Arabia Is Not Cattle Country

Excerpt from "Discovery! The Search for Arabian Oil." By Wallace Stegner

The best time of all had been the frontier time, and the war returned the Hundred Men to the frontier. For nearly four years they went back to making do, improvising, doing without, building things out of nothing. Some things were easier than others; some were hard indeed. It was one thing to cobble industrial equipment, or even to do without it. It was another to do without fresh meat, and still another to do without mail. In both these last their low point was the winter of 1942, before improvisation had built up either sources of meat supplies or routes of communication.

For meat they could on occasion fall back upon the country, as when at Thanksgiving 1942, a providentially heavy flight of southering ducks came down on the sabkhas near Qatif, and John Ames, Hank Trotter, and others of the Bunyans went out and bagged enough for a Thanksgiving dinner for all hands. But for mail there was no substitute. For weeks on end no ships came in, which meant that mail could neither go nor come. With the wartime demand on the service, cables took an endless time. Men traveling to or from the States, beating their way by whatever route they could find, were sometimes on the road for as much as 110 days—nearly four months. And when Christmas drew near, and there had been no word from home for weeks, and no fresh meat for nearly as long, spirits drooped and some asked themselves what they were doing there.

Floyd Ohliger's announcement that there would be a Christmas Eve party at the club cheered them some, but not much. Same old faces, same old pretending to a cheerfulness none of them felt. Even when several carloads of hunters went out into the desert and came back with meat for Christmas dinner, their flagging enthusiasm for Arabia was not notably revived. But they went on over to the club—what else was there to do on Christmas Eve?—and there was Floyd Ohliger dressed up as Santa Claus, standing by a mock Christmas tree and trying to cheer people up by reading them phony messages and greetings from their wives and children at home.

They sat there and listened politely for quite a while before it began to seep through to them that the greetings had an intimate and authentic sound, and it was even longer before they fully accepted the truth: that Socal had rounded up all the dependents it could locate and collected their greetings and sent them on from San Francisco as a Christmas present to Dhahran. It had also sent a film, made at the suggestion of Esta Eltiste, that showed a good many of the wives and children at home. Not even the ones who had no wives and children, or whose wives and children had been missed by the camera, could resist that. There was not a dry eye in the place. They cursed Ohliger and Willie Jones, acting as his secretary, for their successful secrecy, and they would not for a thousand dollars have had Ohliger and Jones do it any other way.

One thing they had plenty of, no matter how long the war dragged on and no matter how many months passed between the freighters that brought them their long-delayed supplies and mail, was Brussels sprouts and shredded wheat, of which Les Snyder, looking backward, insists they had a 125-year supply. They felt that, in Steve Furman's commissary, there must be whole warehouses stacked to the ceiling with cans of Brussels sprouts. They ate Brussels sprouts in every form that imagination could suggest and necessity demand, as soup, as salad, as stew, as garnishment for a dozen different things. They complained bitterly that they had been served Brussels sprouts' waffles.

But of other things, especially fresh meat, they were lamentably short, and both Arabs and Americans were meat eaters. No refrigerated meat reached them from Australia or Denmark or the United States or South America; no vegetables except the pallid contents of cans passed their teeth for a long time.

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Above: Camels caravan east of Medina, 1938. Below: Dahran, Saudi Arabia, 1939.

So, as they were forced to do in other matters, the Hundred Men decided to produce their own; in doing so they created Sewage Acres and the Animal Farm and gave Steve Furman his finest hour. The effluent from the sewage disposal plant at Dhahran ran down into low ground out toward the al-Khobar road, and had created there a patch of vivid green. It was no problem whatever to level, plow, seed, and irrigate it; it was their collective Victory Garden, the apple of their eye. They were making the desert blossom as the rose and fulfilling the buried desire of at least every western American among them. They planted onions, carrots, tomatoes, lima beans, peas, cucumbers, sweet corn—all the varieties of the weekend gardener.

Dr. Alexander gave them a little trouble—he wouldn't permit them to plant melons, for instance, because however healthful they might be inside the rind, they could be polluted in the handling. He also permitted carrots and onions only on the promise that they would always be eaten cooked, and he insisted that tomatoes, cucumbers, peas, and lima beans be supported and kept off the ground. With these limitations, they had the vegetable problem whipped within the first war year, and they kept a steady rotation of crops growing green in Sewage Acres until long after the war. Charlie Davis even tried hydroponics, and there was a night when he entertained and served proudly up to each guest, as a salad, a single air-grown leaf of lettuce.

