

Local News

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SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

Cows find fine home on island

By Hillary Hauser
News-Press Staff Writer

On Santa Rosa Island, Al Vail navigates his truck along a potholed road that resembles a dry creekbed. At his approach, cows get up from a shady spot under an island oak and lumber away.

The red brake light flashes on from the dashboard of the truck, and Vail ignores it.

"It's just one of the idiosyncracies of island equipment," he says.

A long walk

Vail will be back at the ranch house at Bechers Bay by 12:30 p.m. — because if he's not back by then, his ranch hands will come looking for him.

Santa Rosa, the second largest of the Channel Islands, is 52,974 acres — about 18 miles long and 12 miles wide. Getting stuck in a truck somewhere on the island can mean a long walk home.

"I've done it more than once," Vail says.

Vail and his twin brother Russ have grown up with Santa Rosa as their personal backyard. Today, Al Vail oversees the cattle operations on the island, and Russ Vail takes care of game management and the office in Santa Barbara.

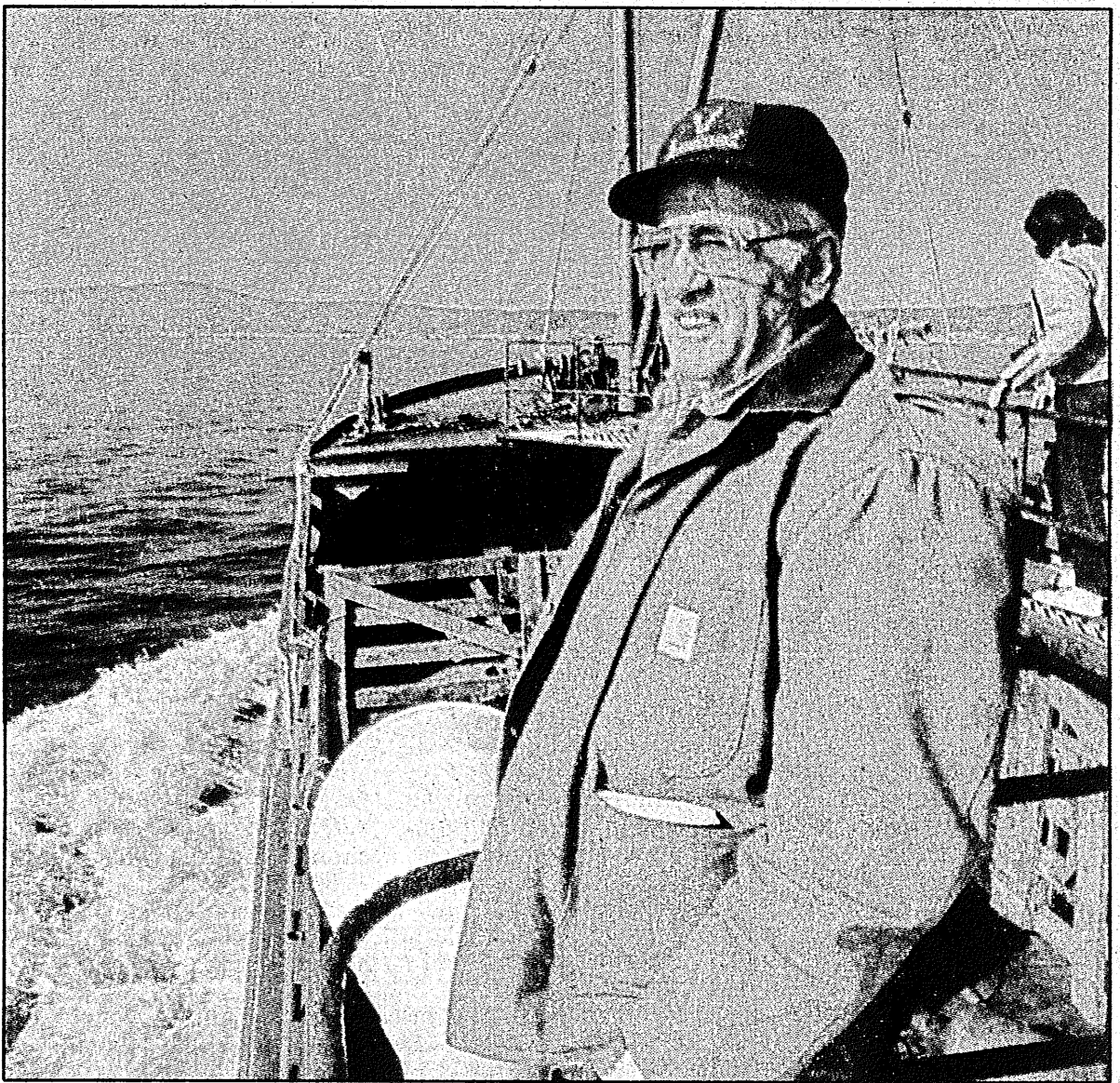
Easy-going bunch

They are easy-going men who see themselves as "cow men, just like our daddy and granddaddy before us."

Since 1902, when Santa Rosa was bought from the heirs of Alexander P. More by "granddaddy" Walter L. Vail and J.V. Vickers, the island has been used for cattle operations.

In 1902, Santa Rosa was densely populated with sheep, but Walter Vail dispensed with the sheep and brought in cows. Until he bought into Santa Rosa, the elder Vail had run cattle on Catalina.

