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# EAGLE SPRING STATION ON THE SAN ANTONIO-SAN DIEGO MAIL LINE\*

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*. . . the line ran from no place through nothing to  
nowhere.* (Winther, 1945)

## INTRODUCTION

The need for a transcontinental mail and passenger line stemmed from the great migration westward that characterized most of the 19th century. Perhaps it was the mad rush to the California gold fields, however, that accentuated the desire of Americans to have at their disposal public transportation eastward and westward as well as reliable and frequent postal service to friends and relatives. The westward expansion of important commercial and governmental activities was no less significant in bringing about a climate in which extension of transportation and postal services to the west coast was demanded by the public and supported in Congress. The Pacific coastal states were, in themselves, rapidly developing commercial and governmental centers and already enjoyed stage and mail line services. All that remained was to bridge the vast expanse from the Mississippi to the Sierras. A number of states and entrepreneurs were campaigning actively for routes that would benefit them; competition was intense.

It was in this atmosphere that the San Antonio-San Diego line came into existence. The events have been described by Webb and Carroll (1952, p. 545):

The San Antonio-San Diego Mail Route, said to be the first American transcontinental mail and passenger line, was projected on June 22, 1857, when James E. Birch entered into a contract with the United States government to open a thirty-day, semi-monthly schedule between San Antonio, Texas and San Diego, California, at an annual compensation to Birch of \$150,000. Four-horse Concord stages were to be used and operations began with twenty-five of the coaches. Because pack mules were used to carry the first mail across the 180-mile stretch between Fort Yuma and San Diego, the line was dubbed the "Jackass Mail."

The first mail left San Antonio for California on July 9, 1857. Relay stations to accommodate passengers were not established until some three months later. The second mail left San Antonio on July 24 in two light wagons and on August 7 overtook the first detachment before it reached El Paso. On August 31 the first mail reached California. The distance of 1,476 miles was made in average time of twenty-seven days with a record of twenty-one days. One-way passenger fare was \$200 . . .

The rival Butterfield Overland Mail took over the route between El Paso and Fort Yuma in 1858 and the route between Fort Yuma and San Diego in 1860. The San Antonio-San Diego Mail continued as Mail Route No. 8067 between San Antonio and El Paso until August 2, 1861, when the beginning of the Civil War activities terminated postal service from the secession states.

## ROUTE

The line was planned to take advantage of the water afforded by rivers and streams and by wells and springs. . . . Although the route of the San Antonio-San Diego Mail Line lay through Indian territory, it was an area that, at least nominally, was under the control of the U.S. Army. Forts and outposts were scattered along the way, and the line utilized them well. A great advantage enjoyed by the southern transcontinental route over the more northerly ones was a relatively mild climate.

The old advertising poster shown in Figure 1 was used in San Antonio in the earliest days of the venture to announce the new passenger and mail service. It was a masterpiece of understatement concerning the rigors and dangers of the journey, but careful and thoughtful reading of the announcement would suggest to the reader that the trip would not be a boring one.

## EAGLE SPRING STAGE STAND

The Eagle Spring stage station (fig. 2) was just one of many such stations on the San Antonio-San Diego Mail Line. During the period of the operation of the mail line (1857-1861) and later, it seems to have been well known because of the number of times it was destroyed by Indians.

As shown in Figure 2, the station consisted of a rectangular rock corral whose exterior dimensions were 48 feet x 120 feet, the long axis oriented due north. Walls were thirty inches thick and made of limestone slabs. Openings were at the northeast and southwest corners of the corral. A large room 19 feet x 22 feet extended westward from the southwest corner of the corral.

Today, the rock walls stand only a foot or so above ground level, and the structure that catches the eye is a small crumbling adobe 300 feet west-southwest (fig. 2) that the Conklings (1947, pl. 49) identified as relatively modern. A number of nearby mounds may well be the graves of victims of Indian attacks.

Concerning the problem of Indian raids at Eagle Springs and in the vicinity, the Conklings (1947, p. 37-39) wrote:

Because of water near them, these stations were always threatened with Indian attacks, for the nomadic bands carried no supply of water with them in their migrations. This station, probably because of its location in a canyon with access to it through numerous passes in the mountains, which could never all be guarded, probably suffered more from Indian depredations than any other station on this portion of the route, for it was destroyed three times at different periods in its history. Early wagon trains were frequently attacked here, and the first coach mails held up as well. With reference to this, Colonel John Garland in a letter to Colonel L. Thomas, dated at Fort Thorn, New Mexico, June 5, 1854, says: "I have the honor to report . . . that several trains have been attacked and the mail stage fired on at a

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point in Texas, not within the limits of this department: called Eagle Spring: and I felt it my duty to detach one of the companies from Fort Bliss to take post there until other arrangements could be made for the safe transportation of mail, and also for protection of emigrants en route to California. The depredators were understood to be Mescalero Apaches from Sierra Blanca."

