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THE NORTH BRANCH OF THE "OLD SPANISH TRAIL"



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<i>by Jack Nelson</i>	

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THE COVER: The drawing is by Ami Turner. She is a graduate of Mesa State College with a B.A. in Fine Arts. She is currently working for an art company, and plans to study art in Russia in the near future.

About the author:

Jack Nelson is a retired public schools administrator, with a Master of Arts in History from the University of Redlands, Redlands, California, 1950. He has spent many years researching the "Old Spanish Trail", the fur trade era, Mountain Men, and all points connected. His background includes archaeological work, and untold hours backpacking miles of the "Trail."

His thesis "Louis Robidoux, the Man Behind the Legend" has been recognized as one of the few authentic documents pertaining to this entrepreneur of the nineteenth century fur trade period. It has been used as reference for continued research on this subject.

Jack Nelson is a native Coloradan, and now resides in Grand Junction.

EDITORS NOTES: The quoted passages in this work are italicized by preference of the author, in order to bring added attention to the information.

Confusion concerning the names "Colorado", "Blue", and "Grand" in reference to rivers comes, primarily, from the fact that travelers on the "Trail" would use the name they were most familiar with. Consequently, what one would call the "Blue", another would call the "Grand." At times it is a frustrating situation, but in order to stay historically correct, the author has used the names employed by each expedition. Referring to the author's end-notes will help clarify the situation.

INTRODUCTION

This article is about a trail known today as the North Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail." Little physical evidence remains of this pack-animal route across the interior of the American Southwest, prior to it becoming a wagon road in the late 1850s. Native Americans, Spanish explorers, priests, slave traders, "Mountain Men", American entrepreneurs seeking fame and fortune, and those just "seeking", all at some time helped create an ephemeral Trail which stretched from Santa Fe, New Mexico into present-day Utah. With the demise of the fur trade and the discovery of gold in California, both the North Branch, and the Main or South Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail" fell into disuse.

The focus of this study is on that portion of the North Branch most heavily used by those traveling from Taos, New Mexico to Antoine Robidoux's Fort Uintah (today spelled Uinta) in northeast Utah until the mid 1840s. Those who traveled this route often referred to it as the "Old Spanish Trail." The southern sections of the North Branch located in the San Luis Valley of south-central Colorado, have been fairly well located and documented. However, after leaving the San Luis Valley, the North Branch, from the top of Cochetopa Pass to the Green River, became a tangle of trails dictated by terrain, weather, Indian relations and the needs of the moment. This "tangle of trail" constituting the North Branch is the focus of this article.

Piecing together this story entailed a search of limited written evidence, inscriptions carved on canyon walls, common-sense surveys of the area, "picking the brains" of people knowledgeable about specific stretches of the route, and virtual archaeological study of that little physical evidence remaining. Wagon ruts indelibly carved in rocky terrain are fairly easy to trace; but, pack animal hoof marks are non-existent after over one hundred and fifty years.

Jack Nelson
1995

NORTH BRANCH OF THE "OLD SPANISH TRAIL"
from
"Touse North to the Winty", 1600-1850

Shortly after Christopher Columbus "discovered" the New World, adventurers, explorers, missionaries, and other emissaries of the Spanish crown, sought to extend Spanish control over the new territory. By 1600, the Spanish had conquered most native populations in Central America, South America, and Mexico. Expansion northward from an established foothold in Mexico during the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries created serious problems for the Spanish crown and the Catholic church.

Among those problems were supply lines that extended north from a base in central Mexico to outposts in its borderlands (areas which became California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas). Finances were always a problem in New Spain, particularly when it came to her northernmost territory. Unrest and open warfare erupted in many areas, brought about by the mistreatment of the native Indian populations, particularly in regions along the lower Colorado River. Missions, widely distributed in this area, were burned and abandoned for long periods during the 1600s and 1700s.¹

Following extensive exploration by land and sea, Spain had established a mission system along the California coast by the late 1700s. The indigenous Indian populations of the area generally accepted the proselytizing efforts of the mission priests. However, the same could not be said about the missions in New Mexico. Santa Fe, founded shortly after 1600, had a long and tumultuous history, marked by Indian uprisings, revolts, and outright warfare. The Native American population in the vicinity of Santa Fe--the Navajo, Ute, Apache, and Comanche--were proud, independent, and resentful of the rigorous demands, restrictions and enslavement placed upon them by the European invaders.

With the Spanish settlements in New Mexico separated from those in California by over a thousand miles of inhospitable terrain, unfriendly Indians, and unknown trails, it was not until the late 1700s that serious explorations of the area began.

High craggy mountains, deep sheer-walled canyons, wide, deep and turbulent rivers, long stretches of desert, and lack of potable water, all discouraged exploration and settlement. For many years explorers came into the area and took different routes. A number of years passed before these unconnected sections came together to form the "Old Spanish Trail", between Santa Fe and the California mission. The North Branch was one of the last sections of the "Old Spanish Trail" to be established.

The "Old Spanish Trail", which followed a sinuous route between the two Spanish centers of influence, evolved slowly. It was not firmly established as an animal pack train route, largely following well used Indian trails, until about 1830. Few physical scars of the early treks remain along its 1200 mile length. River fords, water holes, forage for pack stock, terrain and relations with indigenous Indians dictated routes. Much has been written and documented about the main route of the Trail² which assumed a horseshoe-shaped arc northwest from Santa Fe. After reaching a ford on the Colorado River, the Trail continued on to its northern apogee soon after another passable crossing of the Green River. The Trail then swung southwest, until reaching the California settlements.

While the route of the Main Trail has been firmly established, certain segments have been slighted. Specifically, these were shortcuts or spur trails which branched off from the main route, going almost due north from Santa Fe, and rejoining it hundreds of miles later. These trails led into the interior areas of northern New Mexico, western Colorado, and northeastern Utah. These routes, not extensively used until after 1820, became the North Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail". The geographic area encompassed the river drainage of the upper Rio Grande, and the major upper Colorado River Basin. The mountain ranges included the Sangre de Cristo, San Juan, Elk, Uncompahgre, Grand Mesa, Roan/Bookcliff, and the Wasatch.

The North Branch followed a route north from Santa Fe to Taos Pueblo, an established trade center for Indians.³ At the San Juan Pueblo, the North Branch split into an east and west route, one on each side of the deep gorge of the Rio Grande. These two routes rejoined near present-day Saguache, Colorado, and continued northward over Cochetopa Pass to the Gunnison River. Turning west, the trail skirted the deep gorges along the Gunnison River to reach the Uncompahgre River, near present-day Montrose. There, the route went north to one of the few fordable crossings of the Colorado River at present-day Grand Junction. Once across the Colorado River, the trail assumed a westerly direction to connect with the Main Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail" just before reaching the Green River. There were trails which diverged off the North Branch route between the two river crossings--the ones at the Colorado and Green Rivers. These trails, used by the traders/trappers during the 1820s and 1840s, went north to traverse the Roan/Bookcliff Mountains to reach the Uintah (or Winty) River, a tributary of the Green River in northeast Utah.

Between 1500 and the early 1800s, Spanish expeditions, seeking access to the upper Colorado River basin used the route. Indians in the area told a Spanish leader of an expedition along the lower Colorado River in 1604: "*...it was a thirty-day journey from the mouth [of the Colorado River] to the source of the river and*

*that six days beyond the source there were many bison and very large deer."*⁴

The indigenous Indians of the Southwest played a significant role in the historical development of the Southwest. Their homeland ranged from the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, to the edge of the Great American Desert west of the Wasatch Mountains in present-day Utah. Early contact with the Spanish introduced the Utes to new trade items, including firearms and horses. The Utes became exceptional horsemen, bred horses with fine bloodlines, and enjoyed horse racing. The Ute Indians probably opened sections of the "Old Spanish Trail", including the North Branch, by the 1600s.

The Utes, having little else to trade, soon discovered the Spanish needed Indian slaves for domestic and commercial use. They became adept at swooping down on their weaker neighbors, especially the Piutes, capturing young women and children, and delivering them in trade to the Spanish. One of their main "trade" routes was across the central Wasatch Range, then southeast, where they "...forded the Green and Colorado Rivers at the only accessible points along their awesome canyons, cut across the southwest corner of Colorado, to the Spanish settlements on the Rio Grande."⁶

Mounted Utes established well known trails which crisscrossed the intermontane regions of the Colorado River basin. Spanish explorers, and later venturesome travelers, used these trails. Spanish slave traders also ventured into Ute country to carry out clandestine business in this remote area.⁷ Groups planning a trek into the interior of Spanish territory questioned participants in previous expeditions and studied accounts of their journeys, like that of Fray Alonzo de Posada.⁸ His journal of 1686 was considered one of the few authentic documents describing the area north from Santa Fe.

Unquestionably having studied Posada's journal and possibly following much of his earlier route,⁹ two Catholic priests, Fray Francisco Atanasio Dominguez and Fray Silvestre Velez de Escalante, left Santa Fe in 1776 intending to establish a route to connect Santa Fe with the missions in California. They planned to travel north from Santa Fe to a point at approximately the same latitude as the Monterey Mission in California, then turn west. On July 29, 1776, the two priests began a joint venture of historical significance. While never reaching their ultimate goal, the daily journal of their trek recorded by Escalante, became an invaluable geographical document. Of specific interest here is their journey into the Upper Colorado River Basin, especially regions encompassing those of the North Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail". The details recorded in their journal has made following their route fairly easy for present-day researchers; however, it is unfortunate that most of the later travelers through the area did not do the same.

The small expedition left Santa Fe, and traveled in a northwesterly direction across north central New Mexico and southwestern Colorado. Upon reaching the Dolores River, in the vicinity of present-day Slick Rock, Colorado, they went up and across the Uncompaghre Plateau. Upon reaching the Uncompaghre River, south of present-day Montrose, they turned north to follow a wide Indian trail, traveled downstream until they reached a point near present-day Delta, Colorado, where the Uncompaghre joins with the larger Gunnison river. Here, the expedition went east,

traveling upstream along the Gunnison until reaching its North Fork. Choosing to go up the North Fork, they followed it a short distance, ascended the Grand Mesa, and again headed in a northerly direction. Upon reaching the Colorado River, they forded it, went west a short distance, turned north again to traverse the Bookcliff and Roan Range to reach the White River near present-day Rangely. Again traveling in a northwesterly direction, they approached and crossed the Green River, immediately above present-day Jenson, Utah. At that juncture, the group proceeded west across north central Utah until they reached present-day Utah Lake. From their camp at Utah Lake, they headed south until reaching an area south of present-day St. George, Utah, where they turned east and returned to Santa Fe after a six month journey. As fascinating as their journey was, of primary interest here is only those sections of their route which became parts of the North Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail". It must be noted that much of their line of travel was later incorporated into the Main/South Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail".

Keenly observant, Father Escalante recorded daily distances traveled, terrain, weather, water sources, flora, fauna, Indian groups met, and any other information he considered important. For example, his entry for August 26, 1776, describes the expedition's arrival near present-day Montrose, Colorado: "...after going two leagues ¹⁰ and a half northeast we finished descending the sierra and came to the banks and meadows of El Rio de San Francisco—among the Yutas called Anacapgari [Uncompahgre]...On this river meadow, which is large and very level, there is a very wide and well beaten trail."¹¹ This particular trail became an integral section of the North Branch.

In Escalante's entry for August 27, 1776, the route north along the river is described in great detail. Upon reaching the area of the confluence of the Uncompahgre and Gunnison rivers, the entry makes an interesting historical note: "*To these two rivers, already joined together, there came Don Juan Maria de Ribera [Rivera] in the year of '65...according to the indications he gives in his itinerary.*"¹²

The entry also notes that one of the expeditions interpreters had visited the same area the previous year, in 1775, where some of his men had crossed below the confluence and assumed they had reached the Colorado River, and then returned to Santa Fe.¹³ Interestingly, the Dominguez-Escalante expedition, traveling down the east side of the Uncompahgre River, did not cross at its confluence with the Gunnison. Instead, it proceeded upstream along the south bank of the Gunnison River, followed it for a short distance, forded the river, then continued upstream along the north bank of the North Fork of the Gunnison River. The small expedition then ascended to Grand Mesa by way of Hubbard Canyon,¹⁴ possibly following a well used Indian trail. The expedition crossed the massif to reach the Colorado River on September 5, 1775.¹⁵

The Dominguez-Escalante expedition, taking the route which skirted the south base of the Grand Mesa, may have had little prior information concerning the area. As their original agenda had been to go north until they "reached the same latitude as the Monterey Mission", why they diverged from that general direction remains an unanswered question. Perhaps their insistent Indian guide deceived

them. Whatever the reason, they went up and over the Grand Mesa.

If the expedition had used the river crossing near the confluence of the Uncompahgre and Gunnison rivers, it could have avoided miles and a time consuming detour. If it had followed the base at the western slope of the Grand Mesa, the group would have reached the banks of the Colorado River within a few days, and proceeded in their desired direction. When the explorers bypassed the above route, they little knew that it was to become very heavily traveled by those who came later.

When the Dominguez-Escalante expedition reached the Colorado River, "...which our own [the Spanish] call the *San Rafael* and the *Yutas Red River*,"¹⁶ they found a ford, and crossed the river just downstream from the present Una bridge.¹⁷ Once on the north side of the river, the group proceeded downstream until they reached the mouth of a canyon through which Roan Creek flowed. This route was one that later travelers traversed to go from the Colorado River to the Green River and beyond.

