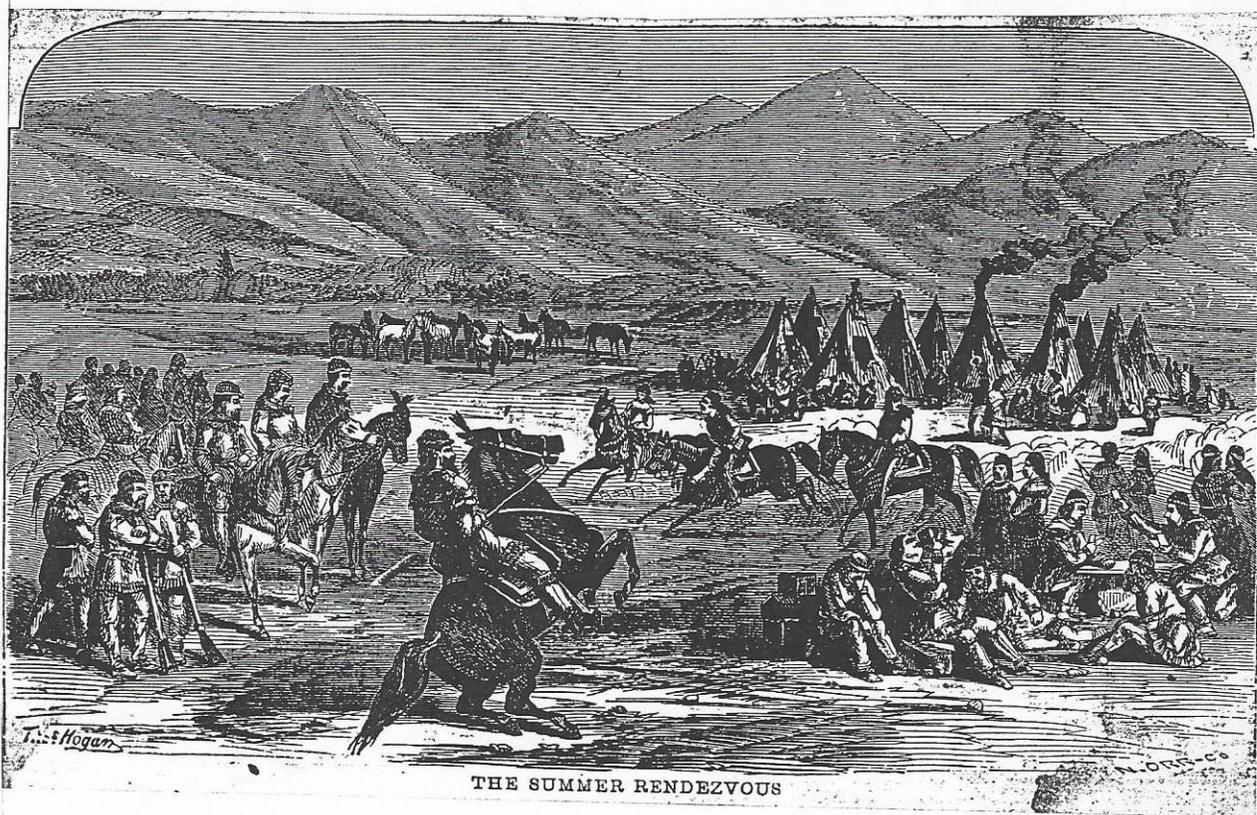


*Forgotten Pathfinders*  
Along the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail  
1650-1850  
by  
Jack William Nelson



Copyright© 2003, Jack William Nelson  
Ed. 2016, Jon M. Nelson

# **Forgotten pathfinders: Along the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail, 1650-1850**

*by Jack William Nelson*

## **About the author:**

Jack Nelson is a retired public schools administrator, with a Master of Arts in History from the University of Redlands, Redlands, California, 1950. He has spent many years researching the “Old Spanish Trail,” the fur trade era, Mountain Men, and all points connected. His background includes archaeological work, and untold hours backpacking miles of the “Trail.”

His thesis, “Louis Robidoux, the Man Behind the Legend,” has been recognized as one of the few authentic documents pertaining to this entrepreneur of the nineteenth century fur trade period. It has been used as reference for continued research on this subject,

Jack Nelson is a native Coloradan, and now resides in Grand Junction, Colorado.

Editors Note: This edition was published in 2003, with limited distribution, it was the intent of the Author to provide a wider public exposure through online publication as a Pdf, with the goal of promoting scholarship.

# *INTRODUCTION*

## “Forgotten Pathfinders”

### The North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail and Beyond

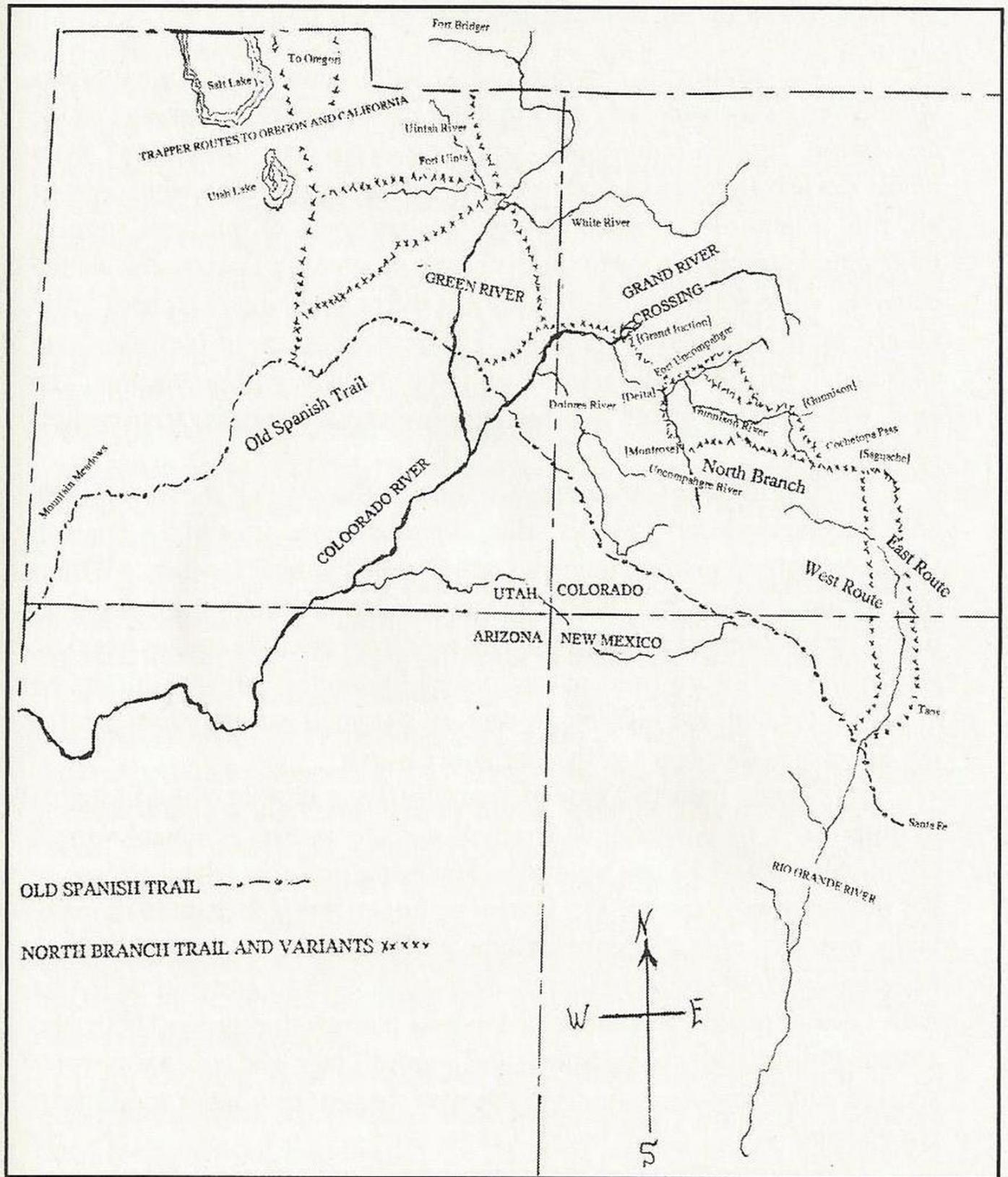
This booklet is about a series of events which culminated in a Trail shrouded in the mists of history. Known today as the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail, little physical evidence remains of this pack animal route(s) across the interior wilderness of the American Southwest. Priests spreading the Catholic faith, brigands bent upon capturing Indian slaves, “Mountain Men” speaking many languages, entrepreneurs seeking fame and fortune, and adventurers just seeking, all at some time played a role in creating this ephemeral route, once a major variant of the Old Spanish Trail.

The major thrust of this study concentrates on that portion of the North Branch which was most heavily used by those traveling from Taos, New Mexico, to the area in the vicinity of present day Salt Lake, Utah. While history has a way of remembering its outstanding heroes, many of its lesser recalled, but men of equal stature have been lost in the annals of time. Our time frame is that period of history when the Spanish Crown then Mexico, had legal control of today’s North American Southwest.

To piece this story together entailed a search of limited written evidence, inscriptions carved on rocky canyon walls, common sense surveys of the area, picking the brains” of people knowledgeable of specific sections of the route, and an archaeological study of the little remaining physical evidence. It has also been of great assistance to have personal knowledge of the area under study.

The National Park Service has been most gracious in accepting topographical maps and the enclosed historical information as part of their study of the Old Spanish Trail. As of December, 2002, the Old Spanish Trail and its North Branch with a stroke of the president’s pen became the fifteenth National Historic Trail nationwide.

Jack Nelson, 2003



## PROLOGUE

The Southwest. Encompassing that region of the United States which even today is sparsely settled, it is a vast area of breathtaking beauty, desolation, broken landscapes, and long distances. Elevations from below sea level to over 14,000 feet exist within sight of each other. Above all, it is a land of contrasts. The region has some of the most rugged, inhospitable terrain on earth: high craggy mountains, deep sheer-walled canyons, wide, swift, and deep turbulent rivers, and long stretches of arid desert, with few sources of water. The present states of Nevada, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Arizona, and California lie within this area. The land, with all its integrated features, largely dictated its history from earliest times.

Shortly after Christopher Columbus “discovered” the New World, adventurers, explorers, missionaries, and other emissaries of the Spanish Crown sought to extend Spanish control over the new territory. Within one hundred years, by 1600, the Spanish had conquered most of the native populations in both Central and South America, as well as Mexico. Expansion northward from an established foothold in Mexico during the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries created serious problems for the Spanish authorities and the Catholic Church.

Supply lines that extended north from a base in central Mexico to outposts in its borderlands were always a concern. Finances were a continual problem throughout New Spain, particularly when it came to her northern-most territories. Unrest and open warfare erupted in many areas, brought about by the mistreatment of the native Indian populations. Missions, widely scattered in this area, were attacked and burned by the natives, and had to be abandoned for long periods during the 1600s and 1700s. Political mismanagement, and poor military leadership was interspersed with many strong individuals who shaped the frontier outposts of New Spain.

Following extensive exploration by land and sea, Spain had established a mission system along the California coast by the late 1700s. A few tentative expeditions had pushed into the interior of California as well. The indigenous

The same was true about the missions in the vicinity of Santa Fe, in the New Mexico Territory. Santa Fe, founded shortly after 1600, had a long and tumultuous history, marked by Indian uprisings, revolts, and outright warfare. The Native American population in the region-the Navajo, Ute, Apache, and Comanche-were proud, independent, and resentful of the rigorous demands, restrictions, and enslavement placed upon them by the European invaders.

The indigenous Indians played a significant role in the historical development of the Southwest. Of specific interest are the Utes, or Yutas, as the Spanish called them. With their homeland ranging from the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, to the edge of the Great American Desert, west of the Wasatch Mountains in present-day Utah, the Utes with few exceptions received the "intruders" well. Early contact with the Spanish introduced the Utes to new trade items, including firearms and the coveted horse.

The Utes probably had horses by 1650. They became exceptional horsemen, learned to breed horses with fine blood lines, and enjoyed horse racing. Having little else to trade, the Utes in the Salt Lake area soon discovered the Spanish needed Indian slaves for domestic and commercial use. They became very adept at swooping down on their weaker neighbors, especially the Piutes, capturing young women and children, and delivering them in trade to the Spanish. Mounted Utes established well known trails which crisscrossed the intermontane regions of the Colorado River basin. One of their main trade routes crossed the central Wasatch Range, then southeast, where they "forded the Green and Colorado Rivers at the only accessible points along their awesome canyons, cut across the southwest corner of Colorado, to the Spanish settlements on the Rio Grande."<sup>2</sup>

Defying strict government regulations prohibiting such activities, Spanish slave traders used these routes to carry on their clandestine business until well into the 1800s.<sup>3</sup> Due to lack of an official stamp of approval, very few written accounts of treks into "Ute country" existed. The few documents that survived were eagerly read by any venturing into Indian country.

With the Spanish settlements in New Mexico separated from those in California by over a thousand miles of inhospitable terrain, unfriendly Indians, and largely unknown routes, it was not until the late 1700s that serious explorations of the area began. The high craggy mountains, deep sheer-walled canyons, wide, deep, and turbulent rivers, long stretches of

desert, and lack of potable water all discouraged exploration and settlement. For many years explorers who ventured into the area followed various routes. It would not be until the early 1800s that the unconnected sections of a route to be called the “Old Spanish Trail,” with its North Branch, were firmly established.

The Old Spanish Trail, which followed a sinuous route between two Spanish centers, Santa Fe in New Mexico and Los Angeles in California, evolved slowly. It was not firmly established as an animal pack train route, largely encompassing well used Indian trails, until about 1830. Few physical scars of the early treks remain along its 1200 mile length. River fords, water holes, forage for pack stock, terrain, and relations with indigenous Indians dictated passable routes. Much has been written and documented about the main route of the Trail,<sup>4</sup> which assumed a horseshoe shaped arc northwest from Santa Fe. After reaching a ford the Colorado River, the Trail continued on to its northern apogee<sup>5</sup> soon after another passable crossing of the Green River. Both these fords had been very heavily used for countless years. Soon after fording the Green River, the trail swung to the southwest, a direction it followed until reaching the California settlements.

While the route of the Main or South Branch of the Old Spanish Trail has been studied and documented for years, certain variants have been slighted. Specifically, these were shortcuts or spur trails which branched off the Main Trail, going almost due north from Santa Fe, and rejoining it hundreds of miles later. These routes led into the interior areas of northern New Mexico, western Colorado, and north central and eastern Utah. Used sporadically early on, these trails became very heavily traveled after the 1820s. Later known as the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail, this route possibly predates the Main Trail by many years. The geographic area encompassed the river drainage of the upper Rio Grande, and the major upper Colorado River Basin. The major mountain ranges include the Sangre de Cristo, San Juan, Elk, Uncompahgre, Grand Mesa, Roan/Bookcliff, Wasatch, and the Western Slope of the Rockies.

The North Branch split off from the Old Spanish Trail north of Santa Fe, just prior to reaching Taos Pueblo, an established trade center long used by the Indians.<sup>6</sup> A variant route, the first of many, was made at San Juan Pueblo, where the North Branch split into an east and west route, following each side of the deep gorge of the Rio Grande. The two routes rejoined near present-day Saguache, Colorado, to continue northward over Cochetopa Pass where the trail split again, with various routes

heading northward to present Delta, Colorado. Still heading in a northerly direction, the North Branch went on to one of the few fordable crossings of the Colorado River at present-day Grand Junction, Colorado. Once across the Colorado River, the trail assumed a westerly direction to connect with the Main route of the Old Spanish Trail a short distance before reaching the major crossing of the Green River, immediately above contemporary Green River, Utah.

A variant route, the major route of the North Branch split off from the above noted Green River trail, about twenty miles west of present-day Grand Junction. Heading in a general northwest direction, this trail crossed the Roan/Bookcliff Range, forded the Green River, and headed north and west into the Uintah, or "Winty" country, then west to the heart of Ute territory and later site of many fur trapping rendezvous. This trail accessed the route of the later Old Spanish Trail well south of Utah Lake.

Terrain dictated the routes followed through any area. Rivers with accessible and usable fords played a tremendous role in the development of both the Old Spanish Trail and its North Branch. There were several very large unpredictable rivers, subject to seasonal changes which governed travel timetables, that had to be crossed. The Colorado and Green Rivers could be forded at few places.

The Colorado River Basin drains a vast area of the West fed by high, snow-packed mountains; even today spring runoff can cause problems. Another concern was coursing through sheer-walled canyons, with drop-offs along one or both banks. Merely locating and utilizing river crossings often caused travelers to go many miles out of their way.

There were only three "safe" places where the Main and North Branches of the Old Spanish Trail could ford the Colorado River. The Main Trail crossed the river at a ford located a short distance above the confluence of the Green and Colorado Rivers,<sup>7</sup> near present-day Moab, Utah. The next crossing, upstream, and one often used by those traveling a variant of the North Branch, was located above the area where the Dolores River enters the Grand from the south. Approximately one hundred miles above the Main Trail ford at Moab was the major crossing used by those traveling along the North Branch. Located about three miles above the confluence of the present Gunnison and Colorado Rivers, this ford was commonly referred to as the "crossing of the Grand."

Two other river crossings offered travelers further excitement, delays in travel, extensive loss of equipment, and potential loss of life. The ford located immediately above the site of present-day Green River, Utah, was an extremely treacherous crossing, especially during a flash flood or heavy spring runoff. Another ford which had to be cautiously crossed was located below the confluence of the Uncompahgre and Gunnison Rivers. Located near Delta, Colorado, it was prone to flooding and heavy snow melt.

With both the Main and North Branches of the Old Spanish Trail heavily used in the days before bridges came into common use, any stream had to be approached with caution and a system for safely crossing the river.

## *THE SPANISH PERIOD*

In a continual search for precious metals, new territories, and conversion of the native population, Spanish influence slowly expanded into the interior of the Southwest.<sup>8</sup> In 1604 the leader of a Spanish expedition along the lower reaches of the Colorado River was informed by the Indians that ". . . it was a thirty-day journey from the mouth [ of the Colorado River] to the source of the river and that six days beyond the source there were many bison and very large deer."<sup>9</sup> This was a very interesting comment. Archaeological research has shown the presence of abalone and other Pacific coast shells as far east as the interior Plains. A passing reference of knowledge of the animal life in the upper Colorado River Basin possibly indicates widespread awareness of known ancient Indian trade routes into the interior.<sup>10</sup> It has been contended that French explorers, in the early 1700s, found mounted Indians in Montana-undoubtedly Spanish horses traded by the Utes.<sup>11</sup>

There is little question that there were sporadic expeditions into the regions north and west from Santa Fe during the 1600s. Each military expedition sent forth, usually trying to chase down horse-stealing Indians, were almost always required to have a literate priest with them. Among other priestly duties was that of being the group's scribe and keeping a daily log for any trek. Unfortunately, many of these journals were lost in the latter part of the 1600s when missions were sacked and archives destroyed during Indian uprisings.

Further exploratory thrusts into the northern areas were hampered by Spanish authorities from Santa Fe, who refused to sanction them. Rumors of an ephemeral land of Teguayo, located "to the north," were rampant in some circles. Despite this fact, officials still maintained a steadfast refusal throughout the 1600s and well into the 1700s. Because of this, the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail has been largely ignored by historians possibly because of the dearth of information, adequate documentation, or lack of recognition. Priest's contributions to the opening of the land of the Utes were tremendous.

Fray Alonso de Posada, who served in the New Mexican mission system from 1661-1665 appeared to be a prolific writer of "authentic" reports coming out of the area occupied by the Utes.<sup>12</sup> The information Posada was disseminating came from various travelers who had probably illegally entered into Ute territory. Undoubtedly, his documents were

eagerly perused by any later travelers going into the area soon encompassed by the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail. His journal of 1686 was considered one of the few authentic documents describing the area north from Santa Fe. <sup>13</sup>

A record of two official, albeit semi-secret, expeditions occurred in the summer and fall of 1765, led by the same man. Juan Maria Antonio Rivera, with the official sanction of the governor, went into the area north and west from Abiquiu in search of a reported silver mine. The first expedition appears to have amounted to little more than a "wild goose chase," netting little but rumors of more riches to be had again to the north. Undaunted, Rivera led another group on a more extensive trek in October of 1765. From his journal, it appears he explored a route to be followed by Dominguez and Escalante ten years later. Rivera's group went as far north as present-day Delta before returning to Santa Fe. His search for silver and the elusive route to the Rio del Tizon, or Colorado River, was marked by an inscription carved on a tree at his most northern penetration point.

By a careful study of Rivera's second expedition journal, it is obvious that he did not reach the Rio del Tizon. His description of the terrain, the ford, and "to the east, nine small rivers flow into it upriver,"<sup>14</sup> would indicate that his group was in the area near Delta, Colorado. The reference to several rivers is evidence of the location, as there are enough sizable streams flowing off the Grand Mesa and the Elk Mountains to warrant this comment. Another interesting statement can be found in the journal: "The return trip took fourteen and a half days by the most direct route with regular marches."<sup>15</sup> While not described specifically, the group may have traveled a route between Delta, Colorado, and Santa Fe.

Unquestionably, both Posada's and Rivera's journals laid the groundwork for more extensive treks into the north and west by the late 1700s, possibly following partially known routes. Two Catholic priests, Fray Francisco Atansio Dominguez and Fray Silvestre Velez de Escalante, left Santa Fe in the year 1776 intending to establish a route connecting Santa Fe with the newly established missions in California. Accompanied by guides who had been with Rivera, the two priests planned to travel north from Santa Fe to a point at approximately the same latitude as the Monterey Mission of California, then turn and go west. On July 29, 1776, they began a joint venture of great historical significance. While never reaching their ultimate goal, the daily log of their trek, recorded by Escalante, became an invaluable geographical document. Of specific interest is their journey into the Upper Colorado River Basin, especially

regions including the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail. The details recorded in their journal have made following their route fairly easy for contemporary researchers; however, it is unfortunate that most later travelers through the area did not do the same.

The small expedition left Santa Fe traveling in a northwesterly direction, retracing much of Rivera's previous route across north central New Mexico and southwestern Colorado. After reaching the Dolores River, in the vicinity of Slick Rock, Colorado, they went up and across the Uncompahgre Plateau. Upon arriving at the Uncompahgre River, south of present-day Montrose, they turned north and followed a wide Indian trail, over which they traveled in a northerly or downstream direction until they reached a point near Delta, Colorado.

Dominguez and Escalante followed the Uncompahgre River to where it joins the much larger Gunnison River. Here the small expedition turned and went east, traveling along the Gunnison until reaching its North Fork. Choosing to go up the North Fork of the Gunnison, they followed it upstream a short distance, ascended the Grand Mesa, and again headed in a northerly direction. Crossing the Grand Mesa, they reached the Colorado River, forded it, went west again for a short distance, then turned north to traverse the Roan/Bookcliff Range to reach the White River near present-day Rangely, Colorado. Again traveling in a northwesterly direction, the Dominguez-Escalante group approached and forded the Green River, immediately above present-day Jensen, Utah. At that juncture, the group proceeded west across north central Utah until they reached present-day Utah Lake. From their camp at Utah Lake, they turned south until reaching an area south of present-day St. George, Utah, where they headed east to return to Santa Fe after a six month journey. Much of their line of travel was later incorporated into the Main/South Branch of the Old Spanish Trail, possibly more than previously accepted.

With the detail recorded by Father Escalante, a much closer examination must be made of the route the small group traveled. His descriptions have a direct bearing when later travelers tried to locate certain sections of the North Branch. Keenly observant, Father Escalante noted daily distances traveled, terrain, weather, water sources, flora, fauna, Indian groups met, and any other pertinent information he deemed important. For example, his entry for August 26, 1776, describes the expedition's arrival near present-day Montrose, Colorado:

*... after going two leagues 15 and a half northeast we finished descending the sierra and came to the banks*

*and meadows of El Rio de San Francisco--among the Yutas called Anacapgari [Uncompahgre] ... On this river meadow, which is large and very level there is a very wide and well beaten trail.* <sup>16</sup>

This particular trail became an integral section of the North Branch Route and would be heavily used by later travelers.

In Escalante's entry for August 27, 1776, the route along the Uncompahgre River is described in great detail. Upon reaching the area of confluence of the present Uncompahgre and Gunnison Rivers, the entry affirms an interesting historical note: ". . . To these two rivers, already joined together, there came Don Juan Maria Rivera in the year of '65 ... according to the indications he gives in his itinerary."<sup>17</sup>

The entry also notes that one of the expedition's interpreters had been to the same area the previous year, 1775, with two other men who had accompanied Rivera. At that time they had crossed the river, assumed they had reached the Colorado River, then returned to Santa Fe. <sup>18</sup> Interestingly, the Dominguez-Escalante expedition, traveling down the east side of the Uncompahgre River, did not cross at its confluence with the Gunnison. Instead, it proceeded upstream along the south bank of the Gunnison River, followed it for a short distance, forded the river, then continued upstream along the north bank of the North Fork Branch of the Gunnison.

The small expedition then ascended to the top of Grand Mesa by way of Hubbard Canyon,<sup>19</sup> possibly following a well established Indian trail. The expedition crossed the massif<sup>20</sup> to reach the Colorado River on September 5, 1775.<sup>21</sup> Detailing this section of their route may appear repetitious, but this trail is very probably the route used in the 1870s by travelers from the Cochetopa Pass area heading to the Colorado River.

The Dominguez-Escalante expedition, taking the route which skirted the south base of the Grand Mesa, may have been at the suggestion of one of their guides. Having been along on Rivera's trek in 1765, he may have been familiar with the area, as he had also been there the previous year.<sup>22</sup> As the two priests' original agenda had been to go north until they reached the same latitude as the Monterey Mission, their diversion from that general direction remains an unanswered question. If the expedition members had used the river crossing near the confluence of the Uncompahgre and Gunnison rivers, they could have avoided miles and a time-consuming detour. If they had followed along the base of the western slope of Grand Mesa, the group

Colorado River within a few days, and proceeded in their desired direction. When they bypassed the above route, they little knew it was to become heavily traveled by those who came later.

After dropping off the north escarpment of the Grand Mesa, the small expedition reached the Colorado River. They noted: " ... which our own [the Spanish] call the San Rafael and the Yutas Red River,"<sup>23</sup> they found a ford, and crossed the river a short way downstream from the old Una bridge.<sup>24</sup> Once on the north side of the river, the expedition proceeded downstream until they reached the mouth of a canyon through which Roan Creek flowed. The description of the expedition's route from here to Utah Lake was later used on rare occasions. The Roan Creek variant of the North Branch, when traveled, was used by those who came over the crest of the Rockies while traveling west. Geographically the route was too far east of the primary trail.

## ***DESCRIPTION OF THE DOMINGUEZ-ESCALANTE ROUTE THROUGH THE ROAN/BOOKCLIFF AREA***

The Dominguez-Escalante journal describes in some detail the difficulties they encountered while traversing the Roan/Bookcliff Range.<sup>25</sup> The Range forms an almost insurmountable barrier which extends east to west immediately north of the Colorado River. This escarpment stretches for well over one hundred miles across northwestern Colorado into what is now the state of Utah. Access into these mountains is limited to a few canyons along their southern cliff-like slopes. With nearly sheer walls encountered by travelers approaching from the south, routes were dictated up limited access canyons. Once on top of the range, an escape route south could be not only dangerous, but great care had to be taken to avert potentially deadly results.<sup>26</sup> While the Dominguez-Escalante route, up and over the Roan Creek drainage, was rarely traveled after its initial passage, the lower end of their route is much used today.<sup>27</sup>

An entry in the Dominguez-Escalante journal records an incident which occurred at the Roan Creek camp just prior to their start up the canyon. An argument concerning what route to use arose between the leaders of the expedition and their Indian guide.

