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THE WAY OF THE FRAY: A PICTORIAL DIARY OF THE ESCALANTE EXPEDITION THROUGH NORTH-CENTRAL NEW MEXICO, 1776

by

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INTRODUCTION

As the Liberty Bell was sounding the joys of independence in the town of Philadelphia, another historical drama of quieter proportions was being enacted on the plaza of a foreign mud village some 2,000 miles across the continent—the preparation of the famed Escalante Expedition from Santa Fe to the California capital at Monterey.

HISTORY

The founding of the province of New Mexico by ^ohate in 1598 was set amidst the remote pueblos of sedentary people. The colonist's only link of communication was to the south via the Camino Real. With the establishment of the missionary frontier in California a century and a half later, the Spanish crown in Mexico City prompted the ties of the mountainous interior to the Pacific Coast. The initiation of this epic effort fell upon the shoulders of New Mexico's governor Mendinueta, who early in 1775 wrote Fray Silvestre Veléz de Escalante, Franciscan missionary at Zuni, and Fray Francisco Garces, Franciscan missionary at San Xavier del Bac, to explore the region to their west and to prepare a report on a possible road to California. Escalante headed north to win the favor of the Hopis, while Garces went west and north into what is now the San Joaquin Valley. On his return to Arizona, Garces discovered Tehachapi Pass; visited the abyss of the Havasupais; and viewed the awesome Grand Canyon. Hoping to connect with Escalante, the travel-weary minister also visited the land of the Hopis, where at Oraibe he was met by sullen occupants who refused him shelter. Garces never closed his exploratory circle with Escalante at nearby Zuni, but instead for some unknown reason returned directly from the high mesas to his desert parish. The two Franciscans' reports, however, of the hostile attitude of the Hopis and Gila River-based Apaches was enough to quell the proposition of a southern route to California.

On June 7, 1776, Escalante was summoned from Zuni to Santa Fe by his superior, Fray Francisco Dominguez, who had now accepted the responsibility of opening the coast road via a known trapper's trail through the mountains to the northwest. Unknown to them, the historical date of July 4, 1776, was chosen for departure. Official business of the church and sickness forced a delay, however, and the trek did not actually commence for another three weeks. Finally, with a proclamation from Dominguez:

"Now I merely inform you that today, Monday the 29th of July, we shall set out from this villa of Santa Fe on our journey. We are happy and full of hope, trusting only in your fervent prayers, and that as our father you will have our brothers in that very holy province bear us in mind in their offerings and prayers...."

Ten persons comprised the exuberant band of explorers that climbed the rounded, pinon-studded hills north of the plaza. It is easy to envision the leaders in their brown, flapping robes and broad sombreros surrounded by gear-laden riders atop unsteady mounts. Perhaps the cathedral bell was clanging; maybe a musket blast or two; certainly barking dogs with trailing processions of screaming children; and the air was filled with choruses of adios, adios. A small herd of cattle, to serve as food, preceded the main body followed by harnessed pairs of pack-mules.

Fray Escalante, known as Veléz to his peers, was selected in the role as keeper of the diary. His superb recordings of the expedition have forever secured his place in history. It should be noted though, for justice sake, that the wayfarer should be bannered as the "Dominguez Expedition," in honor of its originator and leader. But as so often happens in the interpretation of historic events, the pen far outlasts the memory of human deeds.

The diarist's first entry was made at the pueblo of Santa Clara:

"On the 29th day of July of the year 1776, under the patronage of the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, and of the most holy patriarch Joseph her most happy spouse, we, Fray Francisco Atanasio Dominguez, present commissary visitor of this Custodia of the Conversion of San Pablo of New Mexico, and Fray Francisco Silvestre Velez de Escalante, minister and teacher of the Christian doctrine at the Mission of Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe de Zuni, accompanied voluntarily by Don Juan Pedro Cisneros, alcalde mayor of the said pueblo of Zuni; Don Bernardo Miera y Pacheco, retired militia captain and citizen of the town of Santa Fe; Don Joaquín Lain, citizen of the same town; Lorenzo Olivares, citizen of the town of El Paso; Lucrecio Muniz; Andres Muniz; Juan de Aguilar; and Simon Lucero; having implored the protection of our most holy patrons and received the Holy Eucharist, we the persons named set out from the town of Santa Fe capital of this Kingdom of New Mexico; and having traveled nine leagues we arrived at the pueblo of Santa Clara, where we spent the night.—Today nine leagues."