During the later period between 1858 and 1861, the troops at the three army posts on the route succeeded in making the road comparatively safe by breaking up the marauding bands and driving them north or south from the road, but after the troops were withdrawn at the outbreak of the Civil War, the Indians returned unopposed and infested the region again. The white settlers in many sections were driven out of their homes, and the country was plunged back again into its former state of disorder and lawlessness. Chief Espejo, a leader with a large following, established a stronghold in the very heart of the Davis Mountains, and for nearly six years preyed on the country almost at will. During this time whatever remained of the army posts after their brief occupancy by Confederate

**OVERLAND TO THE PACIFIC.**



**The San Antonio and San Diego Mail Line.**

**THIS LINE** which has been in successful operation since July, 1857, is ticketed for **PASSENGERS** through to San Diego, and also to all intermediate stations. **Passengers and Express matter** forwarded in **NEW COACHES** drawn by mules over the entire length of our Line, excepting the Colorado Desert of 100 miles, which we cross on mule back. **Passengers** are guaranteed in their tickets to ride in Coaches, excepting the 100 miles, above stated.

**PASSENGERS TICKETED TO AND FROM SAN ANTONIO AND**

Fort Clark,	Fort Bliss,	Tucson,
Fort Hudson,	El Paso,	Arizona,
Fort Lancaster,	Fort Fillmore,	Fort Yuma,
Fort Davis,	La Mesilla,	San Diego.

The Coaches of our Line leave semi-monthly from each end, on the 9th and 24th of each month, at 6 o'clock, A. M.

An armed escort travels through the Indian country with each mail train, for the protection of the mails and passengers.

Passengers are provided with provisions during the trip except where the Coach stops at Public Houses along the Line, at which each Passenger will pay for his own meal.

Each Passenger is allowed thirty pounds of personal baggage, exclusive of blankets and arms.

Passengers coming to San Antonio can take the line of mail steamers from New Orleans twice a week to Indianola; from the latter place there is a daily line of four horse mail coaches direct to this place.

On the Pacific side the California Steam Navigation Company are running a first class steamer, semi-monthly, to and from San Francisco and San Diego.

**FARE ON THIS LINE AS FOLLOWS, INCLUDING RATIONS:**

San Antonio to San Diego, \$200	San Antonio to El Paso, \$100
" Tucson, 150	Intermediate stations 1c. per mile.

Extra baggage, when carried, 40 cents per pound to El Paso, and \$1 per pound to San Diego.

Passengers can obtain all necessary outfits in San Antonio. For further information, and for the purchase of tickets, apply at the office of the Company in this city, or address J. C. WOODS, Superintendent of the line, care of American Coal Company, 50 Exchange Place, New York.

**G. H. GIDDINGS,  
R. E. DOYLE,**

**Proprietors.**

Passenger travel by "Jackass mail" in the late '50s is outlined in this old advertising poster possessed by the Bancroft library.

Figure 1. Old advertising poster of the San Antonio-San Diego Mail Line. (The Southwestern Historical Quarterly, v. LVII, no. 1, between p. 230-231.)

