

COL. CALEB DORSEY'S FIRST CALIFORNIA ROUNDUP

At the close of the Civil War, Caleb Dorsey, a colonel in the Missouri Guard, was with General Sterling Price in Texas. With other defeated and disaffected Confederate soldiers, he traveled to Mexico to see the new independent colony of Carlotta near Vera Cruz. Instead of remaining there with his compatriots, Dorsey kept moving and finally arrived in Mazatlan. According to his letters, he intended to establish himself there because of promising business opportunities that arose, and he had no desire to return to the United States to suffer the comments and insults awaiting the defeated. However, his brother, Thomas Beale Dorsey, asked him to come to Tuolumne County to help him with some business problems, and so Caleb was in Sonora with Thomas and another brother, John Worthington, in January 1866. Caleb never returned to Mexico. Instead he established his farming operation in Stanislaus County near what is now Oakdale, in an area heavily populated with Southern sympathizers. Eventually he purchased over 4,300 acres of prime wheat-growing land and raised blooded horses and cattle.

While he and his brothers were carving out new lives in California, the remainder of their family, now consisting of a mother and five sisters, remained in Missouri. Caleb immediately launched a frontal attack on them to come and join him. They were clearly a very close and devoted family, and he missed them very much – as they missed him. Caleb devoted himself in his correspondence to explaining and describing his new world and life-style, repeatedly inviting them to come west. In all of the correspondence between them, these two letters, the first written 10 July 1866 and the second undated but written immediately after, offer a wonderful glimpse into the life of ranchers and pioneers in early California. Caleb describes a cattle drive that began in Stanislaus County and moved south to Fresno where the cattle were purchased. They are then driven northwest and east to the railhead in Stockton, where the cattle were sold.

His many letters to them seem to have done the trick. By the 1870 Census, the Dorseys were residing on Phoenix Ranch in Stanislaus County – Caleb, his brothers Thomas and John, his mother Eleanor (Brown) Dorsey, and his three unmarried sisters, Lou Eleanor (Loudie), Ann Brown, and Edwa Worthington Dorsey, leaving only two married sisters behind in Missouri.

This letter was written to “Loudie,” Susannah Lou Eleanor Dorsey, the tenth child and fifth daughter of Edward Worthington and Eleanor Elizabeth (Brown) Dorsey. He wrote many letters to Loudie, who appears to have been a Confederate conspirator – aiding in the cause in a variety of ways. She devoted the war years to assisting her brother and other Confederate soldiers, particularly those held in Union prisons. She eventually married Phillip Chesterfield Stanhope Barbour Ewing, of Lowndes County, MS in 1871 at Phoenix Ranch, the new establishment of Col. Caleb Dorsey in Stanislaus County, California.

Stockton California
July 10th 1866

My Dearest Loudie

Why is it that I have received no letters from you for so long? Is it because you have not felt like writing, or is it because they have been written and have not been sent to me? I have not had a line from you since February. You have surely written me since then! I have not had a line from any of the

From the first page of the original letter by Caleb Dorsey to his younger sister, Loudie

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July 10th 1866
My Dearest Loudie

Why is it that I have received no letters from you for so long? Is it because you have not felt like writing, or is it because they have been written and have not been sent to me? I have not had a line from you since February — You have surely written me since then! I have not had a line from any of the family for two months, which seems like quite a long time now that we are in a situation to write to each other without having our letters pryed into — direct my letters to me at Stockton; you can, if you have any fears of them being opened at the Post Office where they are started from, enclose to Richard Garner, the gentleman with whom I am boarding — My letters are all given me that reach this P.O. — I have written to you and Eddie both several times since I received an answer, and will expect a nice long letter from both of you for this — Although I have but little to write about having just written Annie, a day or two ago, all of the news — But as you are fond of my Journals I will give you a little journal of my first trip after cattle in this country — which, although not very amusing will give you some idea of what it is in

