



...the longest, crookedest, most arduous pack mule route in the history of America...

It is 1829, eight years after Mexico gained independence from Spain. New Mexican traders travel overland to establish new commercial relations with frontier settlements in California. They carry locally produced merchandise to exchange for mules and horses. Items include serapes, blankets, ponchos, and socks; a variety of hides – gamuzas (chamois), buffalo robes, bear and beaver skins; as well as hats, shawls, and quilts.

By this time Santa Fe is witnessing increased economic activity brought on by successful American and Mexican trade. Large quantities of manufactured products arrive in New Mexico from the eastern United States along the Santa Fe Trail. Many goods are also traveling along El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro to and from the interior of Mexico.



Red Pass, California

Connecting Two Mexican Provinces

In 1829, La Villa Real de Santa Fe de San Francisco de Asis, provincial capital of New Mexico, was just a dusty frontier town that sheltered a mix of Spanish colonial families, newer Mexican arrivals, displaced Indians, and a small, but growing number of Americans. Over 1,000 miles to the west, the Pueblo de la Reina de los Angeles was an even smaller ranch town. Consisting of little more than a church and plaza, and a few homes and government buildings, it was the largest Mexican community in an area characterized by dispersed ranches, decaying Spanish missions, and Indian villages.

During the winter of 1829-1830, Antonio Armijo led a caravan of 60 men and 100 pack mules from New Mexico to Mission San Gabriel in California, east of Los Angeles. The caravan carried woolen rugs and blankets produced in New Mexico to trade for horses and mules.



Detail, San Gabriel Mission, 1832, by Ferdinand Deppe
Courtesy Santa Barbara Mission Archive Library

Other trade parties soon followed. Some found alternative routes that together became known as the Old Spanish Trail. It took Armijo's group about 12 weeks to reach California and six weeks to return on the trail historians LeRoy and Ann Hafen called, "the longest, crookedest, most arduous pack mule route in the history of America."



View of Santa Fe in 1846 by John W. Abert

Mules and Men

The lands crossed by the Old Spanish Trail were alluring. For decades missionaries, fur trappers, American Indians, and others ventured repeatedly into and across the vast territory between New Mexico and California.

By the time Armijo started his trip, New Mexican traders were familiar with the routes others had followed and utilized the cumulative geographic knowledge gained from previous expeditions.

The trips were arduous. Dramatically changing terrain and climate posed major challenges. Caravans lost their way, suffered from thirst, and were forced to eat some of their pack mules when supplies ran out. Animals also suffered in the harsh desert environment and endured severe weather.



Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), 155829

Commerce along the Old Spanish Trail began as a legitimate barter for horses and mules, but some traders and adventurers found it easier to steal livestock than to obtain it legally. Americans claiming to be beaver trappers, fugitive Indians from the missions, gentle Indians from the frontier, and renegade New Mexicans teamed together to gather horses and mules to take illegally back to New Mexico. In reaction to these widespread raids, California authorities tried to recapture the stock and punish the thieves but were never able to control the illicit trade.

The line of march of this strange cavalcade occupied an extent of more than a mile...Near this motley crowd we sojourned for one night...Their pack-saddles and bales had been taken off and carefully piled, so as not only to protect them from damp, but to form a sort of barricade or fort for their owner. From one side to the other of these little corrals of goods a Mexican blanket was stretched, under which the trader lay smoking his cigarrito...

Lieutenant George Brewerton, 1848

Packing the Train

Along the Old Spanish Trail sound animals, good packing equipment, and a capable crew were the prerequisites of a successful pack train. The success of the trip depended on the skills and abilities of those who packed and drove the animals that carried the merchandise.

New Mexicans had a well-deserved reputation as excellent horsemen and muleteers. American eyewitnesses marveled at the dexterity and skill with which they harnessed and adjusted packs of merchandise. Experienced travelers suggested that New Mexicans should always be used as teamsters for they "can catch up and roll up in half the time the average person does."

Packers were always in demand and utilized a variety of skills. They secured loads with intricate knots, splices and hitches; they acted as veterinarians and blacksmiths. They estimated the safe carrying capacity of a mule, and identified and treated animals suffering from improperly balanced loads. They timed the travel day to stop at a meadow or creek bottom that provided good forage. Packers also had to be able to lift heavy loads, be good farriers, and "accomplish marvels with the axe and screw key and a young sapling for a lever."

Beasts of Burden

Mules had incredible strength and endurance, fared better than horses where water was scarce and forage poor, and recovered more rapidly after periods of hardship. Their hard and small hoofs withstood the shock and abrasion of rocky, boulder-strewn terrain.



Courtesy Laws Railroad Museum



The Equipment

While the mule was the heart of the transportation system, the packing equipment played an equally significant role. The *aparejo* (packsaddle) was the central piece of gear and carried heavy, odd-sized items safely over long distances without injuring the animal. It was described by one observer as "nearer to what I consider perfection in a pack saddle, than any other form of pack saddle yet invented."

Witness



Jeanne Howerton



Ben Wittick, Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), 015870

Illegal Captivity

Long before traders ventured into this region, American Indians traveled and traded along many of the paths that the trade caravans later followed. Petroglyphs show us that the mule caravans were witnessed by American Indians along the route. Indian guides had lengthy contact with Mexican and American traders.

Trade sometimes involved the illegal exchange of horses, mules, and even human beings. Some captives, including American Indians, Spaniards, and Mexicans were ransomed at the frequent trade fairs that characterized the western economy. The slave trade changed the lifeways of American Indians through depopulation and loss of traditional knowledge. Human captivity was part of the reality of the West, affecting all who lived in the region.

The Railroad and the End of the Trail

Beginning in the mid-1840s, new routes such as wagon roads carried troops fighting in the Mexican-American War, pioneers bound for California, miners joining the gold rush, and still more traders into the West. A few notable Americans used the trail. In 1847 and 1848, Kit Carson carried military dispatches east along the Old Spanish Trail. Military attaché George Brewerton kept a detailed account of his trip. John C. Frémont led U.S. government-sponsored exploratory survey trips to plan for the advent of railroads in the West.

By 1869, however, a rail route connected the plains of the Midwest and San Francisco Bay. Portions of the Old Spanish Trail evolved into wagon roads for local travel, but the days of cross-country mule caravans on the Old Spanish Trail had ended.



Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, Nevada