

Road to San Felipe Station is silent today

...canyon walls were chipped with hand tools to widen passageway for wagons

By Bill Sullivan

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There was something different about the battalion of soldiers that marched northward from Vallecito on the 19th of January, 1847. Indians had long gone this way. The Mexican Army officer Santiago Arguello had chased horse thieves in this direction. The American General Kearny had passed through here, too. What was different about these soldiers, the U.S. Army's Mormon Battalion, was that their entourage included five wagons, and numerous cattle and sheep. The western edge of the desert wasn't quite ready for wagons.

The soldiers, tired, hungry, thirsty, many of them shoeless, had marched for six months from Council Bluffs, Iowa. After crossing the Sonoran Desert, they moved from the greenery of Vallecito (this was five years before the stage station) and came to the base of the Campbell Grade. They needed an hour and a half to get themselves, their livestock (horses, cattle, sheep and mules) and their five wagons up the grade's steep 200 feet and into the Mason Valley. They then moved on into Box Canyon where they faced the nuisance of boulders on the ground and the thorns of mesquite and catclaw, and two major obstacles.



Cholla spines catch the morning sun in Box Canyon.



Box Canyon — route of Indians, pathfinders, soldiers, gold-seekers and the Butterfield Stage

First, the canyon walls had to be chipped away (with hand tools, mostly axes) to widen the passageway so the wagons could be pulled through. Then, to avoid a narrow dry waterfall, a 30-foot wall in the middle of the wash, they had to build a bypass road up and over a rocky hill full of cactus. Less than an hour of daylight remained when the beleaguered battalion got through to Blair Valley. When the commander, Lt. Col. Philip St. George Cooke, was told that another obstacle, Foot and Walker Pass, stood in their path, he gave the order to camp in Blair Valley, with the next water seven miles away at the Indian village at San Felipe Creek.

It was a tough two days, after a strenuous six months, but because of the soldiers' work, emigrants to California had a southern route during the Gold Rush, the Butterfield Overland Mail had a mail route in the 1850s and '60s, and a few Californians had a route eastward to fight in the Civil War. When engineers looked for trans-desert routes, they looked here and opted to go up the east side of the Salton Sea instead. Anza-Borrego's west-side rocks were just too tough for them. The route through Anza-Borrego was left to return to silence, and to us.

Today it's possible to walk the 20-odd miles from the Vallecito stage station by way of Foot and Walker Pass to Scissors Crossing, a mile and a half south of the San Felipe station, but private property forces you to walk part of the way along the highway. Most of us are likely to approach the area with short day hikes.

EXPLORING CAMPBELL GRADE

The Campbell Grade is the steep 200-foot slope between the Vallecito Valley and the Mason Valley. "Campbell" was Everett Campbell. His former
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Mexican troops under Captain Melendez — he made a perilous retreat across the high Sierra and surrendered to Captain Burton, U.S.A., at Tia Juana, the scene of the last battle of the late Socialist invasion.

Of the forces left to hold Rosario and San Quentin, not one man escaped. Later Walker was tried in the federal courts in San Francisco and charged with violation of neutrality laws, but was acquitted without argument. So, we look at the facts over almost a century, through the Mexican War of 1847, Walker's invasion of 1853, our attempt to obtain Lower California from Benito Juarez in 1859, when after almost 20 years of warfare the Mexican government was bankrupt and helpless to resist any demands we might make on through the last, the revolution of 1911, when American renegades slaughtered and destroyed. Do you wonder the Mexican feeling against the Gringo has not lessened as the years rolled by?

When you halt, after your hard day's ride, at the home of the poor ranchero — and over his meager supper of tortillas and abalone he tells you how the American revolvers killed his chickens, dogs, hogs and cattle, and in one great pile with his scanty household goods burned what they could not use — does your national pride grow any? When you hear from the mouths of your own people of the outrages committed on the women and girls of the Real and learn that the American revoler was the culprit, can you censure the Mexican for his attitude toward the Gringo?

Yet, today the American man or woman of good character and morals who goes to Mexico with the intention of building for himself a legitimate business and lending his hand toward the development of the country's latent resources will find no more courteous people or a more hearty welcome than in this same Mexico which we have so often wronged.

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ranch, in the Vallecito Valley west of Highway S-2, is now state park property as is the former Mason Ranch over the ridge in Mason Valley.

At the north end of the Vallecito Valley, east of Highway S-2, just before the Campbell Grade, is a small piece of the state park. A marker stands beside the Mormon Trail. A pathway, wide enough to accommodate a stagecoach, leads to the foot of Campbell Grade where the trail becomes faint. Walk the pathway and imagine how shoeless soldiers got through the cactus with their bawling sheep and cattle.

This area is home to numerous examples of Anza-Borrego's tallest and smallest cacti. The tallest is known as Mason Valley Cholla, Hoffman's Cholla or Pink Teddy-Bear Cholla. The smallest is Fish-Hook Cactus.

After struggling to get their livestock and wagons over the top of the Campbell Grade, the Mormon Battalion followed a wash up the Mason Valley to Box Canyon.

BOX CANYON TO FOOT AND WALKER PASS

Today at Box Canyon, the California Riding and Hiking Trail, descending from the Cuyamaca Mountains (partly along the route of the San Antonio and San Diego Mail Line, the so-called Jackass Mail) joins the Mormon route.

On a weekday morning, the canyon can be quiet. The sounds of highway vehicles have replaced the sounds of the hoofbeats and snorting of horses and the squeaking of wheels as wagons were tugged northward.

While the barriers the soldiers faced are still present, they may not seem as formidable. Thanks to erosion and the hammering of the soldiers and the Butterfield Mail route

builders, the canyon today is wider. The 30-foot waterfall is still there. The bypass road is an easy hike.

The Riding and Hiking Trail crosses Blair Valley to Foot and Walker Pass, the lowest point on the ridge to the north. The trail at the pass is somewhat steep. It's an easier climb from the north, off the Little Blair Valley road.

WALKING UP EARTHQUAKE VALLEY

Earthquake Valley stretches northwest from the ridge at Foot and Walker Pass. It meets the San Felipe Valley near Scissors Crossing. The exact route of the early travelers is unknown. It seems possible there were more routes than one. Anyone with livestock probably would have chosen a route away from the cactus and creosote, down in the low ground by Highway S-2.

After a rainstorm, wagons and stagecoaches would probably have traveled a slightly higher route with better drainage and less mud. Hikers and horseback riders today can follow the California Riding and Hiking Trail in the high ground parallel to the likely pioneer routes, at a distance from Highway S-2 and traffic noise.

Trail scenery includes Granite Mountain on the west side of the valley on the Elsinore Fault, the Volcan Mountains to the northwest, and the North Pinyon Mountains straight ahead, where shrubs like Mohave Yucca, Desert Agave and California Juniper come into view.

Once I reach the mountains I find myself drawn toward Plum Canyon to the northeast, away from the route to San Felipe, down the hill to the northwest. There are wide trails, which perhaps were once roads for wagons and early automobiles, to Sentenac Cienega at Scissors Crossing.

San Felipe Station is no more. It stood under Fremont Cottonwood trees beside San Felipe Creek a short distance north of Highway 78 at Scissors Crossing.