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WILDLIFE AND RANCHING OBSERVATIONS OF TASKER ODDIE, 1898-1902

Tasker Lowndes Oddie, a Nevada US Senator, Nevada Governor, Nye County District Attorney and State Senator, was an eastern “dude”, who as a 28 year old New Jersey lawyer was hired in 1898 by Anson Stokes (of “Stokes Castle” fame) to represent his mining interests in central Nevada, and came west.

Oddie wrote letters frequently, and his correspondence contains a plethora of on-the-ground observations about Nevada.

His letters are mainly written to his immediate family, are gossipy, but filled with tidbits of valuable historical evidence and facts. Oddie was a co-founder of Tonopah, which brought Nevada out of a terrible twenty year depression (1880-1900) and is a major Nevada historical figure in his own right.

Oddie was a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant to the core, yet he clearly admired, even envied, the hell-bent-for leather habits of the cowboys and ranchers he was soon neighbors with. He worked hard himself as a hard-rock miner and hard-riding horseman. He spent most of his travel time in the center of Nevada, riding on horseback between Austin, Belmont, Ione, and later, Tonopah. He wrote frequently of hunting trips, roundups, weather, livestock, mustangs, horses and horsemanship, mining, people and their personalities, and his evolution from a snobbish eastern dude into a genuine westerner and Nevadan is clear and traceable in his writing. For the purposes of this paper I have extracted all of his mentions of wildlife and to keep it simple all of his comments on ranching and livestock are given in italics. The location the letter was written is included in brackets by the date written. His correspondence covers 1898-1902, a window of time when wildlife in Nevada has next to nothing written about it.

This is not a scientific based treatise. It is however valuable in that Oddie clearly spends a lot of time in the back country and is in nearly daily contact with others almost all of which lived an out-of-doors, country lifestyle.

Oddie arrived by train in Nevada on February 10th 1898, stopping in Battle Mountain, and then going by train south to Austin.

February 10, 1898: (Austin) *“The country from Battle Mountain to Austin is the most genuine western country you can imagine. You see there some of the genuine ranches and real cowboys. The country is nothing but alkali and sagebrush but cattle live on it...the air is simply delightful and the climate is as fine as any that can be found.”*

February 16th 1898: (Austin) *“I have not seen any game yet...there are lots of sage hens...There are a good many coyotes around.*

A man can get all he wants [horses] in the country for nothing. They run wild by the hundreds...he told me he has over 500 head out in the mountain...horses that are not used are turned out to shift for themselves all year round.”

February 27, 1898: (Austin): *“This afternoon we watched some cowboys round up a herd of ponies in the valley and bring them up to the town. We could see them running full tilt a number of miles away. I went to town and saw them in a corral. Several of the cowboys rode some of them and got thrown about ten feet. It was a pretty wild sight and the cowboys are a pretty wild lot.”*

March 18, 1898: (Ione): *“There is a man who has a livery stable...he owns 500 head [of horses]...his horses are all running wild...”*

March 22, 1898: (While staying at the Winder Ranch in Reese River Valley) *“Lee is a great hunter...knows everything about guns and game and shoots a great deal of it...They get lots of sage hens, ducks and blue mountain grouse...last winter Lee shot and killed a large timber wolf...he has its skin now. He gave me two coyote skins...he wants me to go hunting with him next fall at a place beyond Ione where the Indians killed a great many deer...I shot at a coyote while coming on the summit of the Shoshone Mountains about five miles outside Ione... The Indians kill a lot of ground squirrels...they do not like to kill coyotes because they believe they will turn into them when they die.”*

June 23, 1899: (Austin): *“...I met Pat Walsh, the largest and richest ranchman in this part of the country. He has many thousand head of cattle, and a great many horses...”*

July 29, 1898: (Ione) *“I killed a large rattlesnake in front of our boarding house.”*