THE ROUTE

They were on their way.... The overall plan was to follow the established trapper's trail along the watercourses of the intervening highlands; up the Rio Chama and Rio Navajo into present Colorado; across the San Juan and Animas; and then northerly following the Dolores, San Miguel and the yet unnamed Uncompahgre and Gunnison drainages.

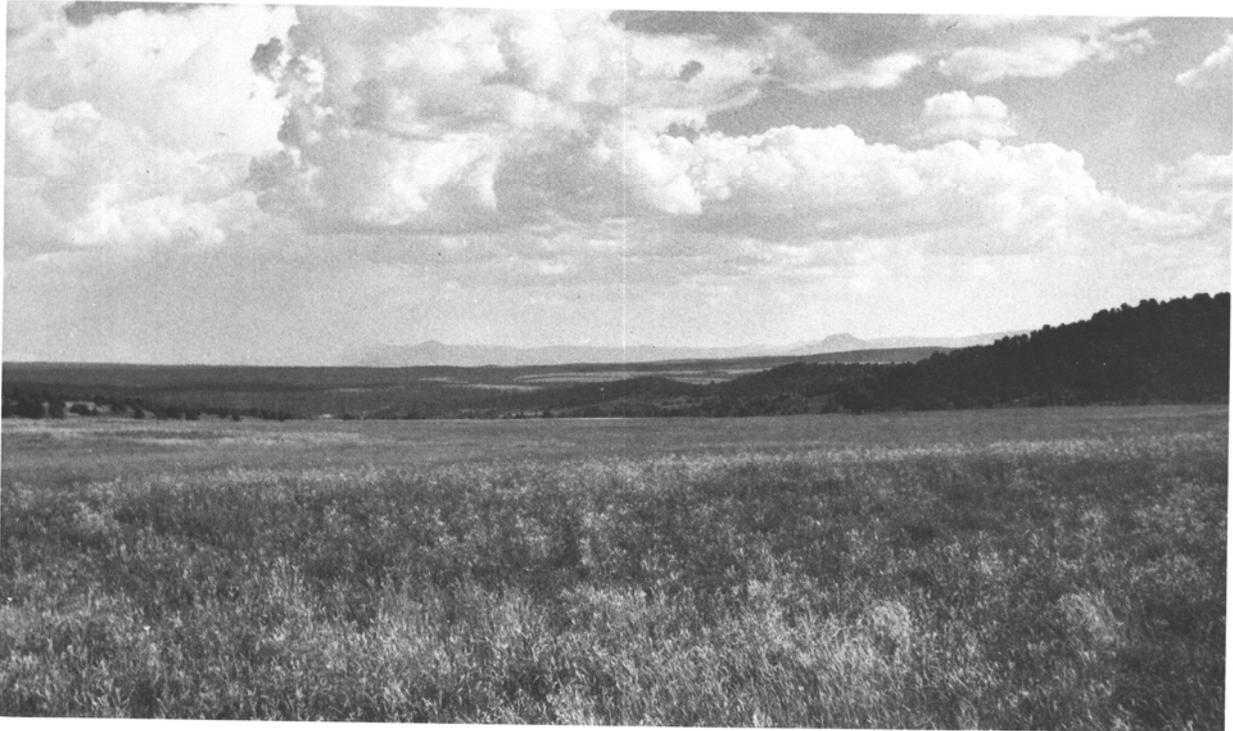
By August 27 the party had passed present-day Montrose. The trapper's trail was now becoming vague and directions were dependent upon an occasional foraging Yuta Indian. Information received on the 27th indicated that a settlement of



July 30, 1776. "We traveled nine leagues, more or less, and arrived at the pueblo of Santa Rosa de Abiquiu, where because of various circumstances we remained on the 31st without traveling, and where by means of a Solemn Mass we again implored the aid of our most holy patrons." Note: The ruins of Santa Rosa de Abiquiu still stand beside U.S. 84 two miles east of the village of Abiquiu.



