

# Settlers followed the Spanish Trail to Solano

**By Jerry Bowen**

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Today, travel from one corner of our continent to the other and indeed the entire world, is generally well-mapped and with so many modes of travel, quite easy.

Most places in the world are within reach in just one or two days. Of course it wasn't always so. Our ancestors and early pioneers had to have a lot of desire, spirit of adventure and grit to want to travel to certain places in the United States when it was still mostly unknown wilderness.

And so it was with many of Solano County's early pioneers.

The trail the Pena and Vaca families took to California originally was a trade route established by none other than Antonio Armijo, another early Solano County pioneer.

The Old Spanish Trail actually is an extension of the original Santa Fe Trail that twisted from Missouri to New Mexico. There were two routes of the Spanish Trail and are known to some today as, "The Spanish Trail" and "The Old Spanish Trail."

Both trails originated at Abiquiu, N.M., northwest of Santa Fe.

The Spanish Trail was longer and went as far north as the Utah town of Castledale. From there it turned west to Gunnison and basically followed along the same route as Interstate Highway 15. It entered Nevada, crossing the Las Vegas Wash - the site of today's city of Las Vegas - and continued into California south of Death Valley. Its course passed through Barstow, Victorville and eventually reached San Gabriel Mission at Los Angeles. The Spanish trail was capable of supporting wagon trains.

The "Old Spanish Trail," that Armijo established was a trade route and impossible for wagons to use. The primary means of transport of goods was by mule train.

Thanks to in-depth research by Leroy and Ann Hafen and published in their book, "Old Spanish Trail," several documents were discovered that related to the route that Armijo took.

One of the discoveries they made during their research was a diary kept by Armijo that was published in Mexico City's "Registro Oficial del Gobierno" of June 19, 1830. A letter from Jose Antonio Chaves, the Minister of Interior and Foreign Relations at Santa

He to the Mexico First Secretary of State-Department of Interior, accompanied the diary.

Interesting details of what Armijo and his party encountered along the trail were in the letter:

MOST EXCELLENT SIR.

"On November 8th of the past year (1830), there departed from this territory a group of citizens, about sixty men, towards the Californias with the object of trading for mules certain products of the country: they made their trip through deserts unknown until now, and succeeded in discovering this new route (short cut) having to go through many barbarian tribes who, upon seeing them, fled as though frightened, such cowardice contributing in no small part to the success of the undertaking. By means of the diary, copy of which I attach for your Excellency, it will be seen that the distance which separates the Californias from this territory is not great, taking into consideration that these discoverers often had to backtrack, make detours and, in short, that they had neither maps nor compass nor guide, other than the enterprising, daring and adventurous spirit of the sons of this territory. - I believe that it would be very useful to both territories for the Supreme Government to protect the commerce in these parts to which end I mention it to your Excellency. God and Liberty."

One of the problems with Armijo's diary was its lack of detail. Almost all the entries were very brief and mostly gave a name of a place they stopped for the night. There are still several opinions as to the exact route that Armijo took. The trail also left from Abiquiu, N.M., and took a more westerly route passing through the Four Corners, where the borders of New Mexico, Colorado, Utah and Nevada all meet.

It then traversed back and forth between the borders of Nevada and Utah to St. George, Utah. From there it stayed south of the Spanish Trail until it reached Cottonwood Springs in Nevada where the two trails joined.

Some examples of Armijo's entries were as follows:

"Diary made by citizen Antonio Armijo as commandant for the discovery of the route to the Californias, named by the political chief of this territory of New Mexico, Citizen Jose Antonio Chavez and which appears as follows:

'The 7th of November of 1829 I left the jurisdiction of Abiquiu, advanced as far as the Puerco River, stopping at said place on the 8th. 9. At Arroyo de Agua (Water Wash). 10. At Capulin (Choke Cherry). 11. At Agua de la Canada larga (Water of the Long Canyon). 12. At the mouth of Canon largo (Long Canyon). 13. At Canon largo. 14. At

the lake of Canon largo, at this point we found a settlement of Navajos. 15. At the San Juan River. 16. Stopping at said river.' “

It took the Armijo party 86 days from beginning to end, mostly because they often ran into dead ends and terrain too rugged and had to backtrack. After trading goods, the party broke up into three groups, each returning by different routes. The newly forged trail back to Abiquiu only took forty days.

Over the next few years some familiar names in Solano County history used the trail; Lorenzo Trujillo, John and William Wolfskill and William Pope (Pope Valley),

In 1841, the political climate in New Mexico became so bad that many of its citizens decided it would be better to relocate to California. Among them were the Vacas and the Penas.

They left Abiquiu the first week of September 1841 with Lorenzo Trujillo as the guide. Here again were familiar names to the local area; William Gordon (Gordon Valley) and William Knight (Knights Landing). A group that included the William Workman and the John Rowland family also joined them. Although the group is known today as the “Workman Rowland Party,” there is evidence the name is credited only because John Rowland gave a formal account to the Ayuntamiento (Mayor) of Los Angeles of the trip and presented a written list of his fellow travelers.

The fact that oral tradition of the Pena family says that 3-year-old Nestoria and 2-year-old Appalonia rode the trail to California in saddle bags on a mule is given further credibility that they followed the “Old Spanish Trail” because there were no wagons.

They arrived in Los Angeles on Nov. 5, 1841, and that spring traveled the El Camino Viejo trail to Sonoma. From there, they obtained the Rancho Los Putos Grant in Solano County, built their adobes and in 1850 became the founders of the great city of Vacaville.

The Pena Adobe remains as a testament to their past.

For those of you who would like to see a more complete account of the Old Spanish Trail and the history of Antonio Armijo, be sure to get a copy of the next Solano Historian magazine due out in the next couple of weeks.

If you are not a member of the Solano County Historical Society, copies can be purchased at the Vacaville Museum and the Vallejo Naval Museum. The article, “Antonio Maria Armijo, New Mexico trader to California Ranchero,” by

researcher/author, John W. Robinson, is full of newly found information.

If you wish to join the Solano County Historical Society Write to: SCHS, P.O. Box 3009, Fairfield, 94533-0309.

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