September 14, 1898: (Ione) *“The Indians shoot a good many deer up the river [Reese] and bring the skins to the town to sell them.”*

September 28, 1898: (Ione): *“I kept on the trail [next to upper Reese River] after passing the upper corral... Lee Otis brother has a band of sheep in the mountains near the head of Reese River...my horse stood the ride all right...It is hard for him, every little while we would see a band of wild horses... my horse puts his ears up and wants to follow them as such a short time ago he was one of them... in their wild state they are not worth a dollar a piece.”*

September 28, 1898: (Upper Reese River): *“I passed a few Indians...they were fishing and hunting deer. On the trail I saw a number of deer tracks, but I did not see any deer... I saw a porcupine...”* (Oddie rides into Belmont. On his return trip he writes the following) *“At Lee*

Ott's ranch I walked around there and saw some large wild cat tracks, but did not see the wild cats... On our way up the trail [in the Toquima Range] I shot two blue mountain grouse with my pistol... they stay around the timbered streams high up in the mountains and are beautiful birds... they are of a bluish gray color and are fine eating."

October 22, 1898: (Ione) *"I have seen a good deal of ranch life while in this country, and here the old fashioned rancher and "cowboys" live... Cattle run in the mountains for many miles, and are rounded up twice a year and branded... beef cattle are picked out in the fall to be driven to the railroad and shipped. The ranchmen, as a rule, are pretty hard up right now, as they have had heavy losses in the last few years... I think the toughest people in the whole land are to be found right here... there are a few who have large numbers of cattle, and all of them have hundreds of horses, which are of little or no value. Thousands can be bought for a dollar or two a head, but that does not mean that they can be sold for more, because it is so hard to catch them."*

October 25, 1898: (Austin) *"Pat Walsh is going to have his horses rounded up this fall soon... he must have nearly two thousand head."*

October 31, 1898: (Ione) *"I shot a coyote..."*

November 17, 1898: (Reese River) *"Went down on the river duck shooting... only got one duck... the confounded Indians had been hunting them."*

January 19, 1899: (Belmont) *"I went from Cloverdale to San Antonio... two families live there... they have a ranch... cattle and sheepmen take their stock south of there every winter."*

January 19, 1899: (On the road between Ione and Belmont)... *"[The road] between Ione and Cloverdale... very dreary rough ride... not a human being in sight... only coyotes and jackrabbits."* (While crossing the Toquima Range into Belmont) *"I saw a good many tracks in the snow of all kinds of animals, coyotes, wildcats, etc."*

January 22, 1899: (in Big Smoky Valley at Otts Ranch) *"We tried to trap some coyotes beside a dead horse... he catches a good many of them every winter, also some wildcats around the house... on the road from Belmont I shot at a badger and coyote."*

February 7, 1899: (Lister Ranch, near Austin) *"The boys wanted to see their traps. On the two days before I was there, they caught two large wildcats and two coyotes. There is a bounty on the former of \$1 a head, and on the latter .50 cents a head."*

February 7, 1899: (Austin) *"Friday afternoon I rode out to Watts Ranch... he owned a number of ranches in the county... in the hard winter of 1888-1889 he lost about \$160,000 worth of cattle and sheep so he has had hard work getting on his feet again... I went to Lister's ranch... Lister lost about 4500 cattle in the hard winter... he showed me a pile of bones... now he cuts hay on the valley lands... as a general rule the cattle go all year round on what they can pick up in the mountains..."*

February 18, 1899: (Austin) *"We stopped for lunch at Jensen's Ranch in Smokey Valley... Jensen is a Swede and has probably near 20,000 sheep. They are driven south every winter..."*

May 13, 1899: (Austin) *"Siebert and I rode down to Ledley to see the sheep shearers work. Jensen is having 5000 of his sheep sheared... [there are] ten shearers, and they get six cents a head... some of the larger yields about 10 pounds of wool."*

