



The Old Spanish Trail



The Old Spanish Trail, “the longest, crookedest, most arduous pack mule trail in the history of America,” (1829-1848) was best-known during the Mexican Period of southwestern history. The trail started in Santa Fe and terminated in Los Angeles, and had several variants--the Armijo Route, the Main Branch, and the mountainous North Branch with East and West Forks. The Old Spanish Trail became the fifteenth National Historic Trail when Congress adopted S. 1946 in November and President George W. Bush signed the bill early in December 2002.

The Old Spanish Trail linked two provinces of Mexico separated by such difficult topography and climatic extremes that, despite attempts beginning as early as 1776, a route was successfully opened only in 1829. In that year Antonio Armijo, a merchant from Santa Fe, led 60 men and 100 mules on the known trails blazed northward by trappers and traders with the Utes, and backtracked along the route Spanish padres Dominguez and Escalante recorded as they returned to Santa Fe from southern Utah more than fifty years earlier.

Armijo's group then blazed a new path using parts of Jedediah Smith's routes of 1826 and 1827, and Rafael Rivera's route of 1828. Armijo avoided the worst of the Mojave Desert, traveling south of Death Valley following intermittent streams and locating springs to support the party. He arrived at San Gabriel Mission in California with his group intact, although the men were forced to rely on mule meat during their final days on the trail. In California, they traded the blankets and other goods carried by packsaddle from Santa Fe for horses and mules, available in great numbers and little valued by the Californios. Several thousand of these horses were driven back to Santa Fe, where they became important in trade with both Chihuahua and St. Louis.

The return journey marked the first time a caravan made a round trip between Santa Fe and Los Angeles, and the governor of New Mexico trumpeted this fact immediately to his superiors in Mexico City. There was finally a land link between these two regions; no longer was Santa Fe so land locked, because California provided access to foreign markets via her seaports. The international trade between the United States and Mexico via Santa Fe would be enhanced by the commercial traffic between Santa Fe and Los Angeles made possible by Armijo's success. For his efforts, New Mexico's governor appointed Armijo “Commander for the Discovery of the Route to California.”

News of the opening of trade with California resulted in immediate commerce between Santa Fe and Los Angeles. With a few exceptions, pack trains made annual treks between New Mexico and California, bringing woven Mexican products to California, which lacked sheep, and bartering them for horses and mules, scarce in New Mexico. Emigrants from New Mexico began to take the Spanish Trail to California in the late 1830s, and outlaws used the trail to raid the California ranchos. Raids for Indian slaves became common, with victims sold at either end of the trail despite official condemnation of the practice. The traffic in human beings reverberated among the peoples who lived along the trail for many years longer than the caravans plied their trade.

People made use of the Spanish Trail for a variety of purposes, which over time led to the development of several main routes and numerous alternates. The Old Spanish National Historic Trail Feasibility Study recognizes several main routes and the Armijo trace in identifying the period of significance for the trail. The year after Armijo's journey, 1830-1831, William Wolfskill and George Yount blazed a different route that used some of the same landmarks. Their route, following the Colorado River to Needles, and up the Mojave River to Cajon Pass, was much favored by later travelers. Some trail users chose to trade with the Utes as far north as Salt Lake, and followed a path now labeled the “North Branch,” which led to Grand Junction, Colorado before heading south to rejoin the other major route from Santa Fe via Green River, Utah. Several variants of these two routes were also used, but all came together in southern Utah, fanning out once again into separate trails from southern Nevada to southeastern California. They came together again at the Mojave River, which brought travelers to the Cajon Pass portal of southern California. The group of main trails and alternates together form the Old Spanish Trail.

Americans became aware of the trail with the publication of John C. Fremont's Report of his 1844 journey from California to the States, the return leg of his expedition to Oregon for the U.S. Topographical Corps. Fremont's Report created a sensation in Washington, already struck with Manifest Destiny fever. Fremont took the Spanish Trail across to Utah.

People called the route by various names, but he called it the “Spanish Trail” in his Report, and that is the name that has been used ever since. Recognizing that a large area of the interior desert had no connection to the sea, Fremont first called it the “Great Basin”, another name used ever since – in his report. The Spanish Trail name and use lapsed after the War with Mexico ended in 1848. There was no longer any need to link Santa Fe with Los Angeles by this difficult mule trail; other, wagon-friendly routes were opened. The Spanish Trail was not a route of major emigration to the West; trails to the north and south of it were preferred for this wagon traffic. Spanish Trail caravans continued to trade with the Mormons in Utah, but by 1853 they were no longer welcome there. The New Mexican caravans were out of business.