*SEPTEMBER 7 ... set out from [camp at confluence of Brush and Roan Creeks] ... found a meadow with good pasturage [and good water for the animals]. Afterward . . . going up an incline so difficult an ascent we doubted ever reaching the top ... its ascent must be half a league long, [a mile and a quarter] and when one reaches the top there are some shelves . . . where two pack mules lost their footing and rolled down more than twenty yards ... We climbed it on foot with many exhausting arid scary experience ... Having climbed the slope, we traveled ... going down a short narrow valley ... [and found] a scanty water spring. Today live leagues and a quarter.*

*SEPTEMBER 8 ... climbing up a steep incline . better terrain than yesterday's. . . We descended the ridge down an extremely steep slope, rough in places but with rock ... Today five leagues.*

*SEPTEMBER 9 . . . we swung i lorth-northwest; . then, after having trekked nine leagues in this direction all through the canyon over a well beaten ‘path .... Half way in this canyon ... we saw, crudely painted, three shields, or “Apache shields”, of hide, and a spear head. Farther down . . . we saw another painting which supposedly represented two men in combat. For this reason we named it El Canon Pintado [ Painted Canyon], ... Having passed the canyon, we traveled ... and came to a river which we named San Clemente [the White River]; we crossed and halted on its northern edge ... good pasturage ... Today ten leagues.*

*SEPTEMBER 10 We set out after midday ... toward the northwest over rockless hills and brief plains with neither pasturage nor ... [ a waterless camp]. Today three leagues.*

*SEPTEMBER 11 . . . headed west-nmthwest; after going a league and a half through arroyos and embankments . . . found . . . a tiny spring of water from which the horses were unable to drink ... [Traveling an additional four leagues] . . . found plenty of running water for ourselves and for horse herd, which was already much fatigued from thirst and hunger. Today six leagues.*

*SEPTEMBER 12 [Lay-over day to rest animals]*

*SEPTEMBER 13 [Today the group follow a we eaten path, over fairly gentile tenain, much water and good pasturage]” .. . (We) came to a large river which we name San Buena Ventura [ Green River] ... Today six leagues. The river is the most copious one we have come by, and the same one which Fray Alonso de Posada, in the century gone by relates in his repoit.<sup>28</sup>*

*SEPTEMBER 14 We made no day's march . . . Before noon the quadrant was set up to check the observation by the sun, and found not more than 40° 59' 24".*<sup>29</sup>

*SEPTEMBER 15 . . . no march . . .*

*SEPTEMBER 16 [They left their camp, on the east bank of the Green River opposite the mouth of Brush Creek, went up the river about a mile to a ford, and crossed the Green). . . . We took to the west, and after going one league along . . . the meadow of the river, crossed another smaller one . . . [the expedition went on, crossed present-day Ashley Creek, and proceeded through some 'rough and stony' terrain, and came upon] . . . spoor of about twelve horses and some people on foot; . . . [They followed the trail and concluded that a group of Comanches had been lying in wait to] . . . deprive us of the animal herd at this place ] . . . deprive us of the animal herd at this place."30 Today eight leagues.*

*SEPTEMBER 17 . . . On the 17<sup>th</sup>" we set out from the meadow of Las Llagas de Nuestro Padre San Francisco [Stirrup Bend of the Green River] toward the southwest [At this point they were still following a well defined Indian trail. The group continued on until, they reached an overlook above the junction of the Green and White Rivers] . . . which now joined together flowed to the south with respect to where we stood. We descended to a plain and another river's large meadow, and after going west another league and a half, arrived at the juncture of two medium-sized rivers . . . The one more to the east before the juncture runs to the southeast, and we named it Rio de San Damian [the Uintah/ or Uinta River]; the other to the cast, and we named it Rio de San Cosme [the Duchesne River]. We continued upstream along the latter, and after going west one league we saw ruins near it of a very ancient pueblo ruin where there were fragments of stone for grinding maize, of*

*jars, and pots of clay. The pueblo's shape was circular, as indicated by the ruins now almost completely in mounds . . . Today eight leagues.*<sup>31</sup>

The expedition continued on in a general westerly direction. They followed up the Duchesne River watershed crossed through the Uintah Mountains to reach Utah Lake on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September, 1776. Their journal details their route until their return to Santa Fe on January 2, 1777.<sup>32</sup>

There is a strong possibility that the route they used across the Uintahs had been often traveled, as they had guides with them. They may still have been using Posada's journals of previous Spanish travelers. These excerpts from the journal of the Dominguez-Escalante expedition on its trek from the Colorado River to the site of the future Fort Uintah, while condensed, are hopefully detailed enough to cast some light on scanty references made by later travelers. Of special interest are the comments concerning well-defined and heavily used Indian trails. Also, the difficulties in traversing the Roan/Bookcliff Range, north and west of the Colorado River crossing, adds credence to why there would be few well defined trails across the area in the years to come. Their journal has aided historians in establishing a firm foundation for the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail. There is little question that certain sections of their route from the Green River to Utah Lake were utilized during the fur trapping heyday of the 1820s to 1840s.

The Dominguez-Escalante expedition was historically significant because they went among the Indians as men of peace, expanded knowledge of a vast Spanish area of the Southwest, and proved that a route from Santa Fe to the missions in California was feasible.

## *CHIANGING TIMES*

Spanish influence over the area traveled by the Dominguez-Escalante expedition, soon to be encompassed by the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail, existed for several years after the group's return to Santa Fe. However, a period of rapid transition came shortly after 1800. At that time, international politics affected the entire region west of the Mississippi. In 1800 Spain, which had controlled most of the West from the Mississippi River to California, ceded much of the area to France. France, in turn, sold the region to the United States with the Louisiana Purchase in 1804. While Spanish control existed for several more years, the area north and west of the Arkansas River and west to a line between California and Oregon became part of the United States. Often a lack of understanding the whereabouts of the boundary, brazen behavior, or just plain poor judgment led to conflict. Spanish governmental control, especially in the more settled regions of New Mexico, could become quite oppressive for "foreigners."

With the threat of Spanish reprisal lifted, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark's expedition opened the door to the newly acquired West between the years 1804 and 1806. Exploring and mapping areas adjacent to the major river waterways between St. Louis and Oregon's coast gave much needed knowledge to eager entrepreneurs. The expedition had barely returned to civilization before plans were being made to send trapping and trading companies into the upper Missouri River area. Far north of Spanish territory, activities along the major rivers of the region would soon affect the entire intermontane West.

Manuel Lisa, a St. Louis, Missouri, entrepreneur, visited the upper Missouri River watershed as early as 1807. Over the ensuing years, he and other men who became legends in the fur trade formed various trading companies.<sup>33</sup> Very early Lisa established a fort on the Yellowstone River. From that central location, engages, or contracted trappers, fanned out to trap the many beaver-rich streams throughout the area. Small bands also worked farther south, along the upper Snake and Green Rivers.

Manuel Lisa had a strong desire to open friendly trade relations with the Spanish at Santa Fe, and wanted to open a direct trade route from his fort on the Yellowstone. He could thus eliminate the "middle man" in St. Louis. In 1809, Lisa sent a small group of men down the River of the Spaniards, or Green River, as far as the Colorado River. The purpose of

their trek might well have been to meet-up with some Spanish traders. Whatever his intent, his gestures for open trade failed.<sup>34</sup> It is very possible that rumors, or even hard facts, of Spanish traders in the area of the lower Green River, had reached as far north as the upper Missouri River. If the Spanish were still trading in the region, they were undoubtedly there without official sanction. That fact alone would cause Lisa's mission to fail.

Because Lisa's engages had trapped the Snake and upper Green rivers, they were familiar with the region. Knowing that the "River of the Spaniards" flowed to the south in order to reach the Colorado River, those assigned the task of contacting the Spanish would naturally go in that direction. The small group probably followed the upper Green River downstream as far as the White River, at which point the Green veers slightly in a southwesterly direction. Changing direction also, the Green enters a sheer gorge. Upon reaching the White River the group bisected the old Dominguez-Escalante Trail, and undoubtedly chose to traverse the Roan/ Bookcliff Range, thereby giving birth to a route of the North Branch. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the trail they followed had already functioned as an Indian Route, or one known by the Spanish traders traveling toward the Utah Lake region.

Quite possibly they traveled the Willow Creek Trail to avoid the deep canyons of the Green River. That trail provided access to one of the few exit routes off the top of the Roan/Bookcliff Range. Once across the "barricade," they could easily have come upon a route later known as the Old Spanish Trail at some point east of the Green River ford.<sup>35</sup> If, by 1809, Lisa's men did follow this route, they were probably the earliest known group of "American" trappers to traverse the Roan/Bookcliff Range north to south. Routes across the range would become well used, but never firmly established in the years to come. The area north and west of the Roan/Bookcliff Range, which incorporates the Green River and its tributaries, would become the hub of trading and trapping activities from the early 1820s until about 1845. To reach the region, commonly referred to as either the "Winty" or Green River country, which was rich with furbearing animals, created difficulty during that early period.

Soon after Manuel Lisa and various other groups established trading/trapping companies in the Upper Missouri country, inter-tribal rivalry afflicted the entire intermontane region. Unrest and open warfare occurred between intruders and Indians as early as 1811.<sup>36</sup> Unscrupulous trading practices, cheating, and mistreatment of Indian women created

hostility between outsiders and Indians. Those who continued to trap in hostile territory often had their equipment, horses, and weapons taken. While not always killed, trappers were often captured, stripped naked, and forced to leave the area in search of more friendly Indians. Trappers usually emerged from such encounters feeling "lucky to have their hair." Competing fur trade companies also entered into the fray; it was not uncommon for one group to pit "their" Indian allies against another.

With the routes virtually blocked through unfriendly Indian territory from the Upper Missouri drainage to the fur-rich Green River, it became necessary for the outsiders to find alternate trails. The Spanish still controlled most of the southwest and forbade travel through their land up until the early 1820s. A few of those adventurous Americans who traded or trapped in Spanish territory were sometimes caught, fined, and/ or incarcerated. Despite this, adventurers, explorers, traders, and trappers continued to come into the Rocky Mountain West. Some continued to press to open trade with the Spanish in Santa Fe. Others, seeking to reach the beaver-rich waters of the Green River, Uintah, and Wasatch Basins sought out other routes while trying to avoid the Spanish in the south and hostile Indians in the north. These early Mountain Men initially followed a narrow corridor through the Rocky Mountains. Soon an interlacing system of trails was developed which would be used by those who followed.

In the meantime, illicit trade, usually with small bands of Spanish slavers, continued to venture out of the settlements of New Mexico. Any traders apprehended were usually given a fine and often a short jail sentence, but that did little to deter the practice. Not all Spanish traders dealt in Indian slaves. It was not long before they realized that animal furs were also in demand; however, trading in human flesh was much more lucrative.

During the late 1700s and well into the 1800s, trails leading from Santa Fe north and west into Utah became well-known. There is little question that not only sanctioned Spanish expeditions, but also illicit forays into the interior of the Colorado River Basin helped lay a network of trails throughout the region. By 1820, the southwest was ready for exploration, with known access routes cutting through its internal structure.

Santa Fe, long under the Spanish yoke, became part of the independence movement that hit the area of New Mexico, early in the fall of 1821. After achieving independence, the area was known as a part of Mexico, and its citizens as either New Mexicans or Mexicans. One of the

government's first actions was to allow the long banned Americans to come into now Mexican territory. Soon trade between the United States and Mexico was legally opened. An American mountain man, Joseph Walker, helped ease trade restrictions between the two countries, despite the fact he had been imprisoned in Santa Fe for illegal trade with Mexicans. He and his companions were released when they offered to help the Mexicans in an Indian uprising. In 1822, the Mexican officials lifted previous trade restrictions imposed on outsiders, partially because of Joe Walker's efforts.<sup>37</sup>

## ***MOUNTAIN MEN AND THE NORTH BRANCH OF THE OLD SPANISH TRAIL***

It has been said that "times make the man." This is probably a truism with such legendary men as Joseph Walker, Ewing Young, Jedediah Smith, "Old" Bill Williams, William Wolfskill, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Kit Carson, Jim Bridger, and the Robidoux brothers: Miguel, (Michel), Louis, Francois, Joseph, and Antoine would make an indelible imprint on the pages of history.<sup>38</sup> Many of these famous figures later served as guides or scouts for various United States government sponsored ventures in the West. Many are also remembered by physical and geographical locations bearing their names.

When the mountain men first ventured west, they had to face and overcome many obstacles. While the Rocky Mountains presented a formidable barrier with craggy snow-capped peaks, raging rivers, and steep boulder-strewn canyons, these men found routes around and through the area. Trapper trails were developed early and became well known by the eastern invaders, shortly after about 1815. They followed such rivers as the Arkansas, North and South Platte, Laramie, Sweetwater, and others, offering access to the Green River country from the east. Various routes often followed trails made by Indian horse trading and hunting bands, who in turn had been led to water holes and forage by following wild animal traces. The opening of the Green River country and the areas farther to the west, probably well-known to the Spanish traders, soon became mountain man territory.

The region from the Colorado River north to the Snake River, then west into the Wasatch and Uinta Mountains, became familiar. An extensive area, it soon was the center of trading and trapping activities, the domain of the mountain men. The famous "rendezvous," or trade fairs, for traders and trappers were held annually from 1825 until 1845. Held on the various tributaries of the Green River, and also at sites in northern present-day Utah, the rendezvous were a source of supply for the trappers. Along with the annual fairs, several forts or small trading posts, usually consisting of little more than crude log lean-tos, tepees, or dug-outs, sprang up in the region. Most of the so-called forts were usually located in sheltered areas, or "holes," in an attempt to protect them from the harsh winter climate. To supply these small trade centers, usually by mule pack trains,<sup>39</sup> trade goods had to be transported long distances through often rough and dangerous country. With the opening of trade in the Mexican

territory, a new source of supply became available to the traders/trappers of the Green River country.

After 1822, while allowed to bring trade goods into, or out of Mexican territory, foreigners were still subject to tariffs and required to obtain licenses to trade and trap. The Mountain Men broke these laws more often than they obeyed them. Upon being apprehended, heavy fines were levied, and often bribes changed hands. Whatever the outcome, business continued. Despite heavy fees, caravans of wagons loaded with trade goods began to roll between Santa Fe and St. Louis, Missouri.

It was not long before Santa Fe became the trade center for the entire intermontane West. Immediately after the lifting of trade restrictions in the Mexican territory, the fur trade expanded rapidly. While Santa Fe was the destination for the eastern trade caravans, Taos, or "Touse" as the settlement was commonly referred to during that period, developed as a center for the mountain men when they were in civilization. Taos, located several miles before reaching Santa Fe along the Santa Fe Trail, was not quite as restrictive as the capital city, and seemed to suit the free spirited trappers. Beginning around 1823, a large influx of novice trappers started to flow into Taos, many eager to reach the "trapping country." When news of the rich trapping region of the Green River area reached Taos, it caught everyone's attention. New arrivals, fresh from St. Louis, hastily joined or formed their own companies to go "north to the Winty"<sup>40</sup> to trap and trade. With virtual free rein to travel through previously closed territory, the "American" traders and trappers began to seek out more direct routes between the New Mexican trade centers and the source of furs.

Because the routinely followed Main route of the Old Spanish Trail went primarily west in such a circuitous manner, a more direct trail became necessary. Utilizing familiar Indian trails, early-developed Spanish military, and settler wagon routes, a North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail came into regular use shortly after 1822. The North Branch, with its many divergent trails, became what " ... constituted the route which the mountain men called the Old Spanish Trail."<sup>41</sup>

The fact that trails north from Taos, as well as those northwest from Santa Fe, were commonly called the "Old Spanish Trail" has frustrated research of the routes of early travelers. While many of the early traders and trappers were literate, few kept journals of their specific activities or routes. Not until after the American traders/trappers started to use trails previously traveled by the Spanish did the term "Old Spanish Trail" become common. Mexican trappers and muleteers proudly claimed

historic knowledge of routes unknown to the Americano and serve as another source for the Trail's title. The North Branch, usually likewise called the "Old Spanish Trail;" it came into heavy usage as a route between Taos and the Green River country after 1823.

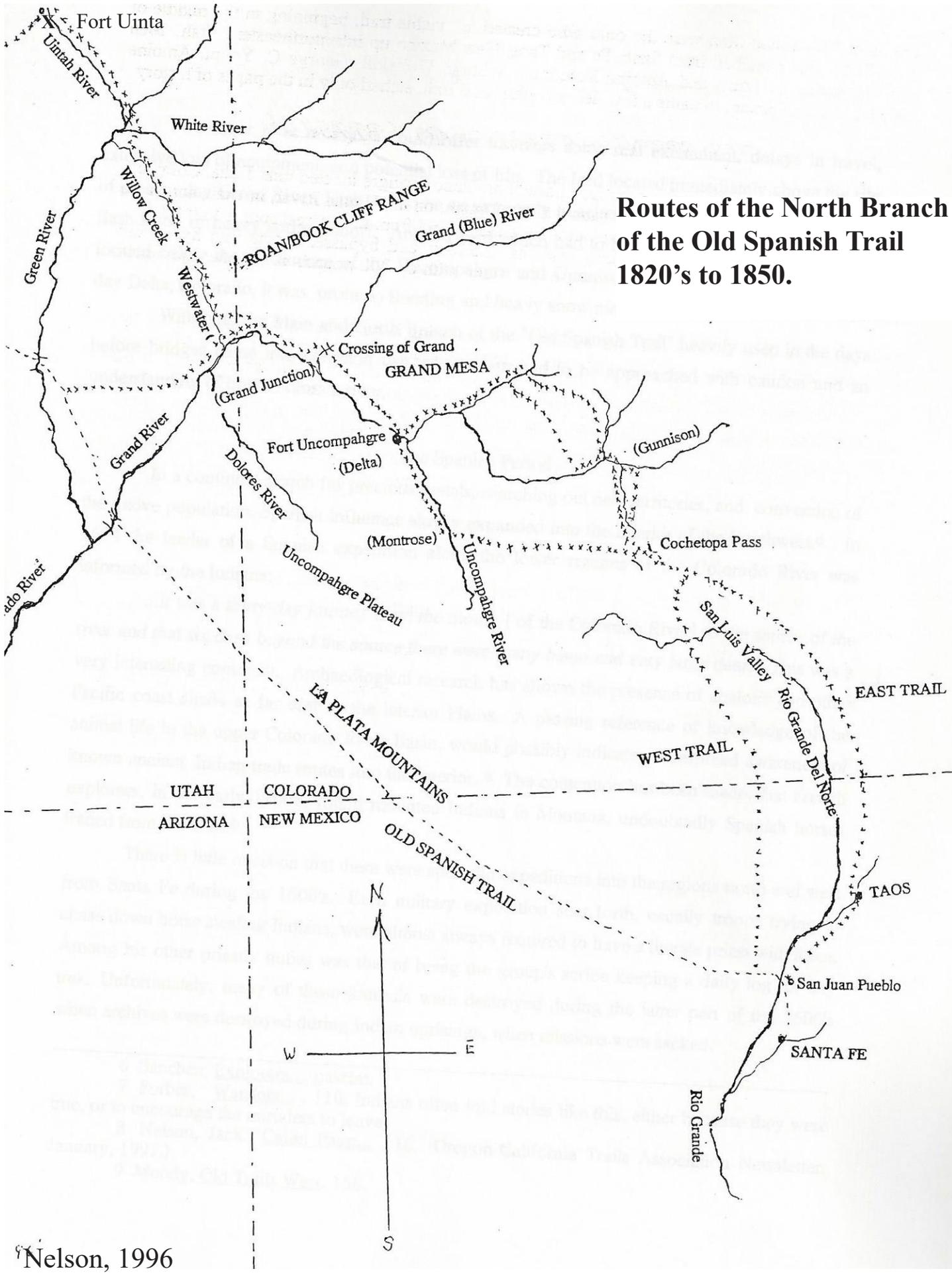
The Main or South Branch of The Old Spanish Trail headed north and west out of Santa Fe. At a river crossing of the Rio Grande Del Norte, located at the San Juan Pueblo, a route referred as the East Fork split off to continue on to Taos. A West Fork trail separated from the Main Route shortly afterward, going north up the west side of the San Luis Valley. The two "forks" were integral and heavily used routes of the North Branch and were the first variant trails heading out of Santa Fe.<sup>42</sup> These two routes were necessary to access both sides of the deep gorge of the Rio Grande west of Taos.

Various trails branched off of the East Fork. A route north of Taos, and of principal interest here, headed north and west along the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to join the West Fork at the site of present-day Saguache, Colorado. The East Fork appears to be the most heavily used by trappers on the way to the Winty country. Besides tying directly with the frequently used Santa Fe Trail, a divergent route followed a trail which went up the Eastern Slope of the Rocky Mountains. That route, often called the Trapper Trail, followed the Platte, Laramie, and Sweetwater Rivers. The latter trail crossed over South Pass, which became an integral section of the Oregon Trail. Out of Taos, the Trapper Trail was often used by those accessing the Rendezvous sites, or during the winter months while trying to avoid the high mountain passes.

The East and West Forks became one trail, the North Branch, at present-day Saguache, Colorado. From this point, at the upper end of the San Luis Valley, the route headed west-northwest to access Cochetopa Pass. One of the low passes across the Southern Rocky Mountains, with an elevation slightly over 10,000 feet, it became the site of extreme suffering during winter crossings in the time period under discussion.

Once across Cochetopa Pass, another variant route existed which split off the corridor of the North Branch. The terrain from the top of the pass was and is a hodgepodge of high mountain "parks" and deep gorges often filled with gushing streams. A trail developed early by travelers through the Pass area. By heading due west after passing the summit, an extremely rocky gorge of lower Cochetopa Creek could be bypassed. It also provided better access to the easily traversed upper sections of the Lake Fork Canyon to the west.

**Routes of the North Branch  
of the Old Spanish Trail  
1820's to 1850.**



The terrain after crossing the Lake Fork to the Uncompahgre Valley, although rough, was passable for a pack train. After crossing through the area of the Upper Lake Fork Canyon, the route dropped into the present-day Cimarron, Colorado, valley. From that point the trail continued west, passed over present Cerro Summit, down Cedar Creek to access the Uncompahgre River. Once at the Uncompahgre, a river crossing was made before continuing to present-day Delta, Colorado. Upon reaching the Uncompahgre River, the route north was following virtually the same trail that Dominguez-Escalante and Rivera had followed during the late 1700s. Early trapper routes, while traveling a route in general, would rather follow what could be termed a “corridor.” Actual distinct trails marked in the soil for perpetuity were lacking. Inclement weather, soil conditions, and relationships with the Indians could all cause variations in routes, often by several miles.

Another route from the summit of Cochetopa Pass potentially existed. Following Cochetopa Creek a short distance, the trail branched off to go down Razor Creek. A trail would follow downstream until reaching Tomichi Creek. Tomichi Creek, a branch of the present-day Gunnison River, would be followed downstream until reaching the modern site of Gunnison, Colorado. At this point, there was very probably another divergent pair of trails. An impassable obstacle, the Black Canyon of the Gunnison, lay between the trappers and their desired objective-reaching the Winty country.

To avoid the longer Lake Fork Trail, as well as the Black Canyon, the mountain men likely used a different route, much traveled in the late 1800s.<sup>43</sup> This route followed the Gunnison River upstream from its confluence with the Tomichi until reaching the area of Ohio Creek. Traveling up Ohio Creek, a route traversed passable but rough country, until reaching the area of Kebler Pass. Once across that pass, there was fairly easy access to the Anthracite Creek watershed which could be followed down to meet with the North Fork of the present-day Gunnison River. The North Fork River route, and one traveled by the Dominguez-Escalante expedition as far as Hubbard Creek, was followed downstream to the confluence of the Uncompahgre and Gunnison Rivers. This section of the trail may very possibly have been that explored earlier by the Rivera expedition.<sup>44</sup> Upon reaching the confluence, the North Fork River route joined the Lake Fork trail.

An added variant route from the Tomichi-Gunnison area, and one probably most often used by packers on the way to Fort Uncompahgre,

was the Curecanti Creek Trail. This route, while fairly steep in sections, was probably shorter and faster than the other two routes off of Cochetopa Pass. This trail would have followed down the north side of the Gunnison River. Just before reaching the impassable gorge of the Black Canyon, the route left the river in the vicinity of Curecanti Creek, to access a trail to the northwest. Following along the west side of the Elk Mountain escarpment, the trail passed the present towns of Maher and Crawford, Colorado, and reached the North Fork Trail near the confluence of the Gunnison and North Fork Rivers.<sup>45</sup>

The area where the variant trails joined, at the confluence of the Uncompahgre and Gunnison rivers, became the scene of much activity onward through the 1820s.<sup>46</sup> It appears that the North Branch once again solidified into one route at this juncture. A ford below the confluence, and one usually used by travelers through the area, could be an extremely treacherous crossing. The Uncompahgre, by joining the larger Gunnison River, created a mass of water. Fed by snow melt and an occasional extremely heavy rainstorm, the river could cause serious seasonal delays and required caution in crossing. However, the ford, at most times, was fairly easy to cross and had a good firm footing for pack stock.

From the ford north, travelers along the North Branch Trail faced almost forty miles of high desert terrain. It is and was an area of few permanent water sources, pulverous soil, cut through with arroyos, and little if any dependable forage for pack animals. While the Gunnison River lies west of the route only a few miles, steep gorge-like banks prevented access. To the east, the high flanks of the Grand Mesa confined the route to a narrow corridor until it reached the Colorado River.<sup>47</sup>

Upon reaching the Colorado River, the North Branch Trail was confined to a single crossing. High bluffs along the south bank restricted access to the river; as one observer commented, “The Grand [Colorado] River is border’ed on the south side for several miles above and below the ford by precipitous bluffs. The road follows down an arroyo, the only one for miles which cuts to the level of the river, and which reaches the river most opportunely at the end of a long riffic ... The bottom is perfectly bard, being of pebbles ...”<sup>48</sup> This ford, like the one at the confluence of the Uncompahgre and Gunnison Rivers, could be treacherous for the same reasons. This ford became known as the “Crossing of the Grand.”

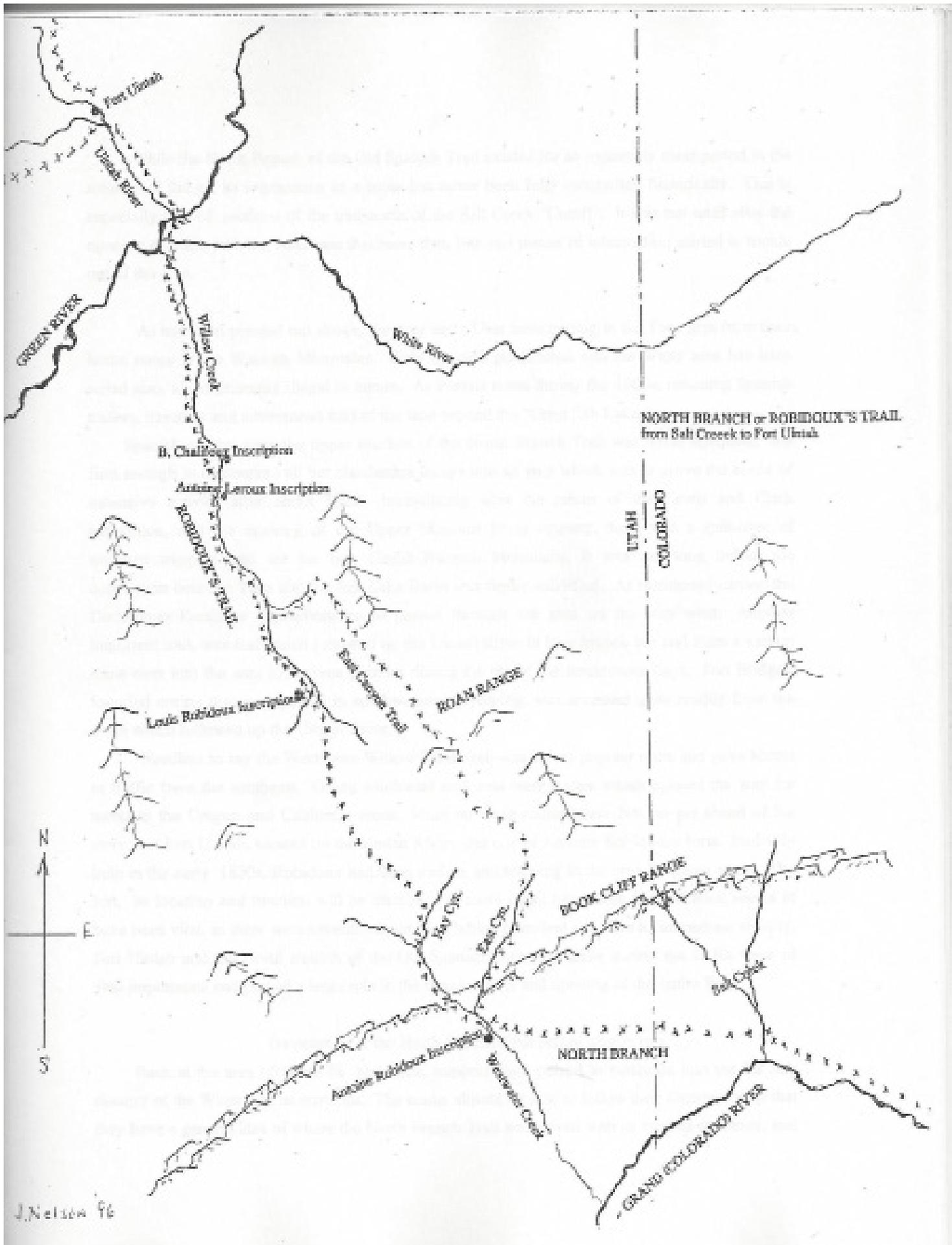
Once across the Colorado, the North Branch hugs the north bank going west for several miles until reaching an area known as the Salt Creek cut-off. At this point, the trail splits again into two distinct routes. One

trail ascended through a series of small hills to the southwest, to access the westerly flowing Colorado River. That route followed the river downstream until it reached another crossing where the Dolores River entered the Colorado. Just below the confluence of the Dolores and Colorado rivers,<sup>49</sup> an almost impassable gorge is encountered, and the river starts to swing to the south. At that point, the North Branch ran across the desert to access the Main and South Branches of the Old Spanish Trail, approximately twenty miles before the combined routes reached the ford of the Green River.<sup>50</sup>

To reach the "Winty," a trail northwest from the Salt Creek cutoff became the main route of the North Branch. It was over one hundred miles between the Crossing of the Grand and the ford of the Green River, with most of country between the two crossings desert, lacking forage for pack stock and permanent water holes. To avoid such desolate country, and find a more suitable and shorter route, an access trail to and over the Roan/Bookcliff Range gained momentum in use.