The Dominguez-Escalante journal describes the difficulties they encountered while crossing the Roan/Bookcliff Range.¹⁸ The Roan/Bookcliff Range forms an almost insurmountable barrier which extends east-to-west immediately north of the Colorado River. The escarpment stretches over one hundred miles across northwestern Colorado into what is now the state of Utah. Access through these mountains is limited to a few canyons along their southern slopes. The almost sheer walls encountered by travelers approaching from the south dictated routes up limited access canyons. The Dominguez-Escalante route, up and over the Roan Creek drainage, was probably rarely traveled after the initial traverse. However, their trail, several miles below the summit, ties into a road which is used today.¹⁹

The Dominguez-Escalante journal records an incident which occurred at the Roan Creek camp. An argument about the route arose between the leaders of the expedition and their Indian guide. When another Indian intervened, the route was decided upon, and the journey continued. Excerpts from their daily log from September 7 to 17, 1776 follow:

SEPTEMBER 7. ...*set out from [camp at confluence of Brush and Roan Creeks]...found a meadow with good pasturage [and good water for the animals]. ...Afterward...go in up an incline so difficult an ascent we doubted ever reaching the top. ...Its ascent must be half a league long, and one reached the top there are some shelves...where two pack mules lost their footing and rolled down more than twenty yards. ...We climbed it on foot with many exhausting and scary experience. ...Having climbed the slope, we traveled...going down a short narrow valley...[and found] a scanty water spring. Today five leagues and quarter.*

SEPTEMBER 8. ...*climbing up a steep incline...better terrain than yesterday's. ...We descended to the ridge down an extremely steep slope, rough in places but with rock. ...Today five leagues.*

SEPTEMBER 9. "*we swung north-northwest...then, after having trekked nine leagues in this direction all through the canyon over a well beaten path.... Halfway in this canyon we saw, crudely painted, three*

shield, or "Apache shields", of hide, and a spear head. Farther down... we saw another painting which supposedly represented two men in combat. For this reason we named it *El Canon Pintado* [Painted Canyon]... Having passed the canyon, we traveled...and came to a river which we named *San Clemente* [the White River]; we crossed it and halted on its northern edge....good pasturage. ...Today ten leagues.

SEPTEMBER 10.... We set out after midday...toward the northwest over rockless hills and brief plains with neither pasturage nor trees... [a waterless camp]. Today three leagues.

SEPTEMBER 11. ...headed west-northwest; after going a league and a half through arroyos and embankments...found...a tiny spring of water from which the horses were unable to drink...found plenty of running water for ourselves and for horse herd, which was already much fatigued from thirst and hunger. ...Today six leagues.

SEPTEMBER 12. [Lay over day to rest animals]

SEPTEMBER 13. [Today the group followed a well beaten path, over fairly gentle terrain, much water and good pasturage.]...came to a large river which we named *San Buenaventura* [Green River]. ...Today six leagues. The river is the most copious one we have come by, and the same one which Fray Alonso de Posada, ...in the century gone by relates in his report....²⁰

SEPTEMBER 14. ...We made no day's march. ...Before noon the quadrant was set up to check the observation by the sun, and we found not more than $40^{\circ} 59' 24''$. [Upon rechecking that night they had a reading of $41^{\circ} 19'$. Both calculations were slightly off, a footnote on page 44 of *The Journal* places the group at $40^{\circ} 30'$.]

SEPTEMBER 15. ...no march...

SEPTEMBER 16. [They left their camp, on the east bank of the Green River opposite the mouth of Brush Creek, went up the river about a mile to a ford, and crossed the Green.] ...We took to the west, and after going one league along...the meadow of the river, crossed another smaller one...[The expedition went on, crossed present-day Ashley Creek, and proceeded through some rough and stony terrain, and came upon]...spoor of about twelve horses and some people on foot... [They followed the trail and concluded that a group of Comanches had been lying in wait to]...deprive us of the animal herd at this place...Today eight leagues.²¹

SEPTEMBER 17....On the 17th we set out from the meadow of *Las Llagas de Nuestro Padre San Francisco* [the Stirrup Bend of the Green River] toward the southwest...." [At this point they were still following a well defined Indian trail. The group continued on until they reached an overlook above the junction of the Green and White rivers.] "...which now joined together flowed to the south with respect to where we stood. We descended to a plain and another river's large meadow, and after going west another league and a half, arrived at the juncture of two medium-sized rivers. ...The one more to the east before the juncture runs to the

southeast, and we named it Rio de San Damian [the Uintah/or Uinta River]; the other to the east, and we named it Rio de San Cosme [the Duchesne River]. We continued upstream along the latter, and after going west one league we saw ruins near it of a very ancient pueblo ruin where there were fragments of stone for grinding maize, of jars, and pots of clay. The pueblo's shape was circular, as indicated by the ruins now almost completely in mounds Today eight leagues.²² [The journal continues to record their journey until their return to Santa Fe on January 2, 1777.]

These excerpts from the journal of the Dominguez-Escalante expedition, on its trek from the Colorado River to the Uintah Basin, while condensed, is detailed enough to throw some light on scanty references made by later travelers. Of special interest are the comments concerning well defined and heavily used Indian trails. Also, the difficulties in traversing the Roan/Bookcliff Range north and west of the Colorado River crossing adds credence to why there would be so few trails across that area in the years to come. These excerpts aided in establishing a firm foundation for later travelers who employed the North Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail." The Dominguez-Escalante expedition was historically significant because they went among the Indians as men of peace, expanded knowledge of a vast area of the Spanish Southwest, and proved that a route from Santa Fe to the missions of California was feasible.

Spanish influence over the area traveled by the expedition, soon to be encompassed by the North Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail", existed for several years after the return of the Dominguez-Escalante expedition. However, a period of rapid transition came shortly after 1800. At that time, international politics affected the entire region west of the Mississippi River. In 1800 Spain, which had controlled most of the West from the Mississippi River to California, ceded much of the area to France. France, in turn, sold the region to the United States with the Louisiana Purchase in 1804. The Spanish controlled much of the Southwest for several more years; however, the area north and west of the Arkansas River, and west to a line between present-day California and Oregon, became part of the United States.

With the threat of Spanish reprisal lifted, Merriwether Lewis and William Clark's expedition opened the door to the West between the years 1804-06. The expedition had barely returned to civilization before plans were being made to send trapping and trading companies into the upper Missouri River area. Far north of Spanish territory, activities along the major rivers of the region would soon affect the entire intermontane West.

A St. Louis, Missouri entrepreneur, Manuel Lisa, visited the upper Missouri River watershed as early as 1807. Over the ensuing years, he and other men who would become legends in the fur trade formed various fur trading companies.²³ Lisa established an early fort on the Yellowstone River. From that central location, *engag'es*, or contracted trappers, trapped the many beaver rich streams and rivers of the upper Missouri River watershed. Small bands also worked farther south on the Snake and Green rivers.

One group went south to the "River of the Spaniards," or the Green River. Manuel Lisa wished to establish friendly trade relations with the Spanish by opening

a direct trade route from his fort on the Yellowstone to Santa Fe, thereby eliminating the middle man in Saint Louis. In 1809, Lisa sent a small group of men down the Green River to possibly meet with some Spanish traders. If a meeting occurred, his gestures for open trade were rebuffed.²⁴ The reference to Lisa's emissaries possibly reaching the Colorado River from the north is cause for more than just passing interest.

Because Lisa's *engag'es* had trapped the Snake and the upper Green Rivers, they were familiar with the region. Knowing that the "River of the Spaniards" flowed to the south, those assigned the task of contacting the Spanish would naturally go that direction. The group probably followed the upper Green River downstream as far as the White River; at which point the Green veers slightly in a southwesterly direction. Upon reaching the White River, the group crossed the old Dominguez-Escalante Trail, and possibly chose to traverse the Roan/Bookcliff Range, thereby giving birth to a route of the North Branch, which would eventually become well known.

Quite possibly they traveled the Willow Creek Trail (to be discussed in more detail later) to avoid the deep canyons of the Green River. Once across the Roan/Bookcliffs, they could have easily accessed the "Old Spanish Trail" at some point east of the Green River ford.²⁵ If Lisa's men did follow this route, they were probably the earliest known group of "American" trappers to traverse the Roan/Bookcliffs north to south. Routes across the range would become well used, but never firmly established, in the years to come. The area, north and west of the Roan/Bookcliff Range which incorporates the Green River and its tributaries, would become the hub of trading and trapping activities from the early 1820s until about 1845. To reach the region, commonly referred to as either the "Winty" or "Green River country," which was rich with fur bearing animals, created real problems during that early period.

Soon after Manuel Lisa and various other groups established trapping/trading companies in the Upper Missouri country, Indian problems affected the entire intermontane region. Unscrupulous trading practices, cheating, and mistreatment of Indian women created hostility between intruders and Indians. Those who continued to trap in hostile territory often had their equipment, horses and weapons taken. While not always killed, trappers were often captured, stripped naked, and forced to leave the area in search of friendlier Indians. Trappers usually emerged from such encounters feeling lucky to have their "hair." In the Missouri country, unrest and warfare between the intruders and Indians occurred as early as 1811.²⁶

With the routes virtually blocked through unfriendly Indian territory from the Upper Missouri drainage to the fur rich Green River, it was necessary to find alternate trails. Spanish control of territory to the south and west to California forbade American travel until about 1822. A few of those venturesome Americans who trapped or traded in their domain were sometimes caught, fined and/or incarcerated in Spanish jails. Despite this, adventurers, explorers, traders and trappers continued to come into the Rocky Mountain West. Some continued to press to open trade with the Spanish in Santa Fe. Others, seeking to reach the beaver rich waters of the Green River country, sought out other routes while trying to avoid the Spanish to

the south and hostile Indians in the north. These early "Mountain Men" followed a narrow corridor through the Rocky Mountains and interlaced it with trails which would be used by those who followed. Legendary men such as Joseph Walker, Ewing Young, Jedediah Smith, "Old" Bill Williams, William Wolfskill, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Kit Carson, Jim Bridger, and the Robidoux brothers--Miguel (Michel), Louis, Joseph and Antoine--would make an indelible imprint on the pages of history.²⁷ Many later served as guides or scouts for various United States government-sponsored ventures in the West.

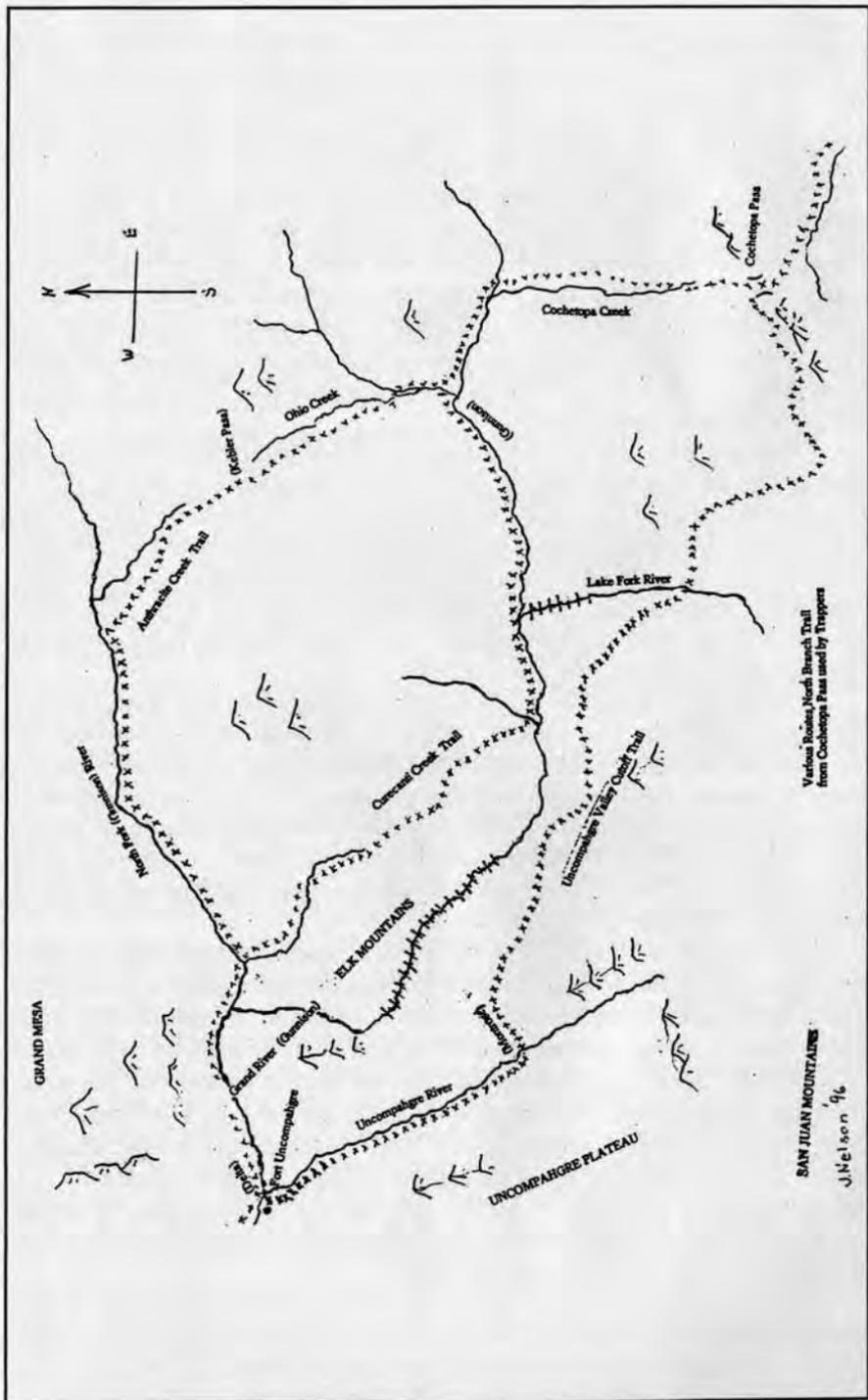
While the Rocky Mountains presented a formidable barrier with craggy snowcapped peaks, raging rivers, and steep boulder-strewn canyons, these men found routes around and through the area. Trapper trails developed early, and became well known after 1820. They followed such rivers as the Arkansas, North and South Platte, Laramie, Sweetwater and others, offering access to the Green River country from the east. Often, these trails followed those made by Indian horse-stealing and hunting bands. These trails usually offered water and forage needed for riding stock and pack animals. While the Green River country was known and worked by trappers as early as 1810, it was not until the early 1820s that the area came into its own.

