



EARLY ROADS TO EL PASO

by Bob Miles

WITHOUT THE WHEEL, there is little need for roads. So, before the Spaniard came, there were no roads at the Pass of the North. The Mansos and Sumas needed no roads. Neither did the wandering Jumanos who carried their meager goods on their dogs, nor the *pochteca*, those far-traveling traders who carried their goods on their own backs or those of slaves when they came from out of the South or West to the Pass.

Don Juan de Oñate is credited with establishing the first road through the El Paso area in 1598, although he probably followed parts of routes previously used. Father Agustín Rodriquez and Captain Francisco Sánchez Chamuscado had passed through the area some eight years before, but had no wagons or carts with them. In 1593, an illegal expedition under Gaspar Castaño de Sosa was escorted with its carts back into Mexico along a portion of the route Oñate later used.

Oñate, the son of a wealthy Zacatecas silver miner, left the banks of the Conchos River south of the later site of Chihuahua City on February 7, 1598. With him were 130 men, several of these accompanied by their families; 83 wagons, carts and carriages; some 7,000 head of horses, mules,

oxen, beef cattle, pigs, sheep and goats; and the arms and equipment necessary for such an expedition. He proposed to strike straight north across the virtually unknown country to El Paso del Norte, then to follow the Rio Grande to the Pueblo Indian lands. From their camp on the Rio Chuiscar, near where Chihuahua City would be established in 1709, the expedition pushed northward roughly following the present route of the Chihuahua Highway and railroad route. Upon reaching the sand dunes south of Samalayuca, the wagons had so much difficulty traversing the sand that the party detoured to the northwest, striking the Rio Grande about opposite present Tornillo, Texas.

The expedition then followed the river upstream through the famed Pass of the North, crossing the river below the "puertas" where the southward flowing river turned to the southeast through the narrow gorge. The going was very rough, and it took the party four days to travel two and one-half leagues (2.6 to 3 miles). About eleven miles above present Dona Ana, New Mexico, the expedition cut straight north to avoid the rugged lands skirting the river. This arid 90-mile cutoff would become infamous as the *Jornada del Muerto*. After following this stretch, the wagons and carts again struck the Rio Grande, probably north of the Fray Cristóbal Mountains near present San Marcial, New Mexico. They again followed the river to the Pueblo of Santo Domingo, reaching the pueblo on July 27, 1598. Of the 83 vehicles that had left the Conchos, only 61 arrived at Santo Domingo. It had taken the expedition some five months to travel the 750 miles from the banks of the Rio Conchos, but the *Camino Real* was now established.

Shortly after Santa Fe was founded in 1609 or 1610, that settlement became the northern terminus of the *Camino Real*, which stretched southward 1,500 miles to Mexico City. Caravans to supply the New Mexico missions at first ran every three years, taking some six months to reach Santa Fe, six months to distribute their cargo, and six months to return to the capital. The supply trains were sizeable, normally consisting of 32 wagons—heavy, covered service wagons, iron-tired and capable of carrying some 4,000 pounds each.

With the growth of the civil settlements in New Mexico, the caravans began to run more often. Other travelers also accompanied the caravans for safety, and the trade evolved into a rather profitable enterprise—profitable, that is, for the merchants in Mexico, for the trade was not competitive. Merchandise taken into New Mexico included primarily ironware, especially tools and arms; cloth, paper and ink; delicacies such as tobacco, chocolate,

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"El Adelantado Don Juan de Oñate, c. 1598" by internationally renowned El Paso artist José Cisneros. The drawing, from Mr. Cisneros' book *Riders Across the Centuries* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1984) is reproduced here with the permission of the artist and Texas Western Press.

liquor and sugar; and a few books. In exchange, the New Mexicans sent such items as they were able to produce or acquire from the Indians—hides, piñon nuts, sheep, wool, blankets, Indian slaves, salt, and wine and brandy produced at El Paso del Norte.

The *Camino Real*, for most of its length, could hardly be considered a road by today's standards. Mostly, it was just a set of tracks that could be followed or paralleled. But it was a road and, for some 250 years, the only one which the El Paso area could claim.