A route, shown as an "Indian Trail" appears on a survey map of 1853.<sup>51</sup> This route was undoubtedly the North Branch, and headed toward the entrance to Westwater Creek Canyon. There were extremely few access routes either into or out of that escarpment. A trail, which assumed many different titles, left the Salt Creek area and headed northwest across rolling desert country. Cut through with seasonal water cut creek bottoms, forage for pack stock was usually readily at hand. Upon reaching the mouth of Westwater Creek Canyon, ample water and forage was available, and travelers readied for the arduous trek ahead. A quick check of the Dominguez-Escalante Journal excerpts gives an indication of the type of terrain facing the trapper/traders.

An elevation gain of almost three thousand feet, with most near the summit, faced a pack train. The route to the top extended approximately ten miles before them. Ascending Westwater Canyon, the trail reached an intersection of two fairly large canyons: Preacher Canyon to the left, Hay Canyon to the right. Fortunately, springs provided water along the way. The route continued up Hay Canyon for another short distance. A very narrow opening to the left gives access up the wall of a side canyon. Traversing the slope up this fairly steep area, the summit is reached just south of present-day Three Pines. Upon reaching the summit, a gently rolling, down-sloped plateau had to be crossed. From the top there were at least two ways down to the trail going northwest along Willow Creek. The descent was virtually as steep as the ascent, great care



NORTH BRANCH OF ROBIDOUX'S TRAIL  
from Salt Creek to Fort Union

was needed by the packers. One divergent route went down an arroyo to access a fork of modern Whetrock Canyon, a fork of which reaches upper Willow Creek. Another, and possibly often used trail, descended presentday Wire Fence Canyon to reach Willow Creek.<sup>52</sup>

Once accessing Willow Creek, the Trail went northwest and downstream for approximately forty-five miles, until it approached the Green River. The route left lower Willow Creek at a point where it veered west toward the Green River. Here the Trail set out across country to reach an easily accessible ford on the White River, just above its confluence with the Green River. The Green River was crossed at a ford near present-day Ouray, Utah. Adding plausibility to the theory that the Westwater-Hay Canyon-Wire Fence Canyon-Willow Creek route was the most heavily used to the Green River, it is several miles shorter than any other possible alternate route.

From the mouth of Westwater Canyon is another route, and one possibly utilized with more heavily laden pack animals, was the less arduous but longer East Canyon trail. This route was undoubtedly a variant of the North Branch on the way to the Winty country. The East Canyon route provided more forage for pack stock and large game animals. Veering to the northeast from the entrance to Westwater Creek Canyon for several miles, a steady uphill climb was made until reaching the summit of the Roan/Bookcliff Range. Once attained, the trail turned almost due west, then northwest to follow down present-day Seep Ridge. The Seep Ridge route could be followed all the way to the White River; however, the lower reaches often lacked adequate forage and potable water. The more probable route, if and when used, would have been to follow Seep Ridge down from the summit at East Canyon, until reaching upper Pine Springs Canyon. A trail down Pine Springs Canyon provided easy access to Willow Creek at a juncture approximately halfway between the mouth of Westwater Creek Canyon and the Green River. There is no solid evidence to substantiate the use of this route, though it was alluded to by later travelers.

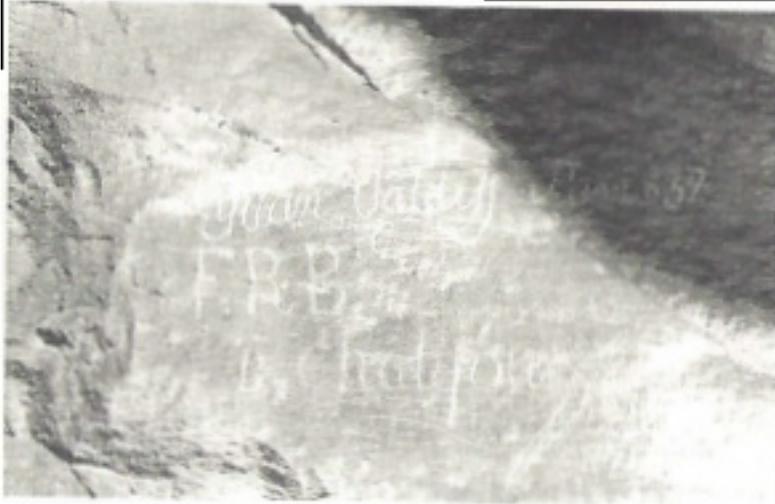
Once reaching and fording the Green River, the North Branch approximated the route of the Dominguez-Escalante expedition, probably all the way to Utah Lake. Of immediate interest is the trail up the Uintah River to a trading fort established during the 1830s. The "Old" Uintah River was a name attached to the complete length of the presentday Duchesne River. Today called the Uinta, it is relegated to being a fork of the Duchesne. The Winty at last!

While the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail existed for an extremely short period in the scheme of things, its importance as a route has never been fully recognized historically. This is especially true of sections of the trail north of the Salt Creek cut-off. It was not until after the opening of trade with the Americans that more than bits and pieces of information started to trickle out of the area.

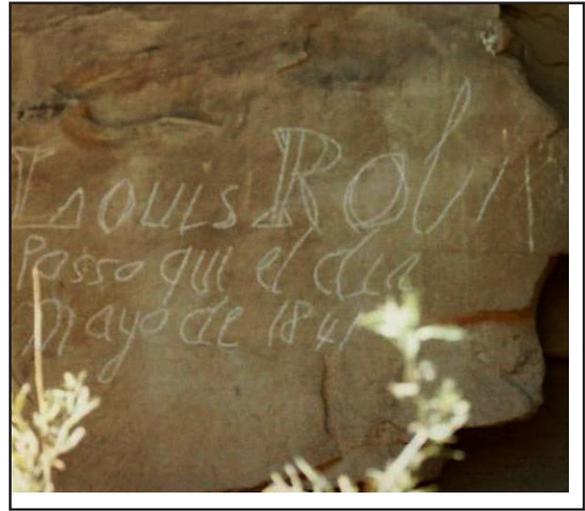
The very early Utes were trading in the Taos area from their home range in the Wasatch Mountains. Early Spanish penetration into the Winty area has been noted also, albeit primarily illegal in nature. As Posada notes during the 1600s, returning Spanish traders, travelers, and adventurers told of the land around the “Great Salt Lake.”

Spanish control over the upper reaches of the North Branch Trail was never adequate, but firm enough to discourage all but clandestine forays into an area which was the scene of extensive activity after 1822. Immediately following the return of the Lewis and Clark expedition and the opening of the Upper Missouri River country, there was a spill-over of northern trappers into the fur rich Uintah-Wasatch Mountains. It was not long before the connection between Taos and the Salt Lake Basin was firmly solidified. The Dominguez-Escalante expedition route passed through the area on the way west. An additional important trail was that which followed up the Uintah River to later branch out and form a variant route over into the area popular during the rendezvous era. Fort Bridger, founded during the same period in southwestern Wyoming, was accessed quite readily from the route which followed up the Uintah River.

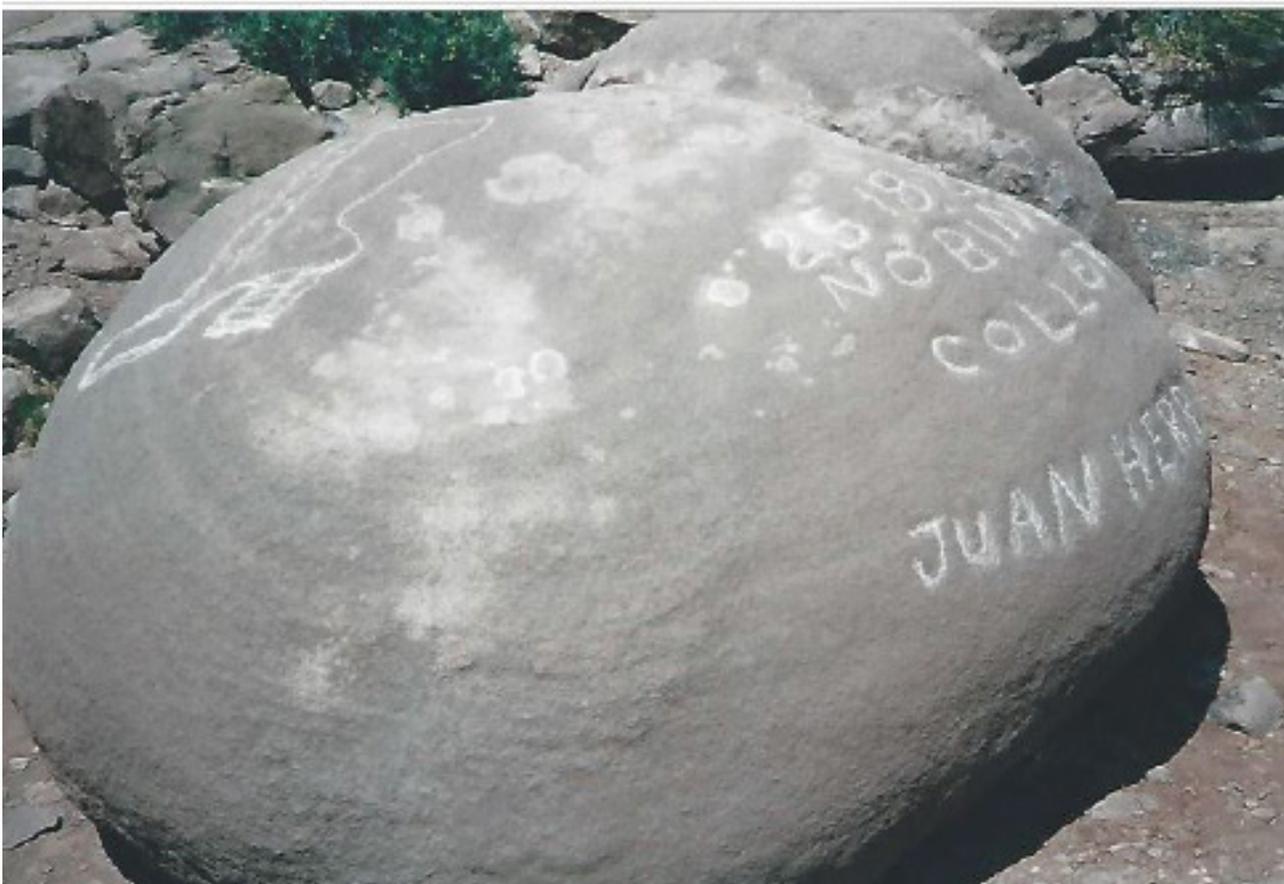
Needless to say, the Westwater-Willow Creek trail was a very popular route and gave access to traffic from the southeast. Going southwest and west were routes which opened the way for travel to the Oregon and California areas. Fort Uintah, located on the Uintah River, was one of Antoine Robidoux's forts. Probably built in the early 1830s, Robidoux had been trading and trapping in the area for many years. The fort's location seems to have been vital, as there were several variant trails which branched out from the immediate vicinity. Fort Uintah and the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail, especially during the 1830s, were of integral in the development and opening of the West.



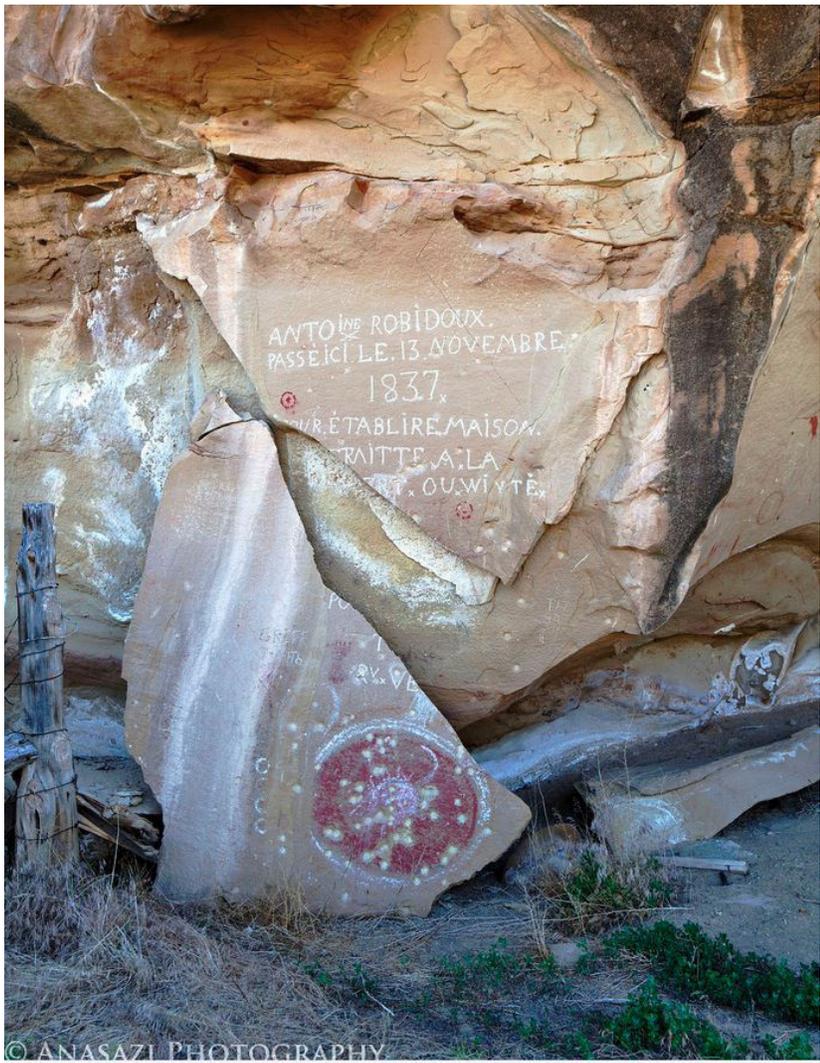
Chalifoux Inscription



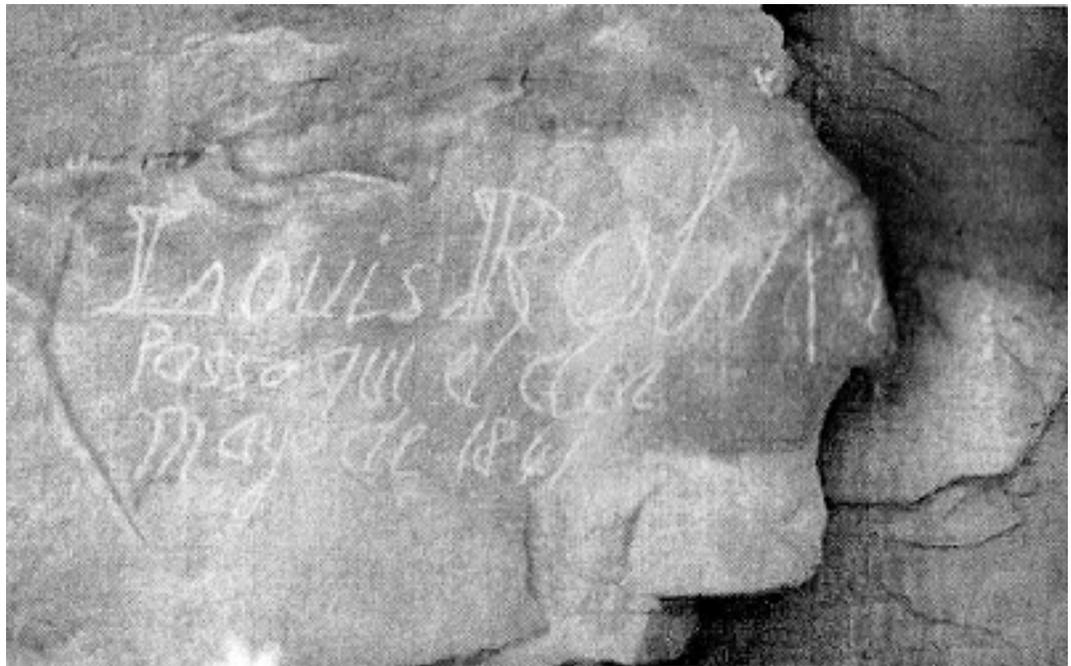
Louis Robidoux Inscription, 1841  
Willow Creek Canyon, Utah



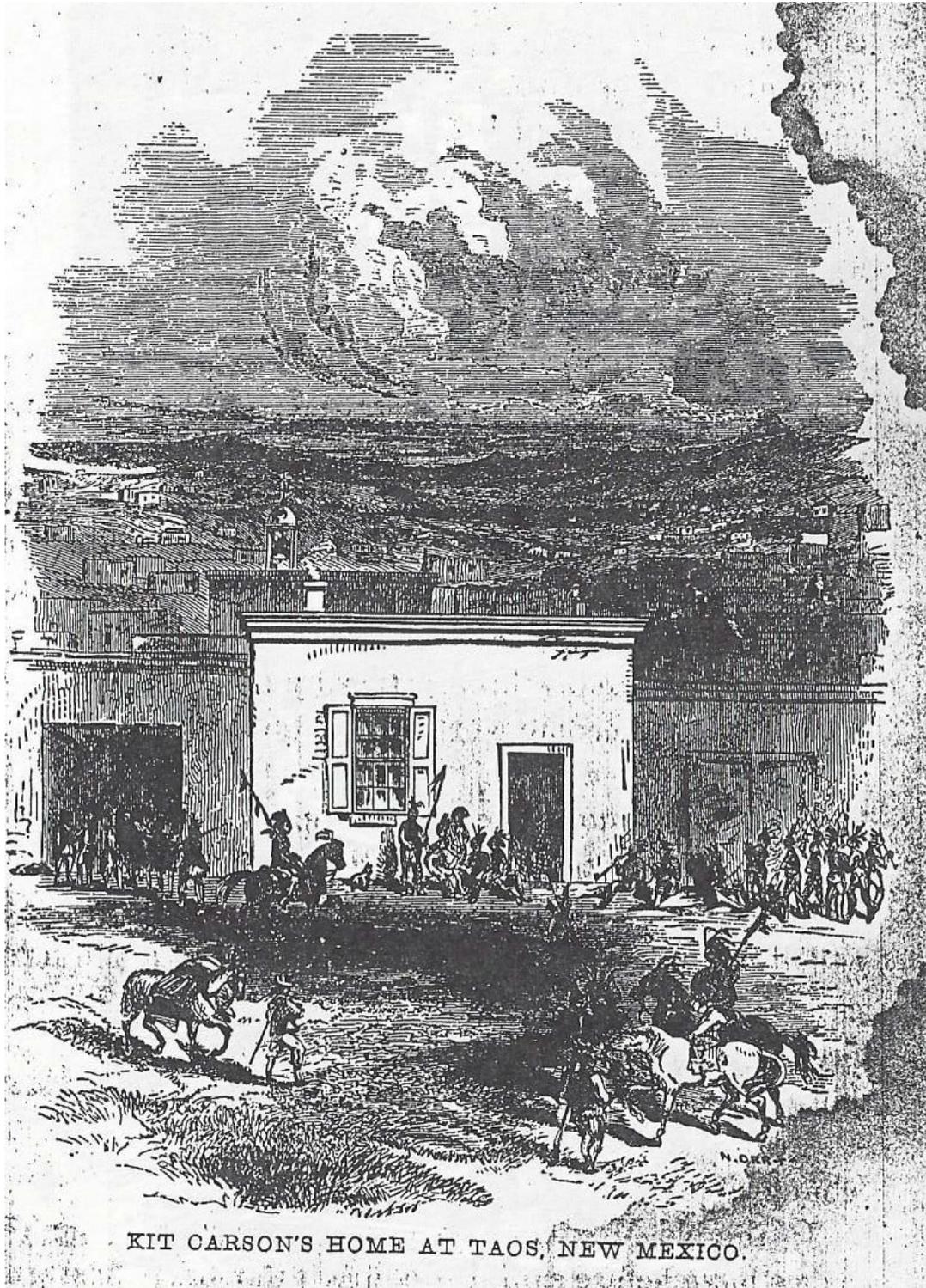
Juan Herrea (Herpea?) Inscription



Antione Robidoux Inscription  
Westwater Canyon, Utah  
Anasazi Photography



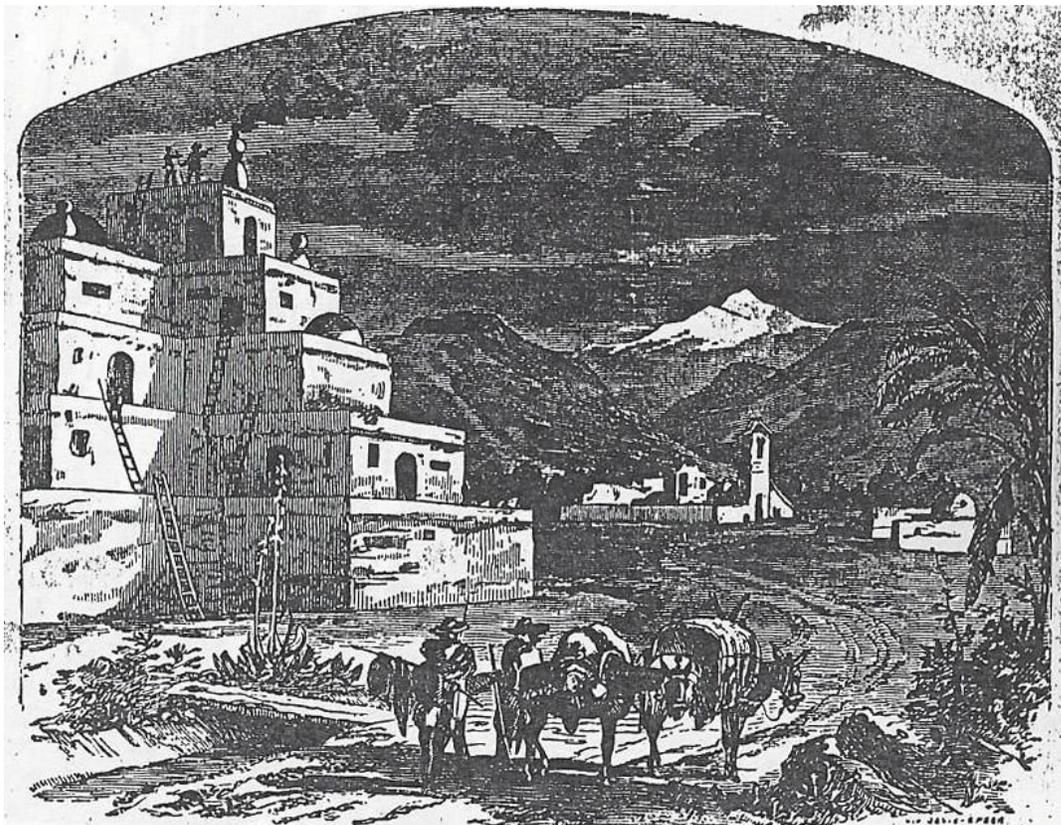
Louis Robidoux Inscription, Willow Creek Canyon, Utah



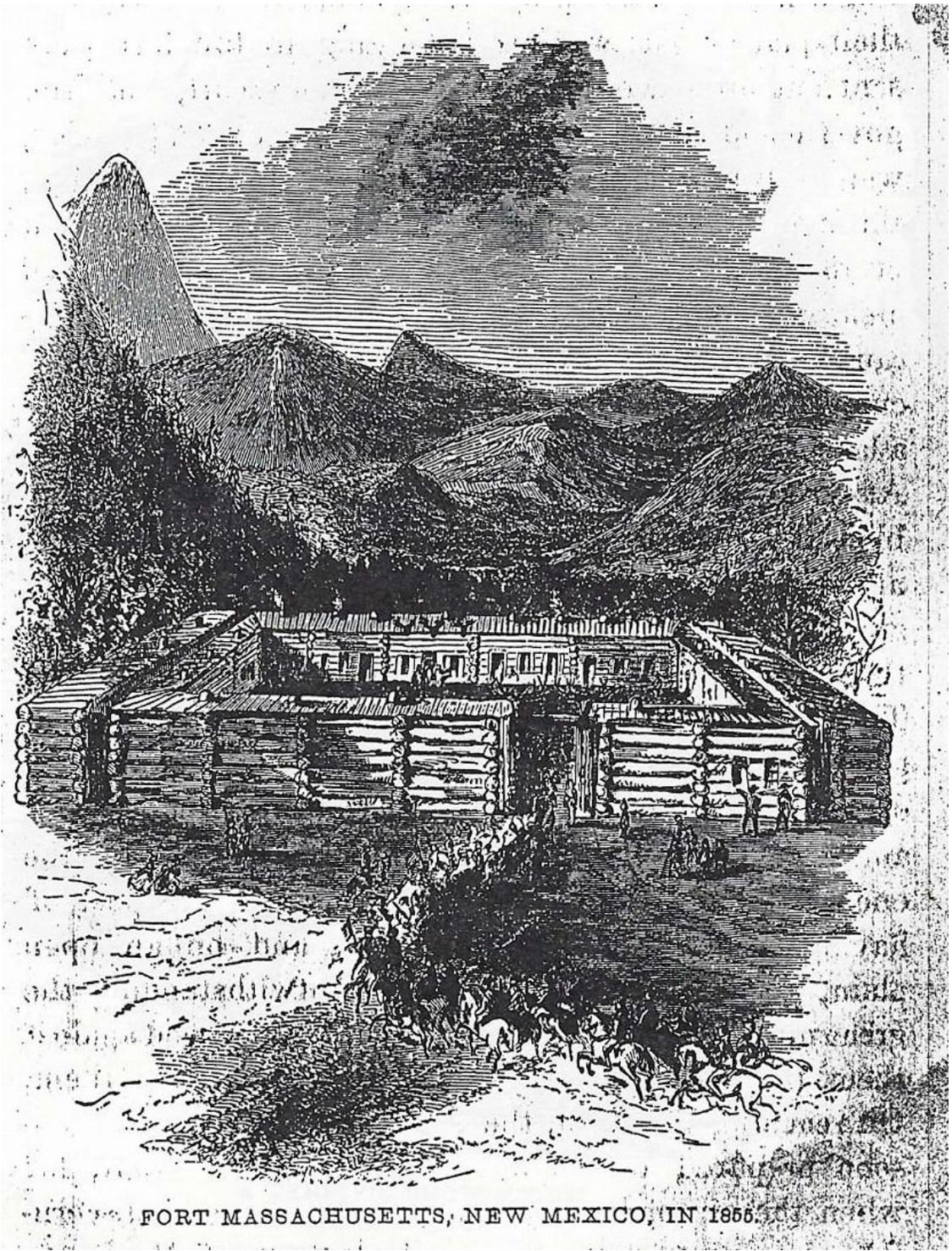
KIT CARSON'S HOME AT TAOS, NEW MEXICO.



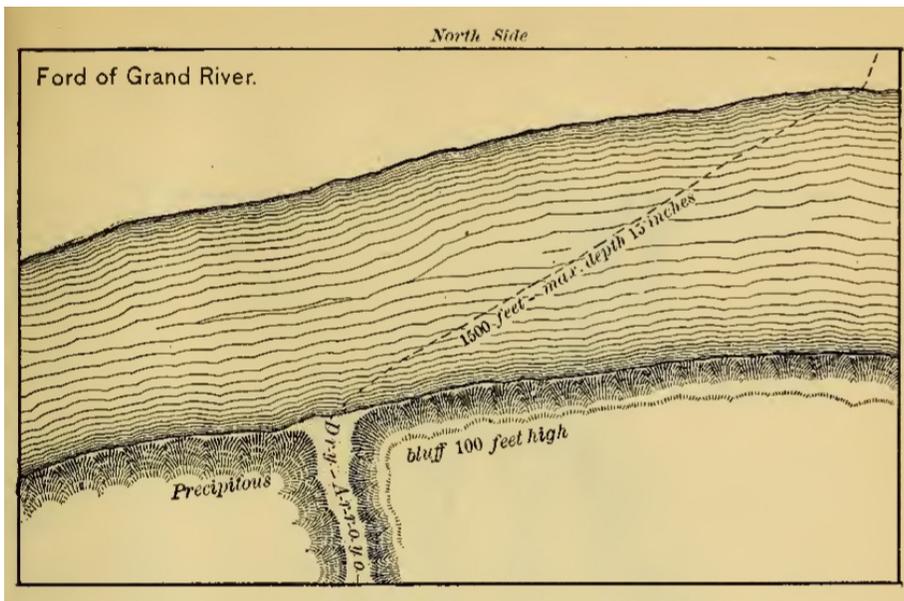
A MEXICAN CART.



THE PUEBLO OF TAOS.



FORT MASSACHUSETTS, NEW MEXICO, IN 1865.



Hayden Survey:

Crossing the Grand River  
(Present Day Grand Junction)

Crossing the Gunnison  
River, Robidoux Bottoms,  
South of Delta

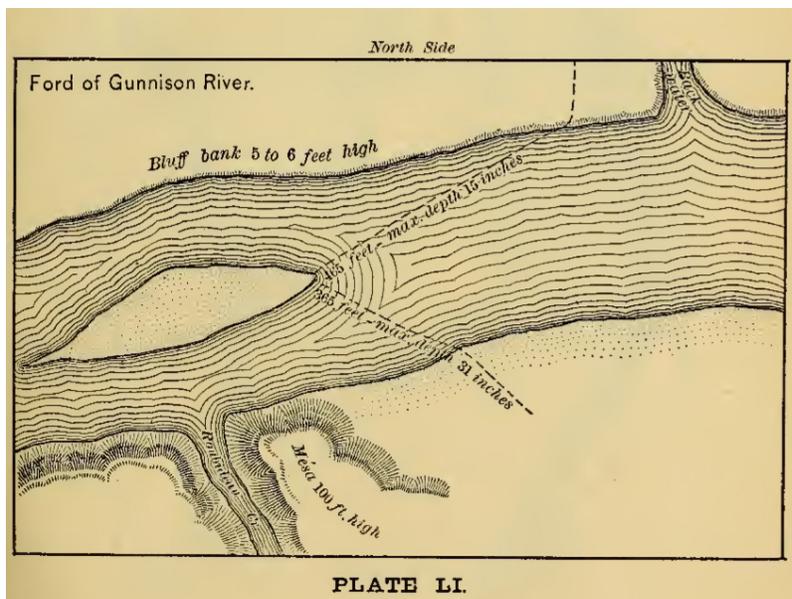


PLATE LI.