Childhood on the island was



News-Press photo by LEN WOOD

Al Vail watches from the bow of the Vaquero II as the boat approaches the landing at

Bechers Bay on Santa Rosa Island in the Santa Barbara Channel.

a happy one.

"It was great for a kid," Al Vail says. "Unless you were bent on self destruction, you couldn't hurt yourself."

Al and Russ Vail are the most visible of the island owners. Two other Vails (a cousin and a sister) continue to hold their interests in Santa Rosa, and the Vickers heirs, who are spread around Southern California, still retain their fifty-percent interest in the island.

With the help of five or six permanent ranch hands who live in the ranch houses at Bechers, Al Vail has since 1963 overseen the cattle operation of the island — 6,600 head of mostly Angus and Herefords.

Almost everywhere on Santa Rosa, cows can be seen — along the ridges, lying in the shade of oak trees, standing by the road, staring at a truck going by, ambling wherever they please.

With few fences and dramatic views of the sea, it is cow heaven on Santa Rosa.

The island road Vail drives on is a "country road" built in 1930 or 1931 by Standard Oil Co., which drilled a well on the island in 1932.

The oil industry has often poked its nose into Santa Rosa — Standard Oil in 1932; Signal Oil in the 1940s, and Mobil in the early 1970s. The Vails wouldn't have minded a little

revenue from the oil companies, Vail says — "we could have thought of something to do with that pocket change."

No oil found

However, no one struck oil on Santa Rosa.