But it was stock farming that really excited their full effort. Steve Furman, especially, was a frustrated farmer; he must have yearned all his life, without perhaps being aware of it, for the chance to run a ranch. Now, almost from the time he arrived in January 1940, he had it—and what a ranch, a ranch that made the King Ranch and the Matador and the 76 look like backyard goat pastures. He had all of Arabia to grow meat in, and he used a good bit of it. Running the Animal Farm was pure satisfaction; he was bitterly disappointed when they closed it down in 1947 and made him a wholesale grocer again.

He bought rabbits in Hofuf, chickens and pigeons in Qatif and Hofuf, local cattle, sheep, goats, and camels where he could get them, and he started building up flocks and herds like Abraham. The stock of every sort which he got was adapted to the climate and forage conditions of Arabia, which meant that none of it was very toothsome to people brought up on the best meat in the world. So Furman began to tinker with the genetic composition of Arabian livestock. He had his henchmen gather up eggs from here and there, and he got George Vivian, the carpenter foreman, and "Goodie" Goodwin, the head electrician, to build an incubator, feeling that if he could raise up his own chickens from the shell they might have a little more meat on their bones.

Above: Steve Furman created Animal Farm and Sewage Acres, a cattle ranch and farm in Thugba, Saudi Arabia in 1941. Below: Furman with a blessed bovine—great relief from Brussels sprouts.

The Arab farmers from al-Khobar, Qatif, and Dammam—where today there is a thriving poultry industry—seeing the eggs put in the incubator, did not believe what the Americans told them. The news spread like wildfire that the crazy Americans were building a machine to make chickens. They had accepted the idea of building machines to do men's work, but fooling around with the reproduction of life—which they understood—that was something else! It was a trick of some kind; the eggs would assuredly not hatch. When they did hatch, the farmers were astonished, but not convinced. Somebody had slipped the chickens in and the eggs out. They watched the next batch very carefully, counting the nineteen to twenty-one days that Furman said would be necessary. On the nineteenth day they were full of laughter and jeers; there lay the eggs which, carefully watched to avoid trickery, were obviously not hatchable. While they were laughing, the first chick pipped his shell. Old Habib, headman at the farm, had been at the commissary at seven in the morning on that nineteenth day, and actually sat in front of the incubator for four hours until the first egg pipped. He couldn't believe it. It was the work of jinns.

Furman was inclined to give them more miracles than that. He selected the biggest roosters and the biggest hens he could find, put them together in the chicken yard, and collected the eggs for incubation to start improving the breed. Depressed by the way Arabian sheep stored fat in their tails, as a camel does in his hump, he cut the tails off some of them to see if he couldn't make them put a little more on their ribs. He himself had to do this. The Arab helpers wouldn't have done it if he had ordered them to. The sheep, they said, would die. They didn't. They got fat. Furman had to cut the tails off perhaps 200 sheep before he was able to persuade a young Arab to learn the trick and take over the job. But probably the most dreadful thing that Furman did, in the eyes of his assistants, was to start castrating the bull calves. Cutting off sheep's tails was one thing, but taking the manhood from a male animal was something that the Saudi men, admirers of masculinity, wanted no part of.

Camels were no problem—veal camels

Steve Furman with gazelles, 1942.

could be bought eight or ten at a time whenever the needs of the Saudi employees' camp called for them. Sheep likewise, though with their tails cut they might make better mutton chops. The rabbits, the pigeons, and the chickens multiplied. At the peak, toward the end of the war, Furman had 2,000 pigeons, 500 rabbits, and 6,000 chickens at the Animal Farm down near Sewage Acres. Out in the desert he had flocks totaling 5,000 sheep, of which they brought in about 500 at a time to the farm feedlots for fattening and slaughtering. At that same peak period he had 1,200 cattle, part dairy and part beef. It was these that caused him the most trouble and gave him the greatest satisfaction.

Arabia is not cattle country. The Bedouins depend on camels for both milk and meat, as well as for transport, and find their fat-tailed sheep and their long-eared goats better adapted to the desert than cows. Only around the oases were there a few scrubby cattle for Furman to start with. But an old Bedouin named Mutlag, who came from somewhere down south of Riyadh, offered to bring a herd up from Yemen in the winter of 1941-42. Mutlag was an old man, desiccated and wrinkled and tough—leather on bone. For a helper he had a half-grown boy. The drive he proposed so calmly was something that would have scared a Chisholm or a Goodnight—well over a thousand miles, around the edge of the most terrible desert in the entire world and catercorner across the whole Arabian Peninsula.

It did not sound plausible that Mutlag would get any cattle through, but Furman was perfectly willing to buy them if he could. Besides, Mutlag tickled him. He was a little like the Old Man of Hisy, and he came from the same part of the country. Furman wrote up a short agreement and Tom Barger translated it into Arabic for Mutlag to sign. But when Mutlag finally realized the nature of the document, he became indignant, and perhaps he had every reason to be: after all, he was a Bedouin, and his word had been given. They never tried a contract on Mutlag again.