this country to trade in Cattle: To begin; I left Stockton, in company with Mr Jas Crow on the 2nd of May, for the King's River Country (a 150 or 175 miles from Stockton) to purchase some Cattle — Passed the first night with Yrineo Corona a Mexican, who is a great friend of Mr Crow's 3rd went by Ben Crow's & got some extra horses, (in this country when the cattle men go out to attend the "Rodillas" they all carry with them extra horses to part out on, the work being too hard for one horse to stand it) Passed the night with, an old school mate of mine & son inlaw of Mr Isaac Crow's John Tucker, on the San Joaquin River — 4th Cap Morris joined us here — Having to camp out all the while from here on we took with us a small wagon some cooking utensils and provisions — Camped at Temples Ranch got a supply of fresh beef and were joined by Jo Workman and party who were going up to attend the "Rodillas" (Pronounced "Rodeyas") — As nothing of importance occurred on the way up I shall pass over that part of the trip and begin with the morning of the 7th which finds us camped at Bradleys "Coral" four miles North-West of Kingston — Attended my first "Rodilla" to day so will try and describe it — It seems to be a custom in this country for all of the Cattle men to meet & collect & brand their cattle about this season every year — These collections of stock are called in Spanish "Rodillas" and are formed by those who are best acquainted or have the largest interest in the cattle in the vicinity. They collect all of the cattle for several miles around And drive them to one place that is designated as the "Rodilla Ground" and place men around them To prevent them from going off again, these Men hold them while all who are interested ride into the "Rodilla" (which sometimes contains several thousand cattle) And drive out their cattle into what they call their "Parrado" (this is also a Spanish word and if I mistake not, means parted) leaving enough men with each "Parrado" to prevent the cattle from going off after they are



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parted out — In this way you sometimes see fifty or one hundred men, atwork at one time, driving out and forming their “Parrados” — Thus you see small bunches or “Parrados” as they are termed all around the “Rodilla” at a distance varying from 150 to 200 yards from the “Rodilla” — This is a grand frolic for the “Vacaras” or Cowherders, who have a fine opportunity of exercising their skill with the “Riatta” as a great many of the calves as well as a few of the grown cattle have to be lassoed before they can be controlled — men frequently have their horses to fall with them, as they ride reclessly [recklessly], regardless of the 1000 squirrel holes that fill the ground and in places make it almost impossible for a horse to keep out of them – Butchers & others wishing to buy cattle all attend these ‘Rodillas’ which sometimes last for more than a month as they go ~~through the~~ from one neighborhood to another through the entire cattle district for 200 miles up and down the valleys — The dust having more or less alcali [alkali] in it makes it very disagreeable, for in many places where they make their Rodillas it becomes so dusty as at times to render it imposible to see their cattle — this dust causes many of the cattle to go perfectly blind with something similar to sore eyes which lasts them for 3 or 4 weeks they then recover the sight in one eye always and sometimes in both — so I am told by cattle men (and have since found out by observation) — I have failed to mention the Liquor & Cake or Restaurant Wagons that follow these Rodillas in great numbers, remind ing one very much of the Old Camp Meetings in the States. These are well patronized for men become very much fatigued and require some refreshing beverage occasionally – which is rarely ever used to excess except by a few ‘Greasers’ or Mexican “Vacaras” (Although I must say to their credit that I saw but one or two drunk at any place I attended — After attending several ‘Rodillas’ we got back to Frisno City (the landing at the head of the San Joaquin) on the 12th here we purchased a band of cattle of Mr Price 13th Received 448 head of cattle of Price, we



Susannah Lou Eleanor Dorsey

camp on slough below Frisno, I stand guard half the night — 14th Start for Stockton Camp on the River 16 miles below Fresno — 15th This morning finds me cooking for 8 or 10 Greasers we have hired to help us drive I find out That one of them can cook, will put him at it — 16th Have “Tortillas” (Mexican cakes) for breakfast. And you must not all feel that I have Deserted you for if I am absent ‘tis that you May enjoy it all the more when we are able to Meet again — So believe me as ever your ever devoted

Brother Cale

[Transcriber’s Note: The reference to mail being “pryed” into refers to the period during the War when Loudie and Caleb kept up a continuous correspondence of coded letters – with him sending her instructions about recruits for the Confederate cause on other issues concerning wartime operations. During this period it was believed that all mail was read by Federal agents looking for such information and collusion. “Eddie” refers to his sister, Edwa - a feminized version of Edward, her father’s name.]

