

EL CAMINO REAL DE TIERRA ADENTRO – Part 1

The Royal Road of the Interior

A sunset view of Socorro from El Camino Real atop Johnson Hill

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With the dedication of El Camino Real International Heritage Center November 18-19, 2005, it is appropriate to reflect on the importance of this historic trail on New Mexico and her people. El Camino Real - the Royal Road - was the main highway into and out of New Mexico for over 300 years, making it the oldest and longest used road in the United States. Even after it's proclaimed 1885 death, upon the arrival of the railroad, it continued to be used by early 20th century motorists. Portions of it were used as the "Coast to Coast Highway," entering Socorro from La Joya until the late 1930s.

Today, I-25 has replaced the old dirt ruts, still moving people about New Mexico - 407 years following the first to use the trail.

Part I covers the Pre-Revolt El Camino Real, from the 1598 arrival of Juan de Oñate until the 1680 Pueblo Revolt abandonment of New Mexico. Part II covers the history of the trail from the 1692 reconquest of New Mexico by de Vargas to the present.

An Early Trip Along El Camino Real

What did New Mexico look like in the early 1600s? What was it like traveling along El Camino Real?

It's possible you are a colonist coming to the New World from Spain, a 3 month ocean voyage, finally arriving at the port city of Vera Cruz - the start of El Camino Real. The newly arrived supplies from Spain are off-loaded from the ships and placed into dozens of wagons for the journey to Mexico City. In Vera Cruz, you would purchase your oxen and carreta to carry your family and earthly possessions. Joining the supply wagons, the caravan begins the 200 mile segment crossing the rugged Sierra Madre mountains into Mexico City - the first leg of the now historic El Camino Real. The rough road was the same route used by Cortez when he conquered Montezuma and the capital city in 1519.

Arriving in Mexico City, you would register for permission to travel into "the interior" and await the departure for the next leg of the trip - the month-long journey to Zacatecas, a prosperous mining town 300 miles to the north. In Zacatecas, you find others awaiting your arrival: Spanish soldiers, more colonists, and more wagons to join the caravan. With the newly assembled caravan, the convoy begins the grueling 600 mile north-bound trip to the banks of the Rio Grande, the gateway to the New World. You're hoping you have an experienced escort that knows the trail. With a good guide, good weather and a good trail, the caravan might average 10-12 miles a day, requiring about two months to reach El Paso de Guadalupe.

Bien Venidos Nuevo Mexico

By the time the Rio Grande comes into view, at least four months since leaving Vera Cruz, and well over six months since leaving Spain, you and your family would be exhausted and utterly sick of travel. Yet somehow, you are happy to see New Mexico, the destination of your dreams. You know your journey is coming to an end. With continued good luck, you could be in Santa Fe in two or three more weeks, a mere 100 leagues to go. However, this last leg of El Camino Real contains the dreaded *Jornada del Muerto* and other stretches of treacherous road. As the experienced caravan escorts tell you, "when we arrive safely at Sevillita, 60 leagues from here, then you can breathe a sigh of relief." Sevillita was considered the head of the perilous Rio Abajo region, after which was fairly good road the rest of the way to Santa Fe.

Sevillita was a large Piro Indian Pueblo, 7 or 8 leagues north of Socorro, near present day La Joya. With nearly 1,000 inhabitants, it was one of several large pueblos along the east bank of the Rio Grande. When Juan de Oñate arrived in 1598 with the first Spanish colonists, he did not find an uninhabited land. Over 5,000 Piros lived from Sevillita to Black Mesa to greet the Spaniards. They were the original inhabitants of the Rio Abajo, building pueblos perhaps as early as 800 A.D.. Most of the pueblos were on the east bank of the Rio Grande, connected together by a network of roads. These ancient roads, pueblos, and the Piro people defined El Camino Real. Oñate did not fashion El Camino Real through the Rio Abajo; he simply followed the existing trails from pueblo to pueblo.