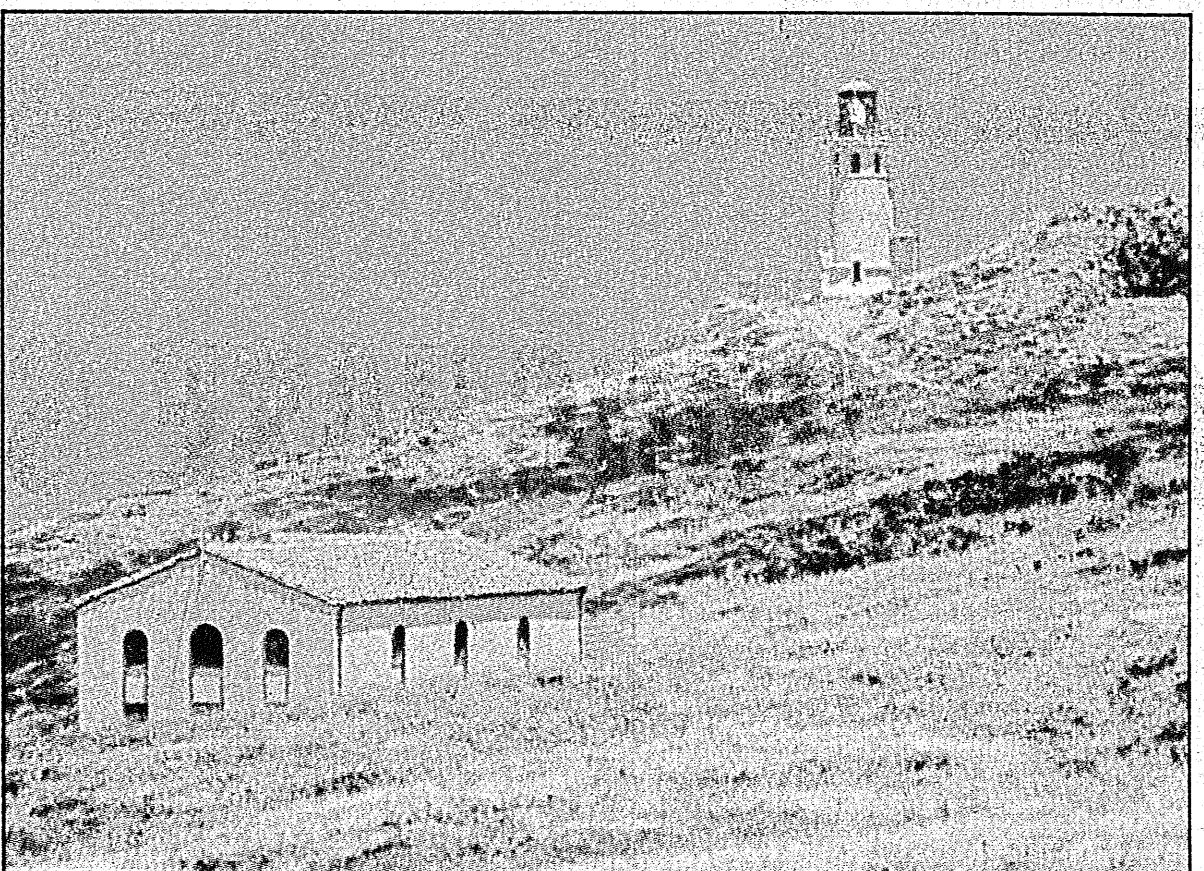
The financial realities of doing any kind of business on an island become apparent when one considers an ocean barrier that is often turbulent. The Vails, however, take in stride the 27 miles of the Santa Barbara Channel they regularly cross to transport cows between the island and the mainland.

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News-Press photo by RAFAEL MALDONADO

The California brown pelican is making a comeback.



News-Press photo by STEVE MALONE

Major landmarks on east Anacapa Island are the lighthouse, which serves ships traffic,

and the "church" built over water tanks to discourage vandalism.

Anacapa—gateway to islands park

By Hillary Hauser
News-Press Staff Writer

Anacapa Island, referred to in early times as a "mass of inaccessible volcanic rock," stands watch over the eastern entrance to the Santa Barbara Channel.

Of all the Channel Islands, Anacapa is the closest to the California coast, and it is the gateway to the Channel Islands National Park. Approximately 100 people per day go ashore at east Anacapa to take the self-guided hike around the island.

Since the time the channel was first navigated, generations of sailors have come to know and respect the huge cliffs and jagged rocks of Anacapa. These lava cliffs plunge from as high as 250 feet almost perpendicularly to the sea, a geologic phenomenon that occurs nowhere else on any of

the other islands in the channel.

Ocean waves have carved out networks of caves at the base of these rocky abutments, which now serve as echo chambers to sea lions and surf. The familiar Arch Rock, located at the tip of east Anacapa, is the result of wave action that has eaten all the way through the land mass.

Anacapa is actually three rocks connected by shallow reefs, very much like a submerged mountain top. The whole chain is about five miles long and averages only a half mile wide.

At the easternmost island is a landing. Here, boatloads of people can climb a ladder to a platform, where they can view over a video monitor the activities of divers exploring the ocean floor below.

From there, they can take a nature walk of 1½ miles, to

view the pelicans and other birds that nest on Anacapa, the island landmarks that include the "church" that was built over water tanks to discourage vandalism, and the giant yellow coreopsis, which blooms in spring.

