

# *Philip Tedro: A Greek/Arab Legend of the American West*

By Steve Frangos

Special to The National Herald

Philip Tedro was one of less than a dozen Greeks who participated in the United States Army's experiment with the use of camels as dray animals in the American southwest. Just prior to the American Civil War, these Greeks were involved with driving and caring for the animals, as well as much-needed scouts for the U.S. Army. Yet it was after their participation in the camel experiment that the real long-term impact of this handful of Greek immigrants on the American imagination took place.

Eight Greeks arrived at the Port of Indianola in Lavaca county Texas aboard the USS Supply On February 10, 1856. "Go West Greek George," by Steven Dean Pastis is the first published account which specifically identifies all eight Greeks as Yiorgos Caralambo (later known as Greek George), Hadji Ali (Hi Jolly), Mimico Teodora (called Mico and

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# Philip Tedro: A Greek/Arab Legend

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Domingo Mimico in Texas), Hadjiatis Yannaco (Long Tom), Anastasio Coralli (Short Tom), Michele Georgios, Yanni Illato and Giorgios Costi. Needless to say, handling and care of these great beasts of burden required special knowledge and abilities. The Greeks were hired to teach the soldiers how to handle, drive and pack these animals.

His name is a saga in itself. Hi Jolly was born Philip Tedro in Smyrna. One of his parents was Greek and the other Syrian. At some point, while he was still living in the Middle East, he changed his name to Hadji Ali. Some versions of the story say this change of name happened when he converted to Islam and made a pilgrimage to Mecca. Of course once he came to America, his name changed once again. Nobody could pronounce Hadji Ali, so he became Hi Jolly ([www.publicradio.org](http://www.publicradio.org)).

After the War with Mexico (1846-48) ended in victory for the United States, all the land which now includes Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah and the western regions of Colorado and New Mexico added another 529,000 square miles to the country. With the discovery of gold in California in 1849, thousands of Americans from the east began to surge west. Surveying, defending and supplying the newly acquired lands fell to the federal government.



A plaque commemorating the U.S. Army's so-called "Camel Express" of War Jefferson Davis imported camels to the U.S. to build and supply a California. Eight Greeks, among them a man named Philip Tedro, partic

Kerr County, Texas. There, Lieutenant Edward Fitzgerald Beale (1822-1893) assumed command.

At some point during the great Southwestern camel experiment, the Army was thinking of fashioning the "Camel Express" - a la Pony Express, but with camels. The Army set up trials to test the camel against the horse. With the first shipment of camels came a caretaker: a short, heavysset, happy-go-lucky man named Hadji Ali, whose name was promptly changed to "Hi Jolly" by the soldiers.

At some point between 1857 and 1859, Hi Jolly was involved in the delivery of the very first U.S. mail routes in the southwest.

On June 25, 1857, under Beale's command, 25 camels, 44 soldiers, 2 camel-drovers (Greek George and Hi Jolly), and numerous horses and mules left Fort

were auctioned at Camp Verde on March 18, 1866. When the last of the camels were finally abandoned at Fort Yuma, Arizona that year, so were the handlers. A number of camels were left to fend for themselves in the Arizona desert.

The Army never officially explained why it abandoned the experiment. Perhaps they proved uneconomical or perhaps the Arizona desert country was too tough for them. It is speculated that the rocks hurt the camels' feet. For a time, Hi Jolly wrapped their feet in burlap. Later, a special shoe was fashioned for the animals' split toes. The shoes never proved a satisfactory solution, as they couldn't keep rocks out from between the animals' toes. Hi Jolly was grieved at the loss of his camels, but he took up scouting for the Army and also did some mining ([www.svchistory.com](http://www.svchistory.com)).



ARIZONA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**Philip Tedro, a Greek/Arab camel jockey and scout for the U.S. Army in the 19th Century.**

With all this in mind, Secretary of War Jefferson Davis was told of an innovative plan in 1855 to import camels to help build and supply a federal wagon route from Texas to California. Congress agreed and appropriated \$30,000 for the task.

The USS Supply brought 34 camels, landing at Port Indianola, Texas on February 10, 1856. On a second trip, additional animals were transported, bringing the total number to 100. From Port Indianola, the expedition traveled to Camp Verde, a frontier outpost in

Davis to chart the shortest distance between Fort Defiance in Texas and the Colorado River. Roughly following the 35th parallel, Beale and the expedition traveled to San Antonio and then onwards to El Paso. From El Paso the expedition traveled due west across Arizona through the Flagstaff area to the banks of the Colorado River. Known initially as Beale's Wagon Road, today we know this road as Route 66.

On the Beale expedition to open a wagon road across Arizona from Fort Defiance to California, the camels, under Hi Jolly, proved their worth, though not without some hardship. In one test, Hi Jolly's camel foundered and died partway through the journey. Hi Jolly is said to have carried the sack of mail across the desert the rest of the way on foot. After reaching California, the expedition returned to Texas a success.

The War Department abandoned the experiment, however. With the first shots of the Civil War, the Camel experiment was finished. Thirty-four of the camels - then in route for Benicia, California - were auctioned off upon their return to Texas On February 26, 1864. The remaining 66 camels

The events of the camel experiment cover roughly only ten years in the lives of all the individuals involved. The later experiences of these Greek cowboys have yet to see detailed documented examination.

