

Armijo blazed an arm of the Old Spanish Trail

By Jerry Bowen

Sunday, November 20, 2005

Several stories have been written about Antonio Maria Armijo over the past years concerning his life as one of Solano County's earliest pioneers. Not much has been said up to this point about his accomplishments before he arrived in the area.

I recently had the pleasure of assisting John D. Robinson, a southern California author. Over a period of weeks he managed to dig up many facts about Armijo's life that either were ignored or missed during research and Robinson has given me permission to quote him extensively.

Robinson's findings recently were published in "Spanish Traces," the periodical published for the Spanish Trail Association and in our own "Solano Historian".

One of the interesting items he used for reference was a diary that Antonio Maria Armijo kept when he established a separate arm of the Old Spanish Trail as a trade route from Abiquiu, near Santa Fe, N.M., to San Gabriel Mission near Los Angeles in 1829..

Although Armijo was a man of few words in the diary, researchers have managed to establish the basic route of the trail he created.

Armijo probably carried a copy of the map drawn by Father Escalante in 1776.

The following is part of the account of the trip. An entry - by number -was made each day of travel:

"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.

1. At Arroyo de Agua (Water Wash).
2. At Capulin (Choke Cherry).
3. At Agua de la Canada larga (Water of the Long Canyon).
4. At the mouth of Canon largo (Long Canyon).

5. At Canon largo.
6. At the lake of Canon largo, at this point we found a settlement of Navajos.
7. At the San Juan River.
8. At Las Animas River.
9. At the springs on the bank of the Plata River.
10. At San Lazaro River.
11. At the San Juan River again; at this juncture we found six Navajos but nothing happened.
12. At the springs of the Navajo mountains.
13. At the river which comes down on the other side of the Navajo Mountain
14. At Escondido (Hidden) Spring.
15. At the little canyon of Chelli Creek.
16. At the rock artenesales.
17. At the lake of the mountain pass of Las Lemitas.
18. At the water hole of El Cuervo.
19. At the water hole of the Payuches: three Indians were found, no trouble ensued, and it was necessary to scale a canyon for which purpose we had to carry the baggage in our arms.
20. December 1. At the lake of Las Milpitas (The little corn patches). On this day we had to work our way down the canyon.
21. At the Picacho (Peak) Springs: on this day I went out on reconnaissance with Salvador Macs.
22. At the craggy canyon with the downgrade and upgrade trail of the padres. It was necessary to scale up one and down the other and to carry our baggage in our arms.

23. Stopping: on this day I returned from the reconnaissance with nothing to report.
24. At the edge of the mesa of the Rio Grande, known in the Californias as the Colorado; a day's journey without water.
25. At the Rio Grande Crossing of the Fathers.
26. We stopped the train and repaired the upgrade of the canyon, the same one which had been worked by the padres.
27. At Blanco (White) Canyon: permanent water.
28. At the artenejal of Ceja Colorado (Red Ridge): on this day there was found a settlement of Payuches, with no mishap; it is a gentle and cowardly nation.
29. At the Creek of Ceja (Ridge) Canyon.
30. At the top of the tree-covered ridge: no water.
31. At Colorado Pueblo: no water, but we used snow instead.
32. At Carnero [Ram] Creek.
33. At Agua de la Vieja (Water of the Old Woman).
34. At the Coyote Plains without any water.
35. At Caloso (Limestone) Canyon: water from water holes.
36. Stopping: reconnaissance party went out and returned with nothing to report.
37. At Stinking Water Canyon: permanent water.
38. At the Severo River.
39. At the Milpas (Cornfield) River: at this point the reconnaissance party without mishap.
40. At Calabacillas (Little Wild Squash) Arroyo.
41. Below (or beyond) the Milpas River.

42. We hit the Severo River again, from which point the reconnaissance party went out.

43. We found a settlement of Indians with rings in their noses. Nothing happened for these Indians are gentle and cowardly.

