



## EL CAMINO REAL

In Spanish colonial days, New Mexico's chief artery of communication with the outside world was El Camino Real, the Royal Road, or King's Highway, which connected Santa Fé with the vice-regal capital of Mexico City, 1,200 miles (440 leagues) to the south. The road descended the Rio Grande Valley by way of Bernalillo, Albuquerque, and Belén; crossed the central New Mexico desert known as the Jornada del Muerto; led past El Paso del Norte; and then wound through such Mexican cities as Chihuahua, Parral, Durango, Zacatecas, and Querétaro. In its time, El Camino Real was the longest and most significant roadway in North America.

The story of El Camino Real lasted more than 220 years, from its beginning in 1598 down to the close of the colonial era in 1821. During that period, New Mexico's history was shaped by the swelling volume of traffic that flowed over this pioneer route, and many of the central events affecting the province's development were closely associated with it. The origins, evolution, and inner workings of El Camino Real make an absorbing narrative and shed light on one of the most dramatic chapters in the distant past of New Mexico.

### BLAZING THE ROAD

Don Juan de Oñate, founder and first governor of the kingdom and province of New Mexico, deserves credit for establishing El Camino Real in the closing years of the sixteenth century. From his native city of Zacatecas, famous for its productive silver mines, he marched northward with a caravan of colonists to the frontier outpost of Santa Bárbara in southern Chihuahua, where the King's Highway ended in 1598.

Following scouts he had sent ahead, Oñate guided his wagon and cart-train across the barren Chihuahuan desert and over the terrible sand dunes, Los Médanos, to reach the El Paso Valley by April. After a brief rest, he began ascending the Rio Grande, crossing the present state boundary of New Mexico. At the north end of the Mesilla

Valley, Pedro Robledo, an old soldier with the caravan, died. Ever after, the place was known as the Robledo Campsite, and a height nearby is still called Robledo Mountain today.

At this point the Rio Grande began a wide bend to the west through rough country, so Oñate chose to go straight north across an arid, level plain, later called the Jornada del Muerto. After a 90-mile journey, the expedition rejoined the Rio Grande and began making its way upriver through lands of the Pueblo Indians.

By September, the caravan had reached San Juan Pueblo in the scenic Española Valley, where Oñate determined to build his capital. Some months later the Spaniards founded San Gabriel on the west bank of the Rio Grande, just above the mouth of the Chama. It was the first European settlement planted in what is now the western United States. In those early years, the little community marked the end of El Camino Real.

### PARAJES

The tracks left by Oñate's caravan in 1598 became the designated route of El Camino Real, followed by all later travelers. In the course of that initial journey, the governor had selected and named the official *parajes*, that is, campsites or stopping places. Over the years some of the locations were moved and the names changed. For example, El Rancho de las Golondrinas, after its founding in the eighteenth century, became the first *paraje* for wagons going south from Santa Fé.

Ideally, a *paraje* could furnish the three necessities required by all early-day travelers: water, firewood, and grass for the livestock. Campers between Bernalillo and Socorro easily got water from the river and wood from the bosques, or cottonwood groves, and grass could be had on nearby mesas. But at the six *parajes* on the Jornada, all three of these requirements were usually unavailable, so the wagons hurried through that stretch of country as swiftly as possible.

### THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

In 1600 a wagon train load of relief supplies reached Oñate's struggling colony on the upper Rio Grande. It was but the first of many such caravans that lumbered up the dust-laden Camino Real during the next century.

In the same year that plans were made for the founding of a new capital at Santa Fé, 1609, the Crown took over from Oñate full responsibility for support of the colony and its Franciscan missions among the Pueblo Indians. As a result, it was de-

cided to send a train of provisions from Mexico City once every three years. For the first twenty years, however, the inefficient supply caravan could not meet its schedule, and arrivals were often five or even six years apart. The delays imposed severe hardships on both the missionaries and the settlers.

Reforms introduced in 1631 provided for appointment of a capable friar to act as supply agent and wagon master on the King's Highway. Thereafter, the freighting service improved, with goods arriving on time. In these years, almost two hundred kinds of items were shipped to New Mexico, from fancy cloth, ironware, medicines, books, shoes, and cosmetics to a variety of foodstuffs. The colonists sent back to Mexico their own *efectos del país* (native products): buffalo hides, jerky, buckskins, salt, piñon nuts, blankets, raw wool, sheep, and knitted stockings.

### THE PUEBLO REVOLT

The Pueblo Indians rose in revolt during early August, 1680. Some 400 Spaniards — settlers and friars — died. The survivors abandoned the upper province and fled down the Camino Real to El Paso del Norte, where they remained exiled for twelve years. Finally, a new governor, Don Diego de Vargas returned to Santa Fé in 1692 and 1693, restoring Spanish rule and reopening the historic Royal Road.

### THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

New patterns of travel and commerce appeared during the second half of the colonial era. The old supply service operated by Franciscans was abandoned and replaced by government caravans managed by private contractors. This freighting industry provisioned the scattered missions and the Santa Fé presidio. Local New Mexico merchants and other private citizens formed their own caravans, called *conductas*, to transport their products once a year to the markets of Chihuahua, Sonora, and Durango. Such wagon convoys were necessary to afford protection from hostile Indians.

The governor issued an annual proclamation announcing the date of departure for the *conducta* and the point of rendezvous. At mid century, the caravan assembled on the Albuquerque plaza; later, the rendezvous shifted south to La Joya near Belén.

The yearly *conducta* included several hundred people: merchants with their families, ranchers, drivers, herders, soldiers, and a priest or two. The main vehicles were covered freight wagons (*carros*)

and ox carts (*carretas*). Strings of pack mules (*atajos*) led by muleteers (*arrieros*) also transported goods. Extra draft animals and flocks of sheep were driven in front of the caravan, the safest position in case of Indian attack. On the return trip, the carriage of a high government or church official might accompany the caravan.

When strung out on El Camino Real, the *conducta* might extend as much as two miles. Its speed was a mere 12 to 15 miles per day, so it took many weeks to reach a distant place like Chihuahua City. At night, within the wagon circle, troubadours made up songs about life on the Royal Road and played tunes on the *bijuela*, a homemade stringed instrument. Only a small part of this lore has been preserved.

### LAST DAYS

Mexico won independence from Spain in 1821. The new government soon decreed that El Camino Real should now be called El Camino Constitucional, but New Mexicans had used the old term so long they refused to give it up. In the early twentieth century many still used the name El Camino Real for the road south.

In the same year, 1821, the Santa Fé Trail was opened between Missouri and New Mexico. On the Santa Fé plaza, the new route linked up with the old Camino Real. Some American traders followed it to the southern markets, but now they called it the Chihuahua Trail. Much of the original road between Santa Fé and El Paso was followed by builders of the AT&SF Railroad in 1880, and with the laying of their track, wagon traffic at last withered away, putting an end to the story begun by Oñate three centuries before.

— Marc Simmons

---

The essay was prepared as part of the exhibit "Four Centuries on El Camino Real: New Mexico Lifeline". The exhibit was partially funded by a grant from the New Mexico Endowment for the Humanities.

Suggested reading: *New Mexico's Royal Road, Trade and Travel on the Chihuahua Trail*, by Max L. Moorhead, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1958.



EL RANCHO DE LAS GOLONDRINAS

Santa Fe, New Mexico