This is why the main El Camino Real runs along the east side of the Rio Grande, following the pueblo trail, not the west bank where most of today's towns and villages are located.

The Spaniards of this era kept fairly good records, documenting the distances, in terms of *leagues*, between campsites (*parajes*), water holes (*ojos*) and the pueblos along El Camino Real. The league was a rather nebulous measure of travel in the 1600s. A Spanish league was the distance traveled on horse back in one hour. Of course, this distance could vary greatly depending upon the terrain, condition of the trail, the weather, and no doubt the disposition of your horse. A caravan travels at a much slower speed, about half that of the walk of a horse. A two hour ride to the next ojo on horseback could take all day, or longer, for a caravan. This is where an experienced El Camino guide proved invaluable by knowing the exact distances between water. Otherwise, the caravan could be forced to make a "dry camp" for the night, endangering the draft animals and welfare of the colonists.

It was not until the mid-1800s that the length of a league was standardized at about 2.6 miles, based on distance, not time. However, in the 1600s, the documented distances in leagues between locations was often found to be vague and misleading.

Entering New Mexico (New Spain)

Once arriving at El Paso, El Camino split into two branches. One branch crossed the Rio Grande at El Paso to follow the east bank of the river. This branch skirted the mountains between El Paso and present day Las Cruces. This was not the preferred branch due to the number of arroyos, barrancas (gulleys) and sand hills to be negotiated. The second branch followed the Rio Grande to the west through the relatively flat Mesilla Valley. However, this area was often found flooded and muddy in years of heavy spring runoff, forcing the east branch to be used. Today's I-10 and I-25, from El Paso to Fort Selden, traces the east branch of El Camino Real.

Either branch took 5 or 6 days to travel the 35 leagues to the San Diego river crossing. The west bank travelers would spend the night at Robledo paraje, spending the following day getting the caravan of wagons and animals across the Rio Grande at the San Diego crossing, near present day Rincon. It was from here that the journey through the Jornada del Muerto began.

The Jornada del Muerto

The San Diego campsite, or paraje, on the east side of the Rio Grande, was the southern gateway to the dreaded Jornada del Muerto. Here, the stock was heavily watered and every available container filled with water for the 90-mile waterless trek that lay ahead. During the scorching summer



Map by Paul Harden

The Rio Abajo portion of El Camino Real around Socorro. The new El Camino Real International Heritage Center overlooks the Jornada del Muerto from its location west of Paraje Fra Cristobal (map lower left).

months, caravans would often wait for the full moon before entering the Jornada del Muerto - should the cooler, night travel be attempted. If the Jornada del Muerto had any advantage, it was its relatively smooth trail over hard clay and light sand, suitable for night travel. In fact, the miles of flat desert along the Jornada basin was so smooth, many travellers reckoned it to the open ocean.

From San Diego, it was 32 leagues to the next water at Paraje Fra Cristobal. Most caravans would spend the first night at El Aleman and the 2nd night at Ojo del Perrillo. The water



Photo: Paul Harden

A sunset view of the flat, desert expanse of the Jornada de Muerto near Engle. From here, the next available water was more than 45 miles to the north at Paraje Fra Cristobal near Black Mesa, a three or four day trip for a caravan.

found at these springs was seldom sufficient for the entire caravan. The oxen and burros pulling the wagons usually quickly exhausted the limited water supply. Continuing north, the 3rd night was spent at either Ojo del Muerto or Laguna del Muerto, though water was seldom found. These two popular campsites are located north of the present day highway between Truth or Consequences and Engle. This section of El Camino Real crosses the highway about a mile west of Engle, indicated by two markers. One is a state highway historical sign, the other a stone marker erected by the Sierra County Historical Society. In years past, the wagon ruts of the El Camino could be easily followed both north and south from these markers. Today, access is restricted by the Armendaris Ranch, owned by Ted Turner.