Heap:  
Crossing the  
Grand River

## ***TRAVELERS OVER THE NORTH BRANCH TRAIL BEFORE WAGON RUTS***

At the area of Santa Fe and Taos, trappers were poised to penetrate the fur-rich country of the Winty and its environs.<sup>53</sup> With little more to guide them than vague directions, the No1th Star, or distant landmarks, the intrepid Mountain Men were prepared to venture into the wilderness. There, they were often in fierce competition with fur brigades from British controlled "companies" in the Northwest and American units from the Upper Missouri River.<sup>54</sup> Valleys in northeastern Utah and southwestern Wyoming became the center of activity. That region also became the scene of the annual Rendezvous, the first being held on a tributary of the Green River in 1825. They were held on a yearly basis, at various sites, until the trapping era's virtual end in 1840. Much of the trapping area in the Winty country was still in Mexican Territory after 1821.

The newly formed Mexican officialdom was of a fickle nature, and required fees and/or a license to trap anywhere in Mexican territory. The trappers, not above any type of nefarious ruse, often returned to Taos, seemingly empty handed, having cached their furs before reaching town to return for them later. The annual rendezvous served as one source for the Mountain Men to dispose of their furs. Not only to reach the site of the Rendezvous, but to access furs for sale and trade, ancient Indian routes opened up to traffic between Taos and the Winty.

Burgeoning of the fur trade, out of the area of Santa Fe and Taos, began in earnest during 1824 and 1825. It was during those early years that trappers out of Taos began to "invade" the Winty country. The men who followed along on the North Branch Trail spoke many different languages: Spanish, French, German, and a patois-usually understood by all-interspersed with various Indian dialects or sign language. For the sake of this document, they will be called Americans, as most came directly from either Canada or the United States, through the latter territory. Also, while it is known that several lesser men played a tremendous role in the annals of the Southwest, only a few for whom there is specific documentation are included.<sup>55</sup>

Among the first American trappers leaving Taos was a young man named Thomas Long Smith, later known as "Pegleg" for removing his own leg with a hunting knife.<sup>56</sup> Smith purportedly left Taos in the fall of 1824 heading northwest with a large band of trappers, to spend the winter trapping the upper Grand River (Gunnison). Being too large, the

group split up, with half going on to trap the Green River country. Upon his later return to the Taos area, Smith was instrumental in the establishment of a distillery which dispensed the infamous Taos "Lightning."<sup>57</sup> He led an often maligned life, and undoubtedly traveled the North Branch Trail many times.

The year 1825 included another frequently mentioned name along sections of the North Branch; William H. Ashley is credited as the instigator of the famous rendezvous system. He and a group of his men had worked their way down the Green River from the north. After a nearly disastrous bull boat trip down the Green River, Ashley met up with some trappers from Taos employed by Etienne Provost.<sup>58</sup> Receiving directions to Provost's camp, Ashley met him and proceeded up the Duchesne-Strawberry Creek route west and north of the Uintah River, to travel on the first rendezvous at the juncture of Henry's fork and the Green River.<sup>59</sup> The section of the trail Ashley traveled from the Green was the same as described in the Dominguez-Escalante Journal. It appears to have been a route often used by those trappers traveling from Taos over into the Cache Valley area of Idaho.<sup>60</sup> It was one of the variant routes branching off later in the area of Fort Uintah along the North Branch Trail.

An interesting comment by the editor of William Ashley's journal of 1822-1823 sheds some light on the Westwater-Willow Creek section of the North Branch.<sup>61</sup> Apparently one group from the Ashley party had gone on a search for some missing hunters. They described the extent of the search:

To the mouth of Willow Creek, on the east bank of the Green. This was perhaps where the trail later used by Antoine Robidoux in traveling to the Grand River left the Green ... The route from the Grand River, which was left near the Utah-Colorado [state] line, would have been up to the canyon of Westwater Creek, across the mesa to the head of Two Water Creek, down the stream a distance, then westerly to Willow Creek. <sup>62</sup>

Morgan was referring primarily to the many shortcuts along the northern stretches of the Dominguez-Escalante route. Contemporary accounts that are extant give vague descriptions of treks from one campsite to another. The fascinating records give insights into the day to day life led by the mountain men and of the vast country they lived in and traveled through. They gave little thought to taking journeys covering a thousand miles and

many days through varying weather conditions.

The description above of a possible route is not unlike the previously noted East Canyon-Seep Ridge Trail. There is no indication that Ashley, in all his ventures in the Winty region, ever traversed the Roan/ Bookcliff Range. Also, Ashley's group was not alone in the Winty area during those early days.

There is little question that the early years of 1824-25 saw much activity in the vicinity of the North Branch Trail. An interesting inscription carved on a weather-worn boulder, dated November 25, 1825, was recently discovered.<sup>63</sup> This carving, almost indiscernible because of its condition, is written in Spanish. It states, as nearly as can be deciphered:

25 1825  
NOBINBRE  
COLLOTE  
JUAN HERPEA (HERREA?)

The fascinating characteristic of this inscription is its location. The rock is lying on an exposed hillside, in an area adjacent to a probable variant route of the North Branch. This route was the one using the Dolores River ford across the Grand [Colorado] River. As there were trapper brigades, probably trapping any likely looking stream throughout the area, the Juan could have accompanied any group. It has been alleged that there were no fewer than six groups out of Taos in the fall of 1824 alone. "Pegleg" Smith was in Dolores area in fall of 1825.<sup>64</sup>

Etienne Provost had apparently been part of the French-Canadian trapping group that had worked Missouri River country. Shortly after he arrived in the Taos area in 1823, he met Antoine Robidoux. They remained close and appeared to work together off and on up in the Winty area of Utah. Provost, along with a group of his men, were entrapped in an ambush by a group of friendly-appearing Snake Indians. All but Provost and one of his men were killed.<sup>65</sup>

Over the next few years, men of such historical stature as Ewing Young, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Jedediah Smith, and William Wolfskill traveled over various sections of the North Branch route of the Old Spanish Trail. While not considered as a true trailblazer by some, Jedediah S. Smith laid the groundwork for the most northern route of the Old Spanish Trail in 1826. There is little question that Smith was following in the footsteps of the earlier Dominguez-Escalante route at least through sections of Utah, however, his small group went all the way to California. Smith's account of his trek during 1826, and return in 1827, gives an

excellent insight into the many perils along the trail. Smith also established the environs of the Salt Lake Basin as an important section along the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail, that area serving as a staging area for treks onto both Oregon and California.<sup>66</sup> As knowledgeable as Smith was in the ways of the wild country, his untimely death occurred in 1831 on the Santa Fe Trail: a possible minute of carelessness resulting in death by tomahawk.

There were other known mountain men in the early 1820s and 1830s, who not only traveled the North Branch, but used the Salt Lake basin as a staging area. Many brigades were formed which not only traveled to California, but ventured on into British dominated Oregon Territory. Probably one of the best known men to utilize the most northern variants of the Old Spanish Trail was William Wolfskill. He had been trapping in the Uintah-Wasatch country for many years, and was thoroughly familiar with the area. He formed an expedition to California from Taos, by way of the Salt Lake Basin, in September of 1830. Wolfskill<sup>67</sup> firmly established the entire route of the Old Spanish Trail.<sup>68</sup>

Among the early arrivals, eager for economic gain in the New Mexican area, were members of the Robidoux family of fur traders and trappers.<sup>69</sup> They are worthy of mention, as it appears they would soon have a veritable monopoly on the route of the North Branch Trail. Family members also became not only well-known throughout the intermontane region, but a tightlipped group to be reckoned with in both Santa Fe and Taos. Their secrecy could not be blamed upon illiteracy, as the Robidoux all appeared to be well educated. A brief overview of the Robidoux brother's genealogy may be in order, as they were typical of the courier du bois who ventured in large numbers into the frontier country of the American West.

The family has been traced back to the mid-seventeenth century. The first Robidoux to enter the country was one Andre Robidoux, known to have arrived at "Cote de St. Lambert, Seigniory de La Prairie Las [sic] Madeleine, Quebec." He was known as the "Spaniard," possibly because of his swarthy complexion, his ability to speak Spanish, or his name, which may provide a clue to his birthplace. In 1667, Andre married in Quebec and took up the occupation of censitaire, or landholder at La Prairie, a pursuit the Robidoux maintained for almost a hundred years.

In the 1760s, a great grandson of Andre, Joseph Robidoux, packed up and took his family to St. Louis (later in Missouri, but considered Spanish territory at the time), shortly after it was founded. The Robidoux

family was not the only French-Canadian group to leave their homeland after the British occupation in 1760 and the Treaty of Paris of 1763. Joseph I died in 1771, having lived a life of landholder, shoemaker, fur trader, trapper, and all-around adventurer, according to family tradition.

It was not long before the Robidoux family rose in prominence in the St. Louis area. Joseph II became a member of the more affluent mercantile society of St. Louis, and was well respected. In 1782 Joseph married Catherine Roll et dit Laderoute, who bore him eight sons. Catherine saw that all her boys who survived infancy were well educated.

Joseph Robidoux III, considered the founding father of St. Joseph, Missouri, had a trading post at that site. Joseph had long provided supplies for the traders and trappers of the upper Missouri River region. His source of supply has, upon occasion, been questioned by some historians. Nevertheless, he was involved indirectly with the Taos traffic. Two other brothers, Louis and Antoine Robidoux, began trading in Santa Fe and Taos soon after that territory opened to the Americans. Other brothers, Francois, Isadore, and Miguel or Michel, were also very much involved in the trade. History has largely ignored the Robidoux family, primarily through lack of documentation of their activities. Extant information gleaned from public records suggests that they were either suing someone or being sued.<sup>70</sup> As secretive as the brothers were, they appeared to have been well respected by their peers, and were almost universally addressed as “Mr. Robidoux.” (This has led historians to try to place which brother was where at a specific instance.) The Robidoux family played a very large role in the development and use of the North Branch Trail.

Isadore appears to have devoted most of his adult life to the business end of the family’s activities in both St. Louis and Santa Fe-Taos. He and his brothers arrived in Santa Fe during the year 1824.<sup>71</sup> Francois became involved in various trapping activities throughout the Winty country for many years, and led several trapping brigades over the North Branch route.<sup>72</sup> Miguel it appears, knew, and was known throughout much of the intermontane region, from the upper Missouri to the Gila River, where he was the lone survivor of an Indian massacre in 1826.<sup>73</sup>

Louis and Antoine both married women from Santa Fe, and thus gained Mexican citizenship. This was a common practice among the Americans: they could thus avoid paying certain taxes imposed upon non-citizens. They both became very active in civic affairs in their Mexican communities when they were in town. Louis, more so than Antoine, spent time as a liaison “officer” for the business interests in their outlying

trading posts.

Antoine Robidoux was undoubtedly trapping and familiarizing himself with fur rich areas of the Winty country as early as the mid-1820s. He attached himself to, or even conducted, fur brigades going out from Taos. In this manner he grew thoroughly acquainted with not only the trade, but the territory as well. It was not long before he had established himself as a knowledgeable permanent fixture in the region between Taos and the Winty.<sup>74</sup> Antoine, beyond any other single individual, established and solidified the No1th Branch into a viable route. The Robidoux brothers, Antoine, Louis, and possibly Francois, monopolized trade going over the North Branch by the late 1820s.

Robidoux's route out of Taos, while varying at times, was probably as follows; traveling up the East Fork route, he would access and cross over Cochctopa Pass down to the Upper Grand [Gunnison] River. His pack train route then took the north bank trail of the Grand down to the Curecanti Trail and followed it over to the confluence of the Uncompahgre and Grand Rivers. The route to this point is based upon an aside made in the journal of a later traveler.<sup>75</sup> Another route, possibly much used by Antoine, was the Lake Fork Trail. This variant may have been accessed depending upon relations with the Indians, supplies being carried, and time factors. The route was apparently through more open country, with less opportunity for Indian ambush, although slightly longer.

Whichever variant Antoine used, the trails came together at the confluence of the Uncompahgre and Grand Rivers. At this site a trading post, Fort Uncompahgre, was theoretically established in 1827. No specific time of construction or actual location for the Uncompahgre post has been documented to date. The "fort," possibly constructed of rough adobe bricks, served as a trade center for the Indians and trappers in the immediate area. Undoubtedly, it also served as a re-supply station for forts to be constructed later and farther north. Antoine Robidoux has been credited with being the first to establish a trading fort in the intermontane West, an honor which is open to debate. He is also credited with being the earliest trader to use wagons or carts to haul supplies over the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail.<sup>76</sup> \* If any type of wheeled vehicle was used, it could only have been a small cart. The route of travel was through some very rough country, and time factors involved would almost negate the use of wagons during the early days of the trading post.<sup>77</sup> Hardy pack mules, carrying up to three hundred pounds of supplies and trade goods, could

\*Ed. Note: Bailey miss understands St. George's location, St. George met Antoine Robidoux with carts full of furs in Eastern Kansas, not the San Luis Valley.

cover more ground in a day, negotiate rougher terrain, and rarely needed spare parts. If wagons or carts were used to supply Fort Uncompahgre, they probably were driven only as far as the Cochetopa Pass area.<sup>78</sup> Apparently, it was common knowledge that taking wagons farther than the Grand River (Gunnison) was not feasible.

Fort Uncompahgre remained a focal point for trade in the presentday Delta, Colorado, area, until destroyed by the Ute Indians in the 1840s. The remains of the destroyed fort were casually noted by travelers through the area in the 1850s, but never pinpointed as to location.<sup>79</sup> The Robidoux's use of the North Branch route up into the Winty country, during the late 1820s to 1840s, has been sporadically documented by various fellow trappers and travelers of their time. Unfortunately the entire Robidoux "clan," along with their many often clandestine business affairs and travels, have been cloaked in mystery. As previously mentioned, a "Mr." Robidoux would show up, often during a specific time frame, to add confusion for those trying to keep track of the various family members. It is known that the Robidoux, operating out of Taos, were very familiar with the trapping areas of Utah, Colorado, Idaho, and Wyoming.

A "Mr." Robidoux, possibly either Miguel or Antoine, was leading a brigade of trappers in the Cache Valley area of Idaho in 1830.<sup>80</sup> There is little question that he had led the group over the North Branch or one of its variants. The Robidoux were not alone in the Utah area during the 1820s and 1830s. William Wolfskill, from Taos, led a fairly large brigade into the area on his way to California, en route from Taos over into Idaho's Cache Valley area, before turning to the southwest, to head for California.<sup>81</sup> This may add credence to the concept that the North Branch route may have been a much earlier trail than the later historically acknowledged route of the Old Spanish Trail. Jedediah Smith also traveled to California from the upper Utah area a few years earlier.<sup>82</sup>

The North Branch route, which was followed by several of the trapping brigades out of Taos, was not an easy trail. The route, especially from the Salt Creek cut-off north and west offered adequate forage and water for vital pack stock. With an established Fort Uncompahgre and a trapping/ trading area in Utah, Antoine Robidoux needed to expand his sphere of influence in the area between the two forts. Knowing that there was not only an adequate trail but food for his animals, Antoine set about defending an established route into the Winty. There is little question that a route, possibly called the "Robidoux Trail," followed the early one up and over Westwater Creek and into the Willow Creek drainage.

While Antoine's route is never discussed in detail, an interesting event occurred in 1832/33 which concerned Kit Carson. Carson, the wellknown Mountain Man and later army scout, recalled and purportedly dictated in his later years an account of time spent in the Winty area. In 1832, it appears that Carson met a Captain Lee, who was a partner in the famous Bent-St. Vrain enterprise, which was operating out of Bent's Fort on the Arkansas River. Captain Lee encouraged Carson to join an expedition to trade and supply trappers in the Winty area.

In the latter part of October, 1832, with their goods well packed and properly fitted for the rough transportation which they must necessarily be subjected to, they left [Taos and] set out to find the trappers. They traveled for some distance on a route well-known as the Old Spanish Trail,<sup>83</sup> which was nothing more than a mule-path leading from New Mexico to California. Having arrived safely at White River, they continued their march downstream, following the windings of the river until they came to the Green River.<sup>84</sup> Green River they forded, then struck across the country for the Winty River, which is a branch of the Green River.

Here they found Mr. Robidoux,<sup>85</sup> who had a party of twenty men in his employ, and who was engaged both in trapping and trading, ... The two parties met, snow began to fall ... The two parties joined together and began to establish winter quarters suitable for the whole.

They selected a site for their permanent camp on the Winty River, at its mouth, ... They were provided with skin tents . . . which according to Kit's mountaineering experiences, are very comfortable substitutes for houses.<sup>86</sup>

There has been some speculation concerning which "Mr. Robidoux" Carson wintered with; Louis Robidoux seems to be a likely candidate. To add to this enigma, historians have largely placed Carson and Robidoux together in the winter of 1833. Based upon the account above, as well as the chronology by years after Carson arrived in Santa Fe, 1832 seems to be accurate. If the year was 1833, Antoine Robidoux was in Santa Fe during those winter months.<sup>87</sup> If the year actually was

1832, either Louis or Antoine could have been on the Winty.

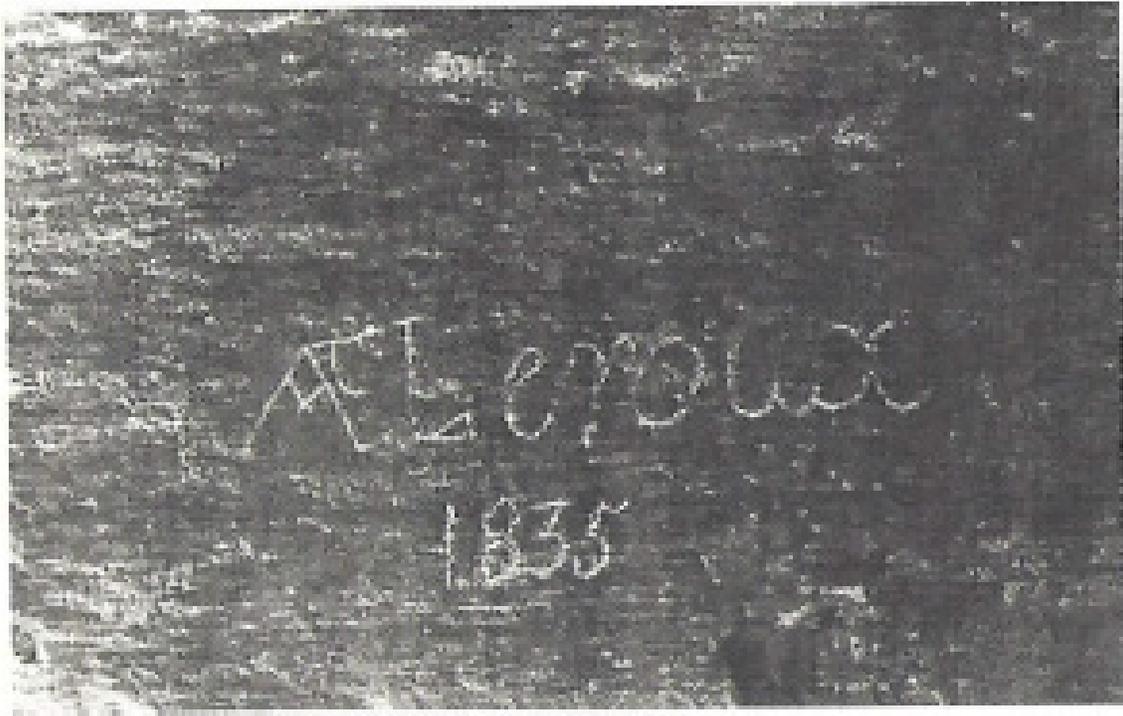
As Carson and "Mr." Robidoux's group spent the winter in skin tents, it seems that Antoine had not as yet erected any type of pennant trading post. However, Carson tells of selling his furs at Robidoux's Fort on the Winty over the next few years. He recalls trapping along the Snake River as well as the Grand during the period from 1835 to 1837. At the end of each trapping season, Carson returned to sell his furs at Robidoux's Fort. By 1837, Carson became discouraged: " ... at Robidoux's Fort, Carson again found a purchaser for his fur; but the prices at which he was obliged to sell them, did not please him."<sup>88</sup> The price of furs was declining by the late 1830s. Furs, previously used in the manufacture of hats, were slowly being replaced by silk.

Kit Carson's comments about trading at "Robidoux's Fort" prior to 1837 places another historical concept in limbo. It has been suggested that Antoine Robidoux established another trading post or fort on the Uintah River, a tributary of the Green, sometime in the 1830s.<sup>89</sup> This premise appears to be false. The trappers and other travelers called the fort either Fort Uintah or Fort Robidoux, the names used interchangeably. During the heyday of the trappers, the Uintah or "Winty" in the vernacular of the Mountain Men, became the center of activity. For many years, Fort Uintah served as a primary trading post in the area. <sup>90</sup> While 1837 is strongly suggested as the year the fort was first built, this date remains uncertain. It is known that Antoine Robidoux was trading and trapping throughout the Winty country for several years. That Fort Uintah/Robidoux existed in one form or another as early as 1831 is almost certain.

The date 1837 has been based upon an inscription carved on a rock overhang located at the mouth of Westwater Creek Canyon in the Roan/Bookcliff Range which reads:

ANTOINE ROBIDOUX  
PASSE.ICI.LE,13 .NOVEMBRE  
1837x  
POUR ETABLIRE.MASON  
TRAITTE.A.LA  
RVx VERTxOUxWINTEx <sup>91</sup>

While variously interpreted as a date for the year Antoine Robidoux intended to establish a trading post, it may have been an indication that this was the year he would erect a more permanent fort. Antoine, ever watchful for business, was possibly advertising to anyone passing that he would be open for trade, specifying the location of the post, and



The A. Leroux (Antoine Leroux) inscription, dated 1835. It is also found in the Main Canyon of Willow Creek. Photo by James H. Knipmeyer.



One of the many Denis Julien inscriptions in Canyon Country. Julien left at least four scratched inscriptions into the canyon walls along or near the Green and Colorado Rivers.

Photo by James H. Knipmeyer

the trail used to get there. To reiterate, Antoine and/or one of his brothers had been trapping/trading on the Winty for a decade. This being the case, the well-known inscription serves as an advertising sign. Another major factor, and one not to be overlooked, 1837 was a time of decline in the price of furs.

The fort's location is no longer shrouded in the mists of history like Fort Uncompahgre. More physical evidence remains of Antoine Robidoux's Fort Uintah. Over the years several historians have searched and speculated about the whereabouts of the fort on the Uintah. A. Reed Morrill<sup>92</sup> conducted a commendable study attempting to locate the probable site of Fort Winty. He points out that the fort was at times called Fort Robidoux and/or Uintah and acted as a viable post. His research, both intellectually and physically, located the site of the "lost" fort to most interested historian's satisfaction. Morrill's main conclusions contend that Captain John C. Fremont, while stopped at the Fort in June of 1844, made an astronomical observation, placing the location at. 109° 56' 42" west longitude, 40° 27' 45" north latitude. Fremont's .Journal reads:" ... June 1, 1844, We left today the Duchesne fork and after traversing a broken country for about sixteen miles arrived at noon at another considerable branch . . . we reached on the afternoon of the 3<sup>rd</sup>, the Uintah Fort, a trading post belonging to Mr. A. Robidoux on the principal fork of the Uintah River."<sup>93</sup>

Morrill devoted a great deal of time and research in locating the old fort, concluding that Fremont's observations were fairly accurate considering the instruments of the day. Fremont's calculations, as proven by Morrill, were off less than two minutes or two miles in longitude. Archaeological research of a site located within the confines of the accepted area turned up numerous artifacts of the fort's era. Located in October of 1936, Morrill, along with Brigham Young University professor Dr. William J. Snow, found what they and others had firmly concluded: the "lost" fort was found. Over the next several years, Morrill and crew uncovered enough physical evidence to show that the fort covered quite an extensive area; the remains provided enough information to document the time, life, and demise of the fort.

In the same area as Fort Uintah, along the North Branch Trail, are several carved inscriptions. One incised inscription simply states, "DENIS JULIEN, 1831." It is located on a rock bluff, near a mound some assumed as the location of Fort Uintah.<sup>94</sup> Documentation provides evidence that Julien had been in the employ of Antoine Robidoux off and on

since the mid 1820s. These pieces of information have supported the theory, as intimated above, that Antoine Robidoux had not only been in the area, but had operated a trading post there since 1831, albeit a lean-to or a blanket thrown out on the ground.

Other inscriptions, located along the Westwater-Willow Creek Trail, are indicative of the heavy use that route had as a section of the North Branch. To underscore this is another intriguing inscription located on the Westwater-Willow Creek Trail. As has been suggested, Antoine's brother, Louis Robidoux, may have been quite active in the operations of both Forts Uncompahgre and Uintah: " ... Louis probably served as the New Mexico agent for these posts, for they depended on New Mexico for supplies . . . On at least one occasion, in the spring of 1841, Louis Robidoux made the long journey to Fort Uintah . . . as he approached the Green River, he took the time to inscribe his name on a cliff in the Willow Creek drainage, some thirty-five miles south of [presntday] Ouray, Utah .. ".<sup>96</sup> The inscription reads:

LOUIS ROBIDOUX

Passo qui diade

Mayo de 1841<sup>97</sup>

With the Robidoux brothers' inscriptions located as they were along the Westwater- Willow Creek Trail, it would appear to be the one most used. Fairly easy access to the Dolores River ford, as well as the Crossing of the Grand, would not rule this out. With the mouth of the Westwater Creek Canyon marking one of the few access routes over the Roan/Bookcliff Range, the trappers undoubtedly used the trail and left other physical evidence to show the way. The Louis Robidoux inscription marks a turnoff along the Willow Creek Trail illustrating the path to the summit above Westwater Canyon. While the date of the inscription appears quite late, it possibly could supplant some other indicator located near the entry from Wire Fence Canyon.

There have been other "trapper" inscriptions found along the Westwater-Willow Creek Trail. A carving, located on a rock overhang, downstream from the Pine Spring access trail to Willow Creek, declares,

A' Leroux 1835

Antoine Leroux. ever an intrepid wanderer, is known to have traveled through the Winty country for many years, and often in the company of one or more of the Robidoux brothers. His major claim to fame was that

of serving as a guide for the famous John W. Gunnison survey party during the 1850s. Another inscription of some antiquity, but unknown authorship, simply states:

ARobidoux

The carved letters are unlike Antoine Robidoux's. Even so, they may have been scratched in haste or placed as a trail marker along the Willow Creek route by one of Robidoux's men. There are other inscriptions in the area, but located off today's traveled path and not easily seen.

Possibly the most intriguing set of carvings are those found below the Pine Springs access route. These read:

Juan Valdez Paso 8 & 9 N 9 1835

F.R.B.

B. Chalifou

It has been suggested, inasmuch as Chalifoux was known illiterate, that Valdez probably was the inscriber.<sup>98</sup> This writer has been unable to discover who Juan Valdez or FRB were. As to Jean Baptiste Chalifoux, he was known to have been in and out of Taos for many years, and an associate of several illicit “horse traders” during the period. From time to time he had also been in the service of Antoine Robidoux, or at least occasionally joined him on forays into the Winty area.<sup>99</sup> Chalifoux was one of the shadowy figures of his day and very little of his life is known, with the exception of the documented information quoted. Chalifoux became quite familiar in California where he operated outside the law, as leader of a renegade group of Indians. There is no record of him ever being at Fort Uintah, although, in associating with Antoine and Francois Robidoux over the years, there is little doubt that he spent time there.

Among the earliest accounts of Fort Uintah written by an American, located to date, is one written by a Methodist minister. Reverend Joseph Williams left a meager description of a route he traveled from Fort Uintah to Fort Uncompahgre in 1842. On a return trip from Oregon to Indiana, he had occasion to stop at Fort Uintah. He had undoubtedly traveled over the route pioneered by Dominguez-Escalante and various mountain men through northern Utah. Good man of the cloth that he was, he seemed more concerned about the decadent behavior and morals of the two fort's inhabitants than anything else. As to his comments on his trek between the two forts, he notes:

*We had to wait there for Mr. Rubedeau about 18 days, . . . July 27 [ 1842]. We started from Rubedeau's Fort [Uintah], over the Winty River, and next crossed Green and White Rivers. Next night we lay on Sugar Creek [possibly Bitter Water Creek], the waters of which were so bitter we could scarcely drink it. Here two of Rubedeau's squaws ran away, and we had to wait two days till he could send back to Fort for another squaw, for company for him.*

*August 1" We camped under a large rock by a small stream. Next night we lay under the Pictured Rock, ... Next day we traveled over rough roads and rocks and we crossed the Grand River, a branch of the Colorado, ... Next day we crossed another fork of the Grand River, and came to Fort Compogera, below the mouth of the Compogera River.<sup>100</sup>*

There are two possible routes Williams and those with him could have traveled. They may have followed up the south side of the White River to the lower end of the Sweet Water/Bitter Water Creek access route to the Seep Ridge Trail, then followed the latter over the summit and down East Canyon to the mouth of Westwater Creek Canyon. Another, and more feasible route, would have been crossing the White River, traversing the Willow Creek drainage, and then camping at one of several "Sugar Creeks." Streams with "bitter" waters are common, as alkaline water exists throughout the area.

