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HISTORY OF VAN HORN, TEXAS AND VAN HORN WELLS

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The history of the area surrounding Van Horn, Texas is typical of the history of the 'Old West.' Soldiers were stationed at forts and garrisons along the route from San Antonio to El Paso, Texas to protect immigrants, settlers and stage travelers from the Apache Indians and 'bad hombres.'

In 1849 Major Jefferson Van Horne, a soldier stationed at San Antonio, Texas was ordered to find a shorter route to El Paso. Historians say that he discovered the spring which later became known as Van Horn Wells. These wells were are located one-half mile (1 km) north of the present wells at the foot of the Van Horn Mountains, about 1 mile (2 km) from Lobo, Texas. A garrison, which also served as a stage stop, was later built there as a wayfaring station on the Old Spanish Trail and consisted of two flat-topped adobe buildings. The passageway between the buildings led back to a corral. Wooden gates, through which stagecoaches and wagons could pass, stood at the entrance to this passageway. The corral, or compound, contained a well and was surrounded on three sides by high adobe walls. The two buildings served as the front wall of the compound. An interesting story was told to Rosa Lee Wylie, a member of an early pioneer family, by Mrs. O. L. Shipman on how the station was once destroyed by Indians. This story, which Wylie included in her book on the history of Van Horn (Wylie, 1973), is as follows:

> The day the stand was destroyed a large amount of hay had been brought in and the stage, which was due that evening, failed to come. There were twenty-one head of horses and mules there and four men on duty. After supper the men became engaged in a card game. Then as they were preparing for bed, there was a sudden flash of light. It was discovered that the hay was on fire. They thought it accidental at first and prepared to drive the stock outside to safety. As a man named Jose started to open the gate, it was filled with a flurry of arrows which barely missed him. He cried out "Los Indios" and closed the doors and barred them. The four men then retired to one room and put up the best fight they could. They had one advantage, as it was dark inside, while the outside was lighted by the burning hay. They did not have any water and the smoke and heat made it unbearable. The livestock were being burned to death. They could see that there were about thirty Indians. Of course, they were not able to hold their own, so the Indians set fire to the unoccupied room by digging away the mud. It was discovered that the Chihuahua Indian who was with them in the fort was passing word out to the Indians on the outside. So Jose hit him with his gun and knocked him down and told him if he raised his head up he would blow it off.
>
> The fighting continued all night and about daylight, their ammunition was running out, so they had to think of some way to escape before they were forced out in the open by fire. The Indian chief came to their rescue by calling out in English, "Luz Lightie, come out we your friends and won't hurt you." Of course Mr. Light did not trust him, so he and Jose kept talking to him. He finally came into sight of their port hole and they both fired at the same time, killing him. Taking advantage of the confusion among the Indians when their chief was killed, the four men dashed for a nearby arroyo. They were followed by a few Indians, but they were not overtaken, keeping them away by pointing their guns at them. The Indians gave up finally, but not until they were met by the overdue stage. After consultation, they decided to return to the scene of the battle as it was so far to water, which they all needed. After arriving they discovered that the Indians had been carried away. Both roofs were burned off, all the stock was dead, the harness cut to pieces and most everything destroyed. Blood scattered around showed that the Indians had suffered a great loss.

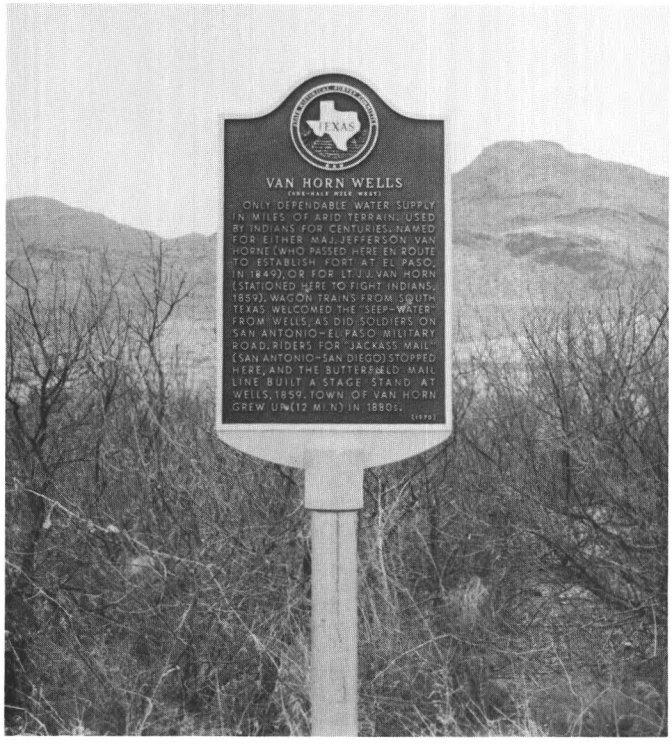


Figure 1. View of historical marker near Van Horn Wells.

It is tales such as these which demonstrate how hazardous living conditions were in this part of the country in the mid-1800's.