44. Down the same river.

45. At the same river the reconnaissance party rendezvoused.

46. January 1. Again at the Rio Grande (Colorado): Citizen Rafael

47. Rivera is missing from the reconnaissance party of the day before.

48. Down the Rio Grande: rugged trail.

49. Stopping: on this day the reconnaissance party went in search of Rivera.

50. Stopping: reconnaissance party returned and did not find Rivera.

51. At Yerba del Manso (a curative herb) Arroyo, at which point the reconnaissance party goes out in search of Rivera.

52. Stopping: waiting for the reconnaissance party. Citizen Rivera returned and announced that he had discovered the villages of the Cucha Payuches and the Hayatas, and had recognized the ford where he had crossed the Rio Grande the previous year in going to Sonora.

53. Stopping. Reconnaissance party looking for Rivera arrived with nothing to report and went out again.

54. At Salado (Salty) Arroyo, with nothing new.

55. At the little spring of the turtle.

56. At the Little Salty Springs.

57. At the River of the Payuches, where a village was found: nothing happened for it was gentle.

58. At the Salitrosa (Alkali) River: where the reconnaissance party rendezvoused without mishap.

59. At the lake of El Milagro (Miracle).

60. At the Ojito del Malpais (little spring of the lava beds, or badlands).

61. At the arroyo of the Hayatas, at the end of which comes in the trail from Moqui, traveled by the Moquis with the object of trading shells with the said Hayatas.

62. Along this same arroyo; we ate a horse.

63. Ditto; we ate a male mule belonging to Miguel Valds.

64. Along said arroyo we met the reconnaissance party with supplies and men from the ranch of San Bernardino.

65. San Bernardino Canyon.

66. At the San Gabriel Mission.

67. I returned on March the first by the same route with no more mishap than the loss of tired animals, until I entered the Navajo country, by which nation I was robbed of some of my animals, and I arrived in this jurisdiction of Xemey (Jemez) today the 25th of April, 1830-ANTONIO ARMIJO."

From these diary remarks, researchers have determined that Armijo left Abiquiu, which remains even today much as it was in the 1700s, headed west and crossed the Continental Divide. The original Old Spanish Trail headed north from the same point and followed a more northerly and longer route to Los Angeles.

At the Continental Divide they changed direction to the northwest, descended Largo Canyon, and forded the San Juan River near present-day Blanco. They turned west-northwest, and passed the sites of today's Aztec and La Plata. Then they followed the plain below the south boundary of present-day Mesa Verde National Park, and left New Mexico very close to Four Corners, the only place in the U.S. where four states join.

Armijo and his muleteers then led their animals down to the south bank of the Colorado River, crossed the river, and ascended the rough steps gouged into the smooth sandstone by the Dominguez-Escalante party 53 years earlier.

Then, according to Robinson, "After fording the Colorado, the caravan skirted the present Utah-Arizona border westward through rough canyon country to the Virgin River, which they intersected somewhere near today's Hurricane, Utah. They

continued westerly to an intersection with the Jedediah Smith trail of 1826-27, followed the latter down the Santa Clara River to its junction with the Virgin, and followed this river down to its junction with the Colorado.

“Instead of fording the Colorado and taking Smith’s route south to the Mojave Villages, Armijo sought a more direct way to the California settlements. One of his scouts, Rafael Rivera, who had traveled from California to Sonora in 1828, left the party near present-day Mesquite, Nevada to scout out a new route. Rivera was gone thirteen days. He rejoined Armijo’s resting caravan near the mouth of Las Vegas Wash on January 7, 1830. Whatever Armijo learned from Rivera, the caravan turned up Las Vegas Wash, crossed the Las Vegas Basin several miles south of the present city, and threaded their way southwest, then west to the Amargosa River and its foul-tasting water, southeast of Death Valley. From the Amargosa, Armijo’s train headed south up Salt Creek Wash, then southwest via Bitter Spring to a junction with the intermittently-flowing Mojave River probably ten or twelve miles east of today’s Barstow. The caravan now ascended the Mojave to its upper reaches, crossed Cajon Pass, and reached Mission San Gabriel on January 31, 1830.”

The pioneering trade journey had taken eighty-six days. After trading his woolen goods for California horses and mules, Armijo divided his party. The first group retraced their way back to New Mexico in forty days. Armijo, with the remainder of the party, took a slightly longer route and returned in fifty-six days. Armijo’s pioneering journey initiated an annual series of trade caravans between New Mexico and California that continued until 1848.”

I’ll continue with the interesting new information in my next column.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/290>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/290/>