

## 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.

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