Towards the end of the journey, the trail began to follow a 50 foot high wall of lava, the malpais of the Jornada. With unpassable lava to the east, and Fra Cristobal Mountain to the west, the trail was forced through a narrow gap called Lava Gate - one of the major landmarks along the trail. It was just 4 more leagues to water at Paraje on the Rio Grande, a welcomed campsite, and one more day of travel to Mesa de Contadero, the traditional end of the Jornada de Muerto. Today, wagon ruts are still clearly visible through Lava Gate, and the turnoff to Paraje.

Unfortunately, Paraje Fra Cristobal was inundated by flood waters in the mid-1980s when Elephant Butte Reservoir was filled to capacity. This historic site is located due east of the new El Camino Real International Heritage Center.

There is no doubt about it. The Jornada del Muerto was one

of the most infamous stretches of El Camino Real for the want of water, occasional attacks from Apaches, and other deadly conditions. It was several days of hard travel over a hot, dusty trail, often well into the night. It was not unusual for some of the oxen and horses to succumb along the trail. And, with the colonists already on the trail for many months, weary, and perhaps sick and malnourished, there is an unknown human toll as well. The Jornada del Muerto, the Journey of Death, was appropriately named. How many unmarked graves must line this trail!



Photo: Paul Harden

This marker, erected by the Sierra County Historical Society, marks the location of El Camino Real near Engle. The wagon ruts can still be seen in many places along the historic Jornada de Muerto.

Black Mesa (Mesa de Contadero)

From Paraje, El Camino Real left the river and returned to the elevation of the Jornada del Muerto trail, where one of the most recognizable landmarks came into view - Mesa de Contadero. This is the majestic Black Mesa east of I-25 at San Marcial. Approaching the southern flank, travellers could see the large Piro Indian pueblo of San Felipe on the west side of the Rio Grande. Located near the mouth of Milligan Gulch, it was seldom visited by the caravans, as the jagged lava cliffs in this area made fording the river virtually impossible. By the end of the day, the caravan reached the river camp of Val Verde on the northern side of the mesa.

Today, much of El Camino Real, from near Paraje to the north side of Black Mesa, can still be seen, and well protected by the remoteness and stewardship of the Armendaris Ranch. It is also visible south and east of Black Mesa on satellite images, such as the TerraServe and Google Earth internet service.

The following day must have been an exciting one, for in just a few hours of travel, the caravans would arrive at the huge San Pascual Pueblo. This was clearly the largest Piro pueblo along the Rio Abajo, consisting of 750 rooms, 4 plazas, and a population well over 2,000. For New Mexico in the 1600s, this was a major city. The Piro Indians (pronounced PEE-ro) were friendly towards the Spaniards. The colonists would often spend several days at San Pascual to rest from the arduous trek over the Jornada, and to trade food, supplies and trinkets. Spanish artifacts of this era have been found at the ruins of San Pascual.

From San Pascual, the large Senecú pueblo (pronounced Sen-eh-COO) could be seen across the river. This was the first Piro pueblo with a Spanish mission. From 1630 until the 1680 Pueblo Revolt, Senecú was famous for its extensive vineyards and tasty wine, thanks to the friars at the mission.

The protected ruins of San Pascual exist today, located on the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. The location of Senecú, however, remains a mystery. In spite of vigorous archeological searches, it has never been located. It has likely been claimed by the river in the distant past.

Pilabo (Socorro) Pueblo

Another day's travel north from San Pascual, along El Camino Real, the caravans arrived at Qualacú Pueblo (pronounced Kwah-lah-COO), south of present day San Pedro. Juan de Oñate and his exhausted colonists camped near Qualacú to recuperate for nearly the entire month of June, 1598. It was here that the Piro people, from the larger Teypama Pueblo, provided the starving colonists with corn and other foods. Teypama was across the river near present day Luis Lopez. Due to the help and assistance given by these Indians, Oñate renamed the Teypama to Socorro.



Photo: U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Here are some of the room structures at Qualacú during an archeological excavation in the 1980s. Most of the Piro pueblos were constructed of adobe, not masonry, making the 400-year-old ruins extremely fragile.

