



A Path Through the Wilderness: The Story of Forest Road 150

**Gila National Forest
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March 2016**

National Forest System Road 150 [commonly referred to as Forest Road (FR) 150], begins within the confines of the Gila National Forest and stretches north about 55 miles from NM 35 near Mimbres past Beaverhead Work Center to NM 163 north of the Gila National Forest boundary. FR 150 is the main road accessing this area of the Gila National Forest. Its location between two Wilderness Areas, Aldo Leopold and the Gila, makes it an important corridor for public access, as well as, administrative access for the Gila National Forest.

Forest Road 150: The Name and a Brief History

FR150 has been known by several names. The road was first called the North Star Road by the residents of Grant County and the U.S. Military when it was constructed in the 1870s.¹ Today, the route is still called the North Star Road and used interchangeably with FR 150.

Through most of the 20th century, FR 150 was under New Mexico state jurisdiction and named New Mexico (NM) 61.² Of interest is that topographical maps dating to at least 1980, list the road as both NM 61 and FR 150.³ This is interesting because, today, it is common practice not to give roads Forest Service names unless they are under the jurisdiction of the Forest Service. In addition, the 1974 Gila National Forest Map refers to the route as FR 150.⁴ There is still some question when the North Star Road and NM 61 became known as FR 150. The earliest known account is 1936. A ‘Truck Trail Inspection’ form from Camp Sully, F-N-11, a Civilian Conservation Corps camp near Mimbres, reports work completed on the Beaverhead Mimbres #150 truck trail.⁵

¹ Neta Pope and Andrea Jaquez, *The Fort Bayard Story 1866-99: The Soldiers...The Hostile Apache Indians...The Settlers in Harm's Way...*, (Self-Published: Andrea Jaquez 2011), 230-231.

Lieutenant C.A. Stedman, 9th Cavalry, to Acting Assistant Adjunct General, District of New Mexico, October 26, 1877," (Letter #N-381, Record Group 393: Records of United States Army Continental Commands (1821-1920), Part III: Geographical Districts and Subdistricts: District of New Mexico (1865-90), Entry 434: Letters and Reports Received (1867-90)., National Archive Building, Washington, DC).

² Lawrence S. Grebner, "Historical Research and Current Status of NM 61 with Enclosures," (Memo to Bill Moyers, Assistant General Counsel, New Mexico Department of Transportation, March 10, 2004, On file, Gila National Forest).

³ USDA Forest Service, "Gila National Forest 1980 Transportation 'B' Quads: Black Mountain, Santa Rita, and Copperas Peak," (On file at the Gila National Forest, 1980).

⁴ USDA Forest Service, "Gila National Forest Map", (Gila National Forest, 1974).

⁵ Forest Service Inspection Forms for Civilian Conservation Camps, 1933-1942 (FS Inspection Forms); Camps F-11-N, F-12-N, F-15-N, F-29-N, F-25-N, F-34-N, F-40-N, PE-202-N, and TF-1-N (CCC Camps); Gila National Forest, Silver City, NM (GNF).

North Star Road:

FR 150 began its life as the North Star Road in the 1870s. Used primarily as a military road, it connected several military forts and camps in the area during the Apache-U.S. Army conflicts in the late 1800s. Citizens of Grant County also thought it would provide safer passage to and from the Mimbres Valley and Silver City Area than other routes. The encroachment of settlers upon Apache lands brought about conflicts between the two groups.⁶

C.P. Crawford of Silver City suggested building the North Star Road on the west side of the Mimbres Mountains. This idea was adopted by the citizens of Grant County, specifically, those in Mimbres and Silver City. They began building the road in early 1875.⁷ Grant County citizens built sections of the road at Willow Springs, at Rocky Canyon, and at Black Canyon.⁸

Later, in 1875, the US Army began working on the North Star Road. Military personnel and, reportedly, military prisoners worked to construct the road.⁹ Companies from the 15th Infantry and both the 8th and 9th Cavalry helped to construct various portions of the road. However, it appears companies from the 15th Infantry and the 9th Cavalry were much more involved in its construction.¹⁰ Detachments from the 15th Infantry worked on the east end of the North Star Road. This stretch included the area between Camp Sherman and Camp Vincent.¹¹ And, Company C of the 9th Cavalry worked on segments of the road in Black Canyon. Camps were built close to work locations including Corduroy Canyon (Camp Sherman), Black Canyon (Camp Beyer), and the Diamond Creek (Camp Vincent) areas.¹²

In 1877, the North Star Road was described as extending "...into the Rio Grande Valley near Sabinal where it intersects the river road."¹³ It is not known if the entire length of this route was

⁶ Pope and Jaquez, *The Fort Bayard Story*, 230,

⁷ Pope and Jaquez, *The Fort Bayard Story*, 230,

⁸ Lt Stedman Letter, 4, 10 and 13.

