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Trail to El Paso: La Jornada de Cantarrecio

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Comments:
Winner of the 1990 "John and Vida White Travel Essay" competition.
About the John and Vida White Endowment:
Created in 1982 by John S. White, former Registrar and Director of Admissions at Texas Western College, 1948-54, and his wife, Vida L. White, an El Paso school teacher and alumna, to establish a permanent endowment fund to create an awards program for the English Department (Creative Writing) on travel-related subjects and the Geography Department award on related composition, with additional academic merit scholarships to senior-level students in each of these respective areas.
By the late 16th century several Spanish expeditions had ventured north into the unknown expanses of the new world with the hopes of spreading the Catholic faith, of expanding the territories of new Spain and of discovering wealth and glory. The explorations of Chamuscado, Espejo, Caataño de Sosa, Morlete and Leyva de Bonilla and Humana, amongst others, blazed trails into what would later be called Chihuahua, Texas and New Mexico (Hammond, 1966). It was not until 1598, however, that an expedition led by Don Juan de Oñate became the first to forge directly north from the frontier mining outpost of Santa Barbara, across the uninhabited expanses of the Chihuahuan desert to El Paso Del Norte and then along the river to the Pueblo settlements of the upper Rio Grande Valley. Begun as a corridor of exploration and colonization and later used as a supply link for missions, presidios and settlements to the north, this trail became known as the Camino Real and has been in continual use for almost four hundred years.

Recent chroniclers have generally suggested that the main path leading into the El Paso valley was due north through the Samalayuca sand dunes, approximating modern Mexico Highway 45. There is, however, a relatively unstudied and therefore largely forgotten branch of the original trail called the Jornada de Cantarrecio. This branch of the Camino Real followed a fork to the northeast near the present town of Villa Ahumada and met the
Rio Grande Valley at or near the town of Guadalupe de Bravo opposite present day Tornillo, Texas. This "alternate" route follows the drainage basin which is bounded by Sierra Presidio to the west and Sierra San Ignacio to the east, along the arroyo Bandejas to its confluence with the Rio Grande. It is this branch of the Camino Real and an assessment of its importance during the three and one half centuries of its use that are the topics of this paper (see Fig 1).

This route into the valley, although two days longer than the direct northerly route, avoided the deep sands of the Samalayuca Dune Field (see Fig. 2). Vicente Zaldivar, deOñate's sargeant major in charge of the advance party, was actually the first European to use this corridor. In February of 1598, after nearly dying of thirst trying to plot a course through the sand dunes, he reached the Rio Grande. The rest of the de Oñate expedition soon followed (Moorhead, 1958).

"Early in April the party reached Los Médanos, those great sand dunes lying south of El Paso (Bolton, 1930, P.202). And - "On April 20, 1598 (de Oñate) reached the Rio Del Norte (Rio Grande)...and on April 30,... took formal possession of New Mexico at a place three leagues above the point where he first touched the river. Continuing upstream-five and one half leagues, on May 4, He reached "El Paso Del Rio," the ford which became the gateway to New Mexico..." (Hughes, 1914, P. 297-98).

Thus began the Camino Real and its role in the establishment
Contemporary topographical map showing the two routes into the El Paso valley

Cantarrecio route

Dune route

(Instituto Nacional, 1980)
Contemporary map showing the extent of the Samalayuca dune field (dark line)

(Schmidt & Marston, 1981)
and supply of the northern reaches of New Spain. In 1609 the Crown accepted full responsibility for support of the missions. For the first 20 years information on this supply system is sparse, but in 1621 Fray Thomas Manso was named procurator General of the Custodia and was in charge of the supply train for the next quarter century. Caravans were to depart every three years, but the interval was at times one or two years longer. From 1631-1656, Manso made nine round-trips with caravans between New Spain and New Mexico (Scholes, 1930, P. 93-94, 189).

By this time the Cantarrecio route was well known. After leaving Ojo Lucero, 15 miles north-northeast of Presidio Carrizal, there was a 15 mile journey to Los Charcos Del Grado, a small but reliable spring south of Sierra Rancheria. Twenty-five miles further, through a wide, low saddle in Sierra Presidio called Puerto Ancho, the caravan would arrive at a water hole called Las Tinajas de Cantarrecio. Another 15 miles down the Arroyo Bandejas and the train would reach the Valley of the Rio Grande Del Norte (Moorhead, 1958, P. 114-115).