A few years later, upon the abandonment of Teypama, Fra Alonso Benevidez transferred the name Socorro to a nearby pueblo named Pilabo (pronounced Pee-LAH-boe). This was a fair sized pueblo with about 600 inhabitants and a small contingent of Spanish settlers and friars. Pilabo, now called Socorro, was largely cut-off from the traffic flow of El Camino Real, being on the opposite side of the river.

In 1626, Fra Benevidez established the Nuestra Senora de Socorro mission. Today, San Miguel church sits on the original mission site with portions of the 1626 walls still intact, making San Miguel one of the oldest missions in the southwest. Around this same time, the west branch to El Camino was formed, fording the river at Val Verde, and running through the pueblos on the west bank of the Rio Grande, including Socorro. Now serviced by the west branch of El Camino Real, Socorro quickly began to grow with arriving Spanish colonists. By 1630, Socorro was considered "the principal pueblo in the province" and the administrative center for the region. I-25 from San Marcial to Las Lunas loosely follows the west branch of El Camino Real.

Today, Qualacú is a protected archeological site on the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, while the location of Teypama has slipped into obscurity. Recent archeological excavations at Plaza Montoya, south of Luis Lopez, suggests this 200 room pueblo may be Teypama. Though the exact location of the Pilabo Pueblo is not known, it is believed to be buried under the houses to the east and northeast from Socorro's San Miguel church, to perhaps as far west as Franklin Street. Whether by happenstance or design, the El Camino Restaurant may very well be sitting on top of the original west bank trail.



Photo: Paul Harden

The present village of Pueblito, east of Escondida Lake, is built over the site of an ancient pueblo of the same name. The Bosquecito Road follows El Camino Real to U.S. 380, where it continues south to San Pedro and Qualacú.

Bosquecito–Pueblito

Today's Bosquecito Road, between U.S. 380 and Pueblito, is bladed over much of the original El Camino Real and through several small Piro pueblos. Near the Los Cañas Arroyo, there was a cluster of small pueblos with several hundred inhabitants. Today's settlement of Pueblito, across the river from Escondida Lake, is built upon the original site of an ancestral pueblo, occupied before Spanish contact. Lack of Spanish references suggests it was likely uninhabited during this phase of El Camino Real.

While El Camino Real north of Black Mesa was a relatively good trail, that quickly changed near Pueblito. In this region, the Rio Grande is typified by a relatively large floodplain, which proved to be unpassable to the wagons due to mud and sudden flooding. As a result, the trail headed into the hills north of Pueblito into what it known today as the Johnson Hill area. It was often a days job getting the caravan across the rocky La Parida Arroyo and atop the gravel benches at Johnson Hill. Even in the early part of the 20th century, when this part of El Camino was the "road to La Joya," northbound autos would struggle to negotiate the sands of Johnson Hill. Pueblito resident Albert Zimmerly remembers his parents telling him how local families, in the 1920-30s, would charge a fee to pull the old cars over Johnson Hill with oxen and mules.

Las Vueltas de Socorro

Once atop Johnson Hill, El Camino was very sandy, going up and down the hills through arroyos and barrancas. This treacherous, twisty, sandy trail was known as La Vueltas de Socorro. Vueltas is an archaic Spanish word meaning "dangerous twists and turns." After a hard days travel, the colonists would arrive at the Alamillo Pueblo, which by the late 1630s contained the Santa Ana Mission and about 300 souls. This was an important stop for the travelling colonists,

being the first Catholic church with a priest encountered since Mexico. For many, Alamillo was seen as a sanctuary. For the first time in several months, travellers could receive communion and exercise their faith.

Today, the east bank location of Alamillo is a mystery. It is believed to be located adjacent to Lemitar or Polvadera.