Just off middle Anacapa lies the wreck of the Winfield Scott, one of the most popular shipwrecks of the Channel Islands visited by divers.

The Winfield Scott was a 225-foot steam paddlewheeler, pride of the Pacific Mail Steam Ship Company. The big ship was on its way from San Francisco to New York, via Panama, on December 2, 1853, when it hit a blanket of deadly fog in the Santa Barbara Channel. There were 450 passengers aboard, many of whom had struck it rich in the California gold fields.

In those days, Anacapa was unmarked, where today a

Coast Guard lighthouse on the east island warns ships of treacherous rocks. At midnight on December 2, the Winfield Scott slammed into Anacapa.

The passengers were rescued by another steamer, and the Winfield Scott settled into the bottom of the sea. Today, divers exploring the area where the ship sank can still make out the paddlewheel, even though it is battered to a fraction of its original size and completely encrusted with sealife.

The name Anacapa comes from the Indian word "Eneeyapah," which means "ever changing." The title refers to the mirage phenomenon that makes Anacapa appear at one time steep and precipitous, while at other times, low and flat, yet the name suits the diverseness of life, history and lore on Anacapa itself.

Cattle enjoy good life on Santa Rosa

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Vail explains that the young calves are bought during fall and winter in Idaho, Utah or Nevada. The "four-weights," as the 400-pound calves are called, are loaded onto the cattleboat Vaquero II from a loading dock in Port Hueneme and transported across the channel.

Spring roundup

The animals spend 18 months on the island, growing to about 1,000 pounds before they're rounded up in spring by island vaqueros on horseback. For the trip back to the mainland, the cattle are herded back aboard the boat and offloaded in Port Hueneme.

The Vaquero II is the last of a breed of sea vessel. It is a shallow-drafted, floating cattle pen. On a narrow, rusty-railed ramp that stretches from the outside bridge to the bow, a hand can walk and tend to the cattle below.

Over the years, the Vails have hauled for other island ranchers, including Dr. Carey Stanton, who has run a cattle ranch in the interior valley of Santa Cruz Island, and Herbert Lester, the self-described "King of San Miguel," who died in 1942.

Weighing time

Berthed in the Santa Barbara Harbor, the Vaquero II is also used to transport supplies and personnel to the island.

On this particular day, two people from the county Weights and Measures Department, along with their heavy equipment, have been carried over for the spring ritual of checking the island's cattle-weighing scales ("in my favor, of course," Vail jokes).

The three-hour trip to the island has been through a thick fog and sea chop, but as the Vaquero approaches Bechers Bay, the sun breaks through and turns the water into a turquoise blue.

All day, the fog hangs off Santa Rosa like a heavy theater curtain, but the island continues to bask in sunshine.

Greeted by vaqueros

Vail has been greeted by vaqueros at the Bechers pier. While they busy themselves with offloading the county equipment, Vail heads for his truck.

Pointing to a small forest of Torrey pines about a mile west of the pier, Vail explains that the island is the only place in the world where the Torrey pines grow naturally, other than La Jolla.

When the National Park Service takes over the island, visitors will be able to take a day hike from Bechers to the Torrey pines.

Vail is philosophical about the Park Service buying Santa Rosa, even though it means a change for the island. Few visi-

tors obtaining visiting permits from the Vail and Vickers office in Santa Barbara have ever gone past the Bechers Bay beach.

Visitors expected

It is expected that the federal government will soon complete its purchase of the island under the terms of the 1980 federal legislation creating the Channel Islands National Park. Then, a limited number of visitors will be allowed to come ashore at Bechers and at Johnsons Lee, and hikers will be able to traverse the island roads.

Including the one Vail now drives on.

Beginning at the Bechers pier, the road leads past the ranch house occupied by the Vail and Vickers foreman, Bill Wallace.

In the front yard, an island fox lazes in the tall grass. No bigger than a house cat, the sleek animal sits calmly in the grass, blinking in the sun. It has a collar and bell around its neck.

Unique species

The fox is one of the unique species of the islands that has evolved into its own, distinct form since the islands split off from the mainland. This one has been tamed by Wallace and his family.