If the time constraints are correct, William's group followed the Willow Creek Trail, crossed over the summit, and then proceeded down Westwater Creek Canyon. Their camp at the "Pictured Rock " could have been near anyone of the many pictographs, located throughout the area, or even at Antoine Robidoux's inscription at the mouth of the canyon.<sup>101</sup>

According to the narrative, they continued across "rough roads and rocks" to the crossing of the Grand in one day. It was not uncommon for writers of the day to call any trail a road. This has been interpreted as connoting a wagon road by some. There is no way the Williams-Robidoux group could have hauled any type of wheeled vehicle through that rough terrain in a five-day period, a distance of over one hundred and fifty miles. The terrain from the mouth of Westwater Canyon to the crossing of the Grand is, even today, rough and rocky, but has "no excessively high mountains." Interestingly, the Reverend Williams makes no entry about any

difficulties in crossing the Grand River [Colorado], or the present-day Gunnison near the Fort. He likewise was apparently not too disturbed about traveling across the desert terrain between the two fords. His major concern was the "wickedness" of the personnel at the fort.

After a short stay at Fort Uncompahgre, he left for Taos on August 15, 1842, along with a small group still under the leadership of Antoine Robidoux. His account gives rise to several questions of historic interest, and an attempt to answer them will be given in the following notes.

*We started to go through New Mexico, which is a long distance out of our route<sup>102</sup> to shun the Apahoc Indians [Apache ?] . . . Tuesday morning we started, and crossed Union River,<sup>103</sup> and next crossed Lake River, and lay that night on a small creek ...*

*August 19<sup>th</sup> We could see snow on the mountain ... Next we came up to Rubedeau's wagon which he had left there a year before. He hitched his oxen to take it along. <sup>104</sup>*

*August 20<sup>th</sup> We left this beautiful plain, which lies between two mountains, with a fine stream running through it . . . We are now on the waters of the Del Norte River and are passing the North Mountain . . . We are now traveling down Tous Valley, . . . This a beautiful Valley, about eighty or hundred miles long. <sup>105</sup>*

As there was some unrest among the Indians at that time, Antoine Robidoux led the party south from Fort Uncompahgre to access the route across the Lake Fork Trail to Cochetopa Pass. At that specific time, the Lake Fork Trail was undoubtedly in fairly heavy use. The route veered west-northwest, soon after crossing over Cochetopa Pass, while heading north, and following a series of old Indian hunting trails. The trail Williams and Robidoux were following was one traveled later by those who established the Indian Agency in the Cochetopa Pass area at Los Pines (Old Agency).

Reverend Williams' comment about "New Mexico" was interesting; as the area the group had been traveling since leaving Fort Uintah was in "New Mexican" territory, he may have been led to believe that he was still under American jurisdiction as he had been in Oregon. The boundary line between the two "territories" was rarely either recognized or adhered to by the trappers. The New Mexican authorities rarely enforced

any type of restrictive laws unless violations occurred in the vicinity of established settlements.

Another intriguing aspect is Williams' reference to oxen. While oxen were excellent beasts of burden and extremely hardy animals, they were rarely used as pack stock. Why Antoine Robidoux would have had oxen with him on this particular trip raises an interesting question. The most viable explanation would be that the oxen were picked up at Fort Uncompahgre for the express purpose of hauling the cached wagons back to Taos. It is known that Antoine Robidoux used some type of wheeled vehicles, probably as far as Cochetopa Pass and through the San Luis Valley. Leaving the carts and pasturing oxen at the closest fort makes sense. Also, the country to the east of Cochetopa Pass across the San Luis Valley would have been fairly easy to drive wagons pulled by the slow moving oxen. Oxen are normally not associated with the traders operating throughout the rougher mountain terrain, but could always be a source of food if needed.

Especially interesting is the comment about the trek being " ... a long distance out of our route ... " The assumption must be made that Antoine Robidoux's regular trail followed either the Curecanti, or an established route over the Anthracite Creek Trail. In all probability the Curecanti Creek Trail was a variant route from Fort Uncompahgre over to the area of the upper Lake Fork Trail. It is almost impossible for the modern reader to visualize what the section covered by the huge Blue Mesa Reservoir must have been like during the trapper/trader days. The Curecanti Creek trail would have crossed the upper today's Gunnison River above the Lake Fork Canyon, and had fairly easy access to the Cochetopa Pass area. Easy access refers to the area north and west of Cochetopa Pass, and south of the Gunnison River, which is largely high mesa country. The terrain varies from gently sloping table land to steep areas cut up by deep canyons and park-like valleys. Fast boulder-strewn creeks and small rivers, swollen during the snow melt, made travel during certain times of the year eventful. Indians had hunted in the area for centuries, and their trails interlacing the region had been sought out and followed by the trappers.

The Anthracite Creek Trail was not unlike the Lake Fork route, with the exception that it was more confined in area and the terrain more rugged. Both of these routes were in areas of fairly high altitude and were subjected to extreme weather conditions, situated as they were with large rivers running through deep valleys serving as conduits for weather varia-

tions. Erratic temperature changes can occur in any season, and it is a common expression that "summer can last all day on the Fourth of July." Weather played a large and important part in the narrative of several journals about treks over the North Branch Trail.

There is little question that Reverend Williams was not a happy camper and none too thrilled to be in the company of Antoine Robidoux. It is also conceivable that Robidoux did not adequately communicate with the minister. By going almost straight south after leaving Fort Uncompahgre, Williams possibly felt that the group was going too far out of their way. Robidoux likely reasoned that it would be easier to avoid an unfriendly Indian ambush by staying in the more open Uncompahgre River Valley as long as possible. He probably avoided telling Williams of the potential Indian danger for fear of frightening the good reverend. After retrieving his "wagon," Robidoux led the group down and across the San Luis Valley, on to Taos. Reverend Williams was apparently happy to leave the company of Antoine Robidoux and return to the East.<sup>106</sup>

Not long after his return to Taos, Antoine Robidoux organized a group to return to Fort Uintah. In the small company of travelers was a New Englander named Rufus B. Sage. Sage became known as an accurate reporter and recorder of the life and times of Mountain Men. He left an account which may cast some light on another variant route between Taos and the Winty. To avoid potential early fall snows in the Cochetopa Pass area, the lower elevations of the Main route of the Old Spanish Trail may have been followed, at least for a short distance.

Another concern: Robidoux may have been trying to avoid problems with the Indians, who were quite restless at the time and on the verge of open warfare at the time. Regardless of the reasons for following the trail they did, the party under the leadership of Antoine Robidoux departed Taos on October 7, 1842. Sage related:

*A small party from a trading establishment on the waters of the Green River, who had visited Taos for the procurement of a fresh supply of goods, were about to return ... on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October we were underway. Our party consisted of three Frenchmen and five Spaniards, under the direction of a man named Roubideau. . . . Some eight pack mules, laden at the rate of two hundred and fifty pounds each, conveyed a quantity of goods; ... the remainder of the company, mounted on horseback, brought up the rear.*

*Crossing the Del Norte [Rio Grande], we soon after struck into a large trail bearing a westerly course [Old Spanish Trail-Main or South Branch?]; ... following which, on the 13<sup>th</sup>, inst. we crossed the main ridge of the Rocky Mountains by a feasible pass at the southern extremity of the Sierra del Anahuac range [La Plata Mountains], we found ourselves upon the waters of the Pacific.*

*Six days subsequent, we reached Roubideaus's Fort, at the forks of the Uintah, having passed several large streams, in our course, as well as the two principal branches which unite to form the Colorado.<sup>107</sup>*

As Sage did not mention Fort Uncompahgre, it is obvious that the group bypassed it. There are two possible routes the Sage party may have traveled after descending the "feasible pass" and then reaching Fort Uintah in six additional days. They presumably followed the Main Branch of the Old Spanish Trail until they reached the Dolores River cut-off, on the same route as that traveled by Dominguez-Escalante in 1776. While a questionable, but not impossible route, a trail followed down the Dolores River to reach and ford the Grand [Colorado] River.

While briefly alluded to in prior discussions of the Dominguez-Escalante and Rivera expeditions, the Dolores River variant was used on occasion by later travelers. Leaving the Main/South Branch of the Old Spanish Trail in the current vicinity of Dolores, Colorado, a route followed the Dolores River north toward the Grand River [Colorado]. Nearly impassible canyons, prior to reaching the Grand, cause a problem when following the river downstream its entire distance. Both the Dominguez-Escalante and Rivera parties bypassed the lower Dolores by turning off from the river route, heading east across to the Uncompahgre Plateau near present-day Slick Rock, Colorado.<sup>108</sup>

A trail is noted on survey maps of the 1850s and 1860s, showing a route skirting the east side of the La Sal Mountain range, which very possibly could have been part of the Dolores River variant.<sup>109</sup> While it is difficult to place too much credence in some of the early maps, it is possible that word of mouth gave information to the early surveyors. With Sage's group traveling "light and fast," they easily could have followed that route. Once arriving upon the south side of the Grand, easy access upstream to the Dolores River ford could have been made.<sup>110</sup>

With the time constraints mentioned in Sage's account, the group probably traveled the Main Branch all the way to the La Sal cut-off, then accessed the Grand. Staying on the Main Branch reduced the chances of Indian ambush and was the fastest route. Regardless of which trail used, once across the Grand River, the small group supposedly veered to the north and east to reach Westwater Creek Canyon, where they could access the Willow Creek Trail.<sup>111</sup>

It appears that Rufus B. Sage spent several days at Fort Uintah after arriving there in the fall of 1842. He records several comments concerning the fort's importance as a post along a well-traveled route. His remarks on the hospitality afforded him were accompanied by other comments;

*A trapping party from the Gila came in soon after our arrival ... Several trappers rendezvoused at the Uintah, being about to leave for Fort Hall on the headwaters of the Columbia river, I improved the opportunity of bearing them company.*<sup>112</sup>

This comment speaks volumes. The Gila was still a viable stream for trapping late in 1842, and trappers from the Gila country visited Fort Uintah, rather than going to Taos. The fort was a stopping place along the trail to Oregon.

Little mention has been made of the Dolores river variant, other than vague references or innuendo. There is little question that it was traveled, but the route was better known by omission than commission. Despite the lack of recognition, mountain men were very familiar with the Dolores River area. A recently located inscription in the Dolores Triangle was dated to 1825. Another trapper rock carving is known to exist in the Squaw Park area, just north of the Dolores River ford. It is very interesting for several reasons. It is carved to note: "J. D. SMITH 1844 R.M.F.T. co."<sup>113</sup>

The initials R.M.F.T., could very easily signify those of the Rocky Mountain Fur Trading Company, defunct by 1844. It follows that many of the "old-timer mountain men" still proudly retained their long-gone affiliation with the group. The carving does not, however, refer to Jedediah S. Smith. Also affiliated at one time with the Rocky Mountain Fur Trading Company, he was killed by the Comanches along the Cimarron River cut-off on the Santa Fe Trail in 1831. The "Smith" inscription, located a short distance from the Dolores River crossing, may have been carved by one of the "dying breed" late in the fur trapping era. Also, while not implied, it was not uncommon for certain characters to masquerade as

famous men, and there are historical references to charades of this kind.

While Antione Robidoux was guiding Rufus B. Sage's party from Taos to Fort Uintah on the Dolores River route, Doctor Marcus Whitman approached the fort from the west. Whitman traveled the North Branch Trail in the 1840s. A missionary in the Oregon territory, Whitman was requested to return East by his church officialdom. Along with Asa L. Lovejoy and a guide, he left for Doston in the early fall of 1842. They bypassed the usual Oregon Trail route to avoid possible Indian problems, and took a more southern route to Santa Fe. Traveling through northern Utah, possibly following the accepted route from the north and west, the small group arrived at Fort Uintah around November 1, 1842, where they met Antoine Robidoux and possibly Rufus Sage.<sup>114</sup> After purchasing new supplies and hiring a new guide, the small expedition proceeded on their way. Upon leaving Fort Uintah, and undoubtedly following the Westwater-Willow Creek Trail, the small group headed for Fort Uncompahgre. Leaving as late in the fall as they did, they were to encounter a few nearly disastrous mishaps. Upon reaching the crossing of the Grand, an infamous ford, located a few miles upstream of the confluence of the present-day Gunnison and Colorado Rivers, Lovejoy records:

*This stream was some one hundred and fifty, or two hundred yards wide, and looked upon by our guide as very dangerous to cross in the present condition. But the Doctor [Whitman], nothing daunted, was the first to take the water, He mounted his horse, and the guide and myself pushed them off into the boiling, foaming stream. Away they went completely under, the horse and 'all; but directly came up, and after buffeting the waves and foaming current, he made to the ice on the opposite side. The guide and myself forced in the pack animals; followed the doctor's example, and were soon drying our frozen clothes by a comfortable fire.*<sup>115</sup>

Once thawed out, the small group traveled on, across the desert, to reach Fort Uncompahgre. Apparently while at the fort, the weather turned colder and they retained another guide. This guide, apparently not too familiar with the country, had to be replaced shortly after the group left. The subsequent delay caused the small party to later run out of food, and they were reduced to eating their pack animals and a dog.<sup>116</sup> Fortunately they met up with a party traveling the trail coming from Taos, who gave them enough food to be on their way. They reached Taos around

December 15, 1842, after a month and a half of frigid snowy travel.<sup>117</sup> Whitman's party trekked over the Curecanti Creek Trail; dangerous and snow-packed in winter months, it was the shortest route.

It can not be emphasized adequately how dangerous the area between Taos and Fort Uintah could be in the winter. Any group, foolish enough or out of necessity, forced to travel the North Branch Trail after the first snows, did so at their own peril. Accounts of various expeditions across the area during the late 1840s and 1850s can attest to the hardships faced. Bitter cold, high winds, deep snows, and lack of game as a ready food source lead to death for travelers through starvation or exposure. Deep snows usually drove game to lower elevations, caused extreme difficulties for travel, and buried landmarks depended upon to mark a trail. The term "moccasin" stew was not uncommon, and even cannibalism was suspected.

An account of the ill-fated John C. Fremont expedition, during the winter of 1848, can attest to specific hardships encountered during winter travel. While attempting to survey a possible route through the southern Rockies, his group became hopelessly lost. Either intentionally or through arrogance, in an attempt to cross Cochetopa Pass during the dead of winter.<sup>118</sup> Fremont successfully followed much of the North Branch on his fifth expedition in late 1853. That time his group crossed over Cochetopa Pass, westward to the Uncompahgre River, on to the crossing of the Grand, then over to the Green River.<sup>119</sup> He followed the footsteps of two other expeditions.

Winter travel and resulting hardships were not the only difficulties facing travelers over the early trails. The seemingly innocuous task of crossing a river could lead to death, as well as loss of vital supplies and equipment. When a source of supply for replacement was often hundreds of miles away, great care had to be taken to prevent loss of even simple pieces of equipment. The loss of a rifle, for example, could lead to fatalities by hostile Indians or starvation.

Hastily constructed log rafts sometimes aided in river crossings. However, they were usually very unwieldy and prone to breaking apart. Other conveyances, time permitting, consisted of hewn-out log canoes or rough boats. It was also known for some groups to "manufacture" a round "bull boat," made by stretching large animal skins over a framework of supple branches. One fascinating trapper account describes a method of fording a swollen river while traveling with a group of friendly Indians: after sewing up all the tears and other holes in the skins covering their

lodges, they were laid out near the stream bank. After piling all their possessions on the stretched out skins, the loose ends were gathered up and tightly secured. The "raft" gave the appearance of a large ball, with small children and women hanging on to attached ropes, while one or two horsemen led the bobbing conveyance safely across the river.<sup>120</sup> Kit Carson, while carrying dispatches from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C. in the spring of 1848, left an interesting account of crossing the Grand. Carson was guiding a small contingent of United States Army troops under the command of Lieutenant George D. Brewerton. While both Carson and Brewerton detailed the same incident, describing the hazards of fording the Grand River, each must have confused the Grand with the Green when telling of it later. Regardless of this historical enigma, Carson's statement underscores the care required when attempting a river crossing.

The small group left Los Angeles in early May. Leaving so late in the traveling season placed the expedition at the larger rivers during the height of the spring runoff. Apparently, the group had little, if any, difficulty while traveling along on the Main/South Branch of the Old Spanish Trail until they reached the Green River, or as the accounts read, to the "Grand."<sup>121</sup> Carson's dictated comments read,

*An escort being furnished him [ at Los Angeles, Carson], . . . was soon underway, and had reached the Grand River without encountering any difficulty. At this place an accident happened to his party while crossing the river on rafts ... accident crippled the resources of Kit Carson's party very much, and caused them afterwards great suffering. The accident occurred something after the following manner. One division of the men constructed a float of logs, on which they had crossed the stream in safety; but the second branch of the party, under the charge of Lieutenant Brewerton . . . were not so successful with their raft; for no sooner did they get into the swift current than it became unmanageable, and, finally precipitated its contents, among which were included several of the men and their luggage, into the water ... Among the very useful articles that were lost were several saddles and six valuable rifles .<sup>122</sup>*

Carson, of a taciturn nature, was naturally concerned, but not overly disturbed by the situation at the river crossing. His major regret

was the loss of ammunition and rifles, which later created major concerns, such as a confrontation with an Indian war party. Brewerton's journal describes the crossing problems in much more detail. After successfully fording the river, he commented, ". . . Two days travel brought us to Green River, where we underwent much of the same difficulty in crossing which we had encountered in the passage of Grand River ..."<sup>123</sup>

From careful study of the two journals, it is almost impossible to conjecture whether this group of unfortunate, half-starved travelers followed the North Branch or remained on the Main or South Branch of the Old Spanish Trail. However, it highly possible that Carson and crew took the North Branch Trail. They do describe a close encounter with a band of Utes, painted for war, and closely averting a serious incident. From their description of the terrain and the one pass crossed, they presumably stayed on the North Branch all the way to Taos. After recuperating at Kit Carson's home for a few days, Brewerton went on to Santa Fe.

Another mystery concerning the North Branch, open to debate, was the early use of wagons or any type of wheeled conveyance along the length of the North Branch Trail. Reports are without firm documentation. There are isolated references to the use of wagons, little if any wagon traffic probably traversed beyond the lower Cochetopa Pass area until after 1850. As Kit Carson is purported to have said in 1832, "The Old Spanish Trail is little more than a long dusty mule track across the desert."

In the account left by the Reverend Joseph Williams, one of Antoine Robidoux's wagons was picked up along the trail to Taos. Just what type of wagon is not even inferred in William's comment, or where it was actually located on the trail. It is known that light carts and even heavier wagons were used along the "roads" in the San Luis Valley. One writer notes an incident which occurred at Bent's Fort: "Robidoux used another fascinating means of transporting his goods ... Robidoux adopted the use of the horse early. On Sept. 6, 1843, a dragoon Lieutenant, Philip St. George Cooke, wrote in his notes, 'I find Mr. Robidoux here, on a trading mission with a dozen light horse carts; has a trading house three hundred miles beyond Santa Fe.'"<sup>124</sup> Aside from the reference to oxen, documented information as to the use of animals beyond those implemented for packing to supply either of Robidoux's forts is unlocatable; mules, burros, and pack horses can cover more ground in a day, are more able to traverse rough country, and do not need spare parts in case of a breakdown.

Another questionable reference to a wagon trek over the North Branch was made by Antoine Leroux in a letter written to Senator Thomas Benton extolling the virtues and ease of western travel. Leroux, an "old timer" mountain man, knew the country well. He was apparently describing various routes throughout the Southwest. In passing, he told of a route north from Taos, over Cochetopa Pass, north to the Grand (Colorado) River, then west on the Old Spanish Trail. Leroux, desiring to become a guide for the J. W. Gunnison railroad survey expedition of 1853, may have been a little exuberant when he wrote, "Wagons can now travel this route to California, and have done it. In the year 1837, two families named Sloover [Slover] and Pope, with their wagons and two Mexicans, went from Taos that way."<sup>125</sup>

While the account of the Slover-Pope "wagon train" traveling over the North Branch was possible, it was improbable. Both the Issac Slover and William Pope families settled in Southern California, after nearly four months on the Trail. It has been suggested that the time factor supported the use of wagons. The birth of a child while on the Trail appears to have been a better cause for lengthening the trek. Slover and Pope were both experienced mountain men, and it is doubtful that they would have subjected their families to unnecessary danger caused by such a small party traveling through unfriendly Indian country with slow heavy wagons. Even assuming that Leroux was truthful, if any type of wagon was used, a light cart would have been the only feasible option. The detailed description of the North Branch route, made by the Gunnison survey crew in the early 1850s with their eighteen wagons, virtually negates earlier travel by anything other than pack stock.<sup>126</sup> It is highly probable that the use of the term "road" has commonly been misinterpreted as any trail fit to handle a wagon.

Further, physical details exist to refute the use of wagons by trapper/traders on the North Branch to the Colorado River and beyond. From the Gunnison Report, it is obvious that the area north from Fort Uncompahgre to the crossing of the Grand, then on to the Green River, is high desert. The soil composition is largely an alkaline, adobe-type pulverous muck. The earth is porous when dry and sticky, clinging mud when wet. A desert "pavement" surface which can retain tracks for many years, once the surface is broken, exists throughout the area. There is no mention of any type of wagon wheel tracks from the site of Fort Uncompahgre north, in the Gunnison Report. As Gunnison's crew had to "cut and fill" to cross several ravines in that area, they certainly would

have recorded any evidence of previous wagon traffic. It has been purported that wagon wheel ruts, from the Gunnison Survey group, were still visible when F. V. Hayden's crew were still visible through the area twenty years later.<sup>127</sup> The tracks seen by the Hayden crew were possibly that of a contingent of United States Army wagons which cut ruts through the area a few years after Gunnison's expeditions went through. Wagon wheel ruts are still visible in sections of the old wagon road even today, and they have not been laid down for almost one hundred years.

## *DEMISE OF THE NORTH BRANCH AS A TRAPPER TRAIL*

Travel over the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail as a pack route was quite heavy during the 1820s and into the late 1840s. By 1844, beaver were becoming scarce in the Winty country. The price of furs had been declining for several years with the introduction of top hats made from silk, and the problems between the trapper/traders and the Indians increased. The introduction of "Taos Lightning" created havoc among the Indians. This cheap potent alcoholic concoction, continued mistreatment of the natives, cheating in trade, and failure to halt the Indian slave market inflicted wounds that would not heal.

In 1844, Indians attacked and destroyed Antoine Robidoux's Fort Uintah. An

*Taos, October 20, 1844 ... The Youtau indians are at ware with the Spaniards and whites a Spaniard came in a few days Since who was trapping with one other his companions was killed he escaped went to the Fort of Rubadoux where he found them all killed five or six Spaniards and one American-A. W. Sublette."<sup>128</sup>*

This letter, rough as it is, describes the fate of Fort Uintah and could have easily told of the destruction of Fort Uncompahgre. It would appear that the Robidoux "empire" collapsed in one fell swoop. With both forts destroyed within an extremely short period of time, the Robidoux moved on. Sublette's letter refers to the unrest between the "Indians and Spaniards" in the Santa Fe area. This "ware" was perhaps the match that lit the fuse cause the destruction of not only the two forts, but spread throughout the area. Whatever the reasons, the so-called "Indian Wars" would continue sporadically throughout the intermontane region for the next forty years.

With the collapse of both forts, the activities of Taos-Santa Fe-Robidoux connection were in complete disarray. Antoine Robidoux underwent a change in lifestyle; he went on to serve as an army scout. In California, he was severely wounded at the Battle of San Pasqual during the Mexican War of the 1840s, and spent much of his later life in litigation concerning uncollected debts and his pension.<sup>129</sup>

Louis Robidoux packed up his family and left the Taos-Santa Fe area for California. He became a landowner, rancher, politician, and

remained active for many years after leaving New Mexico.<sup>130</sup> Many of the old-time mountain men-those that survived the rigors of life on the edge-retired to civilization and lived out their lives as family men. Taos, always fiendly to their lifestyle, was the area in which many of the old trappers settled. Unfortunately, a great many of them were crippled with rheumatism, arthritis, and venereal diseases, and did not survive into advanced age. Many of those able moved on to California and created a new life for themselves; many of the French-Canadian trappers and traders who had settled there often gathered to reminisce.

## *AFTER THE TRAPPERS*

Reduced trade and trapping in the Winty area, coupled with unrest among the Indians, resulted in less traffic over the extreme northern stretches of the North Branch route. As a heavily traveled pack-animal route, the Trail was ended following the destruction of Fort Uintah. Traffic in furs dropped off to practically nothing throughout the entire area, although an occasional wagon load was still being sent on to St. Louis along the Santa Fe Trail.

The North Branch Trail, pioneered by Indians, Spanish Conquistadors, priests, miners, traders, trappers, and slavers, diverted to the south to become a major variant of a route known almost exclusively as the Old Spanish Trail. The route of the North Branch, from Taos north to the crossing of the Grand, then west to the Green River and beyond, had a life of its own after 1850. Still vaguely called the "Old Spanish Trail," the route assumed various names and became a main trail for survey groups, military excursions, settlers, and freight wagons. It would appear that the Carson-Brewerton trek from California had brought news of the discovery of gold which created more than a mild interest in the East.

Shortly after 1850, an intense interest in potential railroad routes west arose in the Congressional Halls of Washington, D. C. As a consequence of this interest, and due to prodding on the part of certain politically-minded military men, the main route of the North Branch Trail continued and became the scene of many exciting events. Senator Thomas H. Benton, the father-in-law of John Fremont, became a standard-bearer in the senate, pushing for extensive western exploration. A comment made in a letter from Antoine Leroux to the Senator explained the ease of wagon traffic through the mountain country. Fremont conducted several expeditions, some nearly disastrous, along sections of the North Branch.<sup>131</sup>

John C. Fremont has been called the "pathfinder," but that title has been disputed as a misnomer. It is unfortunate that Fremont, an extremely capable man, strikes some as a consummate seeker of fame and fortune, caring little for those under his command. He was wont to hire extremely capable men to serve as guides, then refuse to either seek their counsel, or heed it once given. This trait hindered Fremont's career from time to time, often leading to serious consequences. Nevertheless, Fremont usually "landed on his feet."

John Fremont was not a stranger to the North Branch Trail and had visited Fort Uintah in 1844 long enough to survey the area for location

on maps of the day. Fremont's exploits have been adequately covered by others, and are quite beyond the scope of this document other than as they refer specifically to the North Branch.

The year 1853 was very busy one along the North Branch Trail. In March of that year, Congress appropriated \$250,000 and appointed Lieutenant E. F. Beale Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the State of California, urging him to travel to his new post as soon as possible. With orders such as these, Beale hastily recruited a group, left Washington, D. C., and prepared for an overland trek through virtually unmapped country after crossing the Mississippi River. An interesting account of the group's itinerary in the introduction to his journal during the early summer of 1853 is given by Gwen Harris Heap, a cousin and comrade of Beale's.

*After leaving Fort Massachusetts, we were to proceed up the valley of San Luis, lying between the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and the Sierra Mojada on the east, the Sierra Blanca and Sahwatch on the north, and the Sierra de San Juan on the west. Up this valley to the Sahwatch Valley, through the Cootchatope Pass in the Sahwatch Mountains, and down the River Uncompagre to the Grand River Fork of the Great Colorado, in Utah Territory. Thence across the River Avonkaria [early name of the Colorado River, also noted as the Blue at times] and the Green River Fork of the Colorado, through the Wahsatch Mountains to the Mormon settlements near Little Salt Lake and the Vegas de Santa Clara. [Mountain Meadows, north of present-day St. George, Utah.] From this point we would travel on the Old Spanish Trail leading from Abiquiu, cross the desert to River Mohaveh,<sup>132</sup> where we intended to leave it, and enter into the Tulare Valley in California ... "<sup>133</sup>*

This short excerpt of the expedition's route was much easier to jot down on paper than to travel. The small expedition arrived in the Sawatch Mountains to find the streams high and swift. It appears that the group followed the Lake Fork Trail across from Cochetopa Pass to the Uncompahgre River. Upon reaching the latter, they followed it until en-

countering the area of the confluence of the Uncompahgre and Grand [Gunnison] Rivers. Arriving in the latter part of June, the confluence area was a virtual sea of water; a vast morass of mud, tangled branches and with no feasible way to safely cross.

Beale and his group attempted to ford the Grand [Gunnison] above the confluence, but had to abandon the idea. They then followed down the river, and finally crossed the Uncompahgre, where Heap notes seeing the ruins of Antoine Robidoux's old fort. 134 They made several attempts at fording the river, built and launched rafts, hacked out rough canoes, tried to swim the livestock, all to no avail.

At one point Beale and company managed to get one small group across, but had to call them back. Having lost most of their vital supplies and equipment, they were virtually stranded with still a thousand miles to go to their destination. After almost five days of backbreaking labor, the small group left the river and returned to Taos for new supplies and equipment. A river crossing could stop even the most experienced group.