Foreign trade was prohibited by the Spanish government, and the trade

monopoly continued for a time after Mexico gained its independence. In 1821, William Becknell of Missouri led a party west to hunt, trap, and capture wild horses, the party carrying a small supply of goods to trade with the Indians. The group encountered a detachment of Mexican troops and was requested to accompany the soldiers to Santa Fe. There, Governor Facundo Melgares invited the Americans to trade their goods in Santa Fe and expressed interest in establishing trade on a regular basis with Missouri.

In 1822, three caravans set out from Missouri to Santa Fe. One, under Becknell, took three wagons to test their feasibility; and the Santa Fe Trail was blazed, opening the previously closed markets of Mexico to the United States. The *Camino Real* was now extended an additional 800 or 900 miles (depending upon the route taken) into the United States.

Soon, however, the Santa Fe market was glutted. In 1824, some 80 American merchants took an estimated \$35,000 worth of goods into Santa Fe. It was more than the New Mexican town could absorb. The first American trader to push on southward is not known, but the majority of the trade soon shifted to El Paso del Norte, Chihuahua City, and southward, making the term "Santa Fe Trade" obsolete. According to Josiah Gregg, an early trader and recorder of the period, the trade reached a peak in 1834. In that year 230 wagons, accompanied by 350 men under 30 traders, carried goods worth \$450,000 down the trail, some \$300,000 of the merchandise ending up in Chihuahua.

While the bulk of the trade goods carried by the American merchants was cloth of various types, the cargos also included clothing, jewelry, tools, sundries, and books. Even a printing press was taken into New Mexico in 1834. And ordinary glass bottles proved profitable too. Teamsters could purchase a dozen bottles of liquor in Missouri for four dollars each, drink the contents along the way, and trade the empty bottles for six dollars' worth of produce each in New Mexico. Goods carried back from Mexico were mostly coins and mules. Once the southbound goods were disposed of in Mexico, the wagons could be sold. Coins were sealed in rawhide bags which shrank to form a solid mass that had to be opened with an ax. Loaded onto mules, these sacks could be easily transported back to Missouri.

Several of El Paso's earliest settlers were engaged in the Santa Fe-Chihuahua trade, among them James Wiley Magoffin and, possibly, Hugh Stevenson.

Texas' war for independence and its outcome put a strain on the Santa Fe-Chihuahua trade. The Treaty of Velasco gave Texas claim to all the lands east of the Rio Grande, but only on paper; and the trade continued because it was beneficial to both the United States and Mexico. However, the Texans

made several attempts to sabotage the trade. In 1841, the Texas-Santa Fe Expedition under General Hugh McLeod, allegedly sent to New Mexico to promote trade, was captured and imprisoned in Mexico. At least three other attempts were made to disrupt or capture the trade during the winter of 1842-43. Operating under commissions from the Republic of Texas and (at least in the case of Jacob Snively) with letters of mark similar to those under which pirates operated in earlier times, Texan forces attacked the village of Mora, a merchant train, and a detachment of New Mexico militia. Colonel Snively, however, was arrested by United States troops upon entering the United States at the Arkansas Crossing.

In May of 1846, hostilities broke out between Mexico and the United States, and trade was disrupted. By February, 1847, there were at least 315 merchant wagons backed up along the trail, waiting to move on south. Part of this group was organized into the famed Trader Battalion by Colonel Alexander Doniphan at San Elizario. This battalion took part in the Battle of Sacramento near Chihuahua City.

With the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ending the Mexican War in February, 1848, a number of factors combined to spur westward exploration and to find an East-West road through El Paso. Texas merchants wanted their share of the lucrative Santa Fe-Chihuahua trade, and the discovery of gold in California increased the desirability of finding a snow-free southern route to the Pacific coast.

A group of San Antonio merchants hired Texas Ranger John C. Hays to find a suitable road to El Paso. In August, 1848, Hays left San Antonio, traveling to a Ranger camp on the Llano River where he was joined by Texas Ranger Captain Sam Highsmith and 35 Rangers with a Mexican guide who claimed to know the country to the West. They crossed the San Pedro River, renaming it Devil's River because of the increasing difficulties they were encountering. By the time they reached the Pecos River, they were completely out of water. The party wandered around in the rugged Big Bend country for a time, reduced to surviving on mule, bear grass, and mountain lion. Finally, the Mexican guide admitted that he, too, was lost.