When gold was discovered in California in 1849, people began looking for ways to get to California. The northern routes encountered high mountains, bad weather and marauding Indians. Two of the southern routes established to avoid the hazardous northern ones were the Old Butterfield Stage Route and the San Antonio-San Diego or Old Spanish Trail. The Butterfield Stage Route, which passed through the northern part of Culberson County was started in 1859. The Old Spanish Trail was established in 1857 and is the oldest American transcontinental route. Both passengers and mail were transported over the route. It was also known as the Jackass Mail Route because of the sand along the 180 mile (290 km) stretch between Fort Yuma and San Diego, which forced travelers to make the trip by pack mule.

After leaving For Davis the trail passed through Van Horn Wells, Bass Canyon by Eagle Springs, Fort Quitman, Fort Hancock and into El Paso. The ruts made by stagecoaches and wagons are still visible (Wylie, 1973). According to Rosa Wylie the old stage stop at Van Horn Wells can still be seen, and homemade horseshoe nails, pieces of broken china and gun shells have been found in the area.

From 1859 to 1861, Major James Judson Van Horn was in command at Van Horn Wells; the city of Van Horn, Texas was named after him. His command ended when Texas became a Confederate state and Major Van Horn was taken prisoner.

The city of Van Horn, Texas was established in 1881 as a watering and shipping point for the railroad. The city is located about four miles (7 km) north of the old Van Horn Wells. Van Horn lies at an altitude of 4,049 ft (1234 m) and at the last census had a population of 2,889. Crops grown in the area include cotton, alfalfa and wheat. Cotton was first grown in large quantities after the discovery of a large underground reservoir at Lobo, Texas in 1950. In the nearby mountains mining activities include the production of talc, barite and marble. Van Horn is also a market for cattle and sheep.

Hunters frequent the area hoping to bag white-tailed deer, mule deer, pronghorn antelope and upland game birds. The last remaining herd of bighorn sheep in Texas lives in the Diablo Mountains just west of town; however hunting of these animals is illegal.

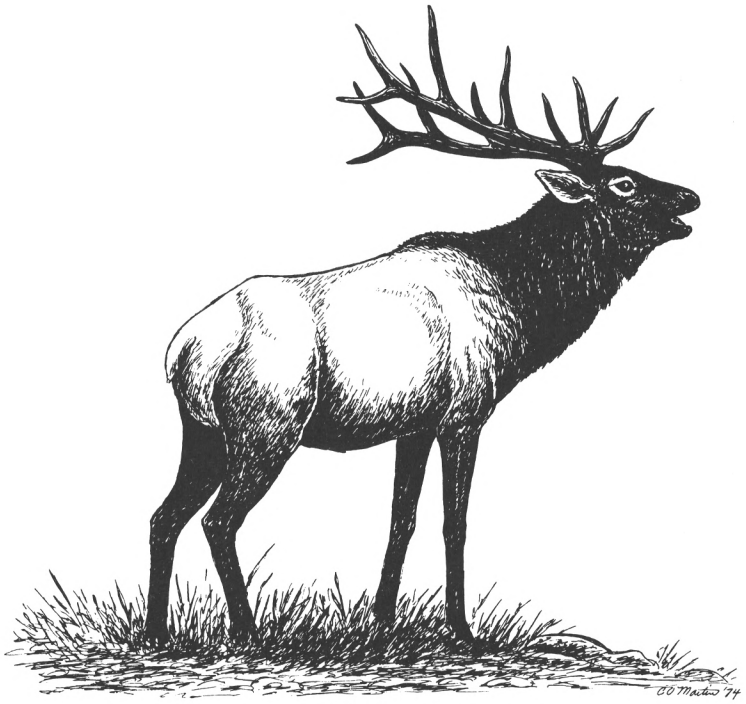
Van Horn is surrounded by several mountain ranges. These include the Baylor Mountains to the north, the Carrizo and Beach Mountains to the west, the Eagle Mountains to the southwest, the Apache Mountains to the northeast, and the Van Horn and Wylie Mountains to the south and west. Most of the mountains were named after prominent citizens or ranches which were located in their vicinity. However, the Eagle Moutains have an interesting legend connected with their name. An account of this legend is included in Rosa Wylie's book on Van Horn.

> There is a legend of how the Eagle Mountains got their name. Immediately back of the Eagle Springs towers a lofty peak, rising to a height of 7,516 feet. From its top a signal fire can be seen from all surrounding country, and lofty peaks may be seen. It was a favorite camping place for the Indians, because the huge bluff 75 feet high reminded them of an everlasting watching eagle, always looking to the west as if watching the setting sun. The legend is that there was a rich mine located across the Rio Grande River. Only one tribe knew its location until one of the Indians of this tribe was captured by a rival tribe. After being tormented and tortured he revealed the secret location. For this treachery, he was turned into a mammoth stone eagle to guard the mine and also the secret location forever. The torturers of the rival tribe were captured and the Great Spirit turned them into smaller stone eagles and placed them about to help guard and remind the tribe of what happened.

Rosa Wylie's book on the History of Van Horn and Culberson County, Texas, relates these and many other stories of Indian attacks, lost gold mines and early settlers of this area. The history of the Van Horn area is limited to the information she has compiled in her book.

REFERENCE

Wylie, R. L., 1973, History of Van Horn and Culberson County, Texas: Pioneer Book Publishers, Hereford, Texas, p. 184.



Elk or wapiti, *Cervus elaphus*.