August 1, 1776. "After having celebrated the holy sacrifice of the Mass, we set forth from the pueblo of Santa Rosa de Abiquiu toward the west along the bed of the Chama River and traveled in it a little less than two leagues. We then turned northwest and having gone three and a half leagues over a bad road, for in it there are some small and very stony mesas, we halted for siesta on the north side of the valley of La Piedra Alumbre near Arroyo Seco. They say that on some mesas to the east and northeast of this valley, alum rock and transparent gypsum are found." Note: In proximity to the Ghost Ranch museum.



August 2, 1776. *“Having passed through the grove, we came to a small plain of abundant pasturage which is very pleasing to the sight, because it produces some flowers whose color is between purple and white and which, if they are not carnations, are very much like carnations of that color.”* Note: After climbing out of Arroyo Seco at the head of Navajo Canyon, the expedition turned slightly eastward where today passes a trail road. Approaching the village of Canjilon from the south, one encounters the same beautiful field, complete with wildflowers, just as Escalante described it.



August 3, 1776. *“We went northwest from Arroyo de las Nutrias, entered a small grove of pines, and having traveled a little less than three leagues descended to the Rio de Chama. Then along its pretty meadow we went up to the north about a mile, crossed it, and halted for a siesta on the opposite bank. The meadow of the river is about a league long from north to south, and is of good land for crops with opportunities for irrigation.”* Note: The crossing of the Rio Chama was three miles downstream from Park View, in the vicinity of the village of La Puente.



August 4, 1776. "We traveled about a quarter of a league to the northwest and went through the pass where begins another lake which we called Laguna de Olivares. It must be about a quarter of a league long and two hundred varas wide, more or less. Although its water has not a very pleasant taste it is fit to drink." Note: Horse Lake, seven miles southeast of Monero.

Sabuaganas Indians were nestled in the high mountains to the northeast, and encamped with them some members of the Timpangotizis tribe from the valley of the great lakes to the west. This encouraging news provided the necessary stepping-stones of guides to facilitate their westward turn toward the coast. In the mountains that discharge the waters of the Gunnison, the travelers met their first ordeals on the trail. Intersecting, westward-flowing tributaries forced continual up and down marches, sometimes traveling 3 miles to advance only one.

The expedition reached the Colorado River downstream from present Grand Valley on September 6, calling it Rio San Rafael. Escalante recorded:

"This river carries more water than the Rio del Norte. It rises, according to what they told us, in a great lake which is toward the northeast near the Sierra de la Grulla."

Continuing northwest the explorers skirted the white cliffs of the Yampa Plateau and crossed into Utah along the approximate alignment of U.S. 40. At Rio de San Buenaventura, now called the Green River, they made camp in the eastern floodplain four miles north of Jensen, Utah. From the diary entry on September 13:

"The river enters this meadow between two high cliffs which, after forming a sort of corral, come so close together that one can scarcely see the opening through which the river comes."

From this description the location of their campsite can

reasonably be placed a half mile south of the Quarry Visitor Center at Dinosaur National Monument.

With the high Uintas now flanking their right, the party marched west toward the land of the great lakes and the homeland of their proud Yuta guides. Following the banks of the Duchesne and Strawberry rivers an uneventful eight days brought them to the impressive body of water now called Utah Lake. Two days were spent along the luxuriant meadows of the lake. Large encampments of friendly Yutas, calling themselves Timpangotizis ("fish eaters"), dwelt near its shores. Escalante was delighted with the fertile valley, naming it "Our Lady of Mercy." In his report to the King of Spain he envisioned the formation of a populous and progressive new province. He urged that one hundred Spanish families be sent to colonize his newly-discovered paradise. One paragraph of his report was devoted to another large lake which lay to the north, but which he never saw. He wrote:

"The other lake with which this one communicates, according to what they told us, covers many leagues and its waters are noxious and extremely salty, for the Timpanios (Timpangotizis) assure us that a person who moistens any part of his body with the water of the lake immediately feels much itching."