The region from the Colorado River north to the Snake River became the center of extensive trading and trapping activity. Areas in the vicinity of, and east and west of, the Green River drainage also became the domain of the Mountain Men. The rendezvous, or trade fair for trappers and traders, was held annually from 1825 until 1845 on the various tributaries of the Green. Several forts, or small trading posts, most consisting of little more than crude log lean-tos, teepees, or dug-outs, sprang up in the region. Most of these so-called forts were usually located in sheltered areas in an attempt to protect them from the harsh winter climate. To supply these trade centers, usually by mule pack trains,²⁸ trade goods had to be transported long distances.

Fortunately for the trappers and traders in the Green River country, international politics once again intervened. When Mexico proclaimed independence from Spain in 1821, trade between the United States and Mexico opened up. An American mountain man, Joseph Walker, helped ease trade restrictions between the two countries, despite the fact he had been imprisoned in Santa Fe for illegal trade with the Mexicans. He and his companions were released when they offered to help the Mexicans in an Indian uprising. In 1822 the Mexicans lifted previous trade restrictions imposed on outsiders, partly due to Walker's efforts.²⁹

While allowed to bring trade goods into, or out of, Mexican territory, foreigners were still subject to tariffs and required to obtain licenses to trade and trap. The Mountain Men broke these laws more often than they obeyed them. Despite heavy fees, caravans of wagons loaded with trade goods began to roll between St. Louis, Missouri and Santa Fe.

By 1825, Santa Fe was the major trade center for the intermontane West. Immediately after the lifting of trade restrictions in Santa Fe, the fur trade expanded rapidly. With virtual free rein to travel through previously closed territory, the American traders and trappers sought out more direct routes between Santa Fe and



the fur-rich regions of the Green River country. Because the Main route of the "Old Spanish Trail" followed a circuitous direction out of Santa Fe, a more direct trail became necessary. Probably utilizing well traveled Indian trails and developed wagon routes through the San Luis Valley of south central Colorado, a North Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail" was extended farther north soon after 1822.

Taos, or "Touse" as the settlement was commonly referred to during that period, became the center for the Mountain Men, when they were in civilization. It was at Taos, on the eastern route, rather than Santa Fe, that the North Branch began. From Taos, heavily used trails went north to the fur trapping areas where some branches of the trail split off to the east to join with the Santa Fe Trail. As noted above, the North Branch split into an East and West route several miles below Taos at the San Juan Pueblo; however, Taos was recognized as the "jump-off" point for those heading north.

While probably not the first, two trappers, William Wolfskill and Ewing Young were among the first Americans to use the North Branch out of Taos in 1823.³⁰ They were trapping in the area of the Uintah-Green River basin by 1824. When news of the rich trapping region of the Green River country reached Taos, it caught everyone's attention. New arrivals, fresh from St. Louis, hastily joined or formed their own companies to go "north to the Winty"³¹ to trap and trade. The North Branch, with its many divergent trails, "*...all constituted the route which the mountain men called the Old Spanish Trail.*"³²

The fact that trails north from Taos, as well as those west from Santa Fe, were commonly called the "Old Spanish Trail", has frustrated those researching the routes of early travelers. While many of the early traders and trappers were literate, few kept journals of their specific activities or routes. Not until after the American trappers and traders started to use trails previously traveled by the Spanish did the term "Old Spanish Trail" become common. The North Branch, usually called the "Old Spanish Trail", was to become heavily traversed between Taos and the Green River country, from the 1820s to the 1840s.

The North Branch, a title of recent origin, as mentioned previously, split into two distinct routes below Taos. In order to bypass the deep gorge of the Rio Del Norte (Rio Grande), the east route was commonly traveled by those heading north to the "Winty". While trails branched off the east route, its main direction skirted the Sangre de Cristo Range to join with the west route at present-day Saguache, Colorado. The west route went west-northwest up the San Luis Valley and joined the east route and became one trail again.³³ Once joined, the North Branch headed northwest to cross the Continental Divide at Cochetopa Pass at an elevation of just over ten-thousand feet. Once over the pass, the trail dropped down to follow Cochetopa Creek until it reached the upper drainage of the Grand River (Gunnison River) near present-day Gunnison, Colorado.³⁴

Upon reaching the Grand River, the North Branch veered westward, and generally stayed well south of the river, to avoid the impassable depths of the Black Canyon on the north side of the Grand (more on this will be discussed later). Much of the terrain through the upper Grand River was extremely rough and hazardous until the trail(s) reached the valley of the Uncompahgre River.³⁵

Undoubtedly, there was a branching off of trails from the top of Cochetopa Pass to the area of present-day Delta, Colorado. To avoid lengthy detours around the deep gorge of the Grand River, an alternate route probably developed very early. It most likely headed almost due west just after crossing the summit of the pass. A route following this course avoided the narrow rocky gorge of the middle stretch of Cochetopa Creek. It also would have provided much easier access to the more easily traversed upper sections of the Lake Fork Canyon. The terrain after crossing the Lake Fork River to the Uncompahgre Valley, although quite rough, was passable for a pack train.

Another strong possibility (suggested above) was that the North Branch may have followed two other routes, which were used and documented later in the 1800s.³⁶ After coming down Cochetopa Creek and reaching the Grand River, travelers crossed in the vicinity of present-day Gunnison, Colorado. Here again the trail split. One route headed north to reach Ohio Creek and proceeded over present-day Kebler Pass. Once across that pass, there was fairly easy access to Anthracite Creek which could be followed down to meet with the North Fork of the present-day Gunnison River. The North Fork River route provided easy downstream access to the area where the Uncompahgre and Grand rivers joined. The second possible route would have followed the north side of the Grand after crossing it below Cochetopa Creek. Just before reaching the gorge of the Black Canyon, the trail left the Grand River, in the vicinity of Curecanti Creek, to access a northwest route. Following along the west side of the Elk Mountain escarpment, the trail went northwest, past the present towns of Maher and Crawford, Colorado, and reached the Grand again near the area where the North Fork enters it, then went downstream to the Delta, Colorado area.³⁷

The trail, across from the Lake Fork, reached the Uncompahgre River, in the vicinity of present-day Montrose, Colorado. Once there, the route headed north, following in the tracks of the earlier Dominguez-Escalante expedition until reaching the confluence of the Uncompahgre and Grand rivers. The area where the two rivers joined, near present-day Delta, Colorado, became the site of Fort Uncompahgre, established by Antoine Robidoux during the 1820s.³⁸ The North Branch probably solidified into one trail at Robidoux's fort, as the routes down the Uncompahgre and the Grand rivers converge at that point.

When the Mexicans opened their territory to outside trade in the early 1820s, a new market for merchants out of St. Louis, Missouri became available. Eager for economic gain, entrepreneurs traveled over the newly opened Santa Fe Trail to seek their fortune. Among the early arrivals were members of the Robidoux family, well known fur traders of the era. Joseph Robidoux, founder of St. Joseph, on the Missouri River, had long provided supplies for the traders and trappers of the upper Missouri River region. Two other Robidoux, Louis and Antoine, began trading in Santa Fe soon after the territory opened to Americans.³⁹ Other brothers, Francois, Isadore, and Miguel also traded or trapped throughout the region. Louis, and especially Antoine, were not closely tied to their business ventures in Santa Fe because they were given to going far afield for economic gain. Both married Santa

Fe women to gain Mexican citizenship. As insensitive as it sounds, this was a common practice among the *Americanos* because they could avoid paying those taxes imposed on Americans.

Antoine Robidoux was undoubtedly trapping and becoming familiar with the rich fur areas of the "Winty" country as early as the mid-1820s. He attached himself to various trapping ventures to learn the trade and the country. Before long, he established himself as a knowledgeable permanent fixture in the region between Santa Fe and the "Winty".⁴⁰ Antoine Robidoux, probably more than any other single individual, established and solidified the North Branch into a viable route.

Antoine Robidoux's probable regular route after reaching Cochetopa Pass, was down Cochetopa Creek, fording the upper Grand River, accessing Kebler Pass via Ohio Creek, then proceeding down the Anthracite Creek watershed to reach the North Fork of the Grand which he followed downstream to its confluence with the Uncompahgre River.⁴¹ Antoine, along with his brother Louis, soon established a virtual monopoly on trade over the North Branch.

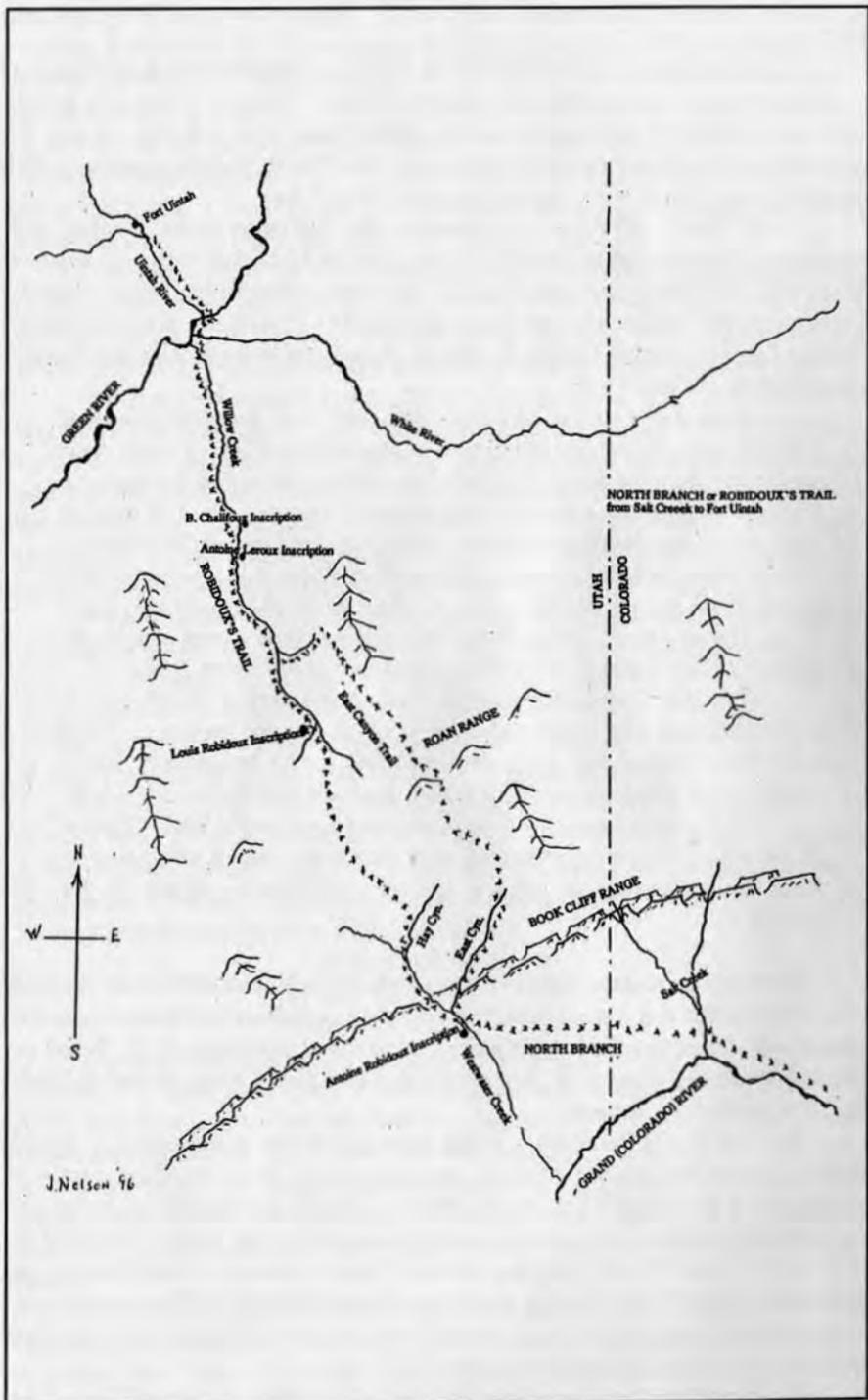
To eliminate the time-consuming round-trip trek from the Santa Fe and Taos area to the "Winty", Antoine Robidoux established a trading fort sometime in the 1820s. Located near the confluence of the Uncompahgre and Grand rivers, Fort Uncompahgre served the immediate area, and as a re-supply base for forts farther north. No specific date of establishment or actual location of the Uncompahgre Fort has been documented to date.⁴² Antoine has been credited with being the first to establish a trading fort in the intermontane West, an honor which is open for debate. He is also credited with being the earliest trader to use wagons or carts to haul supplies over the North Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail".⁴³

Antoine Robidoux established another trading post or fort on the Uintah River, a tributary of the Green, during the 1830s.⁴⁴ During the heyday of the trappers, the "Winty" was the center of much activity. Fort Uintah would become one of the main trading posts for several years.⁴⁵ While 1837 has been strongly suggested as the date the fort was first established, this date, as well as its specific location, are uncertain.