May 21, 1899: (Watts Ranch) *"We had fresh trout both nights for supper. They catch them right near the house in the stream."*

May 21, 1899: (Austin) *"It was exciting working chasing wild mustangs in wild country. We drove some in a corral up one of the canyons and caught several and branded one... one old Italian over in Smokey Valley started a few years ago with just a few cattle. Now he has over six hundred head. He makes a business of branding long ears [unbranded wild calves]."*

July 18, 1899: *"I stayed last night at Wallace's Ranch, at the mouth of Big Creek Canyon...a fine stream of water...full of trout."*

July 27, 1899: (Austin) *"I stayed at Spencers Ranch...they have hundreds of thousands of acres of mountain land, the same as everybody else, for range for their horses and cattle."*

August 17, 1899: (Oddie starts a cinnabar mine on the south side of Mt. Jefferson in the Toquima Range) *"There is plenty of game in those mountains - deer, antelopes, wildcats, coyotes, and a few mountain lions. I saw some deer tracks below the mine when I was up there. There are lots of sage hens up there too, and some grouse." (On Indians): "They catch quantities of ground squirrels or gophers. They throw them in the fire whole and eat everything that was worn inside and outside of the animal. They eat rabbits in the same way."*

September 30, 1899: (During a ride through Big Smoky Valley) *"...I did not follow a trail, but took a straight line. It was mostly flat country to ride through. I saw quantities of jackrabbits, but did not get any."*

September 30, 1899: (Belmont) *"Today an Indian brought my mule I bought in Belmont. He and another Indian had to run it a whole day to catch it as it was with a band of wild mustangs in Monitor Valley."*

October 6, 1899: (Belmont) *"I lost their tracks [of his mules] and walked for hours to get up to a band of wild mustangs. I thought they were with the band, but they were not."*

October 16, 1899: (Describing a projected ride up Jett Canyon to Reese River) *"I will then ride over to Ione with him, and will take him through Jett Canyon pass in the Toiyabe Range. It is the pass I went over a year ago. It is grand and there are plenty of deer and Mt. sheep up there, so we may get a shot at some."*

December 19, 1899: (Belmont) *"The land south of here gradually turns into desert...but in winter, when the snow is on the mountains down there, the cattle and sheepmen drive their stock*

down there, as they can eat the white sage [winterfat] and eat the snow in the mountains till spring, when they are driven north again. It is said 100,000 sheep will be driven down there this winter...bands are going down now. The sheep are closely herded in bands by Dagoes and Chinamen; otherwise the coyotes would make short work of them."

January 1, 1900: *"An Indian was up in the Spanish Belt Mountains [early name for the Toquima Range] a few days ago hunting near where my mine is. He got four deer. I bought a hindquarter from him for \$1.50."*

January 1, 1900: (Belmont) *"Mr. Ernst has a store here. His father has a number of ranches in Monitor Valley, and has about 30,000 sheep..."*

January, 16, 1900: *(Describing a trip to South Klondike, a mining camp south of Tonopah) "I expect to get some antelope, as there are lots of them down there."*

January 30, 1900: *"I had a pleasant trip [to South Klondike] ...it is a dry desert country and nothing lives there but a few coyotes and tarantulas..."*

January 30, 1900: (Belmont) *"We started from Belmont and got as far as Rye Patch... it is simply a low place in the valley with some wild rye grass growing there... we passed several bands of sheep travelling north because there is not snow enough for them south of here..."*

February 27, 1900: (Belmont) *"You asked about my mule... she vamoosed from the mine in winter and I have not seen her since. Some buckaroos saw her in Monitor Valley with a band of wild mustangs."*

April 9, 1900: (Belmont) *"...Potts Ranch (Monitor Valley)... Potts is a Scotsman... they keep quite a large band of sheep... is considered the best sheepman in this part of the county. He is quite well off...Potts takes his sheep south in the winter and summers them in the range east of his ranch. His range extends probably 150 miles..."*

August 20, 1900: (Belmont) *"Coming home I stopped for lunch at the ranch of an old bachelor named Andy Johnson. He kills wild horses to feed his hogs, chickens and turkeys and also himself. Dead horse bones are lying all over his place near his house. He is quite a character, and is full of fun..."*

August 28, 1900: (Near Manhattan) *"I killed a rattlesnake and came near killing another...an Indian killed a large deer a few days ago...I took 20lbs @ .10 cents ... and also got the head as it is a beauty. The Indian shot him right in the trail I went over a few weeks ago on my way up to the head of Pine Creek. There are lots of them up there. A few days ago old Indian Aleck shot a large deer west of here, in the mountains west of Moore's Ranch in Smoky Valley. It was so large he left it and came down after another Indian to help him bring it down. When they returned the deer had been carried off by a mountain lion...they could see its tracks"*

September 4, 1900: *"We hunted...in the canyons below [the mine] for grouse and got seven. They are beautiful birds and are nicer to eat than sage hen. They are only found in the mountain*

canyons where there are trees high above the valleys. They are only found when there are streams.”

October 2, 1900: (Belmont) *“I went out in Monitor Valley a few days ago with two cowboys and two Indians to try and get a band of wild mustangs. I wanted to get my mule out... and the rest of the crowd wanted to get some wild horses to break for the government... we started several hundred down the valley, but most got away... we were going to corral them at Pine Creek, 20 miles away... they...are in demand now by the different governments for Calvary purposes. The German government is buying horses in the vicinity of Austin now.”*

October 18, 1900: (Oddie and Jim Butler have founded Tonopah and Oddie is living there in a tent) *“We fully expected to shoot an antelope but did not, as a fool of a prospector who went down there frightened them away...but on the way home I shot some jackrabbits.”*

October 25, 1900: (Belmont) (Describing the Tonopah area) *“It is a hard place to haul, as we cannot carry hay and the horses will have to rustle a living somehow. The mustangs have eaten up the feed around the springs.”*

November 6, 1900: *“I saw some fresh antelope tracks at the spring the day we came up, made the same day, but I did not see an antelope. I shot a large badger, and then skinned him. It is a pretty one.”*

December 4th, 1900: *“The day I left the mine three of the men left an hour ahead of me, to clean out the spring. When they got there, there were two large antelope which stood quite a while within 50 yards of the men looking at them, but they had no gun.”*

February 19, 1901: (Belmont) *Cattle and sheep are far south of here now, probably from 50 to 100 miles, as this snow has been heavy down there. Many have died in this storm. It looks like another storm now...The mustangs are mostly south now too. Thousands of them. I wish they would not come back, as they are a pest in this country.”*

July 2, 1901: (Tonopah) *“There are over a hundred jackasses around camp, as lots of the men who come in bring them. They are the prospector’s friend in this country. They are called Arizona nightingales.”*

[There is more than a year of no wildlife or livestock entries as Oddie is extremely busy building the town of Tonopah and its brand-new mines from scratch. He soon becomes a millionaire - but loses it all following the crash of 1906-1907.]

March 3, 1902: (Tonopah) *“You will be surprised at my having bought the Pine Creek Ranch...the stream rises near the summit...it is full of fine mountain trout...there are lots of deer up in the mountains back of the ranch. Also wildcats, lynx and an occasional Mt. lion.”*

March 20, 1902 *“I am much interested in my ranch, and when I make some money I intend to raise nothing but pure bred Hereford cattle. There is more money in raising fewer cattle of pure breed... than in raising a large number of scrub cattle.”*

Oddie goes on to become a major player in Nevada politics, although he was unfortunately a pawn of the then dominant “Wingfield machine”. Regardless, his observations are fascinating to read for any Nevadan with an interest in Nevada’s historical wildlife, economic development and its western culture. For further reading see “Letters from the Nevada Frontier” by Douglas and Nylan.

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