There were, of course, smaller groups occasionally traveling north and probably some time in the early 17th century the trail through the Samalaya Dunes, or the Jornada de los Médanos, was blazed. From the amount of information supplied by Manso and his successors it seems highly likely that, at least for the first 50 years, the Jornada De Los Médanos, rather than the Cantarrecio trail would have been considered the "Alternative Route." As Moorhead explained:
"With great difficulty pedestrians and pack animals could continue northward through the billowing sands to the Ojo de Samalayuca and eventually to the pass of the Rio Grande, but heavily loaded wagons such as those accompanying Oñate's train, were obliged to skirt the southeastern margin and reach the river 20 or more miles downstream," (Moorhead, 1958, P.17).

After the Pueblo revolt of 1680, Governor Otermin led over 1,000 refugees including hundreds of loyal indians from the reaches of the northern Pueblo tribes, to El Paso Del Norte. Several new missions including Socorro, Isleta and others as well as the Presidio of San Elizario were hastily constructed in El Paso's lower valley to accommodate this inundation of Christians (Horgan, 1975, P. 127) (see Fig 3). This rapid population expansion led to an increased amount of travel on the Chihuahua highway. One theory holds that the Jornada De Los Médanos was the preferred route until this establishment of the lower valley missions and their vineyards (Timmons, Pers. Int.). By the early 1700's the El Paso valley was producing its first large scale export items, wine and brandy. Caravans heading both north and south along the Camino Real bought and traded with the mission settlements for these valuable commodities. Although this was certainly reason enough to use the Jornada de Cantarrecio it seems more likely that difficulty in traversing the dunes was more the deciding factor throughout the history of the Mexico - Santa Fé trade. Nearly a century after de Oñate's epic journey, Vetancurt reported:
1724 copy of a Kino map showing the relative locations of the valley missions. Note the explanation of the origen of the El Paso missions which translates—"Pueblos moved to El Paso since the uprising of same."

(Burrus, 1965)
"Twelve leagues before arriving at this place (Nuestra Sra. de Guadalupe, the Juarez Cathedral) is a chapel with one religious dedicated to Nuestro Padre de San Francisco, where there are some Christians of the nations which they call Zumas and Zumanas (Sumas) on the bank of the river at a place where it flows toward the east - first place where the wagons arrive on the outward trip," (Vetancurt, 1697, P. 98).

A contemporary of Vetancurt, the great cartographer Father Eusebio Kino, charted the locations of the Rio Grande Valley missions on his 1695 - 1696 map. The Sumas Mission, Vetancurt's Nuestro Padre San Francisco is clearly recorded (see Fig. 4). There is no doubt that the overland freight service of the 17th and 18th centuries was one of considerable proportion. The caravans were comprised of 32 wagons, over 500 mules, large herds of livestock and a formidable military escort (Scholes, 1930, P. 115). Moreover, it seems highly likely that the route taken by most, if not all, of these supply caravans into the El Paso Valley was the Jornada de Cantarrecio.

By the late 18th century (1776) the caravan service seems to have undergone 2 important changes. The operation was now managed more directly by the Royal Government rather than the Franciscan Order, and pack mules, rather than wagons, were being used to haul the freight (Moorhead, 1958, P. 43). The use of mules instead of

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1 It should be noted that the Spanish League which while normally 2.6 to 3 miles in length was often exaggeratedly reckoned at up to 5 miles (Moorhead, 1958, P.12).
From a 1695 Kino map showing the location of the Sumas mission - The first place the freight caravans reached the Rio Grande on the Camino Real

(Burrus, 1965)
wagons may be the most important single factor in the increase in popularity of the Jornada de los Médanos over the Jornada de Cantarrecio. While heavily loaded wagons still seldom ventured over the Médanos, mule trains had no problem cutting straight north through the dune field to Ojo de Samalayuca and then onward to El Paso Del Rio, saving two days on the northward journey.

It appears the teamsters were justified in their hesitance to drive their wagons through the Samalayucas. Over 200 years after Vicente Zaldivar's nearly fatal attempt to cross the dunes, Colonel Alexander Doniphan, during his invasion of Mexico in 1847, realized the difficulties of crossing the sand.

"Troubles soon descended upon the Party after leaving El Paso. The soft dunes of Samalayuca were a real obstacle to the large number of heavily loaded wagons. Weak, struggling teams sank to their bellies and had to be pulled out. Some of the men did not own canteens and had to carry water in their saber sheaths. Lagging rear guard troops were forced to camp on the dunes without water and wood but a nighttime rain had packed the sand and had provided drinking water. Several men perished in the ordeal, one from bloating after finally reaching a stream," (Lister, 1966, P. 123).