Mutlag started in January from the mountains of Yemen. By slow stages he and the boy brought their herd up along the Tuwaiq Mountains past Sulaiyl and Layla, moving from well to well and from patch to patch of forage where the desert lived. From the mountains, after many weeks, he broke eastward and struck the oasis at al-Kharj, watered by great flowing wells like rivers bursting from underground, and from al-Kharj he made a hard dry crossing to Haradh, and from Haradh to Hofuf. The last leg, from Hofuf up, was actually the hardest and driest part of the trip, and Mutlag's cattle, like himself, were bones held together by hide when he brought them in. Still he had brought them. He and his boy, alone and on foot, had done something that might have elicited the respect of the men who made the drives up from Texas that stocked America's northern plains.

Next year, while some of his first herd contentedly ate alfalfa and bore calves and gave milk and grew fat, and Steve Furman's farmhands tried their best to keep a few of them through that lean wartime winter as the nucleus of a breeding herd, old Mutlag and his boy went down and did it again. In 1943-44, for some reason, he did not appear—perhaps he was living on his riches down somewhere in the southern Najd. Furman had to bring in cattle from Iraq to keep his herd up to a size conforming to the size of his market.

Even if Mutlag and Iraq had been able to supply indefinite numbers of cattle, Steve Furman would have been a long way from satisfied. He had no more respect for the unmodified Arabian or Yemenite or Iraqi steer, which would run about 350 pounds on the hoof, than he had for the Arabian sheep before surgery. He set out to improve this breed also. Because every country on the Gulf had export restrictions, and because the job of explaining would have been totally impossible, he paid a dhow captain to smuggle in the biggest bull he could find in Iraq, and when the stevedores unloaded him at al-Khobar, Steve led him up to the Animal Farm and put him to work.

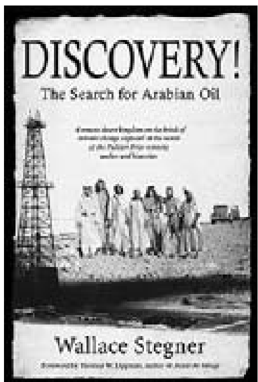
In the fall of 1944 Mutlag was back, ready to take on his 1,000-mile cattle drive for the third time. But that winter was very dry. No rains fell, the seeds lay unsprouted in the sand, the desert slept, many of the water holes were dry. When Mutlag, who had started from Yemen with over 200 head, struggled into al-Kharj with the hardest third of his drive still ahead of him, dozens of his cattle were dead on the road. The rest were walking skeletons.

From al-Kharj, Burt Beverly and the other engineers who were assisting the government in its big new agricultural development radioed Dhahran that if Furman wanted any live cattle he had better haul them the rest of the way by truck. He did, those of them that

Spring-fed well at the Hofuf oasis. Steve Furman bought rabbits, chickens and pigeons in Hofuf to start his own flocks. At the peak, toward the end of the war, Furman had 2,000 pigeons, 500 rabbits and 6,000 chickens at the Animal Farm. Out in the desert he had flocks of 5,000 sheep and 1,200 cattle, part dairy, part beef.

were still alive when the supply trucks got there to pick them up. Only twenty or thirty cattle, about one in ten, made it all the way to Dhahran, and Mutlag, betrayed like many another gambling rancher by the chances of the weather, was so broken up he didn't come in for months to collect what little he had coming for his labor. When he did, he brought Furman a small rug. Asked the reason for the gift, Mutlag replied that Furman had been very good about not talking, and had not shamed Mutlag about the failure of the expedition.

By then, early summer of 1944, Furman didn't actually need Mutlag any more. His Iraqi bull was making almost as many changes in bovine Arabia as Casoc had made in its industry. Instead of 350-pound steers, they were beginning to get some 1,000-pound ones. They had a dairy herd of thirty-five that was supplying milk for the whole camp, and they were getting thirty-five to fifty calves a month from the breeding stock. By the time Furman had his dairy herd developed, however, they were so short of everything else that there was no glass tubing for a pasteurization unit. At first they pasteurized milk in the autoclave at the hospital; later they built a tinkerers' contraption with a stock pot, an agitator, and a thermometer, and did their pasteurizing in the mess hall kitchen.



There was evidence that the wartime mousetrap they built was appreciated. Their only regular communication with the world was by means of the flights that the Persian Gulf Command flew between Basra and Karachi. The regular landing place was Bahrain, and only special flights were supposed to bring planes to Saudi Arabia, but it was remarkable how often the pilots on those flights found it essential, for mechanical or other reasons, to come down on the makeshift landing strip at Dhahran, and when they did, how infallibly they found their way to wherever they could lay hands on a glass of cold, pasteurized milk. ■

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