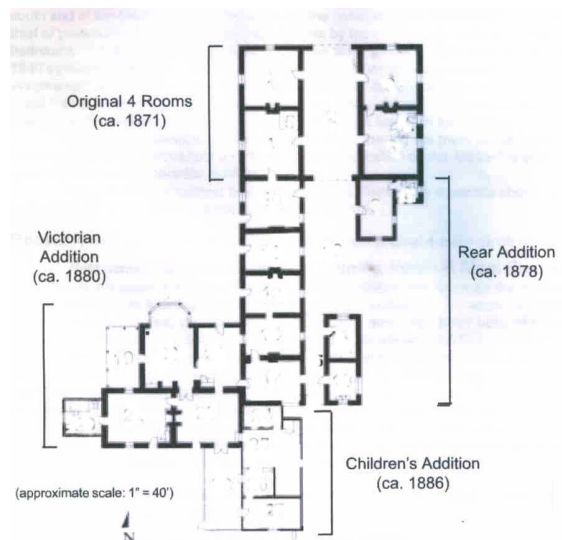


## THE EMPIRE RANCH

**RANCH HISTORY:** The Historic Empire Ranch got its start when William Wakefield took advantage of the Homestead Act of 1862 and staked out a 160-acre homestead in the grasslands north of Sonoita about 1871. Wakefield occupied the ranch until he sold the homestead to Edward Nye Fish and Simon Silverberg in June of 1876. They, however, appeared to be more interested in a quick turn around on their investment than in ranching because they resold it in August of 1876 to a partnership that would turn the ranch into a major operation. This partnership consisted initially of Walter Vail and Herbert Hislop who paid \$2000 for the ranch which came with several hundred head of cattle. Two weeks later, they expanded their holdings by buying a nearby 160-acre ranch that included 612 sheep, two horses, a wagon and five sacks of wool for \$1,174. In October of 1876, John N. Harvey joined the partnership and provided capital to purchase more land and livestock. Both Hislop and Harvey were Englishmen and soon tired of the rigors of life on the frontier. Hislop sold his shares in the ranch to Vail and returned to England in 1878 and in 1879, Walter Vail's older brother Edward joined the partnership.

They continued to acquire neighboring land until the ranch extended about 60 miles north to south and 30 miles east to west. In 1881, John Harvey sold his shares in the ranch to Vail and the ranch became a Vail Family enterprise. The ranch was significantly expanded after a rich silver vein was discovered at a claim that was called the Total Wreck Mine. The mine generated over a half million dollars between 1883 and 1887 that the Vails used in expanding the Empire Ranch Property. By 1906 when Walter Vail died, the Empire Ranch was over one million acres. The Vail family continued to occupy the ranch until 1928 when it was sold to the partnership of Boice, Gates and Johnson. Frank Boice moved into the ranch house and in 1951 became the sole owner of the ranch. Frank died in 1956 and his sons Frank and Bob assumed ownership. The Boice brothers sold the ranch to Gulf America Corporation in 1969 but continued operating the ranch under lease arrangements until 1975 when the property was sold to the Anamax Mining Company. In 1988, the Bureau of Land Management acquired the ranch through a public-private land swap and designated the area as the Empire-Cienega Resource Conservation Area. In December 2000, Congress established the area as the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area consisting of 45,000 acres.

**RANCH BUILDINGS:** The first structure was a four room, flat top adobe house with packed dirt floors and was constructed by William Wakefield in 1871. The house had two bedrooms, a kitchen and a storeroom. After the Vails purchased the ranch, the ranch house underwent a significant expansion. Nine rooms were added to the rear of the original homestead in 1878. The Victorian Addition was added between 1878 and 1880. The Children's addition was added in 1886 to accommodate the growing Vail family. This is the only portion of the house that is wood frame construction. The



following photographs depict the configuration of the ranch house as it appeared in August of 2010.



The Original Homestead



The 1878/1880 Victorian Addition

The following two pictures depict buildings that were added to the ranch during the 1950s when the Boice family owned it. The “Huachuca House” was a building originally located on Fort Huachuca and was moved to the ranch and used by Bob Boyce. It is located to the west of the main house. The other building is a house of block construction used by Frank Boice to raise his family. It is located just north of the main house.



“Huachuca House”



Frank Boice Residence

Walter Lennox Vail – Walter Vail was the driving force behind the early development and expansion of the Empire Ranch; therefore, a summary of his life is provided. He was born 15 May 1852 in Nova Scotia, Canada but lived most of his early years in New Jersey. In 1875 he headed west to seek his fortune and worked for a while in Virginia City Nevada as a timekeeper in the mining industry. When his savings were stolen, he went to visit a wealthy uncle, Nathan Vail, in Los Angeles who suggested that Walter look into cattle ranching in southern Arizona. Nathan Vail introduced Walter to Herbert Hislop as a potential partner and the two traveled to Tucson in the summer of 1876. Walter, using a loan from Nathan, and Herbert Hislop bought the Empire Ranch to start a great Southwestern Dynasty. Walter

bought out Hyslop and a later partner, John Harvey, to bring the Empire Ranch under the complete control of the Vail Family. In 1881, Walter returned to New Jersey and married Margaret Russell Newhall. The Vails had seven children, six of whom were born at the Empire Ranch. Walter served in the 10<sup>th</sup> Territorial Legislature and on the Pima County Board of Supervisors. He also was the first president of a statewide livestock association.

In 1888 Walter decided to expand the business into California, formed a partnership with Carroll Gates and leased land for cattle grazing at Warner Springs from John Downey, a former California governor. In 1890, Walter established a corporate headquarters in Los Angeles for his many ventures that included real estate as well as ranching. He moved his family to Los Angeles in 1896.

In 1902, Walter and a partner, J. W. Vickers, bought Santa Rosa Island off of the California coast from Wallace Moore. The Vail and Vickers families used the island to graze cattle and later introduced deer and elk and established a private hunting preserve. In 1980, Santa Rosa Island was included within Channel Islands National Park. The Vail & Vickers families were opposed to inclusion of the island in the park. They successfully lobbied to have the legislation stipulate that purchase of their land would be the highest priority of the Channel Islands National Park. They voluntarily sold the island in 1986 for the appraised value of nearly \$30 million but continued their operations on the island. The cattle were removed in 1996 and the hunting preserve portion of the operation was closed out by 2011.

In 1904, Vail and Gates pieced together parts of four Mexican Land Grants to form the 87,500 acre Pauba Ranch, which was located near the town of Temecula. Walter's son, Mahlon operated the Pauba Ranch from 1908 until 1964 when it was sold to the developers of Rancho California.

Walter Vail did not live to see the full extent of his empire. On 30 November 1906 he stepped off a streetcar in Los Angeles and was struck by another streetcar heading in the other direction. He suffered major internal injuries and died three days later at the age of 54.

Summary prepared in 2010 & updated in 2019 by T. Johnson from Empire Ranch Foundation brochures and various web sites. Building pictures by T. Johnson. Photo of Walter Vail courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society. <http://arizonahistoricalsociety.org>



Walter Vail

Photo Courtesy of the Arizona  
Historical Society  
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