

NAMING EMIGRANT TRAILS IN THE SOUTHWEST

Don Buck

The most difficult aspect of preparing this proposal on "Designating the Southern Route as a National Historic Trail" is naming the trails. In too many cases, there were no conventional names used either by emigrants or modern historians. Also, arriving at a general or all-inclusive name, proved equally difficult. As briefly as possible, we will explain the problems encountered and the rationale used in determining trail names for purposes of this proposal.

To avoid complicating things any more than they are presently, we decided to rely on names commonly used by either emigrants or later historians. Even this guideline hardly bettered the situation, as the following example shows. Historian Donald Couchman, in a study done for the Bureau of Land Management in New Mexico, found references to 27 different names ascribed to the trails that traversed through the Cooke Spring-Pass area, most of which can be attributed to historians! Part of the proliferation of trail names stemmed from the multiple use the trails received over time. One trail through Cooke Pass became, in turn, an emigrant trail, mail route, stagecoach line, and freighting road, all with a different name. To circumvent this problem, we have limited names of trails to those reflecting emigrant usage.

For the all-inclusive, generic name to cover the trails in this proposal, we had two choices: "Southern Trails" (used by Ralph Bieber) and "Southern Route" (used by Grant Foreman, Harlan Hague, and Patricia Etter). Note the operative words Trails and Route. *Route* connotes the course or way of travel from one place to another while *Trail* connotes a marked or known route of historical significance. Though subtle, a difference does exist; the former points in a direction and the latter points at something known. On the basis of current usage and distinctiveness, we selected Southern Route for our generic name. Also, because we settled on the name "Southern Trail" (singular) for one of the trails in the complex, it would have led to confusion to refer to our all-inclusive name as "Southern Trails" (plural).

Turning to specific trails within the Southern Route, we had easier going for some of them. Six trails held consistent names dating almost from their origins: the **Upper** and **Lower Roads** in Texas, the **Fort Smith to Santa Fe Trail** along the Canadian River, the **Beale** and **Mojave Roads** along the 35th parallel, and the **Old Spanish Trail** out of Santa Fe. A bit of a problem exists with the "Old" in Old Spanish Trail. Nineteenth century diary accounts refer to this pack trail as the Spanish Trail. Mitchell's well known map of 1846, *A New Map of Texas, Oregon, and California*, labeled it the Great Spanish Trail. Not to be outdone, historians since the 1920's have called it by the more romantic name of Old Spanish Trail. Because this trail is so well known by its twentieth century name, we decided to stick with **Old Spanish Trail**.

Merging with the Old Spanish Trail of 1830 was the Mormon Trail from Salt Lake City to Rancho Santa Ana del Chino near Los Angeles, first opened for wagon use in late 1848. In effect you have a later emigrant wagon road superimposed on an earlier

pack trail. So how much of this trail should be called Old Spanish Trail and how much Mormon Trail? Because in origins the Old Spanish Trail was earliest, we thought it best to refer only to the segment from Salt Lake City to where it connects to the Old Spanish Trail in southwest Utah as the **Mormon Trail to Southern California**. Also note that we've used Mormon Trail rather than Mormon Route in order not to lend confusion to our use of Southern Route for the generic name. It's a small point but we are trying to keep the names as clear and distinct as possible.

By far the major problem was naming the remaining trails running through New Mexico and Arizona. Of course, most of them were in use by Native Americans long before the Spanish missionaries, explorers, and American trappers arrived. Many had continued use during the Spanish and Mexican periods, prior to the Mexican War of 1846-48. Because we are emphasizing emigrant trails, we utilized names denoting emigrant travel during the American period of southwest history. However, there exists no unanimity or consensus on trail names, or even where some trails begin and end. We settled on Warner's Ranch as the terminus because it was the first settlement reached in California, though the final emigrant destination in southern California would have been either San Diego or Los Angeles.

Before going any further in our explanation, some historical background may help in appreciating the problem of naming these southwestern trails. The trails under consideration were opened for American emigrant travel through the U. S. Army's efforts at the beginning of the Mexican War in 1846 to make a wagon road from Santa Fe to southern California. After leaving Santa Fe, General Kearny's Army of the West marched down the west bank of the Rio Grande and divided, with one column under Kearny using pack animals and striking west from the Rio Grande along the Gila River to Warner's Ranch. The other column under Lt. Col. Cooke, with his Mormon Battalion, detoured south making a wagon road of sorts in an arc bending southwest into Mexico and then marching northwest via the San Pedro River to Tucson and the Pima villages along the Gila River. There Cooke followed the old route along the Gila River west to the Yuma Crossing at the Colorado River and on to Warner's Ranch. Then in 1848 Maj. Graham improved Cooke's original wagon road by diverting it west of the San Pedro River in Mexico to the Santa Cruz River and then north along the river to Tucson.¹ When emigrant diarists did give this route from the Rio Grande to California a name it was invariably something like "Cooke's Wagon Road" or "Cooke's Trail." A few diarists even mentioned Graham's improvement west of the San Pedro River by referring to his name.²

Now, what do we call these trails opened up by the army between 1846 and 1848? Depending on which branch referred to, they have been called variously Kearny's

¹ As previously noted, Juan Bautista de Anza, leading an emigrant party of colonists from Sinaloa, had used this same Santa Cruz-Gila River route in late 1775 to reach southern California which made his party the first overland emigrants to California.

