

**June 24, 1905**

**H.R. Rankin, 'Report on [sic.] expedition to “Oasis of Siwa” starting from Mersa Matrouh'**

**Citation:**

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**Summary:**

In 1905, H.A. Rankin led an expedition from Mersa Matrouh to the Siwa Oasis in Egypt to collect valuable date palm offshoots for export to the United States as part of an early US effort to introduce date farming to arid regions. Though intended as a report on the palm collection, Rankin's account reads more like a travel narrative, highlighting the hardships of desert travel, encounters with Bedouins, and the hospitality of Siwa's local leaders. His detailed observations provide a firsthand glimpse into the human and environmental challenges behind the USDA's agricultural ambitions abroad.

**Original Language:**

English

**Contents:**

Transcript - English

(page 1) Leaving Mersa Matrouh on afternoon of 16th February, we arrived after a short journey of an hour, at the farm of Sheikh Farag, (Omdeh or Major of Mersa Matrouh) where we pitched tent for the night, as he informed us, we could not find a better resting place, if we went farther on. after inviting us into his house, and we have seated ourselves on mats laid on the floor, he ordered, to be brought in, his dinner which consisted of soup, stewed beans, and boiled mutton, when the meal was over, he made native green tea, over which we chatted for about half an hour, and then as we were living to go to our tent, he instructed a servant to ring in a small lamb, which, he said was for us.

We naturally endeavored to decline same, telling him we were greatly obliged for his hospitality, but he would not hear to it, and so there was no other alternative but to accept. The lamb was then slaughtered and boiled and brought to us in evening, for us to take on our journey, to mutton being very good which lasted two days.

(page 2) After a good nights rest we rose following morning at 6 o'clock, packed luggage on camels, and after a breakfast of milk and brandy (as it was so cold), we filled our water tanks, with rain water from reservoirs by the Sheikh's house (which was exactly color of clay but not at all bad to taste) and started at 8 o'clock. The old Sheikh bidding us, God's speed, and a safe return.

At 12 noon we stopped for one-half an hour, and lunched on potted chicken, and ham, and then proceeded, travelling right on until 6 o'clock at night, when we stopped at what is known by Bedouins as a station in the Station (which was indeed an ideal resting place under a hill among abundance of green shrub and small trees). After dining on cocoa and potted chicken we retired to sleep at 8 o'clock thoroughly exhausted after our first days experience of camel riding (I must say here, before I write more that I was accompanied by my cousin (Mr. G. O. Ashton) together with two of my own servant and two Arabs owners of camels and caravan consisting of camels) which gives one the feeling of having had his body severely bruised.

(page 3) Rising at 6 o'clock on morning of 18th we packed in a bitter cold wind (barometer standing at 30 degrees freezing point) and started off at 7:30 without any breakfast. Myself only riding, but after a short time my legs became so numbed I was obliged to get down and walk with remainder of party. It was astonishing how the Bedouins stood the cold as they only wore thin cotton shirts and cotton pants with a thin blanket thrown round their shoulders; and thin pieces of calico wrapped round their feet for stockings and every old native shoes which they soled every night after the day's march as their walked a sole off, daily. One of them informed me it cost then about one Franc for boot leather for journey from Mersa Matrouh to Siwah as these men walk the whole way which must be a distance of at least 450 km.

At noon we stopped behind some small trees to shelter ourselves from strong wind and partook of lunch consisting of a sausage, sardines, and bottle of soda water.

During our lunch a stray Bedouin came up and after inquiring where we were bound (page 4) for wishing us best of luck and a safe return. We, in return, inviting him to lunch with us but he would not accept anything but an onion and a piece of bread, declining sardines and a cigarette and even hesitating over white bread, which he said he had never seen before in his life. However after farewells we proceeded forthwith about 12:30 passing on our way patches of green shrub which was the only thing that took away the monotony of a stony desert from one's sight.