Continuing north along Las Vueltas de Socorro, the trail came up on the narrow gap between the two lava mesas at present day San Acacia. There appears to be two separate trails to El Camino in this region: one, skirting the west face of the southern butte, the second passing farther to the east to avoid "the gorge." The nearby 100-room Cerro Indio Pueblo, atop the north mesa, was occupied in this Colonial period. It was unlikely they had much contact with the caravans due to their inaccessible mesa-top location. Most contact was with the 200-300 inhabitants of the smaller San Acacia Pueblo and Estancia Acomilla near the base of these mesas. Archeological surveys have revealed a possible mission church at Estancia Acomilla.

North of San Acacia, El Camino again traveled across more sandy hills, arroyos and barrancas for continued difficult travel. This stretch of the trail was called Las Vueltas de Acomilla and terminated at the huge Sevillita Pueblo near present day La Joya. Portions of El Camino Real are still visible along parts of this stretch, particularly through the Cañoncito mountains south of La Joya.

Sevillita Pueblo

The Piro name of this extensive pueblo of 1,000 inhabitants was Seelocú (pronounced See-loh-COO). However, it was renamed Sevillita by Onate in 1598 as it's location above the river reminded him of Seville in Spain. Most all of New



Photo: Paul Harden

Longtime Pueblito resident Albert Zimmerly points out the location of the original El Camino Real over the Parida Ridge and Johnson Hill. The trail is still visible in places north of Pueblito.

Mexico's pueblos were renamed as part of the Spanish conquest. In a few cases, like Seelocú, Qualacú and Pilabo, the ancestral Piro names are known. The original Piro names of many of the others have been lost to history, known today only by their Spanish-given names.

Sevillita was an important pueblo along the El Camino Real. By the 1620s, it contained the San Luis Obispo mission. Sevillita was considered the northern terminus of the treacherous Rio Abajo. For northbound travelers, El Camino Real became a fairly good road the rest of the way to Santa Fe, with the exception of the climb up La Bajada hill. Indeed, these travelers could now breathe a sigh of relief. For southbound travelers, it was the start of a long journey back to Mexico City or Vera Cruz. Southbound caravans would assemble at Sevillita until of sufficient size to ensure their safety against the perils of the trail. Small caravans were often doomed if attacked by Apaches, a breakdown on the trail, or the death of any of the draft animals.

Today, Sevillita is an extensive archeological site within the boundaries of the Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge. Somewhere between then and now, the spelling seemed to change from Sevillita (little Seville) to Sevilleta.

From 1598 through 1680, over 2,000 Spanish and Mexican colonists had settled in New Mexico. While most settled around Santa Fe and along the Rio Arriba country, others stayed in Socorro and along the Rio Abajo. Some of these settlers lived in or near the Piro pueblos, such as Sevillita and Socorro. Others established small nearby estancias. These were two different cultures of people living together, and after two and three generations, had begun to intermarry, having children, their communities growing. During this same time, the Conquistadors continued exerting the Spanish rule on the native peoples, resulting in the Pueblo Revolt in 1680, expelling the colonists from New Mexico. Due to the friendships expressed towards the colonists by the Piro, and the common bonds through marriage, the Piro



Photo: Paul Harden

A surviving piece of El Camino Real north of the Parida Arroyo. This section of the trail was called Las Vueltas de Socorro for the twisty, sandy terrain. This was typical of the trail from Pueblito to Sevillita Pueblo, near present day La Joya.

Indians fled New Mexico with the Spaniards along the same trail for which they arrived - El Camino Real.

When the Piro's fled with the colonists, the indigenous culture of Socorro and the Rio Abajo disappeared with them. Hopefully, someday the dozens of Piro Pueblos along the Rio Grande around Socorro can be excavated and researched with the same resources devoted to Chaco Canyon or Quarai before our native bretheren are completely forgotten.

Some of the references used in this article:

"Origins of New Mexico Families" by Fra Angelico Chavez, "Rio Abajo" by Michael Marshall and Henry Walt, "Qualacu," Michael Marshall for U.S. Fish and Wildlife, "The Royal Road," by Douglas Preston and Jose Esquibel, interviews with Albert Zimmerly, Brenda Wilkenson, Benigno Barreras and Carlos Rodriguez, University of Mexico (UNAM), Mexico City.