² For a more developed summary, refer to Harlan Hague, "The First California Trail: The Southern Route," *Overland Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Winter, 1987), pp. 41-50.

Pack Trail, the Gila Trail, Cooke's Wagon Road, the Cooke-Graham Wagon Road, the El Paso to Fort Yuma Road, Southern Emigrant Road (or Trail), Southern Wagon Road, and Southern Trail. To complicate things even more, in 1849 gold rushers opened up a cutoff between Cooke's Wagon Road and Tucson. At best emigrants called this trail a cutoff to Tucson while today it is most commonly known by the more alluring name of Apache Pass Trail.³ During the Gold Rush years of 1849 & 50, Cooke's Wagon Road--with Graham's improvement--received the most emigrant use. Not only did emigrants coming from Santa Fe and El Paso use it but emigrants heading northwest through Mexico fed into it just east of Guadalupe Pass. Kearny's Pack Trail along the upper Gila River to the Pima villages got only packer use. Later in the 1850's, most of the southern loop of the Cooke-Graham Wagon Road fell into disuse and the cutoff to Tucson via Apache Pass became the primary route for not only emigrants but mail and stagecoach traffic.

The most widely and indiscriminately applied name for the three trails opened for emigrant use between 1846 and 1849 has been the Gila Trail, apparently on the grounds that traffic on the three trails eventually ended up along the Gila River. Applying the name Gila Trail in this fashion, as Harlan Hague and Patricia Etter have pointed out correctly, creates even more confusion by giving three distinctly different trails the same name. Clearly that won't do.

Another possibility, advanced by Etter, is retaining the Gila Trail name for the route along the full length of the Gila River (involving a pack trail on the upper half of the river and a wagon road on the lower half of the river) and naming the remaining two, Apache Pass Trail (the cutoff to Tucson) and Southern Trail (the Cooke-Graham Wagon Road to the Gila River). While working out well for the trails from the Rio Grande to Colorado River, this scheme leaves one segment in a nameless limbo--the trail from the Yuma Crossing of the Colorado to Warner's Ranch. Trail guides available at the De Anza-Borrego Desert State Park (through which the trail extends) have called this segment the Southern Emigrant Trail. Now we have three different segmental names for one continuous trail from Santa Fe to Warner's Ranch. We need to keep in mind that Cooke's crew opened up this portion of the trail across the Colorado Desert for wagon use in 1846 which makes it an extension of the Cooke-Graham Wagon Road.

This line of reasoning leads one to conclude, as far as emigrants are concerned, that there existed one 900 mile long wagon road extending from the Rio Grande to Southern California at Warner's Ranch resulting from the military expeditions in 1846 and 1848. So what name can be applied for its complete length? The best candidates are: Cooke-Graham Wagon Road, Southern Wagon Road, or Southern Trail. Of the three, the first and third have more currency in the historical literature.

³ Most likely it was not until the mid-to-late 1850's that the pass became known as Apache Pass but during the earlier emigrant period it was known by its Spanish name of Puerto del Dado.

With all of this in mind, the easiest way to make sense out of the muddle of names is to call (1) the wagon route from Santa Fe--along the west side of the Rio Grande⁴--opened up by Cooke (with Graham's improvement) to Warner's Ranch the **Southern Trail (Cooke-Graham Wagon Road)**; (2) the pack trail used by Kearny, from the Rio Grande along the upper Gila River to the Pima villages, the **Gila Trail**; and (3) the cutoff to Tucson the **Apache Pass Trail**. Note that all three have recognized names used in one way or another by historians. Also all three names follow fairly closely those appearing on OCTA's recently revised *Western Emigrant Trails* map.

Undoubtedly the trail names we have settled upon for purposes of this proposal will not satisfy everyone but they do have the virtue of common usage and easy recognition. Within the near future, before the trail names we are proposing become irretrievable, we will have time to make minor changes. For the time being, however, we offer the trail names designated in this proposal.

⁴ Running along the east side of the Rio Grande was the Santa Fe to Chihuahua Trail dating from the Spanish period. Sections of this old trail were used by American emigrants beginning in 1849, especially those traveling north from El Paso trying to intersect the Southern Trail (Cooke's Wagon Road).