The date 1837 has been based upon an inscription carved on a rock overhang located at the mouth of Westwater Canyon in the Roan/Bookcliff Range which reads:

ANTOINE ROBIDOUX
PASSE ICILE. 13 NOVEMBRE
1837
poure ETABLIRE MAISON
TRAITE A LA
rv VERT OU WINTE⁴⁶

While variously interpreted as a date for the year Antoine Robidoux intended to *establish* a trading post, it may have been an indication that this was the year he would *erect* a more permanent post. Antoine, ever watchful for business, may have just been advertising to anyone passing that he would be open for trade, the location of this fort, and the trail used to get there. Whatever the intention, it is documented that Antoine Robidoux was trading in the "Winty" area well before



1837.

An inscription, "DENIS JULIEN, 1831", is carved in a rock bluff, near a mound assumed to be the location of Fort Uintah.⁴⁷ Perhaps Julien was in the employ of Robidoux during that period. While there is no particular reason to concentrate on a date for the establishment of Fort Uintah, it adds emphasis to the apparent heavy use of trails coming into the "Winty" area.

Kit Carson, well known Mountain Man and army scout, recalled and dictated in his later years an account of time spent in the Uintah region. It appears that in 1832, Kit Carson met a Captain Lee who was a partner in the famous Bent-St. Vrain enterprise, which was operating out of Bent's Fort on the Arkansas River. Captain Lee encouraged Carson to join an expedition to trade with and supply trappers in the "Winty" area:

In the latter part of October, 1832, with their goods well packed and properly fitted for the rough transportation which they must necessarily be subjected to, they left [Taos and] set out to find the trappers. They traveled for some distance on a route well known as the Old Spanish Trail, which was nothing more than a mule-path leading from New Mexico to California. Having arrived safely at White River, they continued their march down stream, following the windings of the river until they came to the Green River. Green River they forded, then struck across the country for the Winty River, which is a branch of the Green River.

Here they found Mr. Robidoux,⁴⁸ who had a party of twenty men in his employ, and who was engaged both in trapping and trading.... Soon after these parties met, snow began to fall. ...The two parties joined together and began to establish winter quarters suitable for the whole.

They selected a site for their permanent camp on the Winty River, at its mouth.... They were provided with skin tents...which according to Kit's mountaineering experience, are very comfortable substitutes for houses.⁴⁹

There has been some speculation as to which Mr. Robidoux Carson wintered with. It is possible that it was Louis.⁵⁰ Another enigma about this is that historians have usually noted that Carson and Robidoux wintered together in 1833. Based on the account above, along with chronology by years after Carson arrived in Santa Fe, 1832 seems to be accurate.

As Carson and Robidoux's group spent the winter in skin tents, it would appear Antoine had not yet erected a permanent fort. However, Carson tells of trading furs at Robidoux's Fort on the "Winty" over the next few years. He recalls trapping on the Snake River as well as the Grand during the period from 1835 to 1837. At the end of each trapping season, Carson returned to sell his furs at Robidoux's Fort. By 1837 Carson became discouraged while "...at Robidoux's Fort, Carson again found a purchaser for his fur; but, the prices at which he was obliged to sell them, did not please him."⁵¹

Kit Carson was very knowledgeable of the trails extending from "Touse" up into the "Winty" area. His years as a trapper and Army scout gave him intimate

knowledge of the entire region. In his memoirs, however, he never mentioned visiting Robidoux's Fort Uncompahgre on the Grand River. This is strange, as he told of following the "Old Spanish Trail" to the White River. Possibly, he failed to mention stopping at the Fort because Robidoux was absent at the time. From his description of the windings of the White River, it would seem he may have used one of the Salt Creek routes over the Roan/Bookcliff Range which would entail following down the White. Carson, in his later years, also led many expeditions across the lower reaches of the North Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail".

While Kit Carson's account may confirm an earlier date for the establishment of Fort Uintah, many questions about access trails to the "Winty" still exist. Literate men of such historical stature as William Ashley, Ceran St. Vrain, Etienne Provost, and the Robidoux left few written accounts of specific trails they traversed.

When any reference was made of traveling along the "Old Spanish Trail", it is possible that they had attached that sobriquet to any section of the Dominguez-Escalante route they followed. In addition, most pack trains out of Taos had Mexican muleteers who were often familiar with certain routes. Undoubtedly, they added to the common usage of the term "Old Spanish Trail". With that in mind, it is probable that any heavily used route, from Taos north to the "Winty" received that title. The name may even have applied to the trail which followed the White River.

When Antoine Robidoux carved his inscription on a rock overhang at the entrance to Westwater Canyon in 1837, he may have been leaving a message: this is the access route for Antoine Robidoux's trail to his fort on the Winty. To underscore this is another inscription located on the Westwater-Willow Creek Trail. As has been suggested, Louis Robidoux may have been quite active in the operations of both Forts Uncompahgre and Uintah: *"...Louis probably served as the New Mexico agent for these posts, for they depended on New Mexico for supplies.... On at least one occasion, in the spring of 1841, Louis Robidoux made the long journey to Fort Uintah. ...as he approached the Green River, he took the time to inscribe his name on a cliff in the Willow Creek drainage, some thirty-five miles south of [present-day] Ouray, Utah...."*⁵² reading:

LOUIS ROBIDOUX

Passo qui diade

Mayo de 1841⁵³

With the Robidoux brothers' inscriptions located virtually at each end of the Westwater-Willow Creek Trail, it would appear to have been the one most used. Fairly easy access to the Dolores River ford, as well as the "crossing of the Grand", would not rule this out. Robidoux's Fort Uncompahgre, located as it was near the confluence of the Uncompahgre and Grand rivers, appears to have played a significant role in the development of the North Branch route. Divergent trails met near the fort and solidified into a single route leading to the "crossing of the Grand."

There were apparently several places where people could cross the Grand near the confluence of the two rivers. In several sections, the river bottom consisted of smooth rock and pebbles which gave the pack animals good footing. However, crossings even at these places would have been difficult during periods of high

water caused by snow melt during the spring and early summer months.

Across the Grand, near Fort Uncompahgre, the Trail went in a northerly direction toward the Colorado River (also called the Blue or Grand River).⁵⁴ With the steep-walled canyons to the west, and the high bluffs of the Elk Mountains (Grand Mesa) to the east, the Trail traversed high desert terrain. A stretch of approximately twenty miles went through "hill and gully" country before reaching a permanent source of water at Kannah Creek. Because Kannah Creek offered good water and forage for pack and riding stock, it was a good rest stop before continuing the arduous trek ahead. After leaving Kannah Creek, locating an access route to a ford crossing the Blue River became a major concern. Forging the river above the confluence of the Blue and the Grand Rivers could be a real challenge. The south banks of the Blue, and the east side of the Grand were cliff-like, rising steeply a hundred feet along the two rivers. Approximately three miles above the confluence of the two rivers, a natural arroyo cut through the fairly level plain along the high south bank of the Blue River, and offered a descent to the river.⁵⁵ Once down to the river, a crossing was made on a fairly firm bottom. The north bank was the edge of a wide flood plain which extended well north of the river. Of real concern, however, was that the river at the ford could be several hundred yards wide. Once across the river, the North Branch assumed a westerly direction which closely followed the north bank of the Blue and then the Grand. By remaining fairly close to the river, wood, water and some forage for the pack and riding animals was available.

It would appear that the North Branch, and later wagon roads, remained fairly close to the north side of the Grand River until reaching the Dolores River, which flows into the Grand from the south about sixty miles west of the "crossing of the Grand." At the juncture of the two rivers, the Trail assumed a northwesterly direction. The north side of the Grand became impassable because of sheer canyon walls and the river veering to the southwest. Leaving the river, with its ready source of forage and water, the Trail traversed a route across broken, ravine-filled high desert and virtually waterless terrain before reaching the Main or South Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail." The two trails converged at a point several miles southeast of the heavily used ford of the Green River, probably somewhere along present-day Thompson Wash. From the "crossing of the Grand" to the "crossing of the Green" was a distance of over one hundred miles, much of it lacking forage and permanent water-holes.

To reach the "Winty," a few trails branched off the North Branch, and might be considered a vital part of it. However, approximately twenty miles west of the "crossing of the Grand," a trail split off to the north in the vicinity of Salt Creek. This trail is shown as an "Indian Trail" on the J. W. Gunnison survey map of 1853.⁵⁶ It is highly possible this route was used on occasion to access the Roan/Bookcliff area, going over Baxter Pass, and reaching the White River. Another route possibly split off in the vicinity of the Salt Creek Trail and headed northwest toward the mouth of Westwater Canyon (a more detailed discussion of this route will be given later as it appears to be an integral section of the North Branch). At the Dolores River, where a possible alternate route from the south, off the Main Branch, crossed

at a ford of the Grand, another trail headed to the northeast for the Westwater Canyon route. Trails which split off from the North Branch between the "crossing of the Grand" and the "Old Spanish Trail" ford on the Green River were to be heavily traveled up to the "Winty," from the late 1820s until the mid 1840s, primarily by pack mule trains.

While the Main route of the "Old Spanish Trail," from Santa Fe to Los Angeles was probably little traveled in its entirety until 1830,⁵⁷ the North Branch was busy. Trappers and traders developed a diverse trail system to reach the rich fur-trapping regions of the "Winty." Many of their routes north from Taos, some never firmly established, tied the Main or South Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail" to the Dominguez-Escalante Trail along its northern course. When the two priests traversed the region between the Uncompahgre River and Utah Lake, they little dreamed of the intense activity that would take place over the next seventy years.

In order to identify probable routes north from any crossing of the Grand River, on any section of either the Main or North Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail," the "fords" must be located. Terrain dictated the direction trails took. Keep in mind, the Colorado River Basin drains a vast area of the West, filled with high, snowpacked mountains. Access, especially to the Grand River, because of potential high water and canyons along one or both banks, often created serious problems for travelers.

There were only three places the Main and North Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail" could ford the Grand River. The Main Trail crossed the Grand at a ford located a short distance above the confluence of the Green and Grand Rivers, near present-day Moab, Utah. The river below the joining of the two rivers was called the Colorado River during that period. The next crossing upstream, and one possibly used on occasion by travelers of the North Branch, was located in the area where the Dolores River enters the Grand from the south. Approximately one-hundred miles above the Main Trail ford was the major crossing used by those on the North Branch. Located, as mentioned before, about three miles above the confluence of the present-day Gunnison and Colorado Rivers, this ford was commonly referred to as "crossing the Grand," and impressed many travelers.⁵⁸