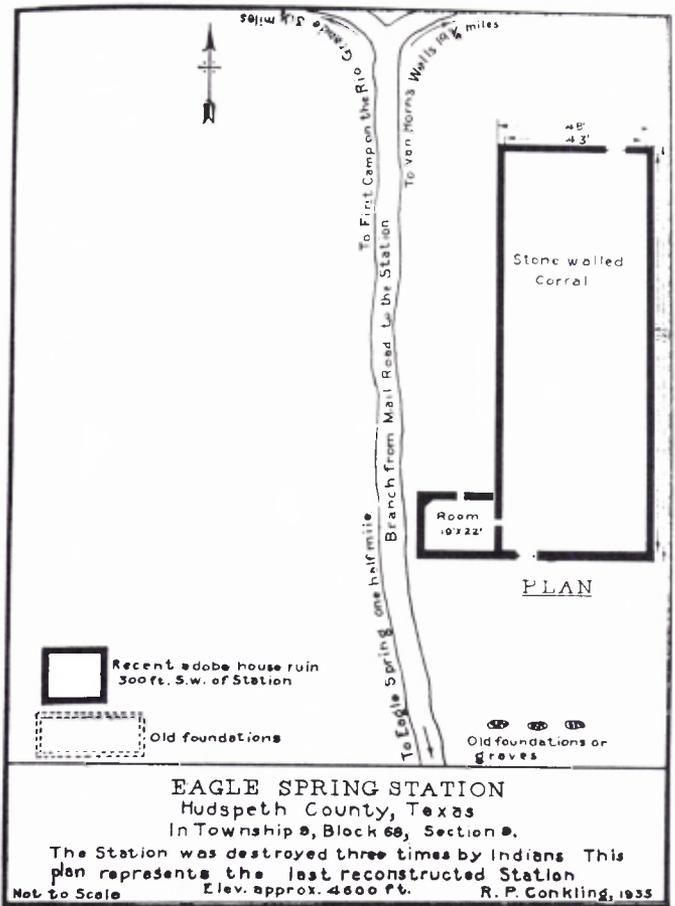


Figure 2. Plan of Eagle Spring Stage Station (Conkling and Conkling, 1947, Atlas Plate 49).

forces, together with the ruined mail stations, all suffered further destruction.

For a period of nearly fifteen years after the army posts had been rehabilitated and reoccupied by Union forces in 1867, the Indians continued to menace travel on the road. In July, 1880, the rebuilt station here at Eagle Springs was made a supplemental base of operations to Fort Bliss, and was occupied by a detachment of cavalry in command of Captain Gilmore, during the army's expeditionary march against Chief Victorio, under Colonel B. H. Grierson of the Tenth Cavalry. Their objective, however, was never accomplished for . . . this murderous Apache chief and nearly all his band were exterminated by General Juuquin Terrazas, in the early part of October, 1880, at the battle of Tres Castillos, in Chihuahua, Mexico.

The Eagle Springs stage station looks out over Eagle Flat to the north and is flanked to the east, south, and west by rugged terrain (fig. 3). The stage route from Eagle Springs eastward lay through Bass Canyon in the Carrizo Mountains and on to Van Horn Wells at the northeast flank of the Van Horn Mountains, some 20 miles from Eagle Spring.

One wonders why use was not made of the seemingly easier and safer route, chosen much later by the Southern Pacific, through the water gap that separates the Carrizo Mountains from the Van Horn Mountains. Bass Canyon, always a place of potential ambush, could have been avoided. Probably the low lying topography that resulted in occasional flooding of the trail through the water gap was the prime factor in selecting the higher and drier, if