Although the bulk of the Doniphan expedition used the dune trail, the Cantarrecio route was by no means forgotten by that time. A soldier with the expedition left this enlightening account:

"After the battle of Bracito, December 25, 1846, Doniphan's column occupied El Paso Del Norte without resistance on
December 27, 1846, (and) stayed more than a month, meanwhile, in their anxiety to reach Chihuahua several traders moved down the river road toward the presidio of San Elizario, and on February 3, 1847 troops were sent to restrain them...but the wagons of Kerford and Jenkins...made their escape, (and) reached Chihuahua ahead of the American forces," (Gibson, 1935, P. 375-28).

Just over one month later, veteran Santa Fe trader Samuel Magoffin drove his large merchant caravan through the El Paso valley and on to Chihuahua. His wife, Susan Shelby Magoffin, who accompanied him on the journey, kept an excellent daily journal of her experiences. A detailed description of the Jornada de Cantarrecio was recorded in that diary (Magoffin, 1847). (see Fig. 5). And in his 1854 Boundary Commission report, Bartlett gives yet another account of Samalayuca hardships.

"We now approach the most dreaded portion of our journey since crossing the Tucson desert, South of Gila. This was the Médanos or sand hills. All of the emigrants we had met had spoke of these, and the great difficulties that attended their passage. By doubling their ox-teams, that is, by putting from 12 to 15 oxen to each wagon, they had succeeded in passing them. Two trips were thus required for each team occupying the whole of two nights and one day to accomplish the passage, although but six miles across. Owing to the intense glare of the sun on the white sand, the crossing was never attempted except at night," (Bartlett, 1854, P. 372-73).
Map showing the route of the Doniphan expedition indicating use of the Jornada de Cantarrecio.

(Drumm, 1926)
These accounts clearly show that by the mid 1800's both routes were being regularly used. By the late 19th Century there was a well established, regular Juarez - Chihuahua stage route. The stage followed exactly the Cantarrecio route blazed over 300 years earlier.

During field studies of the area, I was directed to some adobe ruins by a hand at the working cattle ranch Tinajas de Cantarrecio. The local ranchers and cowboys call these ruins "rancho viejo" or old ranch and the ruins appear on some maps as abandoned rancho Tanques de Cantarrecio. Further research on this location turned up only conjectural conclusions as to the origin and purpose of the settlement. Some venture that it is just an abandoned ranch, others that it was a stage stop on the old Juarez - Chihuahua road. Another theory is that the settlement was primarily a military post, or presidio, which also served these other purposes. This theory was based on the discovery of numerous artifacts dated to the mid 19th century including bullets and musket balls, shell casings, a rusted sword hilt, pistol barrels and more (Krone, 1978, P. 33-36). There was, by this evidence, heavy occupation during this period. There exists, however, the distinct possibility that this site was the water stop used much earlier by the Spanish freight caravans of the 17th and 18th centuries. The understandably sparse evidence supporting this theory came in the form of a few small pieces of broken pottery from the site. The pieces were tentatively identified as Guanajuato green glaze which could have been made as early as the late 1600's (Gerald, Pers.
Com.). This evidence is far from conclusive yet certainly presents an interesting topic of investigation.

A few miles to the west of the ruins is the low saddle through the mountains called Puerto Ancho. The trail at this location has been deeply eroded into the hard dirt surface. This steep walled, unnaturally straight arroyo leads directly to the Rancho Viejo ruins. Due to the confining effect of the saddle, this spot undoubtedly represents, insofar as original location, one of the better preserved sections of the Camino Real.

By the 1930's, Mexico's Chihuahua highway was still just a thin dirt track across the desert. Even up to this time the Jornada de Cantarrecio was a known and used road. The route is clearly shown on a simple road map from that period (see Fig 6). When, in the early 1940's, the paving of the Chihuahua highway was completed, the reason for using the Cantarrecio route was eliminated and the Jornada de Cantarrecio fell into obscurity (Bloom, 1937).

The now forgotten Jornada de Cantarrecio played a role of incalculable importance in the history of the Camino Real and the mission settlements of the Rio Grande valley. It was surely used more frequently and from an earlier period than is commonly assumed. The amount of information available in literature, both archival and translated, as well as what may be learned in field studies of the trail, certainly present a fascinating research direction. A detailed study of aerial-photographs of the region, leading to the archeological investigation of the Rancho Viejo
1931 roadmap
El Paso - Chihuahua
note that the Jornada de Cantarrecio is the route shown

(Benham, 1931)
ruins, as well as other possible campsites such as the Puerto Ancho saddle, may well turn up valuable information on this historically relevant entrance to the El Paso valley. A renewed interest in the colonial occupation of El Paso is reflected by the enthusiasm of the Mission Trails Project. Perhaps this enthusiasm can generate enough interest to initiate a formal study of the Jornada de Cantarrecio.
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