

My Humanities: Adventures on the Journey of Death

Thomas H. Wilson

I have always loved history. I am not sure how this interest began, but I have an idea. When I was a little boy, my mother, a single parent working as a secretary to support us, subscribed to an historical book club for young readers for me. Every month another book would arrive, often written by well-known historians, on some historical subject. I read about the Civil War, Napoleon, the American West, the Middle Ages, and many more places and times. I received these books for about three years, and read nearly all of them. Later I passed them on to my son. My thirst for history was wetted, and remains un-slaked. Give the gift of history to someone you love.

In 2000, as director of the Museum of New Mexico, I had the opportunity to actively engage history. We were planning a new [state history museum](#) to adjoin the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe, and a new state monument near the Rio Grande south of Socorro, the [El Camino Real International Heritage Center](#). In an effort to raise statewide support for these projects, Mike Romero Taylor, deputy director of New Mexico State Monuments, and I contemplated walking the Jornada del Muerto. We wished to enhance our knowledge of the history of the Camino Real in New Mexico and to experience the kinds of challenges faced by those who previously used the trail for exploration, war or settlement.

The El Camino Real was the great royal road or king's highway that connected Mexico City with Santa Fe. The Jornada del Muerto is that section of the Camino Real that abandons the route along the Rio Grande near Las Cruces, crosses 90 miles of barren desert, and rejoins the river south of Socorro, New Mexico. Juan de Oñate blazed the trail, based upon earlier Native American routes, on his way to settle northern New Mexico in 1598. Lack of water and Apache raiding habitually made the journey perilous. The Jornada del Muerto is named for an incident in 1670, when a German trader was killed at a location still called Alemán. How can one resist exploring a trail loosely translated as the *Journey of Death*?

After considerable planning and training, we set off at daybreak on October 17, 2000, from near Las Cruces. We joined the Camino Real near Paraje San Diego and headed north for Point of Rocks, which looked close but required half a day to reach. At Point of Rocks, we discovered an



The Jornada del Muerto near Alemán.
Vegetation here defines the ancient Camino Real.

extensive petroglyph site, ominously featuring an image of a large rattlesnake. We pushed on and made camp on the desert floor 16.5 miles into the journey. Coyotes serenaded us that night.

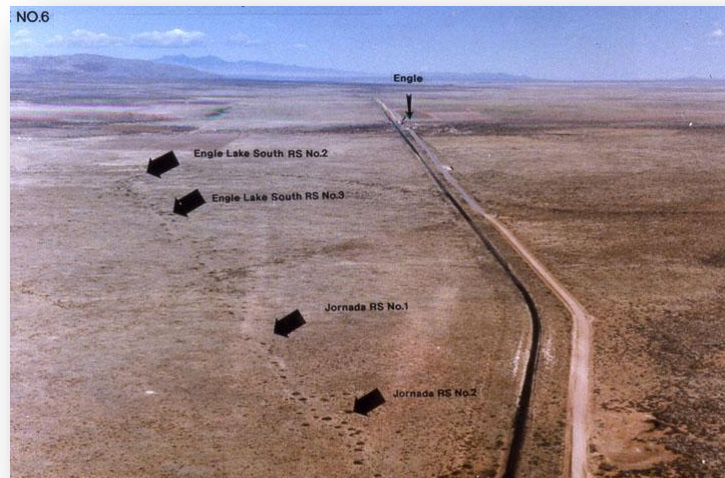
The next day we were off again at dawn. We carried enough food for the whole trip, but we had to make special arrangements for water. Water weighs about eight pounds a gallon, and carrying enough for a four-day trip was more than we could manage. Before

starting, we stashed water at the end of the second day's journey. As we walked, we saw evidence of the historic El Camino Real at various locations, outlined by differential vegetation. Sections of the ancient trail are clearly visible from air photos.

As the miles and hours passed, we thought of the history of the Camino Real. In the seventeenth century, the Spanish ran caravans to Santa Fe and back every three years. From Mexico came manufactured goods, horses, musical instruments, clothing, tools and chocolate. Out of New Mexico went hides, wheat, corn, raw wool, salt and piñon nuts. Following the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, the Spanish fled down the Camino Real out of New Mexico; they returned under De Vargas the same way during the reconquest of 1692.