On October 18, the expedition stumbled across the Mexican village of San Carlos, where they obtained food and directions to Presidio del Norte (present Ojinaga, Chihuahua). From there, they crossed the Rio Grande to Fort Leaton, the fortified home of Ben Leaton, one of those shadowy figures of Southwestern history who apparently went ahead of the trailblazers. When the members of the party learned that they were still some distance from El Paso—and with winter coming on—the expedition was aborted and the group returned to San Antonio in failure.

It was just over a year after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo before the first military expedition was organized to find a road between the Central Texas settlements and El Paso. Major General William J. Worth, Commander of the Eighth Military Department (Texas), assigned Lieutenants William H. C. Whiting, Corps of Engineers, and William F. Smith, a topographical engineer, to find a practical road to El Paso.

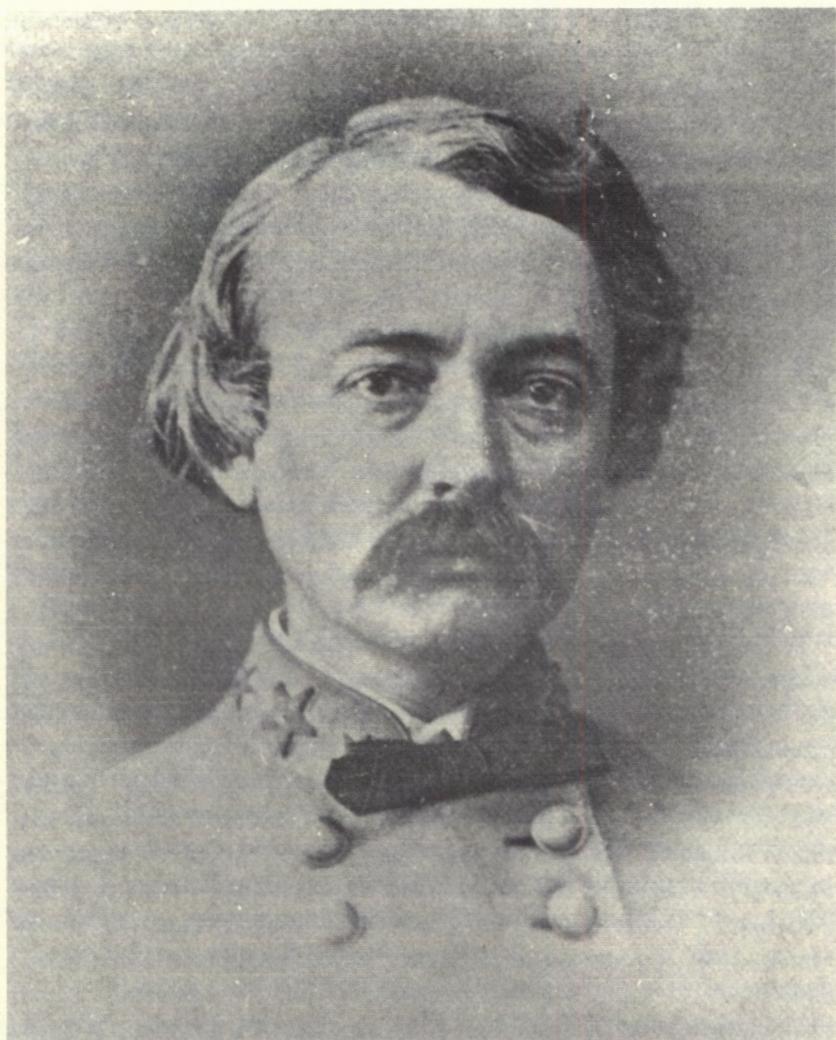
Leaving San Antonio on February 12, 1849, with nine experienced frontiersmen and Richard A. Howard as guide, the party was slowed by green mules and a wet Norther. They left Fredericksburg on February 21, reaching the Pecos River, after three days without water, on March 5. Finding no suitable ford, the party constructed a crude bridge of live oak logs and crossed the river, which they followed upstream for some 40 miles before again turning west. Skirting the rougher country, they found sufficient water in a series of springs. On March 17, they decided to cut through the rugged Sierra Diabolo Mountains (the Davis Mountains) and head for Fort Leaton. This decision nearly proved fatal.