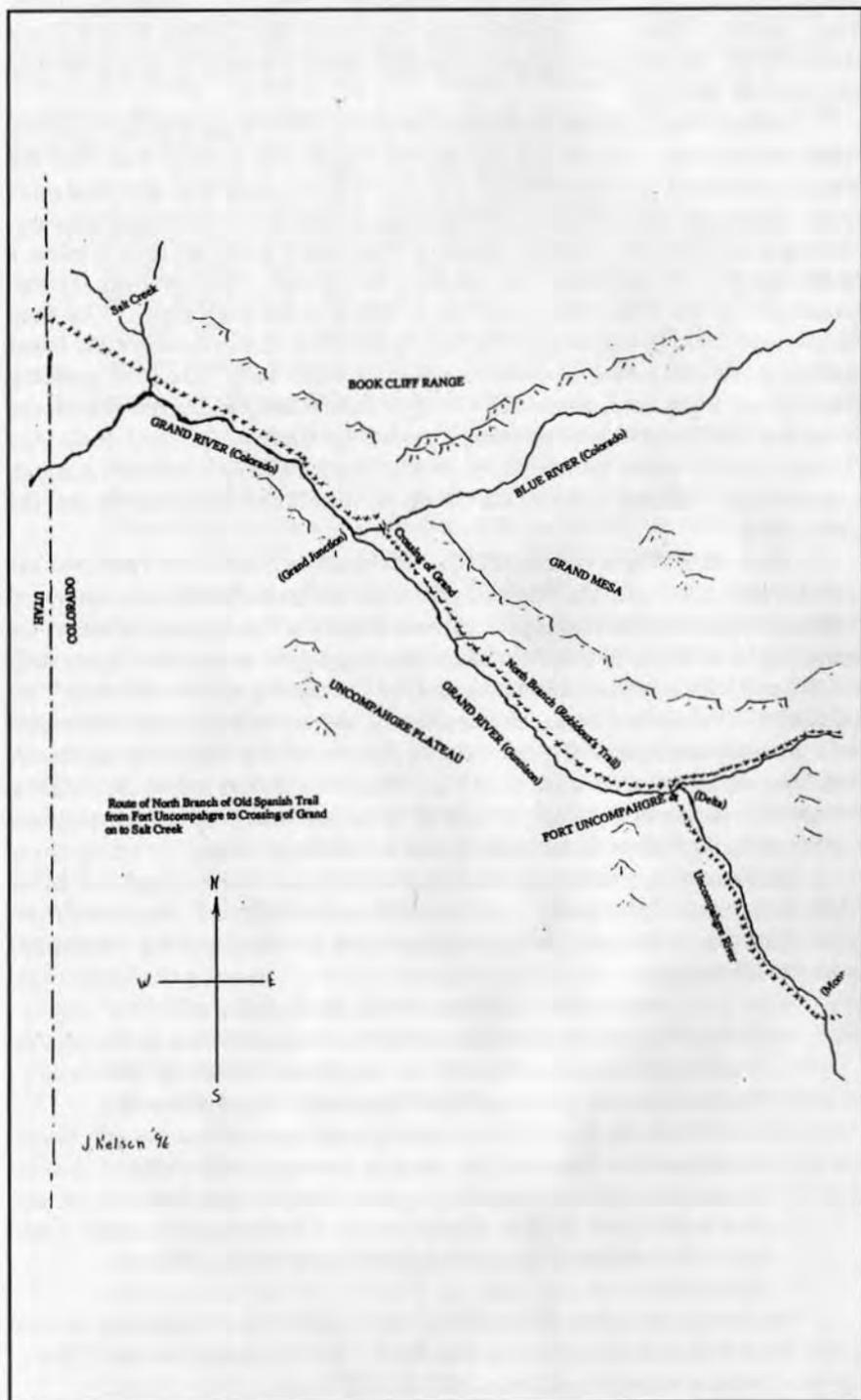
From the 1820s to 1840s, traders and trappers faced more than treacherous river crossings. Leaving Taos, they faced several hundred miles of rugged terrain. Of special interest here, is the area immediately north of the "crossing of the Grand", and the trails that fork from the valley floor and off the North Branch.

The previously mentioned Roan/Bookcliff Mountains north and west of the Grand River presented a seemingly impassable escarpment. Viewed from the south, few, if any, access routes are discernible. As noted in the Dominguez-Escalante journal, the terrain is steep and treacherous, canyons are narrow and rock-strewn, soil conditions are unstable, and there are sheer drop-offs from narrow cliffside trails. Water and forage sources for pack and riding stock were uncertain. However, traders and trappers were accustomed to traversing rough terrain, and seeking out the best routes for themselves and their pack animals. Most often they followed Indian and large animal trails in unknown country because such trails generally led to water-holes.

Other than the detailed description of traversing the Roan/Bookcliff Mountains by the Dominguez-Escalante expedition, there are but a few tantalizing passing references to the region between the trapping areas of the Green River and the "crossing of the Grand." Word-of-mouth descriptions of landmarks, trail markers of stone, or inscriptions carved on canyon rock walls, were probably the common practice to guide travelers along known routes. Locating a trail, especially over the Roan/Bookcliffs, that connected with a potable water source was of prime concern and required careful consideration. All new routes over the Roan/Bookcliff escarpment were probably pioneered from the north, because by following a watercourse up the more gentle northern slope, an adjoining exit route down the steep south side of the range could be located and used. One of those routes across the Roan/Bookcliff Mountains probably first traveled by the small group of Manuel Lisa's men in 1809, was the Westwater-Willow Creek Trail. There is much evidence to support this route as possibly the one most heavily used by later travelers.⁵⁹

People undoubtedly used other routes during the period of the 1820s to the 1840s. The Roan Creek Trail of Dominguez-Escalante fame, lies too far east of the "crossing of the Grand" for travelers pressed for time to reach the "Winty"; however, those taking the headwaters of the upper Colorado Basin and down the Blue or Grand from the east undoubtedly used that route. Two others were the east and west Salt Creek Trails.⁶⁰ These two, almost due north of the ford at the Grand, presented the same problems as the Roan Creek Trail. Upon reaching the White River, immediately to the north of the Roan/Bookcliffs, travelers faced a long, arduous journey over pulverulent alkaline terrain along the twisting course of that river. The Dominguez-Escalante Journal contains a description of the section between the White River and the Green River near "Winty". Whatever route(s) were used, there was a definite need to reach the "Winty" and all the trapping and trading activity in that area, just prior to and after the 1830s.

The Westwater-Willow Creek Trail, a side trail off the North Branch, probably followed this route. At the mouth of Westwater Canyon, in the area of the Antoine Robidoux inscription, travelers made preparations for the arduous journey ahead. An elevation gain of almost three thousand feet, most near the summit, faced the pack train. The route to the top extended approximately ten miles before them. Ascending Westwater Canyon, the Trail reached the intersection of two fairly large canyons: Preacher Canyon to the left, Hay Canyon to the right. Springs provided water at various spots along the route. Continuing up Hay Canyon for approximately another three miles, a very narrow opening to the left gave access up the wall of a side canyon. Traversing the slope of this fairly steep area, the summit was reached just south of present-day Three Pines. Heading north, across a gently down-sloping plateau, the upper end of an arroyo was reached which descended rapidly down to a fork of Whetrock Canyon. Following down Whetrock Canyon, Upper Willow Creek (Main Canyon) was soon reached. Willow Creek was followed downstream, approximately forty-five miles, until it approached the Green River. The Trail undoubtedly left Lower Willow Creek where it veered west toward the Green, to head across country to the "crossing of the White River", just above its confluence



with the Green. The Green River was crossed at a ford near present-day Ouray, Utah. Adding credence to the theory that Westwater-Hay Canyon-Willow Creek route was the trail most heavily used is the fact that it is several miles shorter than any possible alternate.

Another route, possibly utilized on the way to Fort Uintah with more heavily laden pack animals, was the less arduous, but longer, East Canyon trail from the Antoine Robidoux inscription area. The East Canyon route also provided more forage for the pack stock, and large wild animals to hunt to feed the human travelers. Veering to the northeast from the mouth of Westwater Canyon for several miles, a steady uphill climb was made until reaching the summit. Once attained, the trail turned almost due west, then northwest to follow down Seep Ridge. The Seep Ridge route could be followed all the way to the White River; however, the lower reaches sometimes lacked adequate forage and potable water. The more probable route, if and when used, would have been to follow Seep Ridge down from the summit at East Canyon, until reaching Pine Springs Canyon. The trail down Pine Springs Canyon would provide fairly easy access to Willow Creek at a juncture approximately halfway between the mouth of Westwater Creek Canyon and the Green River.⁶¹

Physical evidence verifies that the Westwater-Willow Creek route was the main trapper/trader trail. The location of the Louis Robidoux inscription, mentioned before, is along Willow Creek, upstream from where the Pine Spring trail enters the canyon. In addition, two other inscriptions suggest the same idea. A carving, located on a rock overhang, downstream of the Pine Spring trail access reads: "At. Leroux 1835". Antoine Leroux, an intrepid wanderer, undoubtedly knew this region well. Another inscription of some antiquity, but questioned authorship, reads: "A Rob.", no date [see p. 29 of text. 1837]. The carved letters are unlike Antoine Robidoux's; however, they may have been scratched in haste or placed as a trail marker along the Willow Creek route by one of Robidoux's men.

An interesting comment by the editor of William Ashley's journal of 1822-1838, throws more light on the Westwater-Willow Creek Trail.⁶² Apparently one group from the Ashley party had gone on a search for some missing hunters and wrote the following:

To the mouth of Willow Creek, on the east bank of the Green. This was perhaps the point where the trail later used by Antoine Robidoux in traveling to the Grand River left the Green....The route from the Grand River, which was left near the Utah-Colorado [state] line, would have been up the canyon of Westwater Creek, across the mesa to the head of Two Water Creek [a fork of Sweetwater Creek] down this stream a distance, then westerly to Willow Creek [another variant may have followed Two Water Creek farther down before striking direct for the White.]⁶³

The description above of a possible route is not unlike the East Canyon Seep Ridge Trail. There is no indication that Ashley, in his ventures in the "Winty" region, ever traversed through the Roan/Bookcliff Range.

A Reverend Joseph Williams left another meager description of a route over the Roan/Bookcliff Range. Joseph Williams, a Methodist minister, traveled through the "Winty" region during 1841-42, and criticized the morals and decadent behavior of the trappers at Forts Uintah and Uncompahgre. As to his comments on his trek between the two forts, he notes:

We had to wait there for Mr. Rubedeau about 18 days,...July 27[1842] We started from Rubedeau's Fort [Uintah], over the Winty River, and next crossed Green and White Rivers. Next night we lay on Sugar Creek [possibly Bitter Water Creek], the waters of which was so bitter we could scarcely drink it. Here two of Rubedeau's squaws ran away, and we had to wait two days till he could send back to Fort for another squaw, for company for him.

August 1st. We camped under a large rock, by a small stream,...Next night we lay under the Pictured Rock,...Next day we traveled over rough roads and rocks, and crossed the Grand River, a branch of the Colorado,...Next day we crossed another fork of Grand River, and came to Fort Compogera, below the mouth of the Compogera River.⁶⁴

There are two possible routes Williams and those with him could have traveled. They may have journeyed up the south side of the White River to the lower end of the Sweet Water/Bitter Water Creek Trail, which led them onto the Seep Ridge route, then down East Canyon to the mouth of Westwater Canyon. Another possible route was crossing the White River, traversing the Willow Creek drainage and camping at one of several "Sugar Creeks". Streams with "bitter", or alkaline, waters are found throughout the region. If the time constraints are correct, William's group probably traveled up Willow Creek, crossed over the top of the Roan/Bookcliffs, and then proceeded down Westwater Creek Canyon. Their camp at the "Pictured Rock" could have been near the many pictographs, or even at Antoine Robidoux's inscription, at the mouth of the canyon. According to the narrative, they then traveled across "rough roads and rocks" to the crossing of the Grand in one day. The Reverend Williams, being from the East, would probably have considered any trail a "rough road". If his chronology is correct, the Willow Creek to Westwater Creek Trail, then on to the Grand River appears feasible.

Interestingly, the Reverend Williams makes no entry about the type of terrain encountered between the crossing at the Grand and Fort Uncompahgre. Instead, he was more concerned with the "wickedness" of the inhabitants of the fort. After a short stay at Fort Uncompahgre, he left for Taos, on August 15, 1842, along with a small group still under the leadership of Antoine Robidoux:

We started to go through New Mexico, which is a long distance out of our route,⁶⁵ to shun the Apahoc Indians [Apaches?]....Tuesday morning we started, and crossed Union River⁶⁶, and next crossed Lake River, and lay that night on a small creek...August 19th. We could see snow on the

mountain....Next day we came up to Rubedeau's wagon which he had left there a year before. He hitched his oxen to take it along. ⁶⁷

Sunday, 20th....We left this beautiful plain, which lies between two mountains, with a fine stream running through it.... We are now on the waters of the Del Norte River...and are passing the North Mountain... We are now traveling down Tous Valley....This is a beautiful Valley, about eighty or hundred miles long. ⁶⁸

As there was some unrest among the Indians at that time, Antoine Robidoux led the small party south from Fort Uncompahgre to access the route across the Lake Fork Trail, over Cochetopa Pass and down through the San Luis Valley. Williams apparently was happy to leave Robidoux's company and return to the East. Not long after his arrival back in Taos, Antoine Robidoux organized a group to return to Fort Uintah. In the small company of travelers was a New Englander named Rufus B. Sage. He left an account which may throw some light on another possible alternate route between Taos and the "Winty". To avoid the potential early fall snows of the Cochetopa Pass area, the lower elevations of the Main route of the "Old Spanish Trail" may have been followed. Another concern, alluded to in the Reverend William's account above: Robidoux may have been trying to avoid problems with the Indians who were quite restless and on the verge of open warfare at the time. Regardless of the reasons for taking the route they did, the party under the leadership of Antoine Robidoux departed from Taos on October 7, 1842. Sage related:

A small party from a trading establishment on the waters of the Green River, who had visited Taos for the procurement of a fresh supply of goods, were about to return....On the 7th of October we were underway. Our party consisted of three Frenchmen and five Spaniards, under the direction of a man named Roubideau.... Some eight pack mules, laden at the rate of two hundred and fifty pounds each, conveyed a quantity of goods; ...the remainder of the company, mounted on horseback, brought up the rear.

Crossing the Del Norte [Rio Grande], we soon after struck into a large trail bearing a westerly course; ["Old Spanish Trail" - Main or South Branch?] following which, on the 13th inst. we crossed the main ridge of the Rocky Mountains by a feasible pass at the southern extremity of the Sierra de Anahuac range [old name for the La Plata Mountain], we found ourselves upon the waters of the Pacific.