During the Civil War, Confederate units from Texas invaded New Mexico and engaged Union forces in February 1862 at the Battle of Valverde near [Fort Craig](#) at the north end of the Jornada del Muerto. A tactical victory allowed the Confederates to proceed to their doom at the Battle of Glorieta Pass near Santa Fe on March 28. The rebels fled down the Camino Real. Texans are still under-appreciated in New Mexico.

Such thoughts were in our minds as we struggled exhaustedly into Engle, having logged 24 miles on day two. Here we met Tom Waddell, overseer of the land we would cross the next day, 358,000 acres of the old Spanish Armendariz land grants now owned by Ted Turner. We set off the next morning to cross the old land grant. Turner runs about 1,500 head of bison on the range, and Waddell had warned us that there was an oryx out of control on our path, which we never encountered, and that a large mountain lion was stalking birdwatchers at [Bosque del Apache](#). Walking along daydreaming of history has its perils: we nearly stepped on a rattlesnake on the trail right in front of us. That evening, after 23 miles, we reached Lava Camp.



The arrows identify the Camino Real south of Engle. Solid dark line is the railroad; solid light line is a road.

History teaches that things don't always go as planned, as we discovered on day four. We arose before dawn and were on the trail before first light. We planned the day well, knowing we faced challenges ahead. We had to intersect and cross the Rio Grande, and our goal was to emerge at the site of the future El Camino Real International Heritage Center. We consulted air photos and topographical maps to find a suitable place to cross the thickets on both sides of the river, avoid the flooded upper reaches of Elephant Butte Lake, and make it across the overflow channels of the river.



Mike Romero Taylor fighting the thicket on the east side of the Rio Grande.

At about 8:00 a.m. we plunged into the bush on the east side of the Rio Grande near Paraje Fray Cristóbal, an historic place of rest on the journey named for a padre who died on the trek with Oñate. We tried to follow cattle trails to the river, but this proved impossible, all the while trying to avoid snakes in the ankle-deep vegetation and thick foliage. After about an hour of labor, using the sun and compass to maintain our direction, we reached the Rio Grande. Near the banks the bottom was mud churned up by cattle, but farther out there was soft sandy bottom, and we crossed the water without incident.

On the west side, we turned upriver again and walked along the embankment for another hour, looking for a break in the vegetation to advance to higher ground. Finally we found a channel that looked promising. After about a hundred meters, we encountered ankle-deep water. High reeds, tules (Sp. *carrizo*), flanked the channel. As the water deepened to thigh-level, we moved up onto the tules, pushing them down ahead of us as we went. They were sharp and taller than a

person, and the labor was hard. Finally we saw blue sky ahead and thought we might emerge from the vegetation. Instead, we found ourselves confronting an overflow channel of the Rio Grande.

I removed my belt and pack, held them aloft, and waded into the water. In about three paces, the water was up to my chest, and with the next step, over my head. I lunged and kicked for a sandbar and finally managed to clamber up the side, in the process dunking my camera and losing the Bowie knife that I carried all my years in the field in Africa. Mike crossed the channel without difficulty, and we pushed into the shallow water on the other side of the sandbar. Then we were in the reeds again. Finally we emerged into a belt of salt cedars and then passed through dense, thorny mesquite. Suddenly, we were out of the thickets, and soon rendezvoused with staff from the Museum of New Mexico and BLM at the site of the future heritage center. We went to the Owl Bar in San Antonio for lunch, and I offered a soggy bill in payment. “What happened to you?” asked the waitress, “You look like you fell in the river!”



Mike Romero coming out of the overflow channel on the west side of the river.

We came away from our experience with greater appreciation for and understanding of our predecessors' travails on the Jornada del Muerto, and with an enhanced sense of historical imagination. Engage history! Who knows what adventure awaits.

Thomas H. Wilson is Chair of the Arizona Humanities Council.