Retreating up the Uncompahgre River, following their previous route, the group split after finding a suitable camping area, in the vicinity of present-day Cimarron, Colorado. After a long and serious discussion, it was decided that LL Beale would stay at the base camp while Heap returned to Taos. Dividing what meager supplies they had and leaving Beale on July 1, 1853, Heap led his small group on the route to Taos. In his journal, Heap records:

*July 1, It was not until eight o'clock that I started from Mr. Beale's camp on the Nawaquasitch ... In addition to other causes for anxiety, we had but a small store of provisions, consisting of sour cornmeal and coffee, barely enough for three day's subsistence. The Rio de la Laguna (Lake Creek), where we had lost nearly a day in crossing our packs, had fallen slightly ... At 6 P. M. we reached Rio Jaroso (Willow Creek), where the trail leading to the Puerto del Carnero [Mountain-sheep Pass] branches off to the southward from that to the Coochatope Pass. This trail leads into San Luis Valley by a shorter route than that by the Coochatope, ... for the pass through which we went proved to be, in many respects, superior even to the Coochatope. <sup>135</sup>*

Not encumbered with heavily loaded pack animals, Heap's party averaged over forty miles a day. He described going across over a variant

route from the Uncompahgre River to Upper "Sahwatch" Creek. Upon reaching the upper "Sahwatch" Valley, the group crossed the valley and entered the San Luis Valley near where Garita Creek exits the mountains. Heap's journal gives an excellent description of the West Fork route through the San Luis Valley, and points out various potential shorter trails.<sup>136</sup>

The small group reached Taos on July 6, barely a week after leaving Beale's camp. After purchasing new equipment and supplies, including a portable rawhide "boat," Heap began his return trip on July 11. A few of the men who returned from the ordeal at the confluence chose to go to California by another route, and were replaced by others at Taos.<sup>137</sup> The return trip to Beale's camp was uneventful, and the two groups reunited on July 16, 1853. Two of the men were sent on to construct a "boat if they failed in finding a ford."<sup>138</sup>

With the help of a group of Ute Indians, the small expedition was shown a ford after reaching the Grand (Gunnison) River. The water had dropped over six feet, and they were able to lead the pack animals safely across. There was no mention of needing the "boat" this time.

The group, after fording the Grand (Gunnison) River proceeded, across the barren desert toward the "Avonkarea," as the Utes called the Colorado River. The small caravan had been harassed by a group of Utes for several miles over a minor misunderstanding. Narrowly averting disaster and vastly outnumbered, the Beale party finally arrived on the high bluffs along the south side of the "Avonkarea," where they immediately started to assemble their boat.

Beale's group was confronted with a river wider and swifter than what they previously found. They also were hailed from across the river by a party of Mexicans, who had been stranded for twenty days, unable to cross because of the high water.<sup>139</sup> The leader of the stranded travelers claimed to have lost two men to drowning while trying to cross the Green River. From the conversation with the stranded travelers, it was deduced that there had been some type of trouble between the Mexican traders and the Mormons. Beale's group felt they faced no problem with the Utah settlers, and that the Mexican traders had concocted their story to cover up an unpleasant situation. Beale assured the travelers that they would be assisted, which they were. It took almost two full days, even with the aid of the boat, for the two parties to switch sides. Beale's party gave several letters to the grateful rescued group, who promised to deliver them to "Mr. Leroux" in Taos.<sup>140</sup>

From Heap's description of the location of the crossing place, it is possible that he used the ford located upstream from the one commonly referred to as the "crossing of the Grand." He refers to the ford as being five or six miles above the confluence of the Grand (Gunnison) and the Avonkarea (Colorado) Rivers.<sup>141</sup> His casual comment of the ford being five or six mile is interesting. There is no ford that adequately fits the physical description of the terrain above the river, and the bank where one of the men was trapped by the high water, which more accurately describes "crossing of the Grand."<sup>142</sup>

After the crossing, the group followed on down stream, passing the confluence mentioned above, to camp on the evening of July 21, in the area of Fruita, Colorado. The next day, they reached the spot where the North Branch split off from the Westwater Creek Trail, to follow Salt Creek and camp on the banks of the Grand River. They traveled west southwest, following the river until reaching the area of the Dolores River ford. Taking a last dip in the Grand, Beale's party headed cross country for the Green River ford. At the ford, they found the Green at full flood stage. Upon hauling out the "boat," they discovered it was quite rotted from being put away wet; nonetheless, they repaired it as best they could and successfully used it to cross the Green River. The last service the "boat" saw was as moccasins for the Utes at the ford.

From the crossing on Green River, Beale's party proceeded on, eventually accessing the route followed by Dominguez-Escalante through west central Utah. Heap keeps an excellent mileage and camping chart in his journal, detailing the journey from Missouri all the way to Los Angeles.<sup>143</sup> His detail of the trail, especially between the area of the crossing of the Grand and the ford at the Green River, is invaluable, as it appears to have been a route of later wagon trains across that section of the North Branch. This detailed diary also gives one of the first word pictures of a route south of the North Branch Trail from Fort Uintah west. While some have depicted the North Branch route west from the crossing of the Grand as merely a single trail, there were several variants across that stretch to the Green River. Each expedition or group seemed to cross the one hundred miles of desert as they saw fit, joining only at the river crossings, 1853 appeared to be a year for a recognized push west. Not too far behind the Beale party, but with a different mission, was an expedition designed to survey and explore a route from the Mississippi River to the Pacific ocean. It was led by Captain J. W. Gunnison, with Lieutenant E. G. Beckwith as second in command. Of utmost importance was a survey of the area including a large section of the North Branch Trail. In part, the

orders read, "The more minute reconnaissance [sic] will continue up the Huerfano river into the San Luis valley, and thence through the most eligible pass to the valley of Grand river, and westwardly to the vicinity of the Vegas de Santa Clara ... "144

The party, consisting of officers, enlisted men, and trained specialists, loaded all necessary equipment into eighteen mule-drawn wagons. Mules replaced horses prior to the expedition reaching rough mountain country. Leaving for the west in late June, 1853, they were in the upper end of the San Luis Valley by the end August. Gunnison had been joined by Antoine Leroux, who along with some companions served as guide as far as Green River.<sup>145</sup> It appears that Antoine Leroux had been having personal problems with a certain Ute Chief, and chose to bow out of the possibility of a chance meeting. He left the expedition immediately after their camp on Salt Creek and returned to Taos. Leroux traveled at night to avoid contact with any Indian group and was accompanied by two companions.

Gunnison's wagons were undoubtedly large and heavily laden and, while well built, were not designed for extremely rough terrain. Captain Gunnison did not go into this mountainous country unaware of what was ahead for the group. While still at Fort Massachusetts, prior to heading into the Cochetopa Pass area, he penned a letter in which he had voiced some concerns:

*I have had an old trapper here to confuse me about the road onwards. [Leroux?] These fellows were on a different business in early times & and never dreamed of road making in such terribly rocky & chasmy places & their descriptions are very confused . . . Our road difficulties are ahead no doubt. No wagons have ever been farther than Grand River I am now credibly informed. If I get through it will be a triumph-but I shall at least try .. " .<sup>146</sup>*

As Antoine Leroux served as expedition guide, he possibly was telling Gunnison of the small party led by Slover and Pope in 1837.<sup>147</sup> An interesting account of the difficulties encountered by the group hauling eighteen heavily loaded wagons across Cochetopa Pass to the Uncompahgre River by James Shiel:

*It is not more than about thirty English miles from the Sawatch Butte to the top of Cochetopa Pass, but it took four days of the most intense labor to reach the*

*top . . . we were 10,032 feet above sea level, . . . From the top of the Cochetopa Pass we climbed down a gradual slope . . . into the valley of the Grand River . . . [Gunnison]. The valley route was only rarely usable . . . The wagons had to be dragged up steep mountains and be Jet down steeper slopes with ropes; rocky roads had to be cut through, ravines gone around, and strong mountain streams crossed ... "*<sup>148</sup>

Apparently the Gunnison party continued on the Cochetopa Creek Trail after going over the Pass. The reference to the valley route being "rarely usable," undoubtedly acknowledged the swampy conditions still visible along the lower Cochetopa and Tomichi creeks. Because of the soil conditions and the narrow rocky gorge situation on lower Cochetopa Creek, Gunnison's route traveled down Razor Creek, accessed by a turnoff below the summit. Razor Creek, also known as the Eagle Tail, emptied into the Tomichi River, a main tributary of the upper Grand (Gunnison) River.

After reaching the area near present-day Gunnison, Colorado, the expedition followed the upper Grand (Gunnison) River by crossing over the tops of the fairly level mesas along the south side of the river. Their travel route was severely slowed upon reaching "Lake Fork, coming into Grand River from the south, through almost one continuous canyon from the mountains to the river . . . [September 9, 1853]. This morning ... a rapid descent of 4,500 feet in length, and 935 in perpendicular height above the stream ... the wagons with locked wheels."<sup>149</sup> Regardless, once across the deep gorge of the Lake Fork, the group apparently accessed the regular route of the Lake Fork variant. They dropped down into the valley of Cebol\sa Creek (Onion Creek), modern Cimarron River, climbed out of the valley, and crossed the ridge in the vicinity of present Cerro Summit.

Prior to descending into the Uncompahgre River valley, while at the summit of Cerro Pass, the expedition leaders paused to take in the broad vistas. Antoine Leroux informed the leaders that the peaks in the distance were those in the Salt and Abajo Mountains. He observed that the Old Spanish Trail passed in the vicinity of the peaks, and was a favorite place of trade for the Utah and Navajo Indians. He notes that Abajo Peak is below any ford "on the Grand River known to the New Mexicans, and hence its name."<sup>150</sup> Leroux was referring to the Main Route of the Old Spanish Trail, and the ford at present-day Moab, Utah.

Gunnison's party descended from the pass by following down Cedar Creek to reach the valley of the Uncompahgre River. This particular stretch of "road," from Lake Fork to the Uncompahgre, required much cutting and filling, but was passable. Even today the terrain through that area is cut through with hills and gullies prone to ground slippage and excessive erosion.

Once the group reached the Uncompahgre River, they crossed at a ford and traveled downstream a short distance before again crossing the river to follow the east bank. They were following the route of the Dominguez-Escalante expedition until they reached a point just above the confluence of the Uncompahgre and Grand (Gunnison) Rivers. Forging the Uncompahgre to reach its west bank, they noted seeing the ruins of Antoine Robidoux's old fort.<sup>152</sup> No evidence of fire is mentioned.

Gunnison reached and crossed the Grand (Gunnison) River at a ford located about a mile below the old fort, the crossing being made with no comment. This crossing, made on September 17, 1853, was much more placid than that of the Beale-Heap party a few months earlier.<sup>153</sup>

Once across the river, the Gunnison Expedition proceeded in a north-northwest direction across a high desert. Unable to follow the river, they took their wagons through "hill and gully" country which required much time-consuming road building, cutting and filling across small ravines, and multiple detours. A desert pavement surface also exists in this area. Additionally, there is no mention of any type of wagon wheel tracks from the Fort Uncompahgre site north in the Gunnison Report. This fact helps refute the concept that Antoine Robidoux and others from Fort Uncompahgre used wagons to haul supplies to Fort Uintah. However, wheel ruts from the Gunnison Survey crew were still visible when the Hayden Survey crew of 1876 came area twenty years later.<sup>154</sup> The tracks noted by the Hayden group were from the Loring Expedition of 1858. Gunnison's expedition reached the Grand River (Colorado)<sup>155</sup> on September 19, 1853.<sup>156</sup>

Upon reaching the river, the Gunnison expedition had to locate an access in order to cross it. Beckwith records a description of the area, still visible today:

*The light friable soil of the last two days continued to the Nah-un-kah-rea river, which we reached in a march of 12.32 miles. 1s7 The eastern bank of this stream, for miles above and below where we struck it, is perpendicular and from forty to eights feet in high- the top of*

*clay and the base of shale. A small gully afforded us the means of cutting a very steep path for our wagons to the river, which we crossed a few hundred yards below, at a point where it is but a little over two feet deep and a hundred yards wide ... The opposite bank although but six feet high, the moment it was cut down and moistened by water thrown up by the leading horses, became so miry that we were occupied three hours in crossing, and encamped near the ford . . . .*<sup>158</sup>

The extremely accurate description of this ford has enabled researchers to accurately pinpoint the location of this crossing, currently located at 2825 Unaweep Avenue in Grand Junction, Colorado: "The Crossing of the Grand."<sup>159</sup> In addition, this crossing has been identified primarily because of the accurate descriptions as recorded in maps and reports after 1850. There are a few other arroyos entering the Grand, Blue or Hahunkahrea from the south, but they are farther east and do not fit the descriptions. The present arroyo has been largely undisturbed and remains virtually as Gunnison's crew left it.<sup>160</sup>

Once across the river, the Gunnison expedition proceeded in a westerly direction toward present-day Fruita, Colorado, after a layover near the ford to rest both men and beasts after the rigors of the crossing. From the report, submitted to Congress by Lieutenant Beckwith, it would appear that the expedition assumed the route of the Westwater-Willow Creek Trail for a short distance after reaching the Salt Creek cut-off. Antoine Leroux, having fulfilled his obligations, left the group shortly after leaving the Salt Creek area, returning to Taos.

Prior to his departure, Leroux informed the expedition leaders of the way to access the Old Spanish Trail before reaching the Green River ford. The expedition party turned off the Westwater route, but never strayed too far from the base of the Roan/Book Cliff Range as they headed toward the Green River. The leaders of the expedition felt that by staying close to the Roan/Bookcliffs, they could assume a much more direct route, not only to Green River, but to access the Old Spanish Trail as well. Gunnison's route across the desert stretch, from the "Crossing of the Grand to the Green River, lies much farther north than most subsequent expeditions. In all likelihood, Antoine Leroux urged the group to "hug" the mountain range as water in the form of springs or small streams was usually readily available. The expedition reached the Main route of the Old Spanish Trail and followed it about twenty miles before reaching the ford at Green

River. Their access point appears to have been in the area of Thompson Wash, south of present-day Crescent Junction, Utah. Many records indicate that the Main Route of the Old Spanish Trail was well defined and not difficult to locate.

From the ford at the Green on the group went beyond the area of the Old Spanish Trail and outside the scope of this document and into Utah. Gunnison, along with several members of his group, met an untimely death on October 26, 1853. He and seven of his men were brutally massacred by a group of renegade Indians near Sevier Lake in Utah.<sup>161</sup> Lieutenant Beckwith had the painful task of writing up the report on the expedition, and presenting the information to Congress.

Another group of men traveled the North Branch Trail late in 1853. John Charles Fremont, who seemed to have a proclivity for winter travel, crossed over Cochetopa Pass on December 14, 1853. His Fifth Expedition appeared to be following in the "wagon tracks" of the Gunnison route, at least as far as the Green River.<sup>162</sup> He also proceeded into Utah, and he and his men were subjected to extreme hardship and suffering from the terrain and winter weather. Most of Fremont's exploits took place outside the realm of the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail.

The North Branch route was the scene of an extremely heroic "rescue mission" in the winter of 1857-1858. Extant is a firsthand account by a participant. Captain Randolph B. Marcy, a veteran of the frontier, had been part of a contingent of United States Army troops sent to Utah to aid in quelling the so-called "Mormon War" which broke out in 1857. Though an extensive ordeal, of primary interest here is a small group of Mormon scouts sent from the Salt Lake area to harass the approaching Army troops. The Mormons were quite successful in their efforts and destroyed an alarming amount of supplies and equipment, almost gutting Fort Bridger. Facing a long Wyoming winter with already depleted rations, the time for difficult decisions arrived.

The story can best be told by excerpts from the introduction to the journal of the leader, Captain R. B. Marcy, 51<sup>st</sup> Infantry, United States Army:

*During the month of November, 1857, while our troops were encamped at Fort Bridger, in Utah Territory, I was ordered, with a command of forty enlisted men, to cross the mountains by the most direct route into New Mexico, and procure supplies . . . After a march of fifty-one days, they emerged from the forest, and found themselves at Fort Massachusetts, in New Mexico ...*<sup>163</sup>

This simple statement tells nothing of what happened between the first sentence and the last. The contingent left Fort Bridger on November 24, 1857, with army personnel and several mountain men as guides.

Being assured of little snowfall, even at the high passes, the expedition headed down Henry's Fork to reach and ford the Green River, where they picked up and followed a trail downstream to access the North Branch Trail, a route they would follow virtually the entire distance. From the description given in the journal, it would seem that the expedition ascended Willow Creek, undoubtedly following Antoine Robidoux's old route, while accessing the plateau of the Roan/Bookcliff Range. At that point, the snow was approximately two feet in depth. To add to their concerns, the hired Indian guide left during the night along with his prepaid gifts. To quote the journal,

*Our track led us across this elevated table-land, which we found terminating in a towering and almost perpendicular cliff or bluff, bordering the valley of Grand River, and some two thousand feet above it. On reaching this lofty escarpment, it did not seem possible that our mules could descend it, indeed, I had previously been told that there was but one place for fifty miles along this cliff where the declivity was practicable for animals, and this was at a point where the Indians had cut a narrow path along the face of the bluff ...*<sup>161</sup>

The group possibly escaped by way of Hay Canyon; nevertheless, a route was eventually found down the side of a precipitous canyon wall and the group reached the bottom.

Marcy's group encamped in a tiny enclosed area, fitting the description of that near Antoine Robidoux's inscription, at the mouth of Westwater Creek Canyon. A map showing the route of Marcy's expedition, drawn in the 1860s, would lead one to believe that the group came down either East Canyon or Bitler Creek.<sup>165</sup> While not discounting the route as drawn and its additional historical information, the map's scale leaves much to be desired when correlated with other documentation in determining precise location. Fortunately, first hand information of the physical layout of the area aids in a correct interpretation of Marcy's journal.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of December, Marcy's group reached the Grand, near

the confluence of the "Uncompadre" and the "Bunkara." Interestingly enough, the entry states, " ... We forded them, but with much difficulty, as the water was deep and rapide and encamped at the base of the 'Elk Mountain,' near the remains of an old Indian trading establishment . . . formerly occupied by a man named Robedeau . . ." <sup>166</sup> This may have been an obvious lapse of memory in Marcy's journal, as he mentions that they encamped near the ruins of Antoine Robidoux's old fort that night. In all possibility they had reached the Crossing of the Grand, camped near there, and went on to the area of Robidoux's old fort the next day. Colonel Loring tells of seeing the remains of one of Marcy's campsites in the vicinity of the crossing, the following year. <sup>167</sup>

Ostensibly the group followed the North Branch Trail after leaving the site of Old Fort Uncompahgre. Marcy makes an interesting observation about the remains of the old fort; he states that it had been formerly occupied by a man named "Robedeau" from St. Louis "who had wandered into this remote wilderness many years ago, but was subsequently driven away and his buildings burned by the Indians." <sup>168</sup>

The group had met up with a large band of Indians who absolutely refused to serve as guides to help through the mountains. No amount of bribery, cajoling, or insults could sway the chief to either part with any of his ponies or help them along their way. As they advanced farther into the mountains they were forced to lighten their packs; extraneous equipment, as the snow became deeper, was cached. A later expedition recorded uncovering cached supplies from Marcy's group.

With snow depth becoming a problem, the pack animals were forced to eat pine needles and started to die from starvation. Large wild animals, such as deer and elk, disappeared. The group was becoming desperate. As their pack stock died off, the group was forced to eat them, the meat tough, bitter-tasting, and containing little nourishment. The Captain mentions sprinkling gunpowder on his mule meat to make it more palatable.

Probably the most heart wrenching anecdote to come out of this trek was that of the fate of a young colt. Tom Goodale, a scout accompanying the party, had an Indian wife with a colt being nursed by a mare she was riding. As circumstances became tenuous, the mare could no longer take care of the colt, and the colt had to be sacrificed. Tom's wife was practically inconsolable, until assured of another colt upon journey's end. One good meal, then back to the same old mule hide.

Struggling and staggering along through snow with depths up to six and seven feet, many with severely frozen feet, the group went on. Wind-blown, deep snow concealing the trail, and the group became lost. Marcy's party had apparently followed the North Branch route and the Lake Fork Trail, the same route as Gunnison's survey expedition. Even so, they were unable to locate an access trail to Cochetopa Pass because of the extremely deep snow. As the access route to the lower Cochctopa Pass Trail can be barely discernible in winter, it is understandable how Marcy's expedition became lost. Goodale alerted the Captain to the presence of a small bird unknown to the scout. Along with all their other concerns, they had made an ornithological discovery in a previously unknown geographical area: they located a small flock of white-tailed ptarmigans. Tom Goodale stated that he had seen the rare birds only once before. Regardless, alkr keeping two for later scientific observation, Captain Marcy relates," ... These birds were the only glimpse of animal life we had met with, outside of our own party, during thirty days that we were struggling through the deep snow ... "169

Shortly after this bird incident, and while struggling up the Razor Creek variant, Marcy's group became aware that they were lost. A Mexican guide, Miguel Alona, approached the Captain, informing him that the group was beading in the wrong direction, and he knew the correct trail to Cochetopa Pass. Miguel assured the Captain that he had been through that area several times in the past, and he was sure that they could find the route.

Captain Marcy, mentally at a low point, informed Miguel that if he was right he would be justly rewarded, if wrong he would be hung from the nearest tree. Miguel, much disturbed that his integrity was questioned, assured the Captain he would rather die than lie. Marcy, realizing there was no alternative, entrusted the lives of the entire company to Miguel's judgement. The journal records:

*From this time the uncertainty of our position, and the knowledge of the fact that if we failed to strike the Cochctope Pass we must all inevitably perish, gave me great anxiety, and prevented me from sleeping for several nights. There was not the slightest sign of a road, trail or footmark to guide us ... but my noble soldiers stmggled manfully ahead, and not a single murmur or complaint ever was heard ...* <sup>170</sup>

Miguel proved himself when ten days later the Pass was reached and the group looked out over the San Luis Valley. Suffering severe privation, frostbite, and virtual

starvation, the group had finally located and crossed the Pass, almost a full month after fording the Grand River. Their troubles were still not over; they still had many miles to go before reaching their destination.

Ascertaining that they had indeed located and crossed Cochetopa Pass, Marcy sent a small relief crew on to Fort Massachusetts. The relief crew went on to the fort, while the remaining group followed until they reached forage for the remaining animals which had melted out of the snow. Eleven agonizing days passed before the returning relief crew was sighted, and the expedition was saved. Caution had to be taken that the men not overeat when the relief crew finally arrived. Regardless of warnings, after a supper of filling soup, some of the men pressured the wagon guards to allow them to take more rations. Many gorged themselves only to later suffer stomach cramping resulting in the death of one of the men who had survived the long trek.

After four days of resting up and trying to recoup their strength, the group pressed on: they still had a mission to complete. When the small, but still intact, group entered the fort, Marcy reported:

*As we approached the fort, one of the officers complimented us by saying that he took us for a band of prairie Indians. Not more than one half of the men had any caps, and but few had any remains of trowsers below the knees. Their feet were tied up with mule hides, pieces of blankets, coat-tails, etc., and they certainly were rough and ragged-looking specimens of United States soldiers ...* <sup>171</sup>

Marcy's "march" may well be recorded as a truism for the old adage, "The cowards never started, and the weak ones never got there." Miguel Alona is one of the heroes of the expedition. It was he who had finally located the passage way over Cochetopa Pass. Alona was amply rewarded with a sum of five hundred dollars, and promptly lost the entire amount gambling.

Captain Randolph Marcy completed a mission which belongs in the annals of military history as comparable to the sufferings endured by the soldiers at Valley Forge. The forty enlisted men all survived the fifty one days of uncomplaining duty, with the one exception of the aforementioned death by overeating after the rescue. Not forgetting the purpose of the mission, several wagon loads of equipment

were sent on back to Fort Bridger by a different route.<sup>172</sup> As experienced as Captain Marcy was, he offers some excellent advice, especially for travelers going into the frontier country during the winter months. He makes a few brief comments listing the qualities of various animals when traveling through snow:

*I will remark that I set out upon this journey with horses, mules, and oxen, the latter to be used as food. I found, as soon as we struck snow three foot deep, that the mules directly became disheartened, laid down, and would not exert themselves. The horses seemed more ambitious, and would push their way through the snow as long as possible . . . while the oxen slowly and deliberately plowed their way through the deep snow for a long time without becoming jaded. Moreover, they seemed to derive much better sustenance from the pine leaves ... There is also less danger of their stampeding or being stolen by Indians than with horses or mules.*<sup>173</sup>

This statement from a man of integrity and first-hand knowledge could answer the question for all time.

An additional important expedition occurred in the 1850s which solidified the North Branch Trail. This group was to follow the trail, which had been proclaimed by Senator Thomas Benton the "Central Route."<sup>174</sup> The senator persisted in his desire to open a railroad route through the Cochetopa Pass area, feeling that Gunnison, Beale, and Fremont had proven his point: the route was feasible.

During the summer months of 1858, the senator's dreams were further realized, but never fulfilled, when an Army expedition of fifty wagons and three hundred men followed the North Branch Trail successfully. Colonel William Wing Loring led a large expedition, west to east, across the Trail. His contingent had been part of the group from Fort Bridger, going into Utah to aid in quelling the unrest occurring among the citizenry, at the time. No longer needed, he and his command were ordered to report to Fort Union in the New Mexico Territory. A transcript of his expedition journal is extant.<sup>175</sup>

The journal gives an excellent report on the trek across the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail, from the area near Little Utah Lake, all the way through into New Mexico. It is interesting to note that Loring's expedition appears to have approximated early trails through the north central Utah area, a route used by those traveling south from the Salt Lake

basin region during the days of Jedediah Smith, William Wolfskill, and even the Dominguez-Escalante expedition.

Loring's expedition left Camp Floyd, in the vicinity of Utah Lake, on July 19, 1858, and reached the ford at Green River on August 6th. His final report gives an excellent description of the difficult terrain covered, obstacles overcome, mileage between camps, and the all-important water holes, especially across the desert stretches. The report of the expedition is comparable to that kept by the Dominguez-Escalante party. The Loring expedition, being a military unit, was well equipped to handle nearly any physical difficulties that might arise. The wagons were loaded with an extra supply of timber to bridge arroyos and narrow creek beds, extra rope, chains, tools, and above all adequate man-power to build roads if necessary. Loring also gives a written description of terrain that would later become well-traveled wagon trails. These routes assumed various historic names, depending upon specific usage. The account of accessing the "Mormon Trail" which crossed the Green River at the crossing, but made a wide loop to reach a spring. This comment gives rise to new nomenclature, already in use for the Old Spanish Trail, by 1858.<sup>176</sup> The Mormons, from the Utah Territory, had made exploratory treks into the Moab area as early as 1854.<sup>177</sup> Other trails had been cut through the desert area, so Loring's expedition was not traveling into unknown territory.

Loring's guide over the route was none other than the irascible old mountain man Antoine Leroux.<sup>178</sup> Leroux, a contemporary of Kit Carson and the Robidoux brothers, was extremely knowledgeable and much sought after as a guide for the various expeditions penetrating the area encompassing the southwest, and was a welcome member of Loring's expedition.

After leaving the crossing of the Green River, the group headed in a general southeasterly direction to reach the "horseshoe" bend of the Grand River. Loring, along with fifty heavy wagons and a large contingent of troops, evidently tried to avoid the more sandy stretches of the trail. Their route was south of that traveled by the Gunnison group. They reached the Grand upstream of the old Dolores River ford, to follow the course of the river, well back from it, but close enough to water their livestock. Loring's journal makes an interesting comment about the Dolores River Trail:

*... Leroux says the Dolores empties into the Grand River 10 or 12 miles below where we first struck it ... He thinks the best winter pack trail, with little or no snow, is south of Salt*

*mountain crossing Grand River and following up the Dolores to its head, then around Salt Mountain and across spurs of the San Juan to the head of Rio Mancos, which empties into the San Juan, across the river to the Abiquiu trail ...*<sup>179</sup>

This is an extremely interesting remark by Leroux, as it corroborates the route and location of the Dolores River Trail.

From the journal, it appears the large contingent of troops either directly traversed or approximated the Beale expedition's westward route, at least until they reached the crossing of the Grand. Loring again reports: "crossed the Mormon and numerous Indian trails," just prior to crossing the "Blue" which they forded, three miles above its confluence with the Grand River. He records the crossing as marked by a stone to guide them.<sup>180</sup> His description of the ford is not unlike that written by Lieutenant Beckwith of the Gunnison expedition.<sup>181</sup>

As Loring makes no mention of any difficulties encountered in fording the Blue (Colorado), and the reference to the large rock to mark the crossing site, one has to assume that there was a well marked and traveled trail already in use through the area. He mentions the presence of the Mormon Trail and numerous Indian trails. He also notes seeing one of Marcy's "last winter camps," a short distance after fording the river. This could verify an earlier assumption about an entry in Marcy's journal, stating that his (Marcy's) group camped near Robidoux's old fort the same day that they crossed the river. Loring's large group headed south toward the present-day area of Delta, Colorado. His description of that section of the old North Branch Trail makes it easy to follow even today.

Besides mentioning seeing the remains of one of Marcy's winter camps, he notes where the Gunnison expedition had passed along the route. Upon reaching the Grand (Gunnison) River they crossed, about three miles below its confluence with the Uncompahgre River. The expedition had no problems, such as the Beale-Heap group had suffered, the "water being no more than waist deep and 100 yards wide." [The reports this writer has received, the ford is still there, with an excellent small rolled rock bottom, width varying depending on the seasons runoff] Loring's group proceeded on up the Uncompahgre River valley staying on the west side of the river. The route they followed was on the low bench, well back from the river bottom-Crossing the Uncompahgre, at a well known ford,

in the vicinity of present-day Montrose, Colorado, they proceeded up Cedar Creek, to follow Gunnison's route of a few years earlier.