Second letter:

Camped at Temples Rancho Grass & water good – This Ranch joins Miller’s Ranch which is the largest in this portion of the State having nearly (9,000) acres of land under fence and has on it over 14,000 head of cattle 17th Had a hard day drive to day, it being 12 or 15 miles between watering places and the Sun seemed to shin down upon us as if all of the rays were concentrated just upon the small space of ground we were occupying, making the sand so hot as to burn the calves feet until all of the younger ones were lame and could scarcely travel Camped on Salt Slough – Grass & Mosquitoes in abundance, water brackish – 18th Made a short day drive and camped on a lake just above Wilson’s or Hills Ferry, as it is better know, on the San Joaquin 19th Drove 8 miles & camped near Juneo Corona’s – 20th Started out early this morning leaving Mr. Crow behind us after some young horses – Stopped to moor on the Lake below Grayson – Mr Crow overtook us and we mounted two Mexicans on the young horses, he brought up, that had never had a man on their backs before, and for some minutes we had rare sport for as soon as the Mexicans mounted the horses, which were blindfolded, the blindfold was taken off and the horses began plunging to get their riders off finally one of them finding it impossible to throw his excelent [sic] rider, threw himself broadsided upon the ground. The

rider stepped off very quietly and struck him a blow with his Riatta which caused him to spring to his feet again – as soon as he was up the rider tightened his saddle [sic] and mounted again --- In the meantime the other rider's stirrup breaking, was thrown a most tremendous fall – but he was not hurt – and another stirrup being furnished him, he was soon in the saddle [sic] again – Now each of them started with a Mexican on each side of them the horses plunging and the Mexicans whipping them with their Riattas, soon drove them into a loap [sic] then into a full run and away they went at full speed for more than a mile and in a few minutes all returned with the young horses completely subdued - - We then moved on with our cattle and camped a mile or two above “Manley's Ferry” --- 21st Moved out early and began crossing the River which was very much swollen [sic] from the melting of the snow in the mountains the water now just running over the banks and flooding the low bottom – The Boat being small and the cattle being rather hard to drive on we were late in the evening before we got all across the River. But now came the “tug of war” we had a slough or lake to swim that was quite as wide as the River and the cattle having been shut up in a “corral” all day were quite unmanageable, notwithstanding we placed two men a head of them to keep them back, as soon as they came to the water they rushed right in but when they came to swimming around in a circle and before the circle could be broken near 30 head had drowned – finally Mr Crow who had the skiff [sic] got into the circle and broke it and succeeded in getting the rest back on the same side they started from – By this time night had closed in upon us but Mr Crow and I were wet and the River was still rising, already there was but little dry ground left between the slough and the River – so we pressed on with the work we had made such a poor begining [sic] at – After working and wading in water up to our waists until mid- night we succeeded in getting about one half of them across – about this time the wind began blowing quite cold and we had to stop for the night but the cattle being now divided and very restless we were compelled to guard them closely all night = and having no dry clothes with us we were compelled to wrap up with our Blankets to keep from chilling to death – we were kept up all night, but the morning being cloudy favored us and we went to work early and after wading all of the small slough and becoming almost saturated with mud and water got the last of the cattle across the River about 12 o'clock – we now took breakfast and started for town – camped at Feizer's stood guard for the last night – 23 Got to Town & put our stock in a pasture – 24th Sold 100 head for \$2520⁰⁰ – This closes My journal of the trip – July 15th Lou I have put off finishing this thinking I would certainly get a letter from some of you, but still no letter has come yet – we have just got down with another lot of very fine cattle – so I will be kept quite busy for some time yet = Lou, I must try and make money enough to buy us a little home, some place where we can feel at

home once more – In the meantime you can be thinking where you would be content to live at &c --- I have no news to write – Tom started back yesterday to Kings River to try and buy some more cattle for us, don't know when he will get back – Brother John is still improving --- Lou you and [no name here] must write to me oftener, recollect that I have so many to write to and so little to write about that will interest you and am so much of my time away from any P.O. and writing material that I can't always write just when I would like to – Give my best Love to all of the family & my young Lady friend = and my kind regards to old neighbors & friends. Lou I will enclose two one dollar Mo. Bills, one for you and one for Eddie – I have had them for a long while but they are of no value here – I don't know whether Bank is still good or not.

[Transcriber's Note: Envelope addressed to Miss Loudie E Dorsey, Hannibal, Mo.; postmarked Stockton, Cal., 17, month unreadable; handwritten notes: 1866, Description of first Cattle Roundup from Uncle Cale Dorsey]