⁹ Pope and Jaquez, *The Fort Bayard Story*, 230,

¹⁰ Pope and Jaquez, *The Fort Bayard Story*, 230-231.

¹¹ Pope and Jaquez, *The Fort Bayard Story*, 230,

Lt. Stedman Letter, 21-22.

¹² Pope Jaquez, *The Fort Bayard Story*, 230-230.

¹³ Lt. Stedman Letter, 2.

known as the North Star Road. But, the North Star Road did connect Fort Bayard and Grant County to the areas north of it.

Today, FR 150 does not follow the exact prism of the original North Star Road. In fact, there is evidence of improvements to North Star Road in the late 1870s due to flooding that would have varied its location from the original construction.¹⁴ Nevertheless, today, the names are used interchangeably by residents of the area.

NM 61:

FR 150/North Star Road was considered a state highway for a good portion of the 20th Century. In 1917, the New Mexico State Highway Commission (SHC) created NM 61.¹⁵ The original description of the route did not include FR 150/North Star Road.¹⁶ However, a map from 1948 displays this segment as NM 61.¹⁷ The exact date that FR 150/North Star Road became NM 61 is not known, but it appears to be somewhere between 1917 and 1948. Data discussed below would point to the 1940s. In correspondence relating to maintenance of roads in 1982, the SHC states that Grant and Catron Counties did not maintain the route, but the Forest Service provided some maintenance.¹⁸ This may be why the name ‘FR 150’ was attached to the road before the Forest Service took over jurisdiction in 1985. A SHC memo states that in 1965 the state vacated and abandoned several segments of NM 61, specifically, the FR 150/North Star Road segments, to the US Forest Service. However, it appears this was not finalized until 1985 when Declaration of Vacation and Abandonment documents were signed.¹⁹

FR 150 and the First Wilderness Area

Most documentation describes FR 150/North Star Road as a military or wagon road that received some level of use. The road was improved upon and constructed into a more permanent road by

¹⁴ Lt. Stedman Letter.

¹⁵ Grebner, Lawrence S., “Historical Research Memo”, 2004.

¹⁶ Grebner, Lawrence S., “Historical Research Memo”, 2004.

¹⁷ Grebner, Lawrence S., “Historical Research Memo”, 2004.

¹⁸ Charles A. Sayer, “County Maintained Roads on Rural State Highway System –District 1,” (Memo to Tony Gonzales, Planning Bureau, New Mexico Department of Transportation, August 10, 1982, On file, Gila National Forest).

¹⁹ Grebner, Lawrence S., “Historical Research Memo”, 2004.

the Gila National Forest and CCC in the 1930s.²⁰ This influenced the boundaries of both the Gila and Aldo Leopold Wildernesses.²¹

In the early 1900s, public lands existed in the form of National Parks and Forests. In the early days of the National Forest system, forest management leaned toward production be it timber, grazing, minerals, etc. and providing access through roads for said production or recreation. As time passed, some people argued that some tracts of land within these forests should not be allowed to undergo such modernization.

Aldo Leopold, an early employee of the Forest Service and well known conservationist, was one such person. In a 1921 article, Leopold describes a wilderness as,

...a continuous stretch of country preserved in its natural state, open to lawful hunting and fishing, big enough to absorb a two weeks' pack trip, and kept devoid of road, artificial trails, cottages, or other works of man...,²²

He argues such wildernesses have an important place in Forest Service recreational policy. Due to its isolated nature, lack of railroads and limited intrusion of roads, presence of large game, fowl, and fish, and its potential for pack trips, Leopold suggests the headwaters of the Gila River in the Gila National Forest as good example of where such an area could be established.²³

On October 2, 1922, Leopold proposed the formation of the Gila Wilderness Area. On June 3, 1924, the Gila Wilderness Area was created through the approval of a Recreational Work Plan

²⁰ FS Inspection Forms; CCC Camps; GNF.