Upon reaching the area of present-day Cerro Summit, they uncovered a cache of equipment, that Marcy had abandoned the previous winter.<sup>182</sup> From the summit, they descended, after much cutting and filling, to reach Cimarron Creek [Cebolla Creek-Gunnison's account, or Devil's Creek by Loring's]. They were in the general area where the Beale-Heap expedition had divided, when Heap returned to Taos to re-supply.

From their camp on the Cimarron, they followed, or approximated Gunnison's route until they reached the upper Grand River [Gunnison). From his report, it appears that Loring followed the Lake Fork Trail route, at least for short stretches, as he bypassed the deep gorge of Lake Fork River. Loring mentions seeing traces of Gunnison's route, but it appears, avoided much of the steeper slopes by going farther to the east. Heading in a general northeast direction, the party reached and forded the Grand [Gunnison] River in the vicinity of present-day Cebolla Creek.<sup>183</sup>

They followed the Grand [Gunnison] River, upstream, fording it several times. Continuing on upstream, the main body of the Grand [Gunnison] River, forks off to the left, or north, Loring's group remained on the river to the right. He names that right hand branch, the Goochatope. It actually was, and still is, Tomichi Creek. To add to the confusion, Loring referred to the Cochetopa as both Beaver Creek, and Razor Creek the Eagle Tail.<sup>183</sup>

The expedition continued upstream passed the area where Cochetopa Creek enters the Tomichi, to reach a small valley through which the Eagle Tail or Razor Creek flows, thus avoiding the narrow rocky gorge of lower Cochetopa Creek. [The old route of the Cochetopa Creek Trail, while suitable for pack animals, was too narrow and rough for heavily laden wagons.] As it was, the wagon train had to cross and ford the creek several times going up the gently sloping valley. Loring's expedition went up the Razor Creek drainage several miles, then passing over several small ridges, accessed the Old Cochetopa Creek Trail, on to the top of the pass. Loring's detailed description, and Gunnison's lack of it, gives rise to the conclusion that the latter followed virtually the same route. Once across Cochetopa Pass, the expedition, with its many troops clearing the way, descended into the San Luis Valley. Loring again, mentions Gunnison's route. There is very little doubt that Loring, especially with Antoine Leroux as a guide, had followed virtually identical routes with certain

exceptions. Loring appeared more prone to seeking shortcuts wherever possible. Loring's journey down the San Luis Valley is beyond the scope of this document, but he appeared to have followed the West Fork route variant until reaching Fort Union on September 13, 1858. He makes some interesting comments in his concluding remarks, which should be reported:

*... In obedience to the orders of General Johnston, Commanding the Department of Utah, as full a report as we could make is given. Should it be desirable to construct a road into the Southern Salt Lake Basin, it can be made with wood, water and grass in abundance, and shortened at least 200 miles than that traveled by our command . . .*  
*Mr. Antonio Leroux, an old and faithful guide, has our thanks, his influence with the numerous Indians we met, and his knowledge of the mountains, after a residence of over 40 years, was of great service to us ...*<sup>184</sup>

These simple words could almost be the epitaph for a Trail.

## *EPILOGUE*

We have seen the route of the North Branch, which began as a “track” out of necessity to travel from one place to another, slowly evolve into a more or less permanent road. The North Branch was a trail of change; its mission varied as necessity arose. It changed from a casual trade trace, into a virtual caravan route. It changed from a route followed by Conquistadors to one over which Army troops would escort mail carriers, survey crews and rescue missions. It was a route traveled by priests, missionaries, trappers, horse thieves, explorers, miners and families seeking a new place to live. Primarily a pack animal route, its function changed significantly after the first wagons started to roll over its rocky and rutted course. The caliber of individuals who traveled the route was largely measured in unsigned deeds. It was not until after government agencies began sending sanctioned groups out into virtually unknown areas, that knowledge of a region began to trickle out of it. Some who traveled over the routes wanted the glory, others sought the anonymity, most were forgotten.

Shortly before the Civil War of the 1860s, survey crews came into the area encompassed by the North Branch Trail. Mining camps arose, many which were to become towns later turned into cities. Wagon trails became long distance routes between population centers. Unrest among the Native American population, caused primarily by encroaching settlers, miners, speculators, railroaders, and other “invaders” of hereditary hunting territory, had to be dealt with. This problem was partially resolved with the removal of the Indians to reservations in the early 1880s.

After Loring proved that large wagons could make it over the Rockies, better access routes became a source for enterprising road builders. By 1880, the North Branch of the “Old Spanish Trail” became a long forgotten name to an ephemeral route. The Trail never had a specific title, called at times Spanish Trail, Trapper’s, Robidoux’s, etc. Later it assumed names such as Gunnison’s Route, Salt Lake Wagon Trail, <sup>185</sup> Mormon Trail, and Rainbow Trail.

History has an interesting way of changing titles to name places and things, depending upon their last recognizable usage. This concept becomes especially frustrating when attempting to piece together a patchwork of happenings based upon often faulty concepts, memories or lack of information. What information available on the North Branch is based upon a sorting out of existing scattered documentation and more than a fleeting knowledge of the era and area through which it existed. The North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail was never more than a set of mule tracks existing for a passing moment in time.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Jack D. Forbes, *Warriors of the Colorado* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), passim.

<sup>2</sup>Ralph Moody, *The Old Trails West* (Thos. Y. Crowell Company, 1963), 155.

<sup>3</sup>Joseph P. Sanchez, *Explorers, Traders, and Slavers: Forging the Old Spanish Trail, 1678-1850* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1997), passim. This is a long-overdue account of the colonial Spanish impact on the development of early routes throughout the Southwest.

<sup>4</sup>See Leroy R. and Ann W. Hafen, *Old Spanish Trail* (University of Nebraska Press, 1954; reprint 1993); C. Gregory Crampton and Stephen K. Madsen, *In Search of the Old Spanish Trail* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs-Smith Pub., 1994), passim.

<sup>5</sup>The term apogee refers to ... the most distant or higher point.

<sup>6</sup>Moody, *Old Trails West*, 153. Taos Pueblo had long been a trade center heavily used by the Utes and other desert and mountain Indians in their trading activities with the native groups from the Plains. Taos, located as it was on a major trade route, was well-known by the Native Americans well before the founding of Santa Fe around 1600.

<sup>7</sup>The Colorado River was called the Colorado below the confluence. Above the joining of the two rivers it was named the Grand, and will be called so unless otherwise noted throughout this discussion.

<sup>8</sup>Sanchez, *Explorers*, passim.

<sup>9</sup>Forbes, *Warriors*, 110. Indians often told stories like this, either because they were true or to encourage the intruders to leave.

<sup>10</sup>Jack Nelson, *Cajon Pass*, 16. (Oregon-California Trails Association Newsletter, January 1997).

<sup>11</sup>Moody, *Old Trails West*, 156

<sup>12</sup>Sanchez, *Explorers*, 6ff.

<sup>13</sup>Ted J. Warner, ed., *The Dominguez-Escalante Journal* (Brigham Young University Press, 1976), 42, fn. 192. Warner notes Posada's journal was widely read and considered quite authentic for areas outside the New Mexican settlements.

Warner also contends that many of the documents attributed to Posada were destroyed during the Indian revolts or have simply disappeared. See also an entry of the journal for 13 September 1776 (Ibid.: p.42): "We came to a large river which we named San Buenaventura ... The same which Fray Alonzo de Posada ... of New Mexico in the century gone by, relates in his report as separating the Yuta [Ute] nation from the Comanche." This comment provides two important details: the area of the Green and White Rivers was penetrated and known to the Spanish as early as the 1680s, and the northern boundary of the Ute Indian territory is identified.

<sup>14</sup>Sanchez, *Explorers*, Appendix B, 154.

<sup>15</sup>A Spanish league equals 2.63 miles and is approximately the distance traveled on horseback in an hour at a steady gait over fairly gentle ground.

<sup>16</sup>Warner, *Dominguez-Escalante*, 24. Dominguez and Escalante were undoubtedly following Rivera's route from Abiquiu Pueblo west then north as far as Delta, Colorado. They had also probably studied Posada's writings, as they mention him in their journal of the expedition. That Spanish knowledge of the area was widely known becomes apparent when the later mountain men referred to the Green River as the "River of the Spaniards." The Green was also well known as the "*Seeds-Kee-Dee*," by the Indians and the trappers. Mountain men often called any section of the North Branch route they were traveling the Old Spanish Trail.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* This comment strengthens the premise that the Dominguez-Escalante expedition followed known and documented routes, at least through sections of their travels.

<sup>19</sup>Warner, *Dominguez-Escalante*, 29, fn 14 l. On August 31, 1776, they camped at the confluence of Willow and Hubbard Creeks located on the southern side of Grand Mesa.

<sup>20</sup>The term massif is defined as ... a range containing many summits.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 29-37. Details trek during September 1 to September 5, 1776, over Grand Mesa.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 26. Lists Adres Muniz as interpreter.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 37. Also historically known as the Huhunkarea, Tizon, Blue, and Grand. From this point forward will be called Grand unless otherwise noted in text.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 37, 164

<sup>25</sup>The lower elevation's geological name is Bookcliff, the upper strata Roan.

<sup>26</sup> Randolph B. Marcy, *Thirty Years of Army Life on the Border* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1866), 198-222. An account of a "mission of mercy" led by Captain Marcy across the route of the North Branch Trail in the winter months of 1857. Their group went from Fort Bridger to Fort Massachusetts. Their almost disastrous expeditions problems began when they were unable to locate an exit route off the top of the Roan/Bookcliff Range. He states: "... I had been told ... there was but one place for fifty miles along this cliff ... " to descend (202).

<sup>27</sup>Highway 139, between Loma and Rangely, Colorado, is bisected by the Dominguez-Escalante route at the lower end of Douglas Creek Canyon.

<sup>28</sup>This comment referring to Posada is important, the expedition may still have been referring to excerpts from his journals of previous travelers.

<sup>29</sup>Warner, *Dominguez-Escalante Journal*, 44, fn.194. Their calculations were too high; they were at 40 ° 30'. Upon rechecking that night, they had a reading of 41 ° 19'. Both calculations were slightly off.

<sup>30</sup> The expedition leader's conclusion about the Comanches was probably correct, as they were on the boundary line between the Ute-Comanche hunting territory. Infringement of hunting rights was usually a cause for friction between Indian tribes.

<sup>31</sup> The mention of "ruins of a very ancient pueblo" creates some very interesting speculation. It is possible that later historical researchers assumed the site to be that of Antoine Robidoux's Fort Uintah. Uintah was the correct spelling in use during that period, it was not until much later that the 'h' was dropped. Robidoux's fort was built during the 1830s. His fort was located in the same general area, and destroyed by fire in the 1840s. See F. W. Cragen, *Early West Notebook V*, entry 15, p. 3, for an observation giving geodetic measurements of possible fort's site in 1902. [see later discussion].

<sup>32</sup> Warner, *Dominguez-Escalante Journal*, passim up to p. 118. The record details the trek from the area of Utah Lake down through central Utah until they reach the area of present St. George, at which point they followed a route almost due east to Santa Fe.

<sup>33</sup>R. E. Oglesby, *Manuel Lisa and the Opening of the Missouri Fur Trade* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), passim.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67, 131 ff. Lisa made several attempts to open trade with the Spanish over the ensuing years. He appears to have been an aggressive trader and willing to parlay or fight, as the case might be, for his "rights."

<sup>35</sup> The Main Branch of the Old Spanish Trail crossed the Green River at one of the few accessible spots, just north of present-day Green River, Utah, a well-known crossing used by both Spanish and Indian slave traders. See \*\*Plate LIL for drawing (*Hayden's Report of 1875*).

<sup>36</sup> Oglesby, *Manuel Lisa and the Opening of the Louisiana Fur Trade*, 111 ff. While Manuel Lisa was known as a fair trader, many others were not; this caused problems for all. The Blackfeet Indians especially resented any intrusion of their historic hunting territory, and protected what was theirs often with open warfare.

<sup>37</sup> Ardis M. Walker, "Joseph R. Walker," as found in Leroy Hafen, ed. *Mountain Men and Traders of the Far West*, 291-92.

<sup>38</sup> Many well-researched accounts have been written about the mountain men. See R. G. Cleland, *This Reckless Breed of Men*; Leroy R. Hafen, ed. *Mountain Men and Fur Traders of the Far West*; J. W. Nelson, *Louis Robidoux-The Man Behind the Legend*. Care must be taken to avoid romanticized versions of similar events.

<sup>39</sup> Sure-footed pack mules could carry loads of up to three hundred pounds of trade goods, ideal in extremely rough terrain, and they were not as particular about forage as horses.

<sup>40</sup> The “Winty” or Winty River (Uintah), located in northeastern Utah, was a common trapper term referring to the Uintah River.

<sup>41</sup> Moody, *Old Trails West*, 162.

<sup>42</sup> R. E. Kessler, *Re-Tracing the Old Spanish Trail-North Branch* (Monte Vista, CO:Adobe Village Press, 1995), passim. This book gives the reader an opportunity to visit the many sites throughout the San Luis Valley which are encompassed by the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail. The present writer has avoided covering the San Luis Valley area as a result of Kessler’s work.

<sup>43</sup> Nells, *Topographical Map of Colorado*, 1885. See also the Hayden Report, F.V. Hayden, *Annual Report ... Geological and Geographical Survey ... , 1876*. This is an excellent source which shows wagon roads and trails, many of which were undoubtedly first traveled by Indians, then trappers and traders. In his report on the Hayden Geographical Survey, Henry Gannett, a topographer covering the area under discussion, in 1874, writes of the many trails and routes through the area. He tells of the trail up Ohio Creek and down Anthracite Creek, and also the route along the north side of the Gunnison River west and north. (See Progress Report for the year 1874, p. 428).

<sup>44</sup> See footnote 13 this document. In reading Rivera’s Diary, he may have been on the North Fork Trail prior to his return to Santa Fe.

<sup>45</sup> William S. Wallace, *Antoine Robidoux-1794-1860* (Los Angeles: 1953 ), 22-23. An entry in the diary of a Reverend Williams alludes to the Curicante Creek Trail as being an usual route for travelers instead of the Lake Fork Trail.

<sup>46</sup> W.C. Bailey, *Fort Uncompahgre*, (unpublished, no date). A trapper fort, Fort Uncompahgre/Fort Robidoux, was located at the confluence. Bailey has devoted many years to researching the history of the fort. He suggests a founding date as early as 1825. To date, his search for a specific location has been frustrating. Floods, erosion, agricultural activity, and time have obscured all traces of the fort site to date.

<sup>47</sup> It is interesting to note that wagon ruts of later traveler are still visible along certain sections of the trail. There is little question that the pack trains followed the same route.

<sup>48</sup>See Henry Gannett, in the F V. Hayden Report of the Grand River Division, 1875. pp 348. See Foresgren, under Documents in Bibliography. An on-site visit to the described ford, located at the extension of 28 1/4 Road, Grand Junction, CO., was made in August 1995, by the writer and Mr. Clyde "Dusty" Forsgren, owner of the north bank property. The area observed had recently been flooded by heavy spring runoff. The bank along that north side of the river was about six feet above the water line. In viewing the south bank, the arroyo as described by Gannett, located at 2825 Unawep Avenue, is still discernible, cut into the high bluffs along the south bank. Mr. Forsgren\* verified that the bottom was 'paved' with cobbles and large fiat rocks; also the river is quite deep above and below the ford. A Mrs. Florence Connor, long-time resident living on the south rim, verified Mr. Forsgren's observations, adding that the arroyo was much longer and deeper before Unawep Avenue was put in. She also told of wading across the river as a youngster, the water being very shallow during dry years.

<sup>49</sup>Another ford existed where the Dolores River enters the Colorado. A variant route from the south crossed at this point which is discussed later.

<sup>50</sup>The two routes, primarily used as wagon trails, met in the area of Thompson Wash. The west-southwest variant route from Salt Creek, over to the Green River, was probably seldom utilized during the heyday of the trappers. The only exception was undoubtedly the occasional use by those accessing the trail to the north over a variant route which utilized the Dolores River ford. A trail from the Dolores River, probably followed along the Colorado River until reaching lower Westwater Canyon which was followed up until it reached the trail going northwest from the Salt Creek cut-off.

<sup>51</sup>Beckwith, E.G., Lieut. Third Artillery, U. S. Army, Report of Exploration and Surveys, Map of Gunnison Expedition of 1853-54. While an excellent source for the location of various Indian trails in the area covered by the expedition, the scale to the map leaves a little to be desired. This is not to be overly critical of this invaluable document, but it is understood that very little exploration was made beyond a limited area on each side of their route. However, it should be noted that their guide, at this point of the trek, Antoine Leroux, a Mountain Man, had been through this area off and on for many years. His name appears, carved in a rock inscription on a rock overhang, along the lower Willow Creek Trail, dated 1835.

<sup>52</sup>It would appear that the Wire Fence Canyon route was the one used very heavily by the trappers and packers as they accessed and followed the Willow Creek route of the North Branch. While it was the shortest route, it also avoided the more marshy upper reaches of Willow Creek. This route was a "cliffhanger" in spots, but was passable for the sure-footed pack animals. While this route has never been

documented as such, an interesting inscription by Louis Robidoux at the point where the canyon enters Willow Creek would indicate extensive usage.

<sup>53</sup>The reader should be able to follow their footsteps now that they have a general idea of where the North Branch Trail went, even with its various shortcuts, and often seemingly senseless detours.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 70-71. Another excellent source describing the various “infighting” among the various fur company factions is Bernard De Voto, *Across the Wide Missouri*, (Houghton Mifflin Company Boston, 1947). Fierce competition existed between the companies during the late 1820s and through the early 1840s.

<sup>55</sup>David J. Weber, *The Taos Trappers ...*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), passim. Weber gives a virtual encyclopedia of the entire group of trappers operating out of Taos. An excellent source for any student of the fur trade, especially if trying to locate elusive names or individuals.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 170. Much romanticism has grown around this incident.

<sup>57</sup> Weber, *The Taos Trappers*, 71-72.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 75. Etienne Provost was known to have been in the Taos area as early as 1823. He knew the country of the Winty and other northern Utah trapping regions very well.

<sup>59</sup> L. Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men and the Fur Traders of the West, Eighteen Biographical Sketches* (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark, Co., 1965-72), 84.

<sup>60</sup> Cache Valley, located in present day southern Idaho played a large role in the history of the Mountain Men. Located where it was, it became a center for intermontane trade and traffic to and from Taos, the Oregon country, and those trappers from the upper Green and Snake River areas. Ashley’s second rendezvous, held in 1826, was held in the valley. There are various accounts from the journals of such contemporaries as W. A. Ferris, Colonel Robert Campbell, Jedediah Strong Smith, Osborne Russell, and others which are available for first hand accounts of trapper life, not only in Cache Valley, but throughout the intermontane region as well.

<sup>61</sup> Dale L. Morgan, ed., *The West of William H. Ashley, 1822-38* (Denver: Old West Publishing Company, 1964 ), 113-14. See fn. 162 on p. 280- Notes Book

<sup>62</sup> Morgan, *The West of ...*, fn. 162. Morgan’s editorial comments are more than a little enlightening, especially the one “ ... very little information has come forth on the evolution of the Spanish Trail: in the half century after Escalante . . . “ Another variant may have followed Two Water Creek farther down before striking direct for the White.

<sup>63</sup> A ranch foreman gave this writer a photo of this rock inscription.

<sup>64</sup> Weber, *Ibid.*, 79. “All six had probably followed known trails . . . of Spanish traders.” See also page 91 for a specific group.

<sup>65</sup> Weber, *Ibid.*, 75

<sup>66</sup> Jedediah S. Smith, *The Southwest Expedition of Jedediah S. Smith*, “His Personal Account of the Journey to California, 1826-1827.” Edited by George R. Brooks. See in passim. It would appear that Smith was an educated man, and was quite observant. His death on the Cimmaron River, while on a return trip from St. Louis, was possibly caused by being half-crazed from thirst.

<sup>67</sup> This is not to discredit Antonio Armijo, who traveled a route considerably farther south than Wolfskill’s the same year. Even so, Armijo’s and Wolfskill’s route is beyond the scope of this presentation, so their stories will be left to others.

<sup>68</sup> Weber, *Taos Trappers ...*, see in passim. Weber has scattered information throughout this valuable work on the trappers, their environment and their daily comings and goings. Also of great interest is the short works of Herbert S. Auerbach, “*Old Trails. Old Forts, and Traders. History and Romance of the Old Spanish Trail.*” (Utah State Historical Society), Vol. IX. Nos. 1-2, 1941, pp. 13-63. Auerbach gives an excellent overview of activity along the entire Old Spanish Trail. His discussion of especially activity along the North Branch, is of extreme interest. His material and conclusions appear to have been either overlooked or ignored by later historians

<sup>69</sup> See [unpublished material] J. W. Nelson, Louis Robidoux, “*California Pioneer*” (Redlands: University of Redlands, Masters Thesis, 1950). Also David J. Weber, *Louis Robidoux*, appearing in Hafen’s *Mountain Man* series vol. 8 quotes Nelson’s work. W. S. Wallace, *Antoine Robidoux.* (Glen Dawson: Los Angeles, CA. 1953) These three authors have written the most reliable works published to date on the Robidoux family. All are well documented and have avoided the romanticism associated with a few of the earlier publications on the family. The material presented here on the Robidoux family is thoroughly documented and while not footnoted at presentation, information is available in the sources quoted.

<sup>70</sup> Nelson, *Louis Robidoux ...*, several law cases quoted in passim by both Nelson and Weber.

<sup>71</sup> Weber, *Taos Trappers*, 84 ff.

<sup>72</sup> LeRoy Hafen, ed., *French Fur Traders and Voyageurs in the American West* (Spokane: Arthur H. Clark Co.). One of the twenty five sketches presented by Janet Lecompte: *Jean Baptiste Chalifoux*, 64. A discussion of a trapping expedition in 1827, led by “Francis” Robidoux into the Ute country.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Glass Cleland, *This Reckless Breed of Men-The Traders and Fur Traders of the Southwest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Co., 1950), 179ff This massacre occurred on the Gila River soon after James Ohio Patte had separated for the night, from Robidoux’s party. Miguel staggered into Pattie’s camp the next morning, more dead than alive.

<sup>74</sup>Wallace, *Antoine Robidoux*, 24ff.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 22ff. A remark from the journal of Reverend Williams alludes to the route from the Uncompahgre River to the Lake Fork in the company of Antoine Robidoux.

<sup>76</sup> William Bailey, Ibid. see fn. 45, this paper

<sup>77</sup>William Bailey, Ibid

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 36ff. Bailey suggests that Antoine Robidoux may have been using some type of wheeled vehicle as early as 1826 to haul supplies from Santa Fe and Bent's Fort to Fort Uncompahgre. (This writer questions this premise, Robidoux possibly used some type of cart, but probably not the whole distance.) It is documented that Robidoux had left a wagon(?) along the trail in 1842-possibly on Cochetopa Pass. (See Reverend Williams comments later.) It has been assumed that a guide for Captain John W. Gunnison had informed him of this in 1853. Historians disagree on the wagon issue; while possible, it was not practical for anything other than light two-wheeled carts to go much beyond Cochetopa Pass.

<sup>79</sup> A modern day reconstruction of Fort Uncompahgre has been built at Confluence Park, in Delta, Colorado. Using 1830s type materials and techniques, the replica is an excellent teaching tool for any interested in history of the era. The staff at the Fort do an outstanding job of interpretation for the public.

<sup>80</sup>Ferris, Warren Angus, *Life in the Rocky Mountains, 1830-1835* (Originally published in a series of installments in the *Western Literary Messenger*, J. S. Chadbourne & Co. from July 13, 1842 to May 4, 1844 ), Chapter X, part 2, pp. 6 ff. Printout of series in possession of author. Ferris, obviously a man of some learning gives an excellent account of life and times, while in the employ of the American Fur Company, during the early 1830s. Unfortunately, he never identifies which "Mr." Robidoux with which he was associated.

<sup>81</sup>Weber, *Taos Trappers*, 144-145.

<sup>82</sup>This in no way is meant to discredit Antonio Armijo, who in 1829-30 led a commercial venture from Santa Fe to Los Angeles, and is considered by many to have pioneered much of the Old Spanish Trail.

<sup>83</sup>It is interesting to note how long the Trail has been so named. It has been suggested that Carson traveled as far as the Dolores River cutoff, then headed north to access the Westwater Creek route. See Guild, Selma S. & Harvey L. Calier, *Kit Carson: A Pattern for Heroes* (University of Nebraska Press., 1984), 60.

<sup>84</sup>The group probably followed the Westwater Creek to East Canyon trail route to the summit. From the description, the group must have followed the Seep Ridge route all the way to the White River.

<sup>85</sup>Kit Carson always called the Robidoux by "Mr.", never adding a given name.

<sup>86</sup>Dewitt Peters, *Kit Carson's Life and Adventures* (Hartford: Dustin, Oilman & Co., 1875), 79-80.

<sup>87</sup>David J. Weber, in Hafen's *Mountain Men VIII*, "Louis Robidoux," 322, fn. 25.

<sup>88</sup>Peters, *Kit Carson*, 160. It was around the year 1837 that the fur market started to decline. With a change in style of eastern hats and clothing, the era of the Mountain Men was to end.

<sup>89</sup>The Uintah (Uinta) River, today a branch of the Duchesne River, was known as the "Winty" for its entire length to the Green River. It is located in north-eastern Utah.

<sup>90</sup>R.G. Cleland, *This Reckless Breed of Men* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), 247.

<sup>91</sup>The inscription was first documented and photographed by a rancher in 1912.  
<sup>92</sup>A. Reed Morrill, *The Site of Fort Robidoux*. Utah State Historical Society, Vol. IX, Nos. 1-2, 1941, pp. 6-10. The extensive information provided in the short article is a must-read for any historian doing research of either the Fort or the North Branch Trail.

<sup>93</sup>Morrill, *The Site of Fort Robidoux*, 45.

<sup>94</sup>Charles Kelly, *The Mysterious "D" Julien* (Salt Lake City: 1933) 84. Julien left several inscriptions along the Green River, dating from 1830 to 1836.

<sup>95</sup>Weber, *Taos Trappers*, 108-109.

<sup>96</sup>Weber in Hafen's *Mountain Men VIII*, 321 fn. Weber notes that he received a photograph of the inscription in 1969. A similar photo, taken by Bill Benson, is in the possession of the author.

<sup>97</sup>It is interesting to note that Antoine Robidoux's inscription was written in French while that of Louis' was in Spanish. The author has seen letters written by Louis in which he used English, Spanish, French and German phrases. Louis was also purported to have been fluent in the Cahuilla Indian language and later served as an interpreter in California.

<sup>98</sup>LeRoy Hafen, ed., *French Traders and Voyageurs in the American West, Twenty-five Biographical Sketches*. (Spokane: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1995.) Includes: Janet Lecompte, "*Jean-Baptiste Chalifoux*," 58-75. Lecompte has done an excellent job in piecing together the life of an extremely elusive historical figure. Chalifoux led a life filled with real or ascribed nefarious happenings. He was apparently one of the "saints or sinners" involved in the early California revolutionary movement during the 1830s and 1840s, returning to the Taos area later. This writer is indebted to Bill Benson and "JT" Jacks of Grand Junction, Colorado, for photos and information concerning the terrain of the Willow Creek area.

<sup>99</sup>Weber, *Taos Trappers*, 108 ff. Various trapper brigade lists, of Francois Robidoux, as well as Antoine, note that a Bautista Chalifon or Chalifoux were among

the engages. Lecompte even suggests he was on his way to California, along the North Branch route in 1835.

<sup>100</sup>Wallace, *Antoine Robidoux*, 20-21. The full text of William's narrative, as given in Wallace's write-up, gives an interesting insight into life at a fur trading establishment. As stated above, Williams was quite taken aback by the conduct of the trappers, especially, their treatment of Indian women. Being from the east, he was not used to raw frontier ways.

<sup>101</sup>A very large panel of Indian pictographs is located adjacent to the inscription.

<sup>102</sup>This comment verifies Robidoux's heavy use of alternate trails.

<sup>103</sup>William's comment about "crossing Union River," was probably a transcribed error, he was undoubtedly referring to "Onion" Creek, also more commonly called Cebolla Creek, Spanish for Onion. This particular route was to be heavily used and described by later travelers.

<sup>104</sup>Robidoux's "wagon" probably a two-wheeled cart, was probably parked along the trail somewhere well below the Cochetopa Pass area, or even along Saguache Creek, at the upper end of the San Luis Valley. The early use of wagons along upper sections of the North Branch Trail has long been disputed by historians. The difficulties confronting the J. W. Gunnison expedition in 1855, with their eighteen wagons, would attest to the: need for extensive road building while crossing over the Continental Divide area of the Rocky Mountains. Small carts, or even buggy-type vehicles, were undoubtedly utilized as far as a drop off point. At which spot, materials would be transferred to pack animals for transport over the extremely rough terrain on to the trade centers.

<sup>105</sup>Wallace, *Antoine Robidoux*, 22-23.

