

WILBUR RANCH HISTORY

Wilbur Ranch was homesteaded by Dr. Ruben A. Wilbur in 1862. Dr. Wilbur was a Harvard Medical School graduate who had come to the Arizona Territory in the early 1860's to serve as the physician for the Cheri Colorado Mining Company. They mined silver and gold but because of mismanagement and Indian hostilities, the company failed. After the company failed, Dr. Wilbur decided to homestead on Arivaca Creek under the principle of "squatter's rights". He started with 140 acres but in time the ranch grew to 16 square miles. The house was built one room at a time because of a lack of money, time and materials. Dr. Wilbur married and became the Indian Agent. The family had a fruit orchard, grew vegetables and had an extensive herb garden. When crops were ready to harvest, one member of the family had to sleep in the garden to protect it from Indians who thought that anything that grew could be used by them. Tohono O'Odham (Papago) Indians and some Apaches would come to the creek area. They passed this way as they traveled to the Tucson area to harvest saguaro and other cactus fruit. They would often sit along the wall east of the house waiting to be seen by the Doctor.

Dr. Wilbur and his wife had a son named Agustin who married Ramona Valducea, the daughter of Don Francisco Valducea, in 1901. Their daughter, Eva Antonia Wilbur was born at the ranch in 1904 and was the oldest of five children. In those days, women were raised like men and "Tonia", as she was called, was raised to run the ranch. When she was four, she helped her father dress a calf's wound by digging out the maggots with her fingers. By age 10, she was bossing the cowboys, toting a gun, and riding the range to check fences and water holes. Tonia first went to the top of El Cero while riding double with her father on their horse Diamante. After she was a little older and Diamante had become her horse, she loved to climb El Cero by herself. El Cero became sort of a refuge for her. Pancho Villa raided the ranch during one of his excursions North of the border and trapped her brothers in a remote canyon.



View of El Cero – Photo by
T. Johnson, March 2013

Eva married Marshall Cruce and they took over the operation of the ranch shortly after her father died in 1933. In 1941, she was sent to prison for cattle rustling. She claimed she was framed for the crime because lawmen could not catch her shooting the cattle of the land baron who had shot her horses and had attempted to get control of her land. After her release from prison, she spent a lot of her days trying to protect the Spanish mustangs that roamed the land. It is thought that the ancestors of the horses likely carried Father Eusebio Kino and other Spanish missionaries through Northern Sonora in the 1690's.

In 1987, at age 83, Eva Wilbur-Cruce started writing a letter to her nephews and nieces about her life on the Arivaca Ranch. These memories soon turned into short stories that she compiled into her autobiography, "A Beautiful Cruel Country". The book received a national certificate of commendation from the American Association of State and Local Histories. It is available in the Green Valley Hiking Club Library

After her husband died in 1989, Eva sold the ranch, except the 10 acres surrounding the

house, to add to the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge. She had assumed the horses would remain but they were removed and donated to private ranches. She was pleased that the land was preserved but was upset that the horses were not allowed to remain. Eva Antonia “Bonnie” Wilbur-Cruce died January 30, 1998. Her great niece, Eva Maria Zimmerman, had taken possession of the ranch house after Eva Antonia’s death and had plans to remodel it for her family. However, this never happened. The house rapidly deteriorated and eventually burned. It appears that migrants that had temporarily occupied the structure had started the house fire. Following are a series of pictures showing the deterioration of the structure.



Wilbur Ranch House – Photo taken in 1997 by Jim Campbell, Just before Eva Antonia’s death.



Wilbur Ranch House – Photo taken by T. Johnson after building was gutted and lost its roof.



Ruins of Wilbur Ranch House – Photo by Tom Johnson in March 2012



Ruins of Wilbur Ranch House – Photo by Tom Johnson in March 2012

Summarized by T. Johnson from an article in the 4 February 1998 Arizona Daily Star and from “A Beautiful Cruel Country” by Eva Antonia Wilbur-Cruce published in 1987. Updated by T. Johnson in March 2013.

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