

Backyard Expeditions:
Tim Hagel

*H*orse Thief Trail

I have always been fascinated with the history of the Ventura County backcountry. Recently, I was honored to befriend a local historian named Marie Wren. She has sent me many stories of the Sespe from the Fillmore Historical Society.

After hearing the story out of a pioneer diary, I gathered up a group of VCDSA friends and families and backpacked in the Sespe to retrace a part of the story.

You may want to take the same Sespe hike from Dough Flats to Alder Creek, also known in 1870's as the Horse Thief Trail.

Pioneer Harry Kenney (Kenney Grove) tells the story that in 1875, the railroad was being built from San Francisco to Los Angeles. The railroad crews had started going over the Tehachapi Mountains and needed more work horses. Two enterprising Bakersfield horse thieves thought that Ventura County was the place to fill the horse needs of the Southern Pacific.

Everyone around the Sespe community had two or three horses that they turned out on the range. When they needed them to work, they simply rounded them up. Quickly, the rustlers established a horse market in Bakersfield and came through the mountains to the Santa Clara Valley. They used an old Indian trail later named in their honor as "Horse Thief Trail." From Harry's account and historic maps and diaries I was able to piece the trail together. In short, it meandered through Gorman Station and came east of the Piru Creek to Mutau Flats, down to the Sespe Hot Springs, up Alder Creek, Cow Springs, Squaw Flats, through Angel's Pass and skirted around Hopper Mountain and ended about a half a mile from the wagon road on the old Leavens and Goodenough place (Highway 126). An alternate trail also led from Angel's down Pole Creek to the Santa Clara Valley.

It became obvious that the rustlers likely enlisted the help of William Mutau who was well known as a horse rustler. Old man Mutau had a canyon on his homestead appropriately named "Horse Thief Canyon." He used the canyon to rest and feed stolen horses bound for Tehachapi.

Harry Kenney's pioneer story continues:

One night the rustlers were in the Sespe area and were hiding in the brush getting ready to go down to the Leavens Goodenough Ranch (Cavin Road at 126). It was assumed that their plan was to go out and round up a bunch of horses, catch them, use the advantage of a moonlight night to drive the stolen horses away on the horse thief trail system.

"On that particular evening, a local Sespe man happened to be passing along the wagon road and "spied" the men. He quickly rode his horse down to Santa Paula, telegraphed the Sheriff in Ventura. The Sheriff (John Stone) came out that night and picked up two other men in the Sespe," deputized them and gave them buckshot filled double-barreled shotguns.

The Sheriff and deputies stopped up the road about a quarter of a mile from the Goodenough ranch house where the rustlers were hiding. Sheriff Stone went to the front door and knocked. He sent his two new deputies back to the barn. The Sheriff asked the old man about the rustlers. He said that they were not there.

Harry Kenney's account said it appeared to the Sheriff (Stone) that the old man stalled for time to let the others get away. "The Sheriff was right, they got out the back door, but neither of them reached the barn."

The two deputies were stretched out in the darkness behind some old gang-plows, and when the thieves ran for the barn they downed them both.

Several years later Harry Kenney saw some old graves just east of the Goodenough ranch, his father told him that the horse thieves were buried right along the road.

Using a modern Forest Service Trail map you can backpack along the old horse thief trail and retrace many of the steps from the Sespe horse thieves and William Mutau (later shot and killed at Mutau Flats).

You won't see it labeled as such but here is how to follow it.

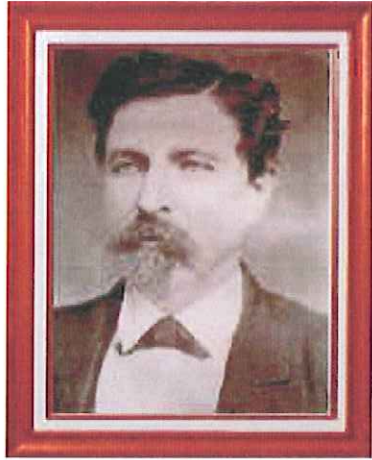
Drive your car up Goodenough Road and then about 7 miles of dirt road to Dough Flats. When you get out of your car, look back, south east to Hopper Mountain, you can still see Angel's Pass and remnants of the horse thief trail used to Fillmore.

Start your day hike or trip north from Dough Flats. You can make a fast day trip to Squaw Flats or Cow Springs, or go on an overnight to Dripping Springs or Alder Creek.

You can also drive around through Lockwood Valley and park at Mutau Flats and then backpack the exact trail to the Sespe Hot Springs and Alder Creek.

While your hiking, think of what it must have been like to be a deputy, using mules to bring justice to the Sespe Wilderness.

Epilogue: An interesting side note is that Sheriff Stone was a saddle maker prior to becoming Sheriff and he ultimately lost his 3rd re-election over an escape of a Sespe sheepherder's murder suspect.



SHERIFF STONE



HORSE THIEF CANYON *West of Mutau Flats*
(Photo by D. Magney)

I retraced this Sespe trail story with the help from Marie Wren, Fillmore Historic Society, David Magney, Kenney Family, Ventura County Historic Society, Los Padres Forest Watch, Bonnie Ketterl Kane and the Ridge Route Historic Society.