

Land, Water and People

## **Travelin' the Old Spanish Trail**

By Lorrie Crawford

The Old Spanish Trail was used from 1829 – 1848 as a trade route from Santa Fe, New Mexico to Los Angeles, California. Woolen textiles, woven in Northern New Mexico, were traded for strong Californian mules and horses.

The Old Spanish Trail had three branches. A portion of the North Branch passed through the San Luis Valley. The East Fork, designated in 2002 as a portion of the Old Spanish National Historic Trail, passed on the east side of the valley from the San Luis area to Blanca and onto the Crestone area. Here it crossed the northern end of the Valley into Saguache and over Cochetopa Pass. The West Fork, still being evaluated for National Historic Trail designation, traveled from the Antonito and Conejos area, over the Rio Grande to La Garita and then on towards Cochetopa Pass (where both forks meet).

Textiles traded on the Old Spanish Trail were made from the wool of Churro Sheep. The wool was desirable because of its water resistance, warmth and multiple colors. Churro wool allowed weavers to create beautiful blankets, shawls and rugs with mixtures of black, white, grey, tan, rust, cinnamon, and brown.

Mules were not only a trade item but were also the primary mode of transportation used during the Old Spanish Trail period. Carrying up to 400 pounds of merchandise, mules traveled the approximately 2,700 mile trail (round trip), in caravans of 50 – 200 animals. Traveling 12 – 15 miles per day, a round trip would take from 180 – 225 days, assuming that nothing went wrong along the way.

The journey on the trail was difficult. Travelers had to deal with water issues – both the lack of it for drinking and the over-abundance of it for river crossings. Food for the journey had to be dried and gathered along the way. While jerky, piñon nuts, berries, and posole are enjoyable treats for many of us today, eating these foods day after day for months would not be desirable. Another concern was hostile people. Not everyone was happy to have these travelers passing through. Some required a 'toll' – horses, mules or other trade goods. Some would simply kill in order to take all of the bounty. The journey along the Old Spanish Trail was long, dangerous, tiring and very challenging.

Finding traces from the Old Spanish Trail period today is difficult. Mule caravans didn't follow the type of trail that we are familiar with today – a trail of a few feet wide. Instead, they likely wandered all about the area, leaving only scattered hoof prints that have since been blown or washed away. These paths had been traveled long before this period by Native Americans and wildlife and afterwards by miners, fur traders, and travelers seeking homes throughout the West.

Wagon ruts near Del Norte are evidence of travel at a time shortly after the Old Spanish Trail ceased to be used as a trade route. A monument, along U.S. Highway 160 between Monte Vista and Del Norte, honors those who passed through this route, before, during and after the Old Spanish Trail period.

The trade period of the Old Spanish Trail ended when the Southwest became part of the United States, following the Mexican Cession of 1848. It was shortly after that time that settlers began coming to the San Luis Valley to make their homes. Many of

their descendents still live here today. If your last name is Salazar, Trujillo, Quintana, Espinoza or Martinez, it is very possible that one or more of your ancestors traveled the Old Spanish Trail.

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