fact that Vail was an American.



John Harvey, one of the “English Boys,” with his horse Billy, in the corral. Harvey, Herbert Hislop and Walter Vail were the original partners in the Empire Ranch operations. Ca. 1880.  
Photo courtesy of Julia Scribner Ruch, Laura V. Ingram and the Empire Ranch Foundation.

In 1879, after just three years of ranching, both Englishmen sold out to Walter. By 1881 the ranch was truly on the way to becoming an Empire, boasting more than 5,000 head of cattle. Business started to boom when Ned Vail came west to join Walter in the business. The brothers had a vision and adhered closely to their plan to buy all the available acreage in the area, especially property that gave them control of the water rights.



Edward "Ned" Vail was the assayer at the Total Wreck Mine. Known as "Tio Ned" to his family, he died a bachelor in 1936 at age 87, after serving several years as President of the Arizona Historical Society. Ca. 1900  
Photo courtesy of Laura V. Ingram and the Empire Ranch Foundation.

Vail was now a prosperous rancher and was in a position to make the trip to his home back east to claim his future bride. He had improved the house from a bare adobe building with a dirt floor and no windows or doors, to one habitable by a civilized lady. He also added a huge Victorian bay window that he hoped would convince his fiancée's socially prominent family that he would not be bringing their daughter to a savage and uncivilized outpost. Walter Vail and Margaret Russell Newhall were married in Plainfield, NJ, and returned to the Empire where they lived until 1896 when they moved the headquarters to Los Angeles.

Walter often told the story of how he almost lost his life trying to defend a yellow dog named Billy, who had been included, along with the cattle, in the purchase price of the ranch. Billy liked to run under the tongue of Walter's butcher wagon, between the mules. One day, according to Walter, "a big dog jumped on Billy and was chewing him up. I picked up a stick and was beating the big dog off ... when the owner ... came up and pulled out a gun. In a minute several men with six shooters drawn were facing each other and I was in the middle. ... Although I was scared, I felt most anxious to prevent a fight. I think I said, 'You men are all friends of mine, don't kill each other over a yellow dog.'

One of them laughed and I said, “Come with me,” and we all went into George’s saloon and I paid for the drinks and that ended the trouble.”

During a roundup on May 10, 1890 Walter spotted a beautifully marked Gila monster. He shot it and tied it on the saddlebag behind him. After riding a distance, he reached back to make sure it was still secure. His fingers went in the animal’s mouth and the reptile that he thought was dead snapped its jaws shut like a vise. He rode several miles back to camp where ranch hands had to dissect the animal to free his hand. Someone sent a message for Southern Pacific to rush an engine to the mine to take him to Tucson where he finally recovered after several weeks of treatment.

The arrival of Southern Pacific Railroad had opened up cattle markets outside the Territory and the Vails routinely shipped to Los Angeles and Kansas. When SP increased their rates in 1889, the Vails led a protest against the same rail line that had saved Walter’s life during the Gila monster incident. The Vails decided to boycott the railroad and drive their cattle overland.

Ned, along with their foreman Tom Turner and eight Mexican ranch hands, drove 917 steers from the Empire to the Warner Ranch pastures in California in 71 days. They survived a stampede and a perilous crossing of the Colorado. They recaptured 110 runaway steers and encountered a challenge by Indians, who they appeased with sugar and coffee beans. They traveled the desert at night and hung a lantern on the tailboard of a wagon to guide the steers. They stumbled on cattle bones, rattlesnakes, a broken-down wagon and a human skull. In Yuma, the sheriff tried to arrest two outlaws who had joined the cattle drive and ended up killing one and taking the other to jail.



Vaqueros on horseback lined up in the corral at the Empire Ranch while women and children look on in the background. Ca. 1890.  
Photo courtesy of Laura V. Ingram and the Empire Ranch Foundation.

In spite of all these adventures, they had lost only two head of cattle while crossing the Colorado and made \$4 more per head over the cost of shipping by rail. When the cowboys returned to Arizona, they met with other ranchers who wanted to identify a safe overland route so they could also ship by land. The route was never established because a SP representative attended the meeting and reduced the shipping fees to the previous rates.

Walter Vail served in the Arizona Territorial Legislature and was a Pima County Supervisor. He and his brother Ned were charter members of the Arizona Cattle Growers' Association in 1904 and were influential in establishing fencing regulations to help control cattle rustling.

Walter had acquired several ranches in California including Santa Rosa Island, now part of the National Park Service, and the family moved their headquarters to Los Angeles in 1896. However, he continued to travel back and forth to oversee the operations at the Empire. He was killed in a tragic accident in 1906 as he was getting off a streetcar. He turned to help his wife disembark when another streetcar came along in the opposite direction and he was crushed between the two. At this time his son, Banning Vail, 17 years old, was sent to Arizona to train at the Empire Ranch and in 1913 he became the manager.



Harry Heffner, manager of the Empire Ranch, on horseback in the corral. The carpenter shop and bunkhouse can be seen in the background, 1896. Photo courtesy Christine V. Shirley, Laura V. Ingram and the Empire Ranch Foundation.

The ranch is now owned by the Bureau of Land Management, which oversees the range as part of the Las Cienega National Conservation Area. The Empire Ranch Foundation, a non-profit group, provides educational programs and spearheads historic preservation at the headquarters. John and Mac Donaldson run cattle on the property

through a lease arrangement. The Total Wreck Mine, in the Empirita Mountains north of Sonoita, is a ghost town and an interesting destination for prospectors and explorers.