Six days subsequent, we reached Roubideau's Fort, at the forks of the Uintah, having passed several large streams, in our course, as well as the two principal branches which unite to form the Colorado.⁶⁹

As Sage did not mention Fort Uncompahgre, it is obvious that they bypassed

it.

There are two possible routes the Sage party may have traveled after descending the "feasible pass" and then reaching Fort Uintah in six more days. They undoubtedly followed the Main Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail" until they reached the Dolores River cutoff. While a questionable, but not impossible route, a trail followed down the Dolores River to reach and ford the Grand at the Dolores River crossing. A more feasible route for the group would have been to remain on the Main Branch, then either cross the Grand River just above the confluence with the Green River, or follow up the Grand from the confluence, then use the Dolores River ford.

With the time constraints mentioned in the account, the group probably traveled the Main Branch all the way from Taos to the Grand River, because staying on the Main Branch lessened chances of an Indian ambush, and it was the fastest route. Regardless of which route they used, once across the Grand River, the group undoubtedly veered to the north and east to reach Westwater Creek Canyon, where they could access Robidoux's Trail to Fort Uintah.⁷⁰

The ford probably most often used by the Robidoux and others going up the "Winty", was the "crossing of the Grand", located at present-day Grand Junction, Colorado. The North Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail" depended upon the vital Grand River crossing, which has been accurately described by a later observer. Henry Gannett, a topographer, recorded the following in the Hayden Report of 1875:

*The Grand River is bordered on the south side for several miles above and below the ford by precipitous bluffs. The road follows down an arroyo, the only one for miles which cuts to the level of the river, and which reaches the river most opportunely at the end of a long riffle....The bottom is perfectly hard, being of pebbles....*⁷¹

Gannett's observations include a drawing of the "Ford of Grand River" showing the "Precipitous bluff 100 feet high" on the south side, and the "Dry Arroyo". The drawing also portrays the route to cross the Grand, cutting diagonally for "1500 feet-depth 15 inches".⁷² Indians and other travelers had used this particular ford for years.

An historical enigma is presented by the report of the John Gunnison survey expedition during 1853-54. While his party probably used the above described "crossing of the Grand", their mileage log has led to some confusion. Another crossing, located upstream of the well defined ford of Hayden's Report, is located at an extension of present-day 31 Road in Grand Junction, Colorado. It is described as follows (a description which more accurately fits the 28 1/4 Road river crossing):

...A small gully afforded us a means of cutting a very steep path for our wagons to the river, which we crossed a hundred yards below, at a point where it was but a little over two feet deep and a hundred yards wide....The opposite bank although but six feet high, the moment it was cut down and moistened by water thrown up by the leading horses, became so miry that we

*were occupied three hours in crossing, and encamped near the ford....*⁷³

Gunnison's mileage charts, and other written comments point to the 31 Road ford, but logic, a more accurate description, and distance from the identified North Branch Trail, raises some questions. We know that the Gunnison expedition crossed the Grand, and had a difficult time doing so.

A few interesting accounts exist which present scenarios of not only "crossing the Grand", but some of the hazards encountered in any large river crossings by travelers during that era. One tells of a river crossing, in the year 1832, recording a method undoubtedly used by many packers when encountering a wide, deep and swift river:

*...It took us all day to cross it. [They were fording the Snake River]. It was a half mile wide, deep and rapid. The way we managed was this; one man unloaded his horse, and swam across with him, leading two loaded ones, and unloading the two, brought them back, for two more. ... In returning, my mule, by treading on a round stone, stumbled and threw me off, and the current was so strong, that a bush which I caught hold of only saved me from drowning....*⁷⁴

Hastily constructed log rafts sometimes aided river crossings. Undoubtedly, such conveyences saved vital and costly supplies and equipment. When a source of supply for replacement was often hundreds of miles away, great care had to be taken to prevent loss of even simple pieces of equipment. The loss of a rifle, for example, could lead to death by Indians or starvation.

Kit Carson, while carrying dispatches from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C. in the spring of 1848, left an interesting account of "crossing the Grand". Carson was guiding a small contingent of U.S. Army troops under the command of a Lieutenant George D. Brewerton. While both Carson and Brewerton related the same incident, which describe the hazards of fording the Grand River, both must have confused the Grand with the Green. Regardless of this historical enigma, Carson's statement underscored the care required when attempting a river crossing.

The small group had left Los Angeles in early May. Leaving so late in the traveling season put the small expedition at the larger rivers during the height of the spring run-off. Apparently, the group had little, if any, difficulty while traveling on the Main Trail to the Green River, or as the accounts read, to the "Grand".⁷⁵ Carson said:

...An escort being furnished him [at Los Angeles, Carson]...was soon underway, and had reached the Grand River without encountering any difficulty. At this place an accident happened to his party while crossing the river on rafts....This accident crippled the resources of Kit Carson's party very much, and caused them afterwards great suffering. The accident occurred something after the following manner. One division of the men...had constructed a float of logs, on which they had crossed the stream in safety; but the second branch of the party,

*under the charge of Lieutenant Brewerton...were not so successful with their raft; for no sooner did they get into the swift current than it became unmanageable, and, finally precipitated its contents, among which were included several of the men and their luggage, into the water...Among the very useful articles that were lost...were several saddles and six valuable rifles....*⁷⁶

Brewerton's journal notes: "...Two days travel brought us to Green River, where we underwent much of the same difficulty in crossing which we had encountered in the passage of Grand River..."⁷⁷ The Carson party continued on to Taos, in discomfort and concern, fearing an Indian attack after the loss of the six rifles. It is a matter of pure conjecture whether this group of unfortunate, half-starved travelers followed the North Branch or remained on the Main or South Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail". The group remained at Taos to recuperate before going on to Santa Fe.

Another account, which records an incident while crossing the ford at present-day Grand Junction, occurred in the late fall of 1842. A small party, which included an Asa I. Lovejoy and Dr. Marcus Whitman, had left Fort Uintah for Taos by way of Fort Uncompahgre. Upon reaching the ford, Lovejoy records:

*This stream was some one hundred and fifty, or two hundred yards wide, and looked upon by our guide as very dangerous to cross in the present condition. But the Doctor [Whitman], nothing daunted, was the first to take the water. He mounted his horse, and the guide and myself pushed them off into the boiling, foaming stream. Away they went completely under the water-horse and all; but directly came up, and after buffeting the waves and foaming current, he made to the ice on the opposite side. The guide and myself forced in the pack animals; followed the doctor's example, and were soon drying our frozen clothes by a comfortable fire.*⁷⁸

Traveling on, the small party obtained a new guide at Fort Uncompahgre, who got lost a short while after leaving the fort. With another guide, facing extremely cold weather, and forced to eat a pack animal and a dog, the group finally arrived in Taos in mid December. There is little question that the Whitman party traveled the Anthracite Creek to Cochetopa Pass Trail.⁷⁹ Dangerous and snow-packed in winter months, it was the shortest route.

While there are isolated references to wagons traversing the North Branch from Taos, not much traffic of that type probably occurred north of Cochetopa Pass until after 1850. Kit Carson noted in 1832: "the Old Spanish Trail was nothing more than a mule path". The detail recorded in the John W. Gunnison survey report from 1853 makes this a bit clearer. In giving an account of the terrain and difficulties encountered while hauling eighteen wagons across Cochetopa Pass to the Uncompahgre River:

...It is not more than about thirty English miles from the Sawatch Butte to the top of Cochetopa Pass, but it took four

*days of the most intense labor to reach the top....we were 10,032 feet above sea level.... From the top of the Cochetopa Pass we climbed down a gradual slope...into the valley of the Grand River.... The valley route was only rarely usable.... The wagons had to be dragged up steep mountains and be let down the steeper slopes with ropes; rocky roads had to be cut through, ravines gone around, and strong mountain streams crossed....*⁸⁰

Gunnison's account of the same trek details traversing the Lake Fork of the present-day Gunnison River. The description adds credence to Antoine Robidoux's route going north of that river to avoid the terrain as described in Gunnison's Report:

*...Lake Fork, coming into Grand River from the south, through almost one continuous canyon from mountains to the river...[September 9, 1853]. This morning...a rapid descent of 4,500 feet in length, and 935 in perpendicular height above the stream....the wagons with locked wheels....*⁸¹

Gunnison's wagons were undoubtedly large and heavily laden and, while well built, were not designed for rough terrain.

As noted earlier, in the account left by the Reverend Joseph Williams, one of Antoine Robidoux's wagons was picked up along the trail to Taos. Also as noted, any wheeled vehicle used beyond Cochetopa Pass, prior to the Gunnison party, was probably a light two-wheeled cart. It has been suggested that Robidoux was using such conveyances as early as the late 1820s to re-supply Fort Uncompahgre.⁸² Another questionable reference of a trek by wagon over the North Branch was made by Antoine Leroux in a letter written to Senator Thomas Benton extolling the virtues of western travel. Leroux was apparently describing various routes throughout the Southwest. In passing, he told of the route north from Taos, over Cochetopa Pass, north to the Colorado River, then west on the "Old Spanish Trail". Leroux, desiring to be a guide for the J.W. Gunnison railroad survey expedition of 1853, may have been a little exuberant when he wrote the following: "*Wagons can now travel this route to California, and have done it. In the year 1837, two families named Sloover [Slover] and Pope, with their wagons and two Mexicans, went from Taos that way.*"⁸³

While the account of the Slover-Pope "wagon train" traveling over the North Branch was possible, it was not probable. Both the Issac Slover and William Pope families were to settle in Southern California, after nearly four months on the Trail. It has been suggested that the time factor supported the use of wagons.⁸⁴ The birth of a child while on the Trail, would have been a better reason for lengthening the trek. Slover and Pope were both experienced mountain men, and it is doubtful that they would have subjected their families to unnecessary danger caused by such a small party traveling through hostile Indian country with heavy wagons. Even assuming that Leroux was truthful, if any type of wagon was used, it was probably a light cart. The detailed description of the North Branch route, by the Gunnison survey crew with their eighteen wagons, virtually negates earlier travel by anything other than pack stock.⁸⁵

More details exist to refute the use of wagons by the trapper/traders on the North Branch to the Colorado River and beyond. From the Gunnison Report, it is obvious that the area north from Fort Uncompahgre to the "crossing of the Grand", and to the Green River, is high desert. The soil composition is largely an alkaline, adobe type soil. The earth is porous when dry and a sticky mud when wet. A desert "pavement" type surface which can retain tracks for many years, once the surface is broken, exists throughout the area. There is no mention of any type of wagon wheel tracks from the Fort Uncompahgre site north, in the Gunnison Report. As Gunnison's crew had to "cut and fill" to get across several ravines in that area, they certainly would have mentioned the existence of any ruts. It has been purported that wagon wheel ruts, from the Gunnison Survey, were still visible when Haydon's crew came through the area twenty years later.⁸⁶

Travel over the North Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail" was quite heavy for a limited period during the 1820s to 1840s. By 1844, beaver were becoming scarce in the "Winty country". The price of furs had been declining for several years, and problems between the trapper/traders and Indians increased. The introduction of "Taos Lightening" was creating havoc among the Indians. This cheap potent whiskey, continued mistreatment of the natives, cheating in trade, and failure to halt Indian slave marketing, inflicted wounds that would not heal.

In 1844, Indians attacked and destroyed Antoine Robidoux's Fort Uintah. A similar fate befell Fort Uncompahgre at about the same time. Warfare between the Indians and Mexicans in the Santa Fe area was, perhaps, the "match" that lit the fuse. Whatever the reasons, the so-called "Indian Wars" would continue sporadically throughout the intermontane area for the next forty years.⁸⁷

Reduced trade and trapping in the "Winty" area, coupled with continued unrest among the Indians, resulted in less traffic over the extreme northern stretches of the "Old Spanish Trail", grinding to a halt after 1844. The North Branch, pioneered by Indians, Dominguez and Escalante, then used by traders, trappers and explorers, faded into history.

The Main/South Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail", as a heavily-traveled pack animal route, ended about 1848. Travel from Santa Fe to the settlements in Southern California developed over the shorter and more direct Gila Trail. With the discovery of gold in California, in the late 1840s, came the creation and extensive use of trails farther north to be known as the Oregon and California Trails. The route of the North Branch, from Taos to the "crossing of the Grand" then west, after 1850, became a main trail for survey groups, military excursions, settlers and freight wagons. The "Old Spanish Trail" North Branch, first etched into soil by moccasin tracks, then horse and mule hooves, became indelibly marked by wagon wheel ruts and is now sometimes covered by modern highways.

APPENDIX

Those who traveled the area now known as the North Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail" originally, may never be known for certain. Suffice it to say that before the Spanish, it was used extensively by various Native American groups for various purposes. Then came the Spanish:

Spanish era until the 1820s

- 1600 on—Various priests, miners, soldiers, smugglers, slavetraders, and others.
- 1640s—Utes on horseback traveled between Wasatch and Taos, and were in direct contact with the Spanish.
- 1686—Fray Alonzo de Posada reached the area of the Green and White Rivers.
- 1761-1765—Juan de Rivera reached the area of the Uncompahgre and Gunnison Rivers; some members of his group may have reached the Colorado River.
- 1776—Fathers Francisco V. Dominguez and Silvestre Velez de Escalante led an expedition that explored some of the country between the Uncompahgre and Uintah Rivers and beyond.
- 1777—Spanish trading and trapping expeditions went into the upper Gunnison River country and as far west as Utah Lake.
- 1779—Juan Bautista de Anza visited during sojourn against the Comanche.
- 1805—Manuel Mestas recovered stolen horses from the Utes in the Utah Lake area, possibly traveling by way of North Branch over Cochetopa Pass, and picking up Dominguez-Escalante route.
- 1809—Small party of Manuel Lisa's sent engages from north to rendezvous with Spanish traders near Green River "crossing", probably following Willow Creek route.