<sup>106</sup>Wallace, *Antoine Robidoux*, 22-23.

<sup>107</sup>*Ibid.*, 24-25. They crossed the Grand and Green rivers, the Grand at the Dolores, and the Green probably above the White River.

<sup>108</sup>Warner, *Dominguez-Escalante*, passim.

<sup>109</sup>Map No. 4, *From the Coo-che-to-Pass to the Wasatch Mountains*, 1855. A.O.P. Nicholson, printer, Washington, D. C. 1855. Shows the route of the Gunnison expedition. See also: Captain J. N. Macomb, *Map of Explorations and Surveys in New Mexico and Utah*. (Geographical Institute, Baron F. W. Von Egloffstein. No.164 Broadway New York, 1864 ). This particular map shows the routes of several of the early expeditions.

<sup>110</sup>The north side of the Grand River is virtually a solid canyon wall for many miles in that area.

<sup>110</sup>The mouth of Westwater Creek Canyon is approximately equidistant between the crossing of the Main Trail and the ford above the confluence of the present day Gunnison and Colorado rivers, on the regularly used North Branch.

<sup>112</sup> Morrill, *Site of Fort Robidoux*, 4.

<sup>113</sup> *Canyon Legacy*, “Explorers and Expeditions” (A Journal of the Dan O’Leary Museum: Moab, UT. No.9, 1991),15, by James H. Knipmeyer.

<sup>114</sup> Wallace, *Antoine Robidoux* , 26.

<sup>115</sup> Wallace, *Antoine Robidoux*, 26-27. The river is virtually choked with large ice floes during the winter months. Normally the waters are not too high and swift until February, however, the river can run high after a wet fall season.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 27

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> Allan Nevins, *Fremont, Pathmarker of the West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1939), 343-372, passim. Fremont has been both praised and maligned by historians as a result of this, his fourth expedition.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 405-420. Nevins records only a very brief sketch of Fremont’s trek over this section of the North Branch Trail.

<sup>120</sup> Ferris, W. A. *Ibid.*, Chapter XLV II, part 6, pp. 15-16. Ferris’s account of life while living among the Indians, trappers and traders gives a fascinating insight of the period under discussion. Further, a log raft, constructed by some trappers in the same group, drifted far downstream and caused a delay in travel.

<sup>121</sup> It has been surmised that both Carson and Brewerton, while recording the same incident as happening on the Grand River, were either mistaken or had a lapse of memory.

<sup>122</sup> Peters, *Kit Carson*, 317 ff. Also, George Douglas Brewerton, *Overland With Kit Carson, A Narrative of the Old Spanish Trail in ‘48*, 120.

<sup>123</sup> Hafen & Hafen, *Old Spanish Trail*, 335. As the group was traveling east from Los Angeles, they had to reach the Green River first. The “two days travel” comment, would indicate they either stayed on the Main route, or possibly crossed the Grand at the Dolores River ford.

<sup>124</sup> See footnote 73, this document. Quote from New Mexico State Historical Review Vol. 2 p. 293-294 as noted in Bailey’s endnotes.

<sup>125</sup> Hafen & Hafen, *The Old Spanish Trail*, 197-198, fn, 6. Quote from “Colonel Benton and the Pacific Railroad” in the *New York Tribune*, March 16, 1853. It would appear that Antoine Leroux was a fairly well educated man. He has been quoted from time to time by various historians from letters written to various officials. It would also appear that Leroux was neither shy nor unafraid to exaggerate or express his own opinions. His later actions while with the Gunnison expedition paint an interesting portrait of his character.

<sup>126</sup>E. G. Beckwith, *Report of Explorations and Surveys*, by Capt J. W. Gunnison, 1853-54, Vol. II, 1855. passim.

<sup>127</sup> Henry Gannett, *Letters to Dr. F V Hayden ...* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1875, 1876), 428ff. His reference to Gunnison's route in 1854 through the area, gives rise to the thought that ruts were visible after twenty some years, but not necessarily Gunnison's.

<sup>128</sup> Wallace, *Antoine Robidoux*, 28. This excerpt refers to the massacre at Fort Uintah while Antoine was absent.

<sup>129</sup> Wallace, *Antoine Robidoux*, passim. Antoine Robidoux's later life is detailed after his trapping days ended.

<sup>130</sup>Nelson, *Louis Robidoux*, passim. Louis Robidoux's life after this time in New Mexico is told in some detail. Both brothers remained very active for many years.

<sup>131</sup> Allen Nevins, *Fremont*, passim. Nevins describes each of Fremont's expeditions. Unfortunately, his fifth expedition along the route of the North Branch, gives little specific detail. See footnote 119, this document.

<sup>132</sup> This offhand comment leads to much speculation. It is possible that a more heavily used route of the Old Spanish Trail connected with a northern variant at this point.

<sup>133</sup> Gwen Harris Heap, *Central Route to the Pacific* (Philadelphia: Lipponcott, Grambo. and Co., 1854 ), 11. Heap, a cousin of Lieutenant E. F. Beale, was invited along on the expedition to serve as the official journalist. His account is very readable and easy to follow.

<sup>134</sup> Located somewhere west of the Uncompahgre and south of the Gunnison.

<sup>135</sup> Heap, *Central Route to the Pacific*, 53-54. This short passage fairly well delineates the route of the Lake Fork variant which probably was a well-accepted trail used for years by the trappers.

<sup>136</sup> Heap apparently was a very keen observer, and probably willing to seek information from knowledgeable frontiersmen. His comprehension of the area traveled shows more than just a passing interest. He notes that he sought out information from Antoine Leroux.

<sup>137</sup> Heap, *Central Route to the Pacific*, 63. The replacements were: Thomas Otterby, Jose' Galliego, a seasoned mountain man who had been with Fremont earlier, and Juan Cordova, a muleteer.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid.,64.

<sup>139</sup>Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Antoine Leroux happened to be residing in Taos at the time, just prior to assuming his role as guide for the J. W. Gunnison expedition. Also, the term "Mexican" was politically correct.

<sup>140</sup>Antoine Leroux happened to be residing in Taos at the time, just prior to assuming his role as guide for the J. W. Gunnison expedition. Also, the term "Mexican" was politically correct.

<sup>141</sup>This comment, about five or six miles, has led to some confusion by researchers. Gannett, *Ibid.*, 416, also makes a similar statement. There was a ford, located at present 31 Road, in Grand Junction, CO., which does not fit the overall description, just the mileage. It is very possible that because of the high water, the group had to detour far north, across a flooded plain, which added miles to their estimate.

<sup>142</sup> See footnote 35 this document, also more discussion of this crossing later.

<sup>143</sup> Heap, *Central Route ...* , 119-120. A detailed daily log of the entire trek is given.

<sup>144</sup> E.G. Beckwith, *Report of Exploration of a Route For the Pacific Railroad ...* 33<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, Ex. Doc. No.129 (Washington, D.C.: Nicholson, Printer, 1855), 3. A report filed with Congress after the death of Capt. Gunnison. [Vegas . . . Mountain Meadows]

<sup>145</sup>J.H. Schiel, *Journey through the Rocky Mountains ...* , as found in Nolie Mumey, *John Williams Gunnison ...* (Denver: Artcraft Press, 1955), 75. Originally printed in 1859 in German, translation by Maria Williams, Denver, CO. She had a copy in the original German. See footnote 118, on page 55 of Mumey.

<sup>146</sup> Mumey, *John Williams Gunnison*, 45. see fn. 97. "Extract from the John Gunnison Letters, used through courtesy of the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California."

<sup>147</sup> See footnote 146 this document. It is believed by this writer, that Leroux was given to exaggerated accounts of his own prowess. It is also apparent by Gunnison's letter above, that while forced to depend upon such men, they in turn were not always reliable.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 77 ff. Schiel accompanied the expedition and is listed on the original roster as a geologist and surgeon. He is noted as Dr. James Schiel by Beckwith, above, page 5.

<sup>149</sup>Beckwith, *Report. ...* 2nd. Session, Ex. Doc.91. Vol. n, 1853-54. 52.

<sup>150</sup>*Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-54. The account of their trek across this section of the Lake Fork variant, is quite descriptive. There is little question that this was the route that Antoine Robidoux followed on occasion. Antoine's trail through there did not follow the Lake Fork as far north as Gunnison's, but undoubtedly took a more direct route over to Cochetopa Pass. Antoine's Lake Fork route would also become the route to be followed later on the way to the Los Pinos Indian Agency.

<sup>152</sup>*Ibid.*, 56

<sup>153</sup>The reports of the Expedition submitted to Congress make recreating the route fairly simple, as they describe the terrain, mileage each day, camp sites, direction traveled and elevation.

<sup>154</sup> Gannett, *Ibid.* in Hayden's *Annual Report*. 1876. 428.

Gannett gives an interesting overview of the various trails in existence in the Gunnison River watershed, in the 1870s. He also mentions the few wagon roads, and emphasizes the roughness of the terrain making wagon traffic impractical. His reference to Gunnison's route across the desert in 1853, on his way to the Grand River, gives rise to the thought that the expeditions' "ruts" were still visible.

<sup>155</sup> At this point a pause for an important clarification is required. History has a way of confusing researchers: the Colorado River has been blessed with many names, a few of which have been mentioned. When Gunnison reached the river, he was informed it was named the Nahunkahrea or Blue, and is so noted on the expedition map. This is probably a phonetic spelling of the "Avonkarea," used by the Beale-I-leap expedition. The Colorado River was known as such by the early travelers, from the confluence with the Green River down. From that juncture up, to its headwater, above modern-day Gunnison, Colorado, it was known as the Grand. The only exception being that from the confluence of the Gunnison and Colorado, the river assumed various titles, at times including the name "Grand." The name Grand remained until well into the twentieth century. The Gunnison River, named after the expedition leader, was so designated and placed on maps by the Governor of Colorado in 1861.

<sup>156</sup> Mumey, *John Williams Gunnison*, 48, fn. 103 & 104.

<sup>157</sup> Beckwith, *Ibid.* 1st Session, Ex. Doc. 129, 1855, p.61. Entry for September 19, 1853: a very careful interpretation will give this mileage from Kannah Creek to ford at arroyo. This is a somewhat confusing entry, and has been misinterpreted.

<sup>158</sup> Beckwith, *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>159</sup> Gannett, *Ibid.* facing pages 350 and 351. These three drawings give accurate portrayals of the crossings at the Green, Grand (Gunnison), and Grand (Colorado), especially when compared with later survey maps.

<sup>160</sup> A few feet at the entrance to the arroyo have been filled in to make way for a street, but the geography remains intact. A housing developer is fully aware of the historic significance of the area, and has placed a restrictive variance on the site.

<sup>161</sup> Mumey, *John Williams Gunnison*, *passim*. Mumey's work gives an excellent overview leading up to the massacre. Replete with letters and newspaper articles, one can piece together the entire event, and the accusations trying to place blame for the massacre.

<sup>162</sup> Nevins, *Fremont ...*, 41 *ff.*

<sup>163</sup>Randolph B. Marcy, *Thirty Years of Army Life on the Border* (New York: Harper & Brothers, ii Publishers, 1866.) [ Photocopy of pages 198-22, in writer's library]. pp.198-200. The quote given here is part of the report submitted to the Secretary of War for 1858. See also: Hafen, LeRoy R. "A Winter Rescue March Across the Rockies." *The Colorado Magazine*. -Vols, IV and V, Jan. 1927 to Oct 1928. Denver, CO. pp.7-13. A much modified version of the entire trek, from that appearing in Marcy's work. This latter work should be read carefully and compared with Marcy's original, there are discrepancies.

<sup>164</sup>Marcy, *Thirty Years*, 202.

<sup>165</sup>J.N. Captain Macomb, *A Map of Explorations and Surveys in New Mexico and Utah, 1860*. (Geographical Institute, Baron F.W. Von Egloffstein, No.154 Broadway, N. Y. 1864)

<sup>166</sup>Marcy, *Ibid.*, 203. This is yet another spelling of the Grand River, From Marcy's description of the ford, there is little question, this was the "Crossing of the Grand." "We ford them ... " The Colorado, the Gunnison and the Uncompahgre-present day spellings??

<sup>167</sup>*The Colorado Magazine* Vol XXIII, No.2. The State Historical Society of Colorado March, 1946. "Colonel Loring's Expedition Across Colorado in 1858" 64. It is very interesting to note the times that Loring mentions either noticing or locating one of Marcy's campsites or caches as he later follows virtually the same route. He was possibly in the vicinity of Kannah Creek at this point in 1858.\*

<sup>168</sup>Marcy, *Thirty Years*, 203.

<sup>169</sup>Marcy, *Thirty Years*, 209. The group, living as the were on tough mule meat, preserved the two birds for scientific purposes. They were sent later to a Professor Baird of the Smithsonian Institute who identified them. They were shown to be the "Sagopus Leucurus." While well-known in Europe, were rarely found in the United States and then only in the Rocky Mountains north of 54 ° Latitude.

<sup>170</sup>*Ibid.*, 212. Captain Marcy is even today to be commended for his exhibition of outstanding leadership. He suffered right along with his men. He was later to receive a letter of commendation from his commanding officer.

<sup>171</sup> Marcy, *Thirty Years ...* , 219. This writer can attest to the extreme weather conditions Marcy's men were subjected to. Minus 50° is very commcm during the winter months along with deep snows which are throughout their area of travel.

<sup>172</sup> Hafen. *Ibid.*, *A Winter Rescue ...* , 12-13.

<sup>173</sup>Marcy, *Ibid.*, 221-22.

<sup>174</sup>"Colonel Loring's ... " *Ibid.* Introduction, 49. fn. 1.

<sup>175</sup>*Ibid.*, 50, This report and reproduction was obtained by Mrs. Ann Hafen, from the National Archives, in January, 1945, as noted in Introduction above.

<sup>176</sup>"Colonel Loring ... " Ibid., 60. The Mormon Trail that Loring crossed was probably in all reality the Old Spanish Trail. An article appeared in the Deseret News, December 21, 1854, of an expedition lead by D. W. Hunington, of Springerville, Utah, down into the area south of Moab. Also, as Loring mentions the Mormon Trail, several times in his report, this is probably in reference to the precursor of the Salt Lake Wagon Road.

<sup>177</sup>Ibid., fn.45, 65. L. Hafen, editor's comments, notes that many Mormon early attempts at settlement were called back during the unrest in Utah during 1857. Moab was settled in 1855.

<sup>178</sup>Antoine Leroux has been mentioned from time to time in this document, but he unfortunately never had an official biographer.

<sup>179</sup> Colonel Loring, Ibid., 62 (there is a footnote 38 incorporated in the quote. It clarifies the fact that Abiquiu, is on the Old Spanish Trail. This comment was inserted by Mrs. Hafen.)

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 63. It is interesting, Loring had apparently dropped the Indian name for the Colorado River, and called it the Blue, even though he had Leroux as a guide. He did have the correct mileage for the ford above the confluence.

<sup>181</sup> Beckwith, Ibid., 61. See also: fn. 144 this document. See: Reeves, Rollin J. Field Notes of the Survey of the Colorado-Utah Boundary Line, 1879. Copy of Handwritten Field Notes. (Copy in this writer's library). Description of "Old Salt Lake Wagon Road" crossing, which is undoubtedly at the identified "Crossing of the Grand" There is little reason to question the location of the crossing as it has been pinpointed.

<sup>182</sup> Beckwith, Ibid., 68. Cebolla Creek, entered the Grand, [Gunnison] River east of where the Lake Fork River joined it. Care must be taken here as the name Cebolla has and was attached to more than one creek in the area. Possibly so named because of the wild onion which flourishes along the marshy creek bottoms. Present Blue Mesa Reservoir has changed much of the landscape in the area, it is difficult to recognize many of the old landmarks which existed prior to 1950.

<sup>183</sup>It is virtually an impossible task to locate many of the place names from the early journals. It appears that even the guides, such as Antoine Leroux, would either become confused or attach a place name according to his whim of the minute.

<sup>184</sup> Colonel Loring, Ibid., 75-76. Loring's report is invaluable to any student of the North Branch route. His very detailed description of the trail, should erase any doubt that a more than adequate route was not only feasible but possible. By the time that Loring and his troops passed over the Trail, in 1858, the route was indelibly etched as a route not to be feared but respected.

<sup>185</sup>William L. Chenoweth, *Historic Trails Through the Grand Valley of Western Colorado*. 1998, Unpublished manuscript prepared for the Colorado Riverfront

Foundation, Grand Junction, Colorado. 21 pages, Mr. Chenoweth's study appears to be the only one extant on an extremely elusive route through the Grand Valley area, Existing from approximately 1875 until the mid 1880s, the trail assumed a regular route over existing previous trails along the North Branch route. Extending from the Salt Lake Basin area it traversed the North Branch route across the desert to the Montrose, Colorado area. One branch of the trail extended on to the mining community of Ouray, Colorado, where it hauled needed supplies. Another fork of the road went on over the "Old Lake Fork" route to reach Old Los Pinos, an Indian

### ***BIBLIOGRAPHY***

Alter, J, Cecil. *Jim Bridger*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962. A definitive study of old "Gabe" and his influence on the fur trade in general.

Bailey, William McCrea, *Fort Unicornpahgre*. no date, unpublished manuscript, contains maps, documents and invoices pertaining to Antoine Robidoux's activities.

Brewerton, George Douglas, *Overland with Kit Carson. A Narrative of The Old Spanish Trail in '48*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993. Reprint of original edition with copies of illustrations and original map.

Chittenden, Hiram Martin, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*. Two Vols. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986. Of tremendous value as a background for information on the fur trade and the period under discussion, of little use for information on the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail.

Cleland, Robert Glass, *This Restless Breed of Men*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950. Unsurpassed account of the individuals who were the mountain men.

Cragin, F. W., Papers, "Early Far West Notebook. V." no date, Colorado Springs Pioneer Museum, Starsmore Research Center. [Photocopy] A vast collection of notes, conversations and observations from early pioneers. Compiled during the late 1800's to early 1900's.

Crampton, C. Gregory & Madsen, Steven K., *In Search of the Old Spanish Trail*. Sante Fe to Los Angeles, 1829-1848 .• Salt Lake City, Utah, 1994, Gibbs-Smith Pug., Maps, photos and text tracing the Trail from end to end.

Craver, Rebecca McDowell, “The Impact of Intimacy. Mexican-Anglo Inter-marriage in New Mexico, 1621-1646,” El Paso: University of Texas, 1982. (Southwestern Studies Monograph No. 66. A fascinating short listing of marriages between the two groups during the period under study. Many familiar names.

De Voto, Bernard, *Across the Wide Missouri*. Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1947. De Voto wrote the book on the fur trade.

Ferris, Warren Angus, *Life in the Rocky Mountains*. 1830-1835. (Originally published in a series of installments in the *Western Literary Messenger*. J. S. Chadbourne & Co. July 13; 1842 to May 4, 1844.) This writer has printout of series in his library.] An excellent overview of life during the 1830s fur trade.

Forbes, Jack D., *Warriors of the Colorado*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965. A well documented study of the Indians along the lower Colorado River, from first European contact until after 1800.

Fourth Annual Publication of the City of San Bernardino Historical Society, “Smith, Ian Alastair. Isaac Slover-Free Hunter, 1777-1854,” San Bernardino, 1981. A very interesting compilation of information on a very elusive and eccentric mountain man.

Gowans, Fred R. *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous. A History of the Fur Trade Rendezvous, 1825-1840*. Gibbs M. Smith, pub, Inc. Layton, UT. c.1976, reprint 1986. An excellent in-depth look at each of the yearly rendezvous.

Guild, Selma S. & Harvey L. Carter, *Kit Carson: A Pattern for Heroes*. University of Nebraska Press, 1984. Excellent account of Carson’s life.

Hafen, Leroy R. & Ann W. Hafen., *Old Spanish Trail*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, reprint of 1954 edition, 1993. Their account of the Trail laid the foundation for all future studies.

-----, Editor, *Mountain Men and Fur Traders of the Far West*. Norman: University of Nebraska Press. 1982. A selection of eighteen biographical sketches from the earlier ten volume works.

-----, Editor, *French Fur Traders and Voyageurs in the American West. Twenty-five Biographical Sketches*. Spokane: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1955. A fascinating collection of informative material by various western historians.

-----, Editor, "A Winter March Across the Rockies," appeared in *The Colorado Magazine*, Vols. IV and V, Jan 1927 to Oct. 1928., Denver, CO. (pages 7-13). A much modified version of Captain Marcy's trek during the winter of 1857-58.

Heap, Gwinn Harris, *Central Route to the Pacific, from the Valley of the Mississippi to California ... Missouri to California, in 1853*, Philadelphia: Lipponcott, Grambo, and Co. 1854. An excellent, observant overview of a near disastrous expedition across the North Branch Trail. Illustrated with ink drawings. Including mileage chart. (This writer has a photocopy of pp. up to IS, and pp. 43 to 87, pp. 113 to 123.)

Kelly, Charles, "The Mysterious 'D. Julien'", *Utah Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 3., State Capitol, Salt Lake City, UT. July, (1933). An interesting study of Julien's rock inscriptions, and the life of an elusive mountain man.

Kessler, Ronald E., *Re-Tracing the Old Spanish Trail-North Branch, Monte Vista*: Adobe Village Press, 1995. Primarily a modern travel guide to points of interest along the North Branch. Documented with historical information for the modern day driver.

-----, "The search for the East Fork of the Old Spanish Trail...", unpublished manuscript on his search for old wagon roads in the San Luis Valley area of Colorado. (1995].

Knipmeyer, James H. *Explorers and Expeditions, from Canyon Legacy*, Moab: Dan O'Leary Museum, 1991. Vol. No. 9. A search for trapper rock carving inscriptions.

Loring, Colonel William Wing., Introduction and edited by LeRoy Ilafen, "Colonel Loring's Expedition Across Colorado in 1858," *The Colorado Magazine*, Vol. XXIII, No. 2. The State Historical Society of Colorado, March, 1946. Photocopy courtesy of Bill Chenoweth.

Marcey, Randolph B. *Thirty Years of Army Life on the Border*, Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co. Philadelphia and New York, 1866 Ed. Unabridged, Introduction by Edward S. Wallace. 1963. [This very difficult to locate edition on interlibrary loan from Clark County Library, Las Vegas, NV., courtesy of Bill Chenoweth, Grand Junction, CO.] Photocopy of 1866 edition, pp. 198 to 223.

Mattes, Merrill J., *Colter's Hell & Jackson's Hole*, Yellowstone Park: Yellowstone Library and Museum Association ... . 1962, reprint 1980. Excellent account of fur trade in area.

Moody, Ralph, *The Old Trails West*, New York: Thos. Y. Crowell Company, 1963. A brief history of the many legendary Trails throughout the West. Well researched.

Morgan, Dale L., ed, *The West of William H. Ashley, 1822-38*, Denver: Old West Publishing Company, 1964. An outstanding interpretation of the notes and diary of Ashley. Very well documented with corroborative information.

Mumey, Nolie, *John Williams Gunnison*, Denver: Artcraft Press, 1955. An excellent overview of Gunnison's life, expedition and death. Includes copy of J. H. Schiel's Journal.

Nelson, John (Jack) W., "Louis Robidoux-California Pioneer," unpublished M.A. Thesis, *University of Redlands*, Redlands, CA. 1950., Published as: "Louis Robidoux-The Man Behind the Legend," in weekly installments *Riverside Daily Press Enterprise*, 1957. The latter complete with photographs of the era. Well documented, study dispelled and corrected many of the myths surrounding Louis Robidoux.

-----, "Cajon Pass: Vital Trail Link to Southern California." Independence: *News from the Plains*, Newsletter of the Oregon-California Trails Association, Vol XI, No. I, Jan 1997.

-----, "North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail," *Journal of the Western Slope*, Vol. IT, No. 4, Fall 1996.

Nevins, Allen, *Fremont, Pathfinder of the West*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992. An excellent overview of Fremont's life and times.

Oglesby, Richard E., *Manuel Lisa and the Opening of the Missouri Fur Trade*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963. Well documented discourse on Lisa.

Peters, Dewitt C., *Kit Carson's Life and Adventures ...*, Hartford: Dustin, Gilman & Company, 1875. Dictated by Carson in his later years to his friend Peters. While somewhat romanticized in spots, it is accepted as fairly accurate in content.

Russell. Carl P., *Firearms, Traps, Tools of the Mountain Men*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981. Fourth Printing. Detailed study of the 'tools' of the trade.

Sanchez, Joseph P. *Explorers, Traders, and Slavers: Forging the Old Spanish Trail-1678-1850*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1997. His work fills in many holes extant in the early development of the Trail. A must for historians of Spanish Colonial times.

Smith, Jedediah S. *The Southwest Expedition of Jedediah S. Smith His Personal Account of the Journey to California, 1826-1827*, George R. Brooks, ed, Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1989. A daily account of Smith's trek to California, excellent.

Spencer, Frank C', *Colorado Story*. Denver: World Press, 1930., An excellent overview of the history of Colorado and the influence of the mountain men on the state's history.

Stegner, Wallace, *Beyond the Hundreth Meridian*, Boston: Houghten Mifflin Co., 1992. Excellent background material on the hazards of the Green and Colorado Rivers.

Utah Historical Quarterly:

Auerbach, Herbert S. "Old Trails, Old Forts and Traders, History and Romance of the Old Spanish Trail," *Utah Historical Quarterly*, Vol. IX, Numbers 1-2, 1941.

Morrill, A. Reed, "The Site of Fort Robidoux," *Utah Historical Quarterly*, Vol. IX, Numbers 1-2, 1941.

These two short presentations are well documented and should be carefully read before any attempt is made to study the Old Spanish Trail. Auerbach's Bibliography is of great value, his work predates LeRoy Hafen's study of the Trail by ten years.

Wallace, William S., *Antoine Robidoux-1794-1860*, Los Angeles: Glen Dawson, 1953. Well documented account of Robidoux's life and times. Very little information has come to light since Wallace's presentation.

Warner, Ted J., ed, Chavez, Fray Angelico, translator. "*The Dominguez-Escalante Journal*," Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1976. A 'must' for any student of Southwestern history.

Weber, David J., "Louis Robidoux," Published in Haen's *Mountain Men*, pp. 322 ff., Vol. VIII. A well documented account which adds information to Nelson's Louis Robidoux, above. Weber quotes Nelson in several instances. The Taos Trappers, University of Oklahoma Press, London, 1970. A must for all Southwestern historians.

## ***DOCUMENTS, MAPS AND PHOTOGRAPHS***

Beckwith, E.G., Lieut. Third Artillery, U.S. Army., *Report of Explorations and Surveys, by Captain J. W. Gunnison, Topographical Engineers, U.S. Army, 1853-54*, Vol. II, 1855.

*House of Representative-Executive Document No. 91. 1853-54. pp. 52- 57.*  
House Document, No. 129, 1st Session, 1854. Senate Report, Ex. Document No. 78, 33rd Congress, 2nd Session, Vol. II. Acts of Congress dated March 3, 1853, May 31, 1854, and August 5, 1854. Map No. 4, From the Coo-Che-To-Pa Pass to the Wahsatch Mountains 1855. A.O.P. Nicholson, printer, Washington, D.C. 1855.

Forsgren, Clyde, *Deed* dated March 17 1882 a multi-paged Deed for property located at 2833 C½ Road, Grand Junction, CO. Pertains to the land located on the north bank at the 'crossing of the Grand'. Initially. filed in Gunnison County, later Mesa County, CO.

Gannett, Henry, *Letter to Dr. F. V. Hayden: Ninth Annual Report of U.S. Geological and Geographical Survey ... , 1875*, F.V. Hayden, Washington, 1876. Also: *Annual Report... of 1874*, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1876. These reports are commonly referred to as The Hayden Report and/or Maps.

## *MAPS*

Maccomb, J. N. Captain, Map of Explorations and Surveys in New Mexico and Utah, 1860, New York: Geographical Institute, Baron Von Egloffstein, 1864.

Map of the Gunnison Survey referred to above: Map No. 4 From the Coo-Che-To-Pa Pass to the Wahsatch Mountains, By Capt. J. W. Gunnison, Top. Eng. and Capt. E.G. Beckwith, 3rd Artillery. R.H. Kern, Topographer, Scale: 12 miles to the inch. 1855.

Nell's Topographical and Township Map of the State of Colorado, 1855. Compiled from U.S. Government Survey's, etc. Denver, CO.

Reeves, Rollin .T., "Field Notes of the Survey of the Colorado-Utah Boundary Line," Copy No. I, 1879, An interesting copy of a handwritten account of a crossing of the Grand River above the confluence of the Gunnison River in 1879. [CO. State Office of US Dept. ofBLM.]

D.G. Major's Township Surveys of Grand Junction, Co. area in 1881. Writer is deeply indebted to William Chenoweth of Grand Junction, CO for several of the early maps and documents.

United States Geological Survey Series, 1: 1 00 000-scale metric topographic maps of western Colorado and north western Utah. A series of twenty maps printed under the auspices of the U.S. Department of the Interior, during 1981-1983. Vital for any study of the routes covered by the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail.

## *PHOTOS*

Photographs: Various photos taken by Bill Benson and "JT" Jacks of Grand Junction, CO. of the inscriptions located in the Westwater-Willow Creek drainage. Photos were also taken in the area by Jon Nelson, writer's son. A Mr. and Mrs. William Morse, of Grand Junction, supplied photos of the rock inscription in the Dolores River "triangle".

Enclosed line drawings and etched scenes are all from printed material from before 1875 and are not copyrighted.