

# The EMPIRE RANCH HOUSE

## A Brief History

Sept. 2007 Rev.



Empire Ranch Vaqueros circa 1890  
*Photo Courtesy Laura ("Dusty") Vail Ingram*

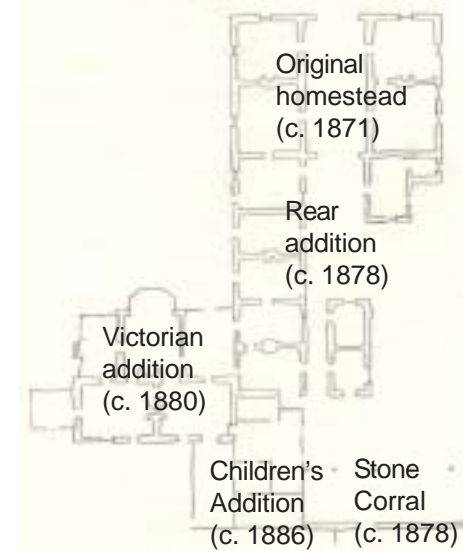
**A 160 acre homestead** owned by William Wakefield formed the heart of the Empire Ranch. In June of 1876, Wakefield sold the homestead to Edward N. Fish and Simon Silverberg, who the following August sold it to Walter L. Vail and Herbert S. Hislop, two young men recently arrived in Arizona to find land on which to establish a partnership cattle ranch. In October of 1876 John N. Harvey joined the partnership, bringing capital for purchasing more land and livestock. Both Hislop and Harvey were from England, and Vail's family had settled in Nova Scotia before emigrating to New Jersey. Locally, the trio's ranch became known as the "English Boys' Outfit."

Unable to adjust to the rigors of frontier life, and worried about financial matters at home, Hislop sold his shares in the ranch to Vail and in 1878 returned to England, vowing never return to "this bloody country again." Vail and Harvey continued to acquire neighboring land until the ranch extended some 60 miles north to south and 30 miles east to west. In 1881 Harvey sold his shares to Vail, who continued to develop and expand the business. Historic land records show that Vail bought out many homesteaders along Cienega Creek. When he died in 1906, the ranch covered almost 1 million acres.

The homestead purchased from Fish and Silverberg included a four room, flat-topped adobe house with packed dirt floors. In a letter written in 1876 to his sister in London, England Hislop described the house as having "two bedrooms, kitchen, and a storeroom." At the back of the house was a corral for holding the cattle and protecting stock from thieves and predators at night. The breezeway between the rooms, sometimes referred to by the Spanish term "zaguan," provided the only entry into the corral. Beams and latillas used in constructing the original, flat roof are still visible from the inside of the breezeway. Hislop's letter also said that the house had no windows or doors, meaning that there were only window and door openings, no furnishing, and that "plaster was needed." The two men installed window panes, doors and a wooden floor themselves. Although Vail had acquired some carpentering skills while working in the Nevada goldfields, neither of the men was experienced in working with adobe mud or plaster. To accomplish this task they hired two Native American adobe masons.

In 1881 Vail returned to New Jersey to marry his longtime sweetheart, Margaret Newhall, and bring her back to the Empire Ranch. As a wedding present to his bride, Vail had a half-hexagon bay window built into the north wall of the living room. Rooms were added to the house to accommodate a growing staff and the family that Vail and Margaret planned to raise.

In the late 1870's, a rear addition of rooms for offices and staff were added, and a gable-roofed Victorian addition followed. Sometime in the late 1880's or early 1890's, a sloped roof was built over the rooms making up the northern half of the house, and a pitched roof was placed over the southern portion. Shake shingles were used as roofing material. The adobe barn south of the ranch house was built in the 1880's. The children's addition



### Empire Ranch House Floor Plan

(approx. scale: 1" = 60')

was added to the southern end of the house in the 1880's and are the only rooms constructed with wood. Eventually the house contained twenty-two rooms. Electricity was produced with a "Delco" plant generator. Original knob and tubing electrical wiring is still visible in the Children's' addition. Bathtubs and flush toilets were installed between the children's rooms and adjacent to the Victorian addition master suite. Walter and Margaret Vail raised seven children in the ranch house and it was occupied by several children and grandchildren before the Vail family sold the ranch in 1928.

In 1928, the Empire Ranch was purchased by the Boice, Gates and Johnson partnership, successor to the Chiricahua Cattle Co. Experienced cattle ranchers, the Boice family was widely known for promoting the Hereford breed in Arizona. Frank Boice and his wife Mary moved to the ranch house where they raised two sons. In 1951, Frank became sole owner of the Empire.

During this period rooms in the west side, or "Victorian" portion of the house were remodeled. From the 1930's through the 1950's there were many improvements. Propane, and eventually natural gas, was piped into the house, a large electric walk-in refrigeration unit was installed, plumbing was upgraded and cement stucco was applied to the exterior house walls. In 1939 or 1940 a swimming pool was installed south of the house. Near the pool, a lawn surrounded by tulips, irises and roses and amply shaded by trees, became the focal point for both family and social gatherings.

In the mid 1950's Frank S. "Pancho" Boice and Bob Boice assumed ownership and operation of the Empire Ranch from their father, Frank, who died suddenly in 1956. During this period a surplus house was moved from Fort



Ladies and cook in Zagan, circa 1890. *Photo courtesy Dusty Vail Ingram*

Huachuca and placed west of the ranch house. This house was referred to as "Bob's Casita," and is now called the "Huachuca House." A block house was built north of the ranch house in the 1950's, where Pancho and his wife Sherry raised three daughters and a son.

In 1969 the Boices sold the Ranch to GAC (Gulf America Corp.), a land development corporation, but continued ranching on the Empire under lease arrangements until 1975. When its real estate development plans faltered, GAC sold the ranch to Anamax Mining company, which leased the Empire to rancher John Donaldson while considering future plans for the lands.

In 1988, through a public-private land swap, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) acquired the ranch lands, which were designated the Empire-Cienega Resource Conservation Area. In December 2000 the U.S. Congress established the area as Las Cienegas National Conservation Area (NCA), encompassing 49,000 acres. Ranching continues under a grazing permit held by John and Mac Donaldson of Sonoita.

Today the Empire Ranch House reflects the story of ranch life in southeast Arizona, from the harsh, unforgiving years of the frontier era, through the bleak and defeating American Depression, the kinder times of post-World War II, and the last four decades of often erratic and unpredictable cattle markets and rapidly changing socioeconomic environment.

In 1997, a group of private citizens formed the Empire Ranch Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the historic buildings and history of the ranch. The Foundation works in partnership with the BLM to determine the future uses of the buildings, and is actively engaged in raising funds to help pay for preservation and historic interpretation of the Empire Ranch and public education about rural life in southeastern Arizona. Through this partnership, the Foundation and the BLM have completed and continue many critical preservation repairs to the adobe portions of the ranch house and nearby adobe ranch buildings. This work proceeds as the initial stage of a phased plan for developing the compound into the Empire Ranch Western Heritage and Education Center.

Since 1996, a group of private citizens, known as the Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership, has also been actively collaborating with the BLM in planning the future resource management of the entire Las Cienegas NCA. The Resource Management Plan for Las Cienegas was produced by this effort, and was Federally approved effective July 2003.

This brochure is a product of Empire Ranch Foundation and BLM collaboration.  
Donations to the Foundation may be sent to:  
Empire Ranch Foundation, P.O. Box 842, Sonoita, AZ 85637-0842