Mexican-American era of 1820-1850

- 1822—William Wolfskill led trapping "brigades" into area north and west of Santa Fe.
- 1824—William Wolfskill, Ewing Young and Issac Slover, trapped as far north as the Uintah area.
- 1824—First mention of Antoine Robidoux leaving Taos for trapping expedition in Uintah-Green country. Miguel Robidoux was probably in the Green River country as well. Also, Thomas Long ("Pegleg") Smith, Willam Huddart and Francois LeClerc were part of a large "brigade" of trappers to leave Taos. All these groups appear to have followed the North Branch into the Green River area.
- 1824—William Becknell, of Santa Fe Trail fame, leads a near-disastrous trapping expedition over the Trail, possibly following the group mentioned above.
- 1824—Etienne Provost was trapping on the Green River and as far west as Great Salt Lake. Provost survived a massacre in which fifteen of his men were killed near Utah Lake. Provost wintered in area of the White and Green Rivers.
- 1825—First Rendezvous held on Henry's Fork of the Green River. Santa Fe and Taos trappers traveled the North Branch over the next few years to reach the various Rendezvous sites.
- 1826—Western end of North Branch explored and traveled by Jedediah Strong Smith and William Ashley. A Rendezvous was held at Cache Valley, Utah.
- 1826—This year seems to mark the beginning of the Robidoux brother's domination of trade over the North Branch of the Trail for the next several years.

- 1827—Francois Robidoux, along with Antoine Leroux, traveled the North Branch to recover cached furs. A Baptiste Chalifoux was also mentioned as part of the group.
- 1827—Possibly the year Antoine Robidoux established Fort Uncompahgre at the confluence of the Uncompahgre and Gunnison (Grand) Rivers. The date of the actual construction, or site, is still unknown.
- 1830—Wolfskill, along with Yount and twenty other trappers, followed the route of Dominguez and Escalante along sections of the North Branch to finally arrive in California.
- 1828-1833—Heavy use of the North Branch after trapping in the Gila River area tapered off. Shipments of furs east from Santa Fe and Taos came out of areas reached by the North Branch.
- 1832-(1833?)—Kit Carson follows the North Branch route of the "Old Spanish Trail" and wintered with Mr. Robidoux, probably Louis, at the confluence of the White and Green Rivers.
- 1831—Denis Julien inscribed his name and date on a rock near what was possible site of Fort Uintah.
- 1835—Inscriptions carved by Juan Valdez (?), B. Chalifou (Jean Baptiste Chalifoux), and a set of initials FRB, along the rock walls of the Willow Creek section of the North Branch. Also this year, the carving of AT.Leroux was made.
- 1837—Antoine Robidoux carved an inscription on a rock overhang at the mouth of Westwater Canyon along the route of the North Branch. There is another inscription, A. Rob, a few miles farther down Willow Creek, but this one is undated.
- 1837—Issac Slover and William Pope, with their families, traveled by wagon over a section of the North Branch, as reported by Antoine Leroux.
- 1841—Louis Robidoux carved an inscription on a rock overhang along Upper Willow Creek.
- 1842—Dr. Marcus Whitman traveled across the North Branch on his way from Oregon to Taos.
- 1842—Reverend J. Williams and Rufus B. Sage each described traveling the North Branch Trail.
- 1844—Forts Uncompahgre and Uintah destroyed in Indian raids.
- 1845—John C. Fremont's third expedition traveled much of the North Branch.
- 1848—Mountain Man traffic ended when trails to the north are opened and earlier southern routes grow in popularity again.
- 1848—Kit Carson, along with Lt. George D. Brewerton, followed sections of the North Branch Trail.

Later travelers over North Branch:

- 1853—Lt. Edward F. Beale traveled and described sections of the North Branch, including Cochetopa Pass, fording the Uncompahgre and Grand (Gunnison) Rivers, as well as the "crossing of the Grand" on the way to the Green River crossing.
- 1853-1854—John W. Gunnison's ill-fated survey of much of the North Branch Route documented the use of wagons over the route.
- 1857—Captain R.B. Marcy's heroic "rescue mission" made use of much of the North Branch.
- 1858—Colonel William W. Loring traversed much of the North Branch, from west to east, with a large Army wagon train.
- 1874-1875—F.V. Hayden conducted geological/geographical survey of much of the area

covered by the North Branch. This, coincidentally, was the first mention of the Salt Lake Wagon Road, which followed the route.

Notes

¹ Jack D. Forbes, Warriors of the Colorado (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965).

² See Leroy R. and Ann W. Hafen, Old Spanish Trail (1955; reprint, Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), and C. Gregory Cramton and Stephen K. Madsen, In Search of the Old Spanish Trail (Salt Lake City, UT: Gibbs-Smith Pub., 1994).

³ Ralph Moody, The Old Trails West (New York, NY: Thos. Y. Crowell Company, 1963), 153.

⁴ Forbes, Warriors of the Colorado, 110. Indians often told stories like this because they were true or to encourage the intruders to leave.

⁵ Ronald Kessler, Anza's 1779 Comanche Campaign (Monte Vista, CO: Adobe Village Press, 1994). Kessler has written extensively on the North Branch through the San Luis Valley and areas of the upper Rio Grande drainage concerning the Trail's historical development.

⁶ Moody, Old Trails West, 155.

⁷ Ibid., 161.

⁸ Ted J. Warner, ed., The Dominguez-Escalante Journal (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), 42, fn.192. Warner notes Posada's journal was widely read and considered quite authentic for the areas outside the New Mexican settlements. Warner also contends that many of the documents attributed to Posada were destroyed during the Indian revolts or have just simply disappeared. See also: an entry in the journal of the Dominguez-Escalante for Sept. 13, 1776 [Ibid., 42.]: "*We came to a large river which we named San Buenaventura....The same one which Fray Alonzo de Posada...of New Mexico in the century gone by, relates in his report as separating the Yuta [Ute] nation from the Comanche*". This provides two important details: the area in the vicinity of the Green and White rivers was penetrated and known by the Spanish as early as the 1680s, and the northern boundary of the Ute Indian territory was identified. The Green River was known also as the "Seeds-Kee-Dee" by the Indians and later the trappers. That name means "Prairie Chicken" or "Prairie Hen".

⁹ Dominguez and Escalante may have followed Posada's route during part of their journey. Later trappers and traders often referred to the Green as the "River of Spaniards", and the route north from the Colorado River crossing and other sections of the North Branch, as the "Old Spanish Trail".

¹⁰ A Spanish league equals 2.63 miles, and is approximately the distance traveled on horseback in an hour at a steady gait over fairly gentle terrain.

¹¹ Warner, The Dominguez-Escalante Journal, 24.

¹² Ibid., 26.

¹³ Ibid., 26. This comment strengthens the premise Dominguez-Escalante followed well established and documented routes, at least through many sections of their travels. Escalante also noted that Rivera purportedly carved a cross and his name in the confluence area.

¹⁴ Ibid., 29, fn.141. On August 31, 1776, they camped at the confluence of Willow and Hubbard Creeks located on the southern side of Grand Mesa.

¹⁵ Ibid., 29-37. The Dominguez-Escalante Journal gives an excellent description of the trek across the top of Grand Mesa from September 1 to September 5, 1776. The detail has made reconstruction of their route relatively easy for historians.

¹⁶ Ibid., 37. The Colorado River has historically been called various names: It was called the Hahunkahrea or Blue River from the confluence of the Gunnision River upstream.

Between that confluence downstream until joined by the Green River it was named the Grand; below that, it was called the Colorado River. The John W. Gunnison survey map of 1853 affixes these names. Liet. E.G. Beckwith, U.S. Army, Report of Explorations For a Route For the Pacific Railroad, by Capt. J.W. Gunnison, Topographical Engineers, near the 38th and 39th Parallels of North Latitude, From the Mouth of the Kansas River, MO. To The Sevier Lake, In The Great Basin, Vol. 2 of 3* (Washington: Beverly Tucker, Printer, 1855).

¹⁷ Warner, The Dominguez-Escalante Journal, 37, 164.

¹⁸ The lower elevations geological name is Bookcliff, and the upper strata is Roan.

¹⁹ On Highway 139, between Loma, Colorado and Rangely, Colorado. The trail bisects Highway 139 at the lower end of Douglas Creek Canyon.

²⁰ This comment referring to Posada is important. As mentioned earlier in this treatise, Dominguez-Escalante undoubtedly followed at least sections of Posada's previously explored route. Hopefully, an eagerly awaited translation of Posada's journal will throw some much needed light on a vital historical question. Also, the trappers in the very early 1800s referred to the Green River as the "River of the Spaniards". It is possible that more than one Spanish expedition had ventured into the "Green River Country" very early.

²¹ The expedition leader's conclusion about Comanches was probably correct as they were on the boundary line between the Ute-Comanche hunting territory. Infringement of hunting rights often caused friction with Indian tribes.

²² The mention of "ruins of a very ancient pueblo" creates some very interesting speculation. It is possible that later historical researchers assumed the site to be that of Antoine Robidoux's Fort Uintah (Uintah was the correct spelling in use during that period, it was not until much later that the 'h' was dropped). Robidoux's fort was built during the 1830s. His fort was located in the same general area, circular, and destroyed by fire in the 1840s. It is possible that Robidoux had built his fort at the same site. See F.W. Cragen, "Early West, Notebook V", entry 15, p. 3, Colorado Pioneer Museum, Colorado Springs, CO, for an observation giving geodetic measurements of site in 1902.

²³ R.E. Oglesby, Manuel Lisa and the Opening of the Missouri Fur Trade (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963.)

²⁴ Ibid., 66-67, 131ff.

²⁵ The Main Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail" crossed the Green River at one of the few accessible spots, just north of present-day Green River, Utah. See Plate LII, for drawing of ford, in Henry Gannet, Letter to Dr. F.V. Hayden: Ninth Annual Report of U.S. Geological and Geographical Survey, 1875, by F.V. Hayden* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1876). Hereafter cited as Hayden Report. This was a well known crossing used by Spanish and Indian slave traders.

²⁶ Oglesby, Manuel Lisa and the Opening of the Missouri Fur Trade, 111 ff. While Manuel Lisa was known for treating the various tribes with fairness, many other traders did not, thus causing problems for all. The Blackfeet Indians, of present-day Montana and Wyoming, especially resented any intrusion into their historical hunting territory, and protected what was theirs.

²⁷ Many excellent, well researched books have been written about the lives and times of the Mountain Men. Many of these men were intrepid wanderers and loners who lived their lives the way they wanted. Many died at an early age, crippled from violent encounters with Indians, animal attacks, and exposure to the environment. See R. G. Cleland, This Reckless Breed of Men (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), Leroy R. Hafen, ed., Mountain Men and Fur Traders of the Far West (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 291-92, and J.W. Nelson, "Louis Robidoux-The Man Behind the

Legend," *Riverside Daily Press Enterprise* (Riverside, CA), May 6, 1957.

²⁸ The sure-footed pack mules could carry loads of up to three hundred pounds of trade goods. They were ideal in extremely rough terrain, and not as fussy about forage as horses.

²⁹ Ardis M. Walker, "Joseph R. Walker," as found in Hafen, Mountain Men and Fur Traders of the Far West, 291-92.

³⁰ Moody, Old Trails West, 61-62, says, "American mountain men did far more than the Spanish to establish the Old Spanish Trail."

³¹ The "Winty" River (Uintah), located in northeastern Utah, was a common trapper term.

³² Moody, Old Trails West, 162.

³³ R.E. Kessler, Re-Tracing the Old Spanish Trail-North Branch (Monte Vista, CO: Adobe Village Press, 1995).

³⁴ The Grand River, today named the Gunnison, was called the Tomichi by the Ute Indians. The full course of the Grand stretched from the mouth of Cochetopa Creek to the confluence of the Colorado and Green rivers below present-day Moab, Utah. It was not until the late 1850s that the Grand was renamed the Gunnison River.

³⁵ Uncompahgre is a Ute Indian word, so called possibly because of its reddish color.

³⁶ Nells, Topographical Map of Colorado 1885, from the Hayden Report. This is an excellent source which shows wagon roads and trails, many of which were undoubtedly first traveled by Indians, then the trappers and traders. In his report on the Hayden Geographical Survey, Henry Gannett, a topographer covering the area under discussion, in 1874, writes of the many trails and routes through the area. He tells of a trail up Ohio Creek and down Anthracite Creek; also, the trail along the north side of the Gunnison River. (See Progress Report for 1874, p. 428).

³⁷ William S. Wallace, Antoine Robidoux-1794-1860 (Los Angeles, CA, 1953), 22-23. An entry from the diary of Reverend Williams in 1841-42 alludes to the route from the Uncompahgre River to the Lake Fork.