On September 25, with promises to return within one year to baptise them all, the Spaniards bade farewell to their aquatic hosts and continued their trek. Their line of travel now lay along the valleys to the south and west, flanked by imposing mountains that prohibited a more direct course toward the

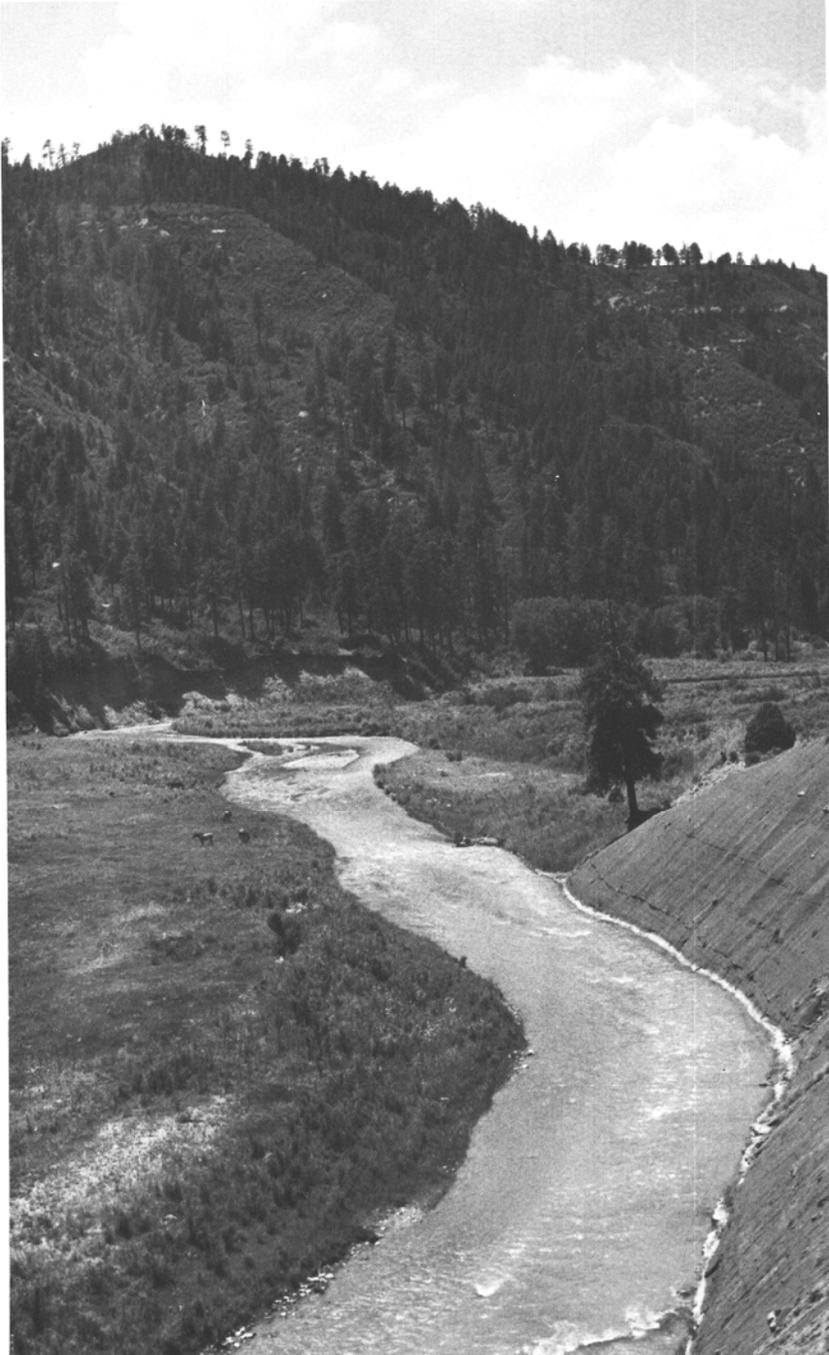
coast. South of Nephi, Utah, they crossed into the Sevier River drainage. From this point the Cricket Mountains formed a blockade and forced them still further south. On October 4 they camped near present-day Black Rock, where a series of events altered the expedition. First, dissension flared-up among some members of the troupe; a fight erupted which in turn frightened their Indian guide into desertion. Secondly, on the following day an early season blizzard set in causing considerable suffering from the wetness and cold. Coupled with this was the feeling of confinement in a north-south desert valley. Unable to move west and already forced far below the latitude of Monterey, the members cast lots in favor of returning to Santa Fe.