David E. Brown and Neil B. Carmony, ed. *Aldo Leopold's Wilderness: Selected Early Writings by the Author of A Sand County Almanac*, (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1990), 163.

Richard H. Spray, "Gila Wilderness Boundary History, " (Memo to Director of the Recreation Staff Unit, Region 3, June 30, 1977, On file, Gila National Forest).

Richard H. Spray, "The Gila Wilderness: Boundary Adjustments and other High Jinks, 1924 to 1980," (presentation, Southwest Wilderness Conference at Western New Mexico University in Silver City, NM, September 29, 1989, Paper on file, Gila National Forest).

Curt Meine, *Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work*, (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press: 1988), 270-271.

²¹Spray, "Gila Wilderness Memo to Director of Recreation Staff."

Spray, "High Jinks."

²² Aldo Leopold, "The Wilderness and Its Place in Forest Recreational Policy," in *Aldo Leopold's Wilderness: Selected Early Writings by the Author of A Sand County Almanac*, ed. David E. Brown and Neil B. Carmony, (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books: 1990), 146.

²³ Leopold, "Wilderness and Its Place," 150-151.

for the Gila River drainage area. Which”...included the last largest body of undeveloped forest management and recreational standpoint in New Mexico...”²⁴ While the Gila Wilderness Area is considered the Nation’s first wilderness designation, this designations was not based in regulation.²⁵

At the time the Gila Wilderness was created, the idea of wilderness areas was new and very different from today.²⁶ According to Richard Spray, USDA Assistant Director of Outdoor Recreation, retired, reports dating to this time period “...imply “*wilderness*” to be only a temporary land use until timbering or something else became more economical.”²⁷ In the Recreational Working Plan that created the Gila Wilderness, provisions were made for the construction of several roads that would allow access to timber or for recreational purposes.²⁸ At this time, FR 150/North Star Road was not one of those listed. The plan further stated that the wilderness policy would not affect grazing or preclude water development or construction of roads for such development.²⁹

When the Gila Wilderness was designated by the Recreation Plan, the area totaled 755,000 acres. However, by 1933, the Gila Wilderness was split into two landmasses, the Gila Primitive Area (573,893 acres), and the Black Range Primitive Area (185,623), separated by FR 150.³⁰ The boundaries of the areas changed several times over the years, prior to their official designations as Wilderness Areas.

In a 1977 memo and a 1989 paper presentation discussing the Gila Wilderness inception and its boundary changes, Spray explains that one of the first adjustments to the Gila Wilderness boundaries came about because of FR 150. Due to the vague language in the ‘Recreation Working Plan,’ the fact that FR 150/North Star Road accessed private land and still received use, the actual or perceived need for Forest Administrative access (specifically for fire), and the

²⁴ USDA Forest Service, “Recreational Working Plan, dated March 28, 1924 and signed, June 3, 1924,” Gila Wilderness Resource Files, (Silver City, NM: Gila National Forest, 1924), 2.

²⁵ Spray, “Gila Wilderness Memo to Director of Recreation Staff,” 1.

²⁶ Spray, “Gila Wilderness Memo to Director of Recreation Staff,” 1.

²⁷ Spray, “Gila Wilderness Memo to Director of Recreation Staff,” 1.

²⁸ USDA Forest Service, “Recreational Working Plan,” 2.

²⁹ USDA Forest Service, “Recreational Working Plan,” 3.

³⁰ Spray, “Gila Wilderness Memo to Director of Recreation Staff.”

reclassification of the Gila Wilderness Area as a Primitive Area, all provided some reasoning behind the Gila National Forest's decision to allow FR 150 to be improved upon.³¹

Other sources cite the deer population as a reason for this decision.³² In a draft forward for *A Sand County Almanac* found in his personal papers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Archives, Aldo Leopold suggests that the road was improved or "constructed," so that hunters could access the area in order to control the deer population. In his draft forward, he suggests land management policies he supported including eradicating large predators, like wolves or mountain lions, caused the over population of deer in the Gila Wilderness.³³ He says:

Here my sin against the wolves caught up with me. The Forest Service, in the name of range conservation, ordered the construction of a new road splitting my wilderness area in two, so that hunters might have access to the top-heavy deer herd. I was helpless...³⁴

Ironically, when the Black Range Primitive Area became a Wilderness Area, it was named the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Area.