³⁸ Fort Robidoux's exact location has never been found. Floods, erosion and time have prevented, to date, all efforts to locate it. A replica of the fort has been reconstructed at Delta, Colorado.

³⁹ J.W. Nelson, "Louis Robidoux: California Pioneer" (master's thesis: University of Redlands, CA., 1950). Also: David J. Weber, "Louis Robidoux", in Hafen's Mountain Men series, Vol. VIII, 321. A short treatise submitted while at San Diego State College (after 1950, as he quotes Nelson's work). Well documented it supplies information on Louis's life in Santa Fe, and W.S. Wallace, Antoine Robidoux (Los Angeles, California: Glen Dawson, 1953).

⁴⁰ Wallace, Antoine Robidoux..., 24 ff.

⁴¹ Hayden Report, 428 ff. Gannett discusses this trail in some detail, and it is shown on later maps, not specifically related to Antoine Robidoux's route (The author has been over this particular trail many times and surveyed an early Indian campsite and Trail through the area).

⁴² W. McC. Bailey, "Fort Uncompahgre" (In Jack Nelson's possession: unpublished, no date). Bailey has devoted many years to researching the history of Fort Uncompahgre. He suggests a founding date as early as 1825. To date, his search for a specific location of the fort has been frustrating. Floods, erosion, agricultural activity and time have obscured all traces of the fort site to date.

⁴³ Ibid., 36 ff. Bailey suggests Robidoux may have been using some type of wheeled vehicle as early as 1826 to haul supplies from Santa Fe and Bent's Fort to Fort

Uncompahgre (I question this premise; he used some type of conveyance, but probably not the whole distance). It is documented that he left a wagon along the trail in 1842--possibly on Cochetopa Pass.

⁴⁴ The Uintah (Uinta) River, today a branch of the Duchesne River, was known as the "Winty" for its entire length to the Green River during the Mountain Man days (northeast Utah).

⁴⁵ R.G. Cleland, This Reckless Breed of Men (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), 247.

⁴⁶ This inscription was found and photographed by a rancher in 1912.

⁴⁷ Charles Kelly, The Mysterious "D." Julien (Salt Lake City, UT: 1933), 84. Julien left several inscriptions carved on canyon walls along the Green River, dating from 1831 to 1836. Mr. Kelly has presented an excellent bit of research on the subject.

⁴⁸ Kit Carson always called the Robidoux's by "Mr.", never adding a given name.

⁴⁹ Dewitt Peters, Kit Carson's Life and Adventures (Hartford, CN: Dustin, Gilman & Co., 1875), 79-80.

⁵⁰ Weber, in "Louis Robidoux", from Hafen's Mountain Men series, Vol. VIII, 321. Antoine was in Santa Fe during the winter of 1833. If the date was 1832, either Louis or Antoine could have been with Carson.

⁵¹ Peters, Kit Carson's Life and Adventures, 160. It was around the year 1837 that the fur market started to decline. With a change in style of eastern hats and clothing, the era of the Mountain Man was to end.

⁵² Weber, in "Louis Robidoux", from Hafen's Mountain Men series, Vol. VIII, 322. Weber notes that he had received a photograph of the Louis Robidoux inscription in 1969. I was given a similar photograph, of the same inscription, by Bill Benson, since deceased, and his friend "JT" Jacks, of Grand Junction, Colorado (I did not locate the inscription personally, until the summer of 1995).

⁵³ It is interesting to note that Antoine Robidoux's inscription was written in French while that of Louis' was in Spanish. This writer has seen letters written by Louis in which he used English, Spanish, French and German phrases. Louis was also purported to have been fluent in the Cahuilla Indian language and served as an interpreter during his later years. It was not uncommon for the early traders and trappers to be able to converse in several languages.

⁵⁴ The names "Blue" and "Grand" River appear to be interchangeable. Called the blue or Nah-un-kah-rea River, on Map No. 4 of the J. W. Gunnison survey of 1855, probably so called by Antoine Leroux, mountain man and guide for that expedition. As mentioned in a footnote above the present-day Gunnison River was also called the Grand. This creates an often confusing situation.

⁵⁵ This "natural arroyo" can still be seen at 2825 Unaweep Avenue, an extension of 28 1/4 Road, in Grand Junction, Colorado. A filled-in dirt road bisects the arroyo halfway down to the Colorado River, and is on private land. Later the ford site was used as a ferry crossing. Permission was granted for a ferry in a lease dated March 17, 1882 for the site on property owned by Mr. Clyde Foresgren of Grand Junction. He very graciously accompanied this writer on a tour of the site, historically called the "Crossing of the Grand".

⁵⁶ See footnote 40. While an excellent source for the location of various Indian Trails in the areas covered by the Gunnison Expedition, the scale of the map leaves a little to be desired. This is not to be critical of this invaluable document, but it is understood that very little exploration was made beyond a limited area on each side of their route. However, it should be noted that their guide, Antoine Leroux, a Mountain Man, had been in this

region off and on for several years. He had carved his name on a rock overhang along the lower Willow Creek Trail, well north of the Gunnison route in 1835. See description later.

⁵⁷ Hafen & Hafen, Old Spanish Trail, 155 ff. A translation of the log of Antonio Armijo describes his trek, in 1829-30, from Santa Fe to Los Angeles. Armijo has been given credit for opening the first commercial traffic over the complete trail.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 335. Kit Carson describes a crossing of the Grand in the Spring of 1848. A more detailed account will be given later.

⁵⁹ The Westwater-Willow Creek Trail, probably most heavily used by Antoine Robidoux, and those going to his Fort Uintah, will be discussed in more detail later. It appeared to head in a northwest direction after crossing the Grand, split off the North Branch near Salt Creek, and accessed the Roan/Bookcliff's up Westwater Creek Canyon.

⁶⁰ Hafen & Hafen, Old Spanish Trail, fn.:101.

⁶¹ It should be noted that this conjecture about possible routes is based upon photographs supplied by Bill Benson and "JT" Jacks. Both of these gentlemen spent many years 'proving' the Roan/Bookcliff area, taking photographs and exploring. They were most generous with their information as to terrain and other pertinent facts. Another hearsay Robidoux inscription, in the area, was never located by them. The above routes were 'guessed' as a result of their on site travel descriptions, and careful study by this writer, of 7.5 minute USGS maps of the area.

⁶² Dale L. Morgan, ed., The West of William H. Ashley, 1822-38 (Denver, CO: Old West Publishing Company, 1964), 113-14. See fn. 162 on p. 280 - Notes: Book II.

⁶³ Ibid., fn.162. Morgan's editorial comments are more than a little enlightening, especially the one: "...very little information has come forth on the evolution of the Spanish Trail in the half century after Escalante...". He was referring primarily to the many 'shortcuts' worked out by the trapper/traders along the northern stretches of the Dominguez-Escalante route. It is possible Morgan concurs with this writer: The Dominguez-Escalante route was called the "Spanish Trail". Also: Frank C. Spencer, Colorado Story (Denver, CO: World Press, 1930), 68-69. In writing of Jim Bridger, "When he became tired of roving, he build a trading post on the Spanish Trail near Green River [in 1843]". Near present Fort Bridger, Wyoming, this is an interesting comment, since the Fort is about one hundred miles north of the known trail.

⁶⁴ Wallace, Antoine Robidoux, 20-21. Use of the term "road" in the quote has been misconstrued as meaning an actual road for wagon use.

⁶⁵ This remark would add credence to the strong possibility that Antoine Robidoux's regular route was over the Anthracite Creek Trail to Cochetopa Pass.

⁶⁶ William's comment on the Union Creek was probably a transcribed error, he undoubtedly was referring to Onion Creek, also commonly called Cebolla Creek. The Onion Creek Trail was an accepted route from the Uncompahgre River to the Lake Fork River.

⁶⁷ Robidoux's "wagon", probably a two wheeled cart, may have been parked along the trail somewhere in the Cochetopa Pass area. The early use of wagons along the upper sections of the North Branch has long been disputed. The difficulties confronting the J.W. Gunnison expedition with their eighteen wagons, in 1855, would attest to the need for extensive road building before wagon use was feasible. Carts were probably used to haul supplies to a given drop-off point, then pack animals would transport the material on over the extremely rough terrain to the forts.

⁶⁸ Wallace, Antoine Robidoux, 22-23.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 24-25. Sage gives an interesting insight as to life at Fort Uintah, citing trade with those trappers on the "Big Bear, Green, Grand and Colorado Rivers" and their tributaries.

⁷⁰ Hayden Report, 34. The mouth of Westwater Creek Canyon is approximately equidistant between the crossing of the Main Trail and the ford above the confluence of the

present-day Gunnison and Colorado rivers, the latter being the point where the North Branch of the "Old Spanish Trail" crossed.

⁷¹ See Deed dated March 17, 1882, under documents; and Hayden Report. An on-site viewing of the described ford, located at the extension of 28 1/4 Road, Grand Junction, CO., was made in Aug. 1995, by the writer and Mr. Clyde "Dusty" Forsgren, owner of the north bank property. The area observed had recently been flooded by heavy spring runoff, though the water, while still high, had receded. The bank along the north side of the river was about six feet above water line. The terrain north and west from that specific spot was fairly level with the base of the Bookcliff range several miles distant. In viewing the south bank, the arroyo described by Gannett, located at 2825 Unaweep Avenue, was partially obscured by heavy undergrowth and trees. The arroyo is discernable, cut into the high bluffs along the south side. Of real interest is a heavy layer of cobble, about 100 feet long, and up to six feet thick along the river bank at the water level, also in the south side. Mr. Forsgren verified that the bottom was 'paved' with cobbles and large flat rocks; also, the river is quite deep above and below the ford. Mrs. Florence Connor, a long-time resident living on the south rim, verified Mr. Forsgren's observations, with her description of the arroyo (as her mother recalled it) as being much longer and deeper before Unaweep Avenue was put in. She also explained the road built halfway down the arroyo was an access road built by a water company to reach their pumping station. She also told of wading across the river at that point as a young girl.

⁷² Hayden Report. Drawings facing pp.350 and 351: including fords at both the Gunnison and Green rivers.

⁷³ Beckwith, Report of Explorations...J.W. Gunnison, 57. Also: Hayden Report, 416. Gannett notes in his general overview of the Gunnison expedition, that the Gunnison party forded the Grand "...about five miles above the mouth of the Gunnison River...". This comment would place the crossing at the 31 Road gully. The key word is "about". While beyond the scope of this paper, both the Gunnison and Hayden Reports are very important.

⁷⁴ J.M. Mattes, Colters Hell & Jackson's Hole (Yellowstone, WY: Yellowstone Library and Museum Association, 1980), 44. Direct quote from an account by John B. Wyeth, from Oregon: or a Short History of a Long Journey (Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1905).

⁷⁵ It has been surmised that both Carson and Brewerton, while recording this incident as happening on the Grand, were mistaken or had a lapse in memory.

⁷⁶ Peters, Kit Carson, 317 ff. Carson, never too talkative, had little more to say about the crossing incident.

⁷⁷ Hafen & Hafen, Old Spanish Trail, 335. As the group was traveling east from Los Angeles on the "Old Spanish Trail", there is little question that the disastrous accident occurred at or near the established ford on the Green River. The "two day" travel comment, would indicate they stayed on the Main Trail and crossed the Grand near present-day Moab, Utah.

⁷⁸ Wallace, Antoine Robidoux, 26-27.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 27. It is easy to understand how a guide could get lost during the winter, especially if he had limited knowledge of the terrain.

⁸⁰ Beckwith, Report of Explorations...J.W. Gunnison. Also, report from the diary of Jacob Heinrich Schiel, Journey Through the Rocky Mountains and the Humbolt Mountains to the Pacific Ocean (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), 9.

⁸¹ Ibid., 52.

⁸² Ibid., 36 ff. Bailey contends Robidoux was using carts in the mid 1820s.

⁸³ Hafen & Hafen, The Old Spanish Trail, 197-198, n.6. Quote from "Colonel Benton and the Pacific Railroad" in the *New York Tribune*, March 16, 1853.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 199.

⁸⁵ Beckwith, Report of Explorations...J.W. Gunnison, 55-57. A very detailed account of the survey through the area from Cochetopa Pass to the Colorado River.

⁸⁶ Hayden Report, Gannett's Report, 428 ff. Gannett gives an interesting overview of the various trails in existence in the Gunnison River watershed, in the 1870's. He also mentions the few wagon roads, and emphasizes the roughness of the terrain making wagon traffic impractical. His reference to Gunnison's route of 1854 through the area to the ford of the Grand River, gives rise to the thought that the expeditions 'ruts' were still visible.

⁸⁷ Wallace, Antoine Robidoux, 28. In a letter between the Sublette brothers: "*Taos, October 20, 1844...The Youtau indians are at ware with the Spaniards and whites a Spaniards came in a feu days Since who was trapping with one other his companion was killed he escaped went to the Fort of Rubadoux where he found them all killed five or six Spaniards and one American...A.W. Sublette*". This excerpt refers to the massacre at Fort Uintah while Antoine Robidoux was absent.

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Vi Haseman, G. Junction
Elaine Henderson, Hotchkiss
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Glen Kendall, London, England
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Gary & Marilyn Kroft, Glade Park
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Pat & Zang Wood, Flora Vista, NM
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