Following an old, faintly marked Indian trail into the beautiful, but rough, mountains, the expedition entered a valley and found themselves "suddenly and completely surrounded by five bands of Apache warriors, each under its respective chief, and numbering altogether some two hundred mounted men." From the hordes of livestock, it was evident that the Apaches were just returning from a raid into Mexico.

Lieutenant Whiting described the situation vividly in his report:

Viewing us as intruders, they advanced with great rapidity, with hostile gestures, bows strung, and brandished lances. Completely enveloped, where but little resistance could be made to numbers so greatly superior, without even a shrub to which to tie our frightened animals, and numbering only twelve armed men, the situation of the little band was perilous.

Lieutenant Whiting, "judging that here policy was the true course," delayed the Indians, holding up his hand and calling for a parlay, which was agreed to. The Apaches wanted to know why the white men were in their country and what the current relations were between the United States and Mexico. Lieutenant Whiting told them that "we had been at war with that power, but were now at peace." The Apaches seemed satisfied with the parlay and the gifts of tobacco, and left the white men to spend a cold and sleepless night. The next morning, Lieutenant Whiting and his party accompanied one of the Apache leaders to his camp and, after another sleepless night, were guided by a warrior to an easy trail through the mountains. The trail led through a beautiful, steep-walled canyon where the lieutenant saw the first wild roses he had seen in Texas. The canyon, just off State Highway 17 between Fort Davis and Balmorhea, still bears the name Wild Rose Pass.



Lieutenant William H. C. Whiting (National Archives Photograph. Courtesy Fort Davis National Historical Site, Fort Davis, Texas)

The party camped near the site where Fort Davis would be built five years later. Lieutenant Whiting was elated by the suitability of the route for wagons and by the abundance of wood, water and grass.

Subsisting on a daily spoonful of *pinole* and a slice of mountain lion killed by one of the Delaware scouts, the party made its way to Fort Leaton, where Ben Leaton spared them what he could in the way of food and fresh horses, and advised them against continuing their journey as the Indians were all hostile. However, the expedition proceeded on up the Rio Grande. General

Worth had stressed the desirability of finding a river route, and Lieutenant Whiting judged the way to be potentially suitable for a wagon road.

Despite Leaton's warnings and plentiful Indian signs, the party reached Ponce's ranch opposite El Paso del Norte on April 12, 1849. After a rest and a look around the area, Lieutenant Whiting recommended that a military post be located at Frontera (in the present Upper Valley Crossroads area). The expedition then obtained fresh supplies and recruited several men to accompany them on their return to San Antonio. Among those recruited in El Paso was the noted frontiersman Henry Skillman.

Following the Rio Grande south for about 100 miles, they encountered the trail left by the Apaches on their return from raiding Chihuahua and followed it eastward through the Davis Mountains and on to the Pecos River. From there, they crossed to the Devil's River, followed it to its mouth, then turned east once more and into San Antonio. They arrived on May 24, having been gone 104 days. Their mission had been successful: they had found a practical road to El Paso. This road would become known as the Lower, or Military, Road and would be used extensively by the military as several forts were established along the route.

Before the return of the Whiting Expedition to San Antonio, the discovery of gold in California had ceased to be a mere rumor. Logic, and the Texas merchants, dictated the need for a southern route for the hundreds of gold seekers who were even now headed west.

A group of Austin merchants hired Dr. John Salmon "Rip" Ford of Mexican War and Texas Ranger fame to find a road west from their city. Major Robert S. Neighbors, United States Indian Agent for Texas, was assigned by General Worth to accompany this expedition. The party formed at Barnard's Trading House near present Waco and got underway in mid-March, 1849. It consisted of Dr. Ford; Major Neighbors; D. C. "Doc" Sullivan; A. D. Neal; two Delaware Indians, Jim Shaw and John Harry; two Shawnees, Joe Ellis and Tom Coshatee; and a huge Choctaw named Patrick Goin.