Regardless of the reason behind improving FR 150, its improvement shaped the history of the Gila Wilderness Area.

FR 150 and the CCC:

Forest Service Inspection forms show that the Civilian Conservation Corps enrollees from two camps, F-11-N at Mimbres and F-34-N at Beaverhead, worked on the North Star Road intermittently from 1934-40. This work included maintenance and betterment work including culverts, headwalls, and catch basins. While construction is mentioned in 1940, specific information is not included. Bridges are mentioned as being on work schedules, but again no specific information on location or actual construction is provided.³⁵

³¹ Spray, "Gila Wilderness Memo to Director of Recreation Staff", 1.

Spray, "High Jinks", 1-2.

³² Meine, *Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work*, 271.

David E. Brown and Neil B. Carmony, eds, *Aldo Leopold's Wilderness: Selected Early Writings by the Author of A Sand County Almanac*, (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1990), 163.

³³ Aldo Leopold, "Forward," in *Companion to A Sand County Almanac*, ed. by J. Baird Callicott, 281-288. (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 284.

³⁴ Leopold, "Forward," 284.

³⁵ FS Inspection Forms; CCC Camps; GNF.

As stated above, the Gila National Forest decided to improve, reconstruct, and/or maintain the North Star Road in 1931. The Forest Service Inspection forms show that this work began as early as 1932. There are a series of letters about the mishandling of blast caps in 1934 at the Beaverhead Camp. In these letters, it is suggested that the blast caps were left in the powder house in 1932 by a crew working on the North Star Road. There is no mention of the type of work, but this provides some indication on how quickly the Forest started working on the North Star Road.³⁶

It is thought that the bridges and culverts along the FR 150/North Star Road are from the CCC era. As seen above, culverts on the road can be directly linked to the CCC through Forest Service documentation. They also show characteristics of being from that era. The bridges also show some characteristics of CCC design, but are not documented through these inspections forms.

The CCC bridges would probably have had wooden decks. However, archeological site forms indicate that the wooden decks were replaced with concrete in the 1950s. Bridge deck plans from the Coronado National Forest dated 1958 seem to confirm this and promote the idea that the decks were built into the bearing walls.³⁷ These plans were most likely used throughout the Southwestern Region of the Forest Service (Region 3). There is also documentation suggesting the Terry Canyon Bridges were replaced in 1953.³⁸ This has not been confirmed. However, most of the bridges show signs of rock re-work, as mortar has been replaced. This work varies in quality from bridge to bridge, but in several cases the work does not detract from the overall CCC feel of the corridor.

Beginning in the 1980s, the FR 150/North Star Road, culverts and several bridges including Terry Canyon 1-5, Black Canyon (Black Canyon Big Bridge), tributary to Black Canyon (Black Canyon Small Bridge), and East Indian Creek were combined and recorded as historic site AR-03-06-05-00618/LA 103484. The site is historically significant given its use as a military road, its relation to the Gila Wilderness Area boundary, and the CCC related bridge and culvert construction.

Conclusion:

Currently, a project on the Gila National Forest called the FR 150 Bridges Project will replace or rehabilitate several bridges along the route. The objective of the project is to address deficiencies in the bridges, providing safe passage to those who travel the road.

Due to the historic significance of the bridges, their removal is considered an Adverse Effect to the site. As such, mitigations have been put in place to preserve two bridges and document one

³⁶ FS Inspection Forms; CCC Camps; GNF.

³⁷ US Forest Service, "Coronado National Forest Bridge Deck Plan," Tucson, AZ: Coronado National Forest, (1958), On file, Gila National Forest.

³⁸ M. Eriksson, C. Milo McLeod, and Dan Gard, "Identifying and Preserving Historic Bridges," (USDA Forest Service and Technology & Development, Missoula, Minnesota, 2000), 41.

of the bridges being dismantled to see if there is evidence of military or CCC activities, buried road alignments, or construction techniques. Also, this document recounting the history of the road and a separate overview about the CCC on the Gila National Forest have been researched and written. Information gathered through this process has been used to create interpretive signs on both the CCC and the North Star Road/FR 150 that will be posted at the Wilderness Ranger District Office and along FR 150. All of this research and information has and will continue to help interpret the history of the North Star Road/FR 150. These mitigations are meant to strike a balance between preserving history, while allowing the project to continue.

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