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Old Spanish Trail was route for trappers, prospectors, explorers



Friday, June 27, 2008

Grand Junction last year celebrated a landmark anniversary of its founding and settling. This year, Mesa County celebrates 125 years as a Colorado county, formed by citizens who were simply tired of traveling to Gunnison to conduct county business. In the late 1800s, that horse-and-cart trip could take several days.

At least a part of that horse-and-cart trip used an "old wagon trail" that decades before had been, in part, forged by Spanish explorers. These early travelers — and others who followed them — didn't settle in our area, but passed through on the way to search for gold, silver and other riches. They were not "city folk." They were trappers, prospectors, fortune hunters, explorers and, yes, slave traders. They left their marks in the "old wagon road" of what we now know is the legendary Old Spanish Trail.

The Old Spanish Trail began to be used in 1829 as a commercial merchant route from Santa Fe to Los Angeles. Three "branches" would eventually be established and were used until the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848, when more wagon-friendly routes were established.

The Northern Branch — the trail that makes its way through Mesa County — begins north of Santa Fe, to the Great Sand Dunes,

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then north and west to Saguache and Curecanti National Recreation Area before coming through our area. The Northern Branch was basically a trade route: Early explorers, trappers and traders used it to trade with and exploit the native Ute tribes of Colorado, who saw this area as their hunting grounds. This branch rejoins the Main Branch at Green River, Utah.

Interest and study of the Old Spanish Trail began in 1921 with the publication of an article by Joseph J. Hill and continued in 1930 with the work of Eleanor F. Lawrence and publication of George Brewerton's "Overland With Kit Carson." The Spanish Trail Association was organized in 1946.

Only a few years ago, several Grand Junction residents focused attention on the Northern Branch of the trail and its importance to the region. These Grand Junction trail enthusiasts — led by William Chenoweth, Earl Heusser, Jack and Kathryn Nelson, and Carlos Sauvage — developed a strategy for National Historic Trail designation.

With cooperation between the City of Grand Junction, Mesa County, Riverfront Commission, Orchard Mesa Irrigation District, the Museum of Western Colorado, the Bureau of Land Management, the Old Spanish Trail Association, and private landowners, the trail was established as miles of open space for runners, hikers, bicyclists and horseback riders. Two trailheads, one at 28 1/2 Road and U.S. Highway 50 on Orchard Mesa, the other off Coffman Road near Whitewater, provide parking. Thousands of people use this area for recreation, wildlife watching and to study the area's unique desert aspects.

A bill introduced in 1996 by former Colorado Sen. Ben Nighthorse-Campbell and U.S. Congressman Scott McInnis authorized the National Park Service to study the feasibility of including the Old Spanish Trail in the National Historical Trail System. The final feasibility study declared the trail "nationally significant within the theme of the 'Changing Role of the United States in the World Community' and the topics of trade and commerce, during the period of 1829-1848."

The Old Spanish Trail Recognition Act was passed unanimously by Congress in 2002, making the trail the 15th to be recognized nationally.

In the past few months there has been a resurgence of interest in the historical documentation of Mesa County's Old Spanish Trail, due to increased pressure to develop not only near the trail, but actually over the trail.

Orchard Mesa Neighbors in Action has worked with several groups and organizations to educate the community about the issues. Members Pamela McGuirk, Ineke Hoops, Victoria Gipson, Suzi Evans and others have researched hundreds of documents to "re-discover" easements and maps that were recorded as far back as the early 1880s.

Neighbors group member Jay Krabacher has studied these documents — some of which are hand-written — and translated them to a map showing that the trail that has been used by the public for more than half a century appears to be the original route of the Old Spanish Trail through Mesa County. All of these documents and more can be found on the neighbors group Web site, omneighbors.com, and at the Old Spanish Trail Association's Web site, oldspanishtrail.org.

This exciting research continues and has proved both satisfying and extremely helpful as we establish not only the legal strength of the Old Spanish Trail documents, but also reconnect with our historical roots in very meaningful ways, and just in time for Mesa County's 125th summer celebration.

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“Explorers, Traders and Slavers: Forging the Old Spanish Trail, 1678-1850” by Joseph P. Sanchez

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Vicki Felmlee is chairwoman of the group that developed the Orchard Mesa Neighborhood Plan. She also is vice president of the Grand Junction Rural Fire Protection District and the president of Orchard Mesa Neighbors in Action (OMNIA). In the mid-'90s, she aided the local chapter of the Old Spanish Trail Association with owner and planning issues to establish the trail as a public recreational area.

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Have a questions about this or any other historic trail? Email Kathy Jordan at kjtj1@bresnan.net

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