Using only mules, the expedition visited various Indian tribes along the way and were accompanied part of the way by a band of Comanches under Buffalo Hump. This group was to guide the expedition to El Paso, but some of the other Comanches convinced Buffalo Hump that he might be less than welcome in El Paso del Norte, the Comanches having frequently raided in that area. Instead, a warrior by the name of Tall Tree or Guadalupe, along with his married sister and her female companion, agreed to guide the party.

As they traveled, "Doc" Sullivan and Neal kept the group entertained with their singing and practical jokes. Despite these antics, a wet Norther,

and a mule stampede caused by Dr. Ford's incorrigible mule, the expedition reached the Horsehead Crossing of the Pecos River with a minimum of trouble. Following Toyah Creek westward and subsisting on mescal, *pinole*, coffee, and the meat of an abandoned horse they found, the explorers crossed Pah-Cut (Davis) Mountains, describing them as magnificent, but almost impassable.

They soon found the Rio Grande and the Whiting Expedition's return trail. Moving up the river, they arrived at San Elizario, where they were graciously received. After resting a few days, they traveled on to El Paso. They found a small settlement growing on the American side and met Sarah Bourgett, the amazon known as the Great Western. This woman appears in several early accounts of El Paso. She is described as a rough fighter who had apparently been left behind by some of the American troops going into Mexico during the war. Dr. Ford said she was operating a hotel of sorts on the United States side of the river and that, due to her reputation, "was approached in a polite, if not humble manner by all of us—the writer in particular."

Returning to San Elizario, the Ford-Neighbors Expedition made preparations for their return to Austin. An old Mexican man named Zambrano agreed to guide them back to the Pecos. They traveled almost due east by way of Hueco Tanks, the Cornudas Mountains and Guadalupe Peak, roughly paralleling the present Texas-New Mexico state line. The going was easy and the party followed the Pecos south, when they came across Captain Isaac H. Duval's group of 49ers bathing in the river. Each group thought the others were Indians, the naked argonauts sprinting for their rifles before worrying about their clothes. A member of the Ford-Neighbors Expedition, an old Texan named Johnson who had joined the party in El Paso, guided the Duval group on to El Paso.

The expedition encountered two other groups of California-bound emigrants along the return route, sending others of their party with them to show the way westward. Obviously, there were many hardy individuals unwilling to wait for the government to find them a way to the riches they hoped to find in California.

Without further incident, the Ford-Neighbors Expedition was back in Austin by June 10, having blazed a second road to El Paso. This road would be known as the Upper or Emigrant Road. From El Paso, westward-bound travelers usually followed the Rio Grande north to above Mesilla, then west along the Gila River, passing through the Pima Villages and crossing the Colorado River at Yuma.

(Continued on page 92.)

Desert, Not Wasteland

*Squaw-thorn, devilsclaw, and Joshua;
Sunray, bullhead, and Spanish bayonet —
These are the plants of the desert,
A hard, curt, unpretentious poetry
Put down in the margins of bloodshed.
They need at most an inch this side death
To teach the rude drop hidden like love's wink
Inside a trim pelvis, perfect but unlavish.*

*They prevail. Each root a break, each pore
A womb, each stem a leaf thorn-arbored
Beneath a sky blandly immaculate.
Here love is solemn, a strict icon of thirst,
And birth a blind tear in a sun-chiseled font.
Here no sound but wind scales the dry heights.*

*And what, one asks, can man's damp brain
Take from such wealth speared without greed
To this light-cisterned land? What parable?
Nothing. Against lip old peace engods first silence.
Soundless, rock ripens on rock.
From beardtongue's flame no speech—except flame.*

In grails of heat life guards its grace, quiet.

—ROBERT BURLINGAME

ROBERT BURLINGAME, Professor of English at The University of Texas at El Paso, is the author of several volumes of poetry as well as many individual poems which have appeared in such periodicals as *New England Quarterly*, *Southwest Review*, *Saturday Review*, *New Jersey Poetry Journal*, and *Bloomsbury Review*. "Desert, Not Wasteland" is from his book *This Way We Walk* (Este Es, Colorado: The Little Press of Este Es, 1964) and is reprinted with permission of the poet.