About 100 yards up the road, there is another ranch house — a quaint, two-story white one with green trim. It is the Vails' favorite place to relax.

"It was built in the '60s, and I don't mean 1960s, either," Vail says.

The house seems like an ambitious building project for the 1860s, since all the materials had to come across 27 miles of often-rough water.

Island high point

"It was easy," Vail explained. "No one told them they couldn't do it."

Later, at the highest point of the island, Vail points out the window of his truck to a concrete bunker to the right of the road. The windows are broken and the old gray bunker abandoned.

"There was a lot of paranoia in the 1950s, after the war," he says. While people on the mainland were building bomb shelters and stocking them with canned food and bottled water, Western Air Defense Systems was in the business of building bunkers on the islands.

Blanket of fog

If the fog weren't so thick around the island, San Miguel could be seen three miles away from where Vail sits in his truck, at the top of Santa Rosa.

The Vails' and Vickers' policy of undergrazing the pastures can be appreciated if the two islands are compared.

San Miguel, now a windswept sand dune, was once a vegetation-covered island. With exces-

sive sheep and cattle grazing over the years, the island was literally nibbled to the ground.

Vail stops his truck on another of Santa Rosa's high mountain ridges.

Herd of elk

About a mile and a half away, atop another ridge, he sees a herd of elk. Looking through a high-powered camera lens, he spots a big bull with a good set of horns.

The elk were originally imported to the island by the Vails in 1912, and since 1979 they have offered five-day elk hunts to hunters paying \$6,000 for a bull elk, \$1,500 for a cow.

Guides and equipment are provided, and the Vails do regular counts of the herd by helicopter, to determine what the annual take of animals will be.

"It's called game management," Vail says. "The numbers dictate what you shoot."

Shuns traveling

There are deer on the island, too, introduced by the Vails in 1929 and now available to hunters for \$750 per deer.

Vail talks of sailing in a Transpac race, but over the years, he hasn't traveled much. "Why do it when you have this?" he asks.

A quail scoots across the road and into the underbrush. "Years ago, my granddaddy made a trade with Catalina," Vail explains. "They wanted hogs to kill the snakes off, so he traded them a bunch of our hogs for a bunch of their quail, and that's how we got those birds."

The hogs are not so happily received on Santa Rosa — because they eat the island oak and other desirable vegetations.

Abandoned barracks

At a fork in the high road, Vail stops and points down the road that leads to Johnsons Lee, an abandoned military barracks on the backside of the island near Ford Point. From the water, a sailor can round the point to get a view of the mammoth rusting hulk of the Chickasaw, a freighter that went aground on Santa Rosa in 1962.

Vail said the old Air Force barracks will be torn down or renovated by the National Park Service. The park plans to provide overnight facilities to visitors there, but no more than 50 people at a time.

Vail says the \$30 million selling price for Santa Rosa is fair market value for the island.

Government rights

"The government has the right to take the land by eminent domain," he says. "We're not overly happy, however, playing around with the courts. It's a long, drawn-out procedure."

The Vails will be able to continue their cattle-ranching operations after the Park Service has taken over the island.

According to William Ehorn, superintendent of the Channel

Islands National Park, the ranching and hunting operations on Santa Rosa will be negotiated with the Vails when the island is sold.

Ehorn wants the ranching operations to continue as an interpretive history program for visitors — "because where else do you see vaqueros in action like that?"

Money is key

The Vails simply want to continue the cattle operations they have known all their lives.

"But it depends upon what kind of money the Park Service wants," Vail says. "There is a lot of romanticism about being a cowman or cowboy, but in truth it is plain, hard work."

By the time Vail's truck rounds the bend to the Bechers Bay ranch house, it is 12:30 p.m. — the time he told his vaqueros he'd be back. They are waiting for him, with a typical lunch of beef (from island cattle), refried beans, corn, potatoes, salad and tortillas.

Approaching the ranch house, Vail steps on the gas at the last minute and a big pothole sends the truck flying. His passengers hit the roof, and Vail apologizes for his last-minute hurry.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I guess I'm just like a tired horse, heading for the barn."