Now with unsettled weather upon them and thoughts of

home before them, their pace quickened. Forward into the Dixie section of southwestern Utah, they passed the site of now-existing Cedar City; crossed the Virgin River near Hurricane; and made the first of three roving entries into the state of Arizona.

CROSSING OF THE FATHERS

On October 26 they reached the Colorado River at the mouth of the Paria, where a century later John D. Lee would establish his historic ferry. From this point commenced one of the great human dramas of Southwest explorations—the Crossing of The Fathers. Their courage and endurance consisted of eleven frantic days of ford searching along the west walls of



August 5, 1776. "We set out from camp in the Cañon del Engano toward the southwest and having traveled half a league arrived at the Rio de Navajo, which rises in the Sierra de la Grulla and runs from northeast to southwest at this point, where it turns back toward the north for a little more than three leagues, and then joins another river which they call the San Juan." Note: Two miles north of Dulce.

the now-inundated Glen Canyon. One week was spent in the area of the Paria confluence in attempts at swimming and raft-building—all to no avail. In a seemingly hopeless situation, they named the campsite San Benito Salsipuedes ("get out if you can"). On November 2 they climbed the perilous sandstone cliffs behind them and continued northerly along the banks of the canyon, camping on Wahweap Creek near the present marina site on Lake Powell. Three more days of traversing tributary gorges were necessary until, on November 7 at the landmark now called Gunsight Butte, they cut handholds in the precipitous wall and descended to a spot of stilled current where they waded to the east bank. Escalante observed:

"... about five o'clock in the afternoon they finished crossing the river, praising God our Lord and firing off a few muskets as a sign of the great joy which we all felt at having overcome so great a difficulty and which cost us so much labor and delay...."

The padres had conquered the river in an unparalleled feat that included eating six of their horses supplemented with grass seed and cacti. The Crossing of The Fathers, as Bolton relates, "will resound through centuries" (Bolton, 1972, p. 118).

THE LAST LEG

Leaving the Colorado, another obstacle blocked their path to the south in the form of steep-sided Navajo Canyon. Confronted with this miniature gorge directly opposite the town of Page, Arizona, they detoured again and followed the canyon to its junction with Kaibito Creek some eight miles upstream—crossing at that point on an old Indian trail. Continuing to the southeast, they trodded the sandy wastes of the Kaibito Plateau, passing near later-founded Tuba City. They then crossed Moenkopi Wash and ascended the Moenkopi Plateau. Finally, on November 17, they viewed some semblance of civilization at the mesa-top villages of the Hopis. After needed rest, the persistent frays made attempts at conversion, but were rebuked by the residents. On November 20 the weary travelers, with no new names to register in the fold of the Holy Church, continued their march homeward. An exhausting, four-day, one hundred-mile trek necessitated a

two-day rest at Zuni, followed by a four-day delay at Acoma because of a snowstorm. Christmas Mass was celebrated at the pueblo of Isleta. Their final direction was now north—up the Rio del Norte where overnight stops were made at Albuquerque, Sandia and Santo Domingo.

On January 2, 1777, exactly four months and some fifteen-hundred miles later, the remarkable Way of The Fray was terminated upon reentry into Santa Fe.

CONCLUSION

The rightfully-termed "Dominguez Expedition" failed in its purpose to connect the provincial outposts of Santa Fe and Monterey. However, its historical significance and geographical contributions of the then unknown interior basins of 18th century New Spain, is monumental. The journal of Escalante and the resultant maps of the expedition are extraordinary in North American exploratory feats. For the opening of new lands and new people, it ranks with the splendid accomplishments of Coronado, Pike, and Lewis and Clark.

AUTHOR'S NOTES TO PHOTOGRAPHS

The photographs for The Way of The Fray were taken in the summer of 1973 on the corresponding day of the diary entry of Escalante—one hundred and ninety-seven years later. Thankfully, few intrusions have marred the physical features of the route during that span. In following the trail of the diary through north-central New Mexico, descriptions and observations at that time can be remarkably applied to the present. Each photograph is captioned by a quote from the diary of Escalante and a note from this author.

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