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AN ISOLATED FRONTIER OUTPOST Historical and Archaeological Investigations of the Carrizo Creek Station



**AN ISOLATED FRONTIER OUTPOST:
HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS
OF THE CARRIZO CREEK STAGE STATION**

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An Isolated Frontier Outpost:

Historical and Archaeological Investigations of the Carrizo Creek Stage Station

By Stephen R. Van Wormer, Sue Wade, Susan D. Walter, and Susan Arter
Editor, Richard Fitzgerald; Series Editor, Christopher Corey

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***“Everybody goes armed here. If a man has no shirt
to his back he will have his knife in his belt.”***
*(Phocion R. Way – San Antonio – San Diego
Mail Line Passenger, 1858)*



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*"Warner's Pass from San Felipe" 1853-1855
Pacific Railroad Expedition and Surveys
Courtesy of Melvin and Ellen Sweet*

PREFACE

Contained within this volume, number 29 in our series of *Publications in Cultural Heritage*, is the story of the Carrizo Creek Station and the once heavily traveled Southern Emigrant Trail. The Carrizo Wash is located on the far southeast boundary of Anza–Borrego Desert State Park and where a small underground current rises to the surface forming a meandering stream and spring. This desert oasis was the first reliable source of flowing water west of the