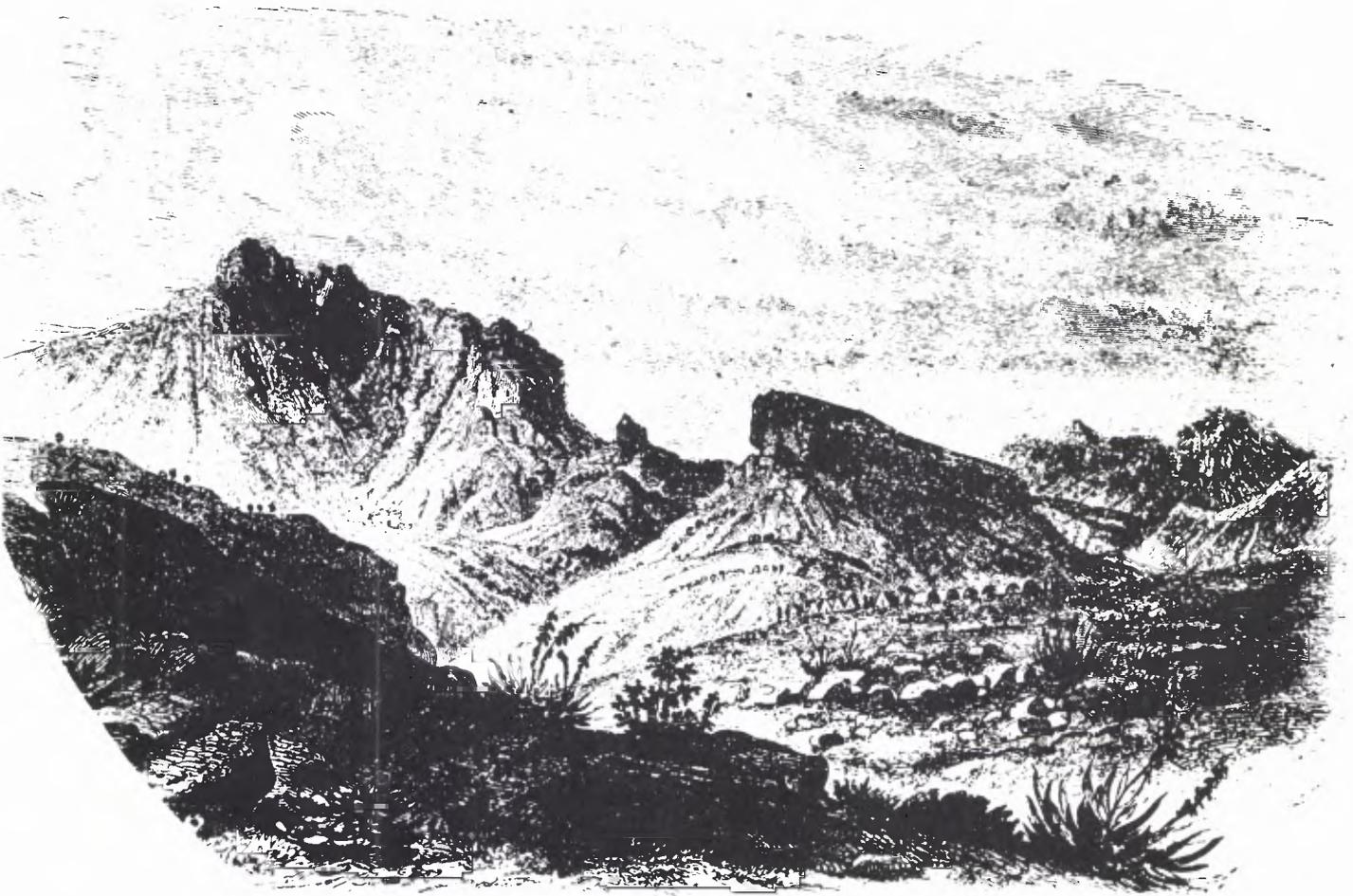


Figure 3. Eagle Spring area as pictured in the Emory boundary survey report (Emory, 1857, vol. 1, p. 5).

not slightly longer and more dangerous, route through Bass Canyon.

Westward from Eagle Spring, the route traversed Devil Ridge through the water gap at the northwest end of Love Hogback, crossed over the low, southeastern end of Back Ridge, crossed Red Light Draw about two miles above present-day Red Light windmills and traversed the rugged terrain of the Quitman Mountains through Quitman Gap, another place of potential ambush and appropriately known in Spanish as Cañon de los Oamentos, Canyon of Sorrows, or as Cañon de los Lamentos. From Quitman Gap it was only a few miles to the First Camp on the Rio Grande, 31 miles west of Eagle Spring.

Air photographs of the Eagle Mountains area, flown in 1950, and used in the geologic mapping of the Eagles and adjacent mountain blocks, show clearly in many places the old stagecoach road (fig. 4, p. 314). The ruts have eroded so deeply in some places that they now are small arroyos; in other places the ruts are partially filled and characterized by a slightly denser growth of desert shrubs along them, the growth of the shrubs there being the result of the moisture retention capabilities of the ruts.

#### TERMINATION OF THE LINE

As the impending war between the states materialized and as Indian unrest became more severe, the Jackass Mail Line was closed. Johnson (1937, p. 76) wrote:

George Giddings, the Mail Line contractor, was at El Paso the day the west-bound stage brought the news of the firing on Ft. Sumpter. That same day the east-bound stage carried to him the word that his brother, J. J. Giddings, and twelve other men had been killed in an Apache attack at Stein's Peak, in Arizona. He left immediately for that place, and soon had organized a force of twenty-five men who went over the line. They did not find any of the bodies of those killed, except at the stations which had been burned, and only one station had escaped the flames in the three hundred mile stretch.

Because of the destruction of this whole division, and because of the curtailment which had already taken place on the San Antonio-El Paso section, the San Antonio-San Diego Mail Line ceased to function. On August 2, 1861, the Postmaster-General annulled the contract.

Only with the completion, at Sierra Blanca in 1881 of the southern transcontinental rail route did regular and dependable mail service and safe travel become a reality.

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