#### THE LAST CAMP

Philip Tedro died walking along the desert road from the Colorado River to Wickenburg on December 16, 1902 at the age of 64, and was buried in the Quartzsite, Arizona cemetery. This was ten years before the Arizona Territory became the 48th state in the Union. Tedro was buried in a simple grave with a wooden headboard. It is said that all the remaining old prospectors attended Hi Jolly's funeral.

For more than 30 years, Tedro's grave lay almost forgotten, until James L. Edwards of the Arizona Highway Department had a handsome tomb erected over Tedro's gravesite in 1934. Ten feet tall, the new grave marker is a pyramid-shaped monument made of the stones from the area such as black malapai rock, petrified wood, gold-bearing quartz, and natural red, white and blue rocks (symbolizing the flag). Some of these stones also feature ancient

# of the Great Old American West

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petroglyphs (still seen on their exterior surfaces). Crowning the pyramid is the silhouette of a one-humped camel made of copper.

Before he died, Tedro applied to the U.S. Congress for pension funds in his later days, arguing that he deserved support after 30 years of service on contract with the Army. There's a small metal box on his memorial which supposedly contains all the money he had when he died: two silver dollars, a dime and a nickel.

Governor B. B. Moeur and oth-

er dignitaries all attended the dedication ceremony for what was called "Hi Jolly's Last Camp." Various Arizona Highway historical markers were also erected and so continue to identify the gravesite. Today, this pyramid gravestone is one of the most visited tourist spots in the American southwest.

## THE BALLAD

Philip Tedro's exploits were not to fade from popular memory. Among the rowdy ballads of American folk songs is "Hi Jolly the Camel Driver." As with many such folk songs, the lyrics often vary considerably. Here are three of the most often heard verses:

*Hi Jolly was a camel driver, a long time ago*

*He followed Mr. Blaine way out west - yee-haw.*

*Didn't mind the burning sand in that God-forsaken land  
And he didn't mind the pretty gals the best.*

*I'm singin' Hi Jolly, Hey Jolly 20 miles a day, by golly 20 miles  
Before the morning light wee-chaw.  
Hi Jolly, hey ya gotta get on  
My way ya told my gal I'd be home Sunday night.*

*There's pretty girls in Albuquerque  
Least that's what they say,  
There's pretty gals in Tucumcari too  
Woo-Hoo.*

*But honey don't you mind  
I won't pay them anytime  
Cause I'm savin' all my lovin' just for you.*

*I'm singin' Hi Jolly...*

*Old timers down in Arizona tell you that it's true  
It's true.*

*That you can see Hi Jolly's ghost a-ridin' through*

*Ooooh.*

*When the desert moon is high*

*He comes riding into sight*

*Driving four and twenty camels over the hill*

*I'm singin' Hi Jolly...*

## CAMELMANIA

This coming Tuesday, January 10, the Quartzsite Chamber of Commerce will host the annual "Camelmania: Hi Jolly Daze." Quartzsite is located at the junction of Highway 95 and Interstate 10 on the western edge of Arizona. Quartzsite town limits are just nine square miles in size. This annual celebration is held explicitly to honor Hi Jolly (c.f., [www.ci.quartzsite.az.us](http://www.ci.quartzsite.az.us)). The "Hi Jolly Daze" opens with a kickoff parade which usually starts at the post office and goes west to the rodeo grounds. Camel races follow. Other entertainment includes swap meets, air balloons rides, musicians and gemstone conventions. This annual celebration transforms this tiny Arizona hamlet of some 1,000-2,000 year-round inhabitants into a carnival with more than a million visitors.

As reported in National Geographic (January 2001), seven months out of the year Quartzsite is transformed into "America's Largest Parking Lot." This startling alteration of the landscape is due to all the winter tourists who travel in recreational vehicles. "Within weeks, 175,000 RV's cram inches apart into 79 trailer parks, onto front yards, and spill out seven miles on either side of town."

It seems highly unlikely that the vast majority of those attending the Hi Jolly Daze do so because of their understanding or appreciation of the life and experiences of Philip Tedro. Obviously, regional history has been utilized to help the economic welfare of the area.

## REALM OF LEGENDS

As "Hi Jolly the Camel Driver," Philip Tedro is a long-recognized figure of the old American South-





The grave of Philip Tedro in Quartzite, Arizona contains a metal box with all his property at the time of his death: two silver dollars a dime and a nickel. Tedro had changed his name to Hadji Ali upon his conversion to Islam before coming to America, and eventually came to be known as "Hi Jolly" by U.S. troops who couldn't pronounce his name.

west. Yet it is Tedro's place in American legends by which most Americans know of this man. Hi Jolly stands on that thin line on which many American heroes of the frontier like Davy Crockett or Kit Carson stand between real historical events and the tall tales told about them.

For Greek American Studies Philip Tedro's life is unique since no other person of Greek descent has a civic holiday held in their honor, nor a tomb erected by a state which is among the most visited historical graves in the entire American southwest. And, as if all that were not enough, there is a folksong, as well.

Reviewing some of these legends, songs, and celebrations that Americans (but not Greek Americans) observe among themselves helps us understand how the question of "what it means to be Greek in North America" is not something limited to our ethnic group alone. Clearly, the history of Greeks in North America is far more complex than is now understood.

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