At 6 o'clock arriving at the foot of a hill where we pitched tent for the night as it was somewhat of a shelter from the bleak wind, which had blown all day. When tent was put up we dined on oxtail, soup, and bread and then fell asleep on old sacks, which we had brought for purpose of packing palms in as we were too fatigued to put up our camp beds. We, however, slept fairly well under the circumstances, and in morning rose at 6 o'clock in fine condition, took breakfast of cocoa, biscuits, and butter and started at 8 o'clock after having photo of caravan taken. The morning was (read was) (page 5 is missing from the original document)

(page 6) Took photo back view of caravan on the march. In the evening stopped at last spot where any green is seen until reach Siwah. Here we took two photos of ourselves with servants and luggage strewn all over the ground. After a good dinner of lentil soup we retired about 8:30 p.m. Rising 6 o'clock next morning with temperature at 32 degrees. We started at 7 o'clock after packing and breakfast of

cocoa and biscuits. Just before noon the camels stampeded and we were surprised to know the cause but when we perceived that they were making for a lafe of rain water we found they were quite justified, as the poor things were very thirsty not having drunk for four days. At noon the temperature was 66 degrees and soon after we entered the "flint desert" (known in Arabic as "Hamriyah" meaning "desert of flint, without any description of vegetation and were no wells exist."). Entrance is called "El-Boo-eb" in Arabic meaning "the door" which is not unlike a door, there being an opening between a range of sandstone hills."

(page 7) Arabs reckon to reach Siwah in 3 days and nights, marching all the time, as it is very trying for camels without food or water. Just before sunset we stopped for an hour in order to have a little dinner and make some tea for the night, as we intended marching all night. We took a good photo of servants and camel owners eating during our short rest, and then at 6:30 commenced our journey for the night, but all at once without any warning the camels stampeded at a full gallop knocking off all our luggage and breaking our box of provisions. Luckily, however, my cousin and self were not thrown off as it would have been a terrible catastrophe to fall on one's head on flint stones and so far from any civilization. The cause of them stampeding was - one of my servants threw his cloak on a camel's back. The camel, believing it to be some wild animal aspiring at it suddenly took fright and galloped, consequently all others following suit. Camel men then informed me that it would be impossible to go any further, until to moon rose.

(page 8) as once they are frightened in a semi-darkness they are very restive and rush off at sight of any black object. However, eventually after working one and a half hours repairing boxes and packing again we all walked behind the camels. The night was glorious and so kept it up until 12:30 midnight when we got on camels and rode right on until 4:30 a.m. Then after a sleep of an hour and a half rose, drank cocoa and biscuits and started off at 7 a.m. At noon meeting the postman from Siwah on his way to Mersa Matrouh. After exchanging a few words with him and giving him some bread, for which he returned dates, we passed on (this poor man receives 3 pounds per month wages and if he cannot afford a camel he must walk the whole way on foot.) at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon we met a Bedouin caravan of some 100 camels accompanied by about 50 men all carrying rifles. All saluted and passed on. They also sending us a few dates. After this we passed nothing else but sandy hills, and then stopped at 6 o'clock at a daily level spot, immediately falling

(page 9) on the top of old sacks and going half asleep without anything to eat, being thoroughly fatigued after a march of 30 hours we were, however, up again at 4 in the morning before sunrise and off at 4:30, journeyed up to 11:30 then stopped then minutes for lunch, and then travelled until 2 in the afternoon, when Arabs informed us we were at our journey's end. However, we reached hills which surrounded Siwah on two sides on 4 o'clock and then started the descent which took us exactly one hour. Until we reached the low laying sandy desert from where we could see Siwah in the distance recognizable by a clump of palm trees and a mountain at the back. The sunset at 5:45 and we had to wend our way through marshy land in pitch darkness as there was no moon, with palms surrounding us, and not a sound to be heard. After walking 3 hours we eventually espied a light in the darkness and as we approached nearer, found it to be a light in the police station, but just before we arrived there we met the officer on his way from there to the governor's house, so after a hearty welcome we accompanied him on his way.

(page 10) Arriving at the governor's house, who welcomed us as if we had been old friends, which was quite natural, living in a place from one year's end to another cut off from all civilization without a change in association or anything else. We were, of course, very glad to find a house even made of mud, and so we were seated and related to him our experience. He ordered his native green tea, which was very refreshing, after our march of 16 hours that day. Being so very tired we slept early, the governor being kind enough to lend us his best room. Following morning we were up at 7 o'clock and after a wash and shave, which we had not been able to have for 7 days, on account of the scarcity of water, we partook of a good breakfast, and then proceeded to police station accompanied by the doctor of the government, where we were received by governor, sub-governor, and all principal chief's of the oasis dressed in their silk robes. After discussing with them for collection of the palms, they

all rose, but us good morning, and went to their morgues to pray (page 11) as it was Friday. My cousin and I then proceeded to a small kiosk situated in the center of a pretty garden facing the police station, where we were arrested and listened to the man praying in the morgues, and took a few photos of the journey. After a while the governor joined us and informed us that he was obliged to pray alternatively one week with chiefs of east side of village and the other with these of West side as both sides bear a great amount of enmity against each other ever since the massacre between themselves in the year of 1897 when 147 or killed in two hours. The government having to use a great amount of discretion and treat everyone on an equality and not show one side a greater favor than the other in case of a rising again. The population of the east being about 3500 and the West 1?500 (sic.). The chief sheikh off the east is "Sheikh Omar Maselim" and the west "Sheikh Etman Heboon". The next morning we rode horses and went for a tour round the whole of the round the Oasis taking as many photos as possible of the interesting sites arriving back for lunch about noon after a very enjoyable time being thoroughly satisfied.

(page 12) The village of Aqormi (originally old Siwah) is built on a hill and gives the appearance of a tremendous honeycomb we walked through the interior (which was anything but planted pleasant) the sheets (if they can be termed so) being only wide enough to admit one to pass at a time and the houses which consist of one room are like so many large rabbit holes and filthy to the last degree the atmosphere being simply abominable, no wonder cholera is so prevalent in the summer, my astonishment is, that it ever leaves the place. It is supposed to be thousands of years old and at one time inhabited by Italians, and then Greeks, and latterly Siwayans, which appeared to be a mixture of Loudanese, Arabs, and Moors. These people are very warlike race, and appear to have No Fear whatever. On the afternoon of 25th we had a garden party with all Sheikhs, whom we photographed in many positions with which performance they were greatly delighted. On the 26th I spent the day receiving palms, labeling same and seeing to them being packed, while my cousin had this throw round village photographing,

(page 13) and then about 4:00 in the afternoon we witnessed some sham fighting on horseback, by the Sheikhs and their sons, and we both confessed the horsemanship was excellent and also firing with one hand while at full gallop which brought back memories of American Cowboys and Indians. The performance ending at sunset (6 o'clock) departed, after thanking them and proceeded homewards, where we had a game of cards, dined, and then slept at 10 o'clock. Following day I was busy again attending to palms and also pay the visit to a mountain named "Mesebareen" meaning "embalmed." Tombs of ancient Sheikhs, from where we photographed several views of the Oasis. In the afternoon we were invited to one of the Sheikhs off the east side, where we drank their green tea color took a few photos, and then departed. Each day following we were always dining at West and then east side alternatively, until the 2nd March, when we departed at 7 o'clock in the morning. We had some difficulty in obtaining 10 more camels from Siwah, but together with the ability of the governor and Sheikhs matters

(page 14) were settled amiably, but not before about 15 bedouins were imprisoned for refusing to hire us their camels, I must say, we shall never forget the hospitality and kindness we received from the government doctor, and all the Sheikhs on the east and West side, the very pleasant sojourn we had while in Siwah and then manner in which they all turned out to bid us a hearty farewell when we were living. On our return journey we were accompanied by 8 poor men of Siwah, who had never been out of the place, and left in search of work at Mersa Matrouh and Alexandria. It was indeed a pitiable sight to see them marching behind camels and especially at night, in the bitter cold, which we experience the whole way. After the third day out one of the number lingered behind, and had it not been for my cousin, who gave him some brandy, and we put him on a camel, the owner of camels would have left him to die in the desert as they informed me that they do not wait for anyone in the "Flint desert," as their camels don't eat or drink for perhaps four days,

(page 15) and so they cannot lose anytime, getting out of this place. Nothing of interest occurred until next to last day of journey, when we caught sight of five gazelles about 200 meters away we fired at them but they were out of sight in no

time not giving us a chance. The Bedouin state that if anyone traveling wishes to kill a gazelle he must walk the distance of one hour in front of camels as immediately a gazelle catches sight of camels on the horizon they will run away as they are aware bedouins are approaching. We also passed the grave of Sheikh of Arabs, who had died for thirst having run short of water. In evening we marched up to 12 o'clock midnight as I wish to arrive at Mersa Matrouh in afternoon of following day. When we stopped we found ourselves surrounded by abundance of green shrub, and small trees, and lost us time in making 3 tremendous fires which we all sat round as it was bitterly cold a rather singular affair occurred on our journey just as we were one day out of Siwah we found that our cups had been forgotten

(page 16) at governor's house and so we had no other alternative than to drink from the kettle my cousin drinking from spout and myself from the lid. The following day we were up at 5:30 and started at six o'clock March on until 10:30 part took of little lunch and then journeyed on without a stop until we reached Mersa Matrouh which was a grand sight to see the blue Mediterranean after seeing nothing but the Gray Stony desert for three weeks. We however arrived at 3 o'clock and were exceedingly well received by a German Baron and all Coast Guard officials. They were nevertheless rather astonished as they had received news to the effect that we had been molested by bedouins while in Siwah, this news being derived from the unpleasant affair which occurred with camel merchants who declined to supply us with camels. Next day we were busy packing palms in a barge which was eventually towed by Coast Guard cruiser to Alexandria we having a special permit to sail on the cruiser which arrived at noon same day

(page 17) and set sail 3 hours later. We however found "Captain Trelaway," Exceedingly kind and after a very pleasant passage of 24 hours arrived at Alexandria thoroughly overjoyed to be back safely into civilization, once more after our first expedition in Egypt number of hours traveling on journey going to Siwah.

Feb:

17th travelled 10 hours.

18th travelled 11 hours.

19th travelled 10 hours.

20th travelled 11 hours.

21st travelled 21.5 hours to 4:30 a.m. 22nd.

22nd travelled 10.5 hours.

23rd travelled 16 hours arrived Siwah 8:00 p.m.

Total 90 hours.

From Siwah to Mersa Matrouh:

Mar:

2nd travelled 12.5. hours.

3rd travelled 16 hours.

4th travelled 13 hours.

5th travelled 11 hours.

6th travelled 12.5 hours.

7th travelled 19 hours.

8th travelled 9 hours.

Total 90 hours.

(page 18) the Oasis of Siwah itself is a vast extent of nothing but gardens. The inhabitants state the average number of palm trees to be 100,000. Land that is not cultivated is covered with salt and in order to remove same for cultivation the people simply inundate the land with water and then allow it to run off gradually in order to sweep away the salt and as Caulliard states in his book the Oasis is covered with swampy pools and very unhealthy in summer. There are several natural springs to be found the water being very clear but slightly brackish. The inhabitants live in mud

houses built on hills and appear from a distance like forts. I forgot to say that from the 20th Feb: we slapped in open air going and coming without the tent and with only a blanket for a cover as we had not much time to waste trusting you will find the report satisfactory and anxiously awaiting your reply on same.

I remain

Your very sincerely

H.A. Rankin.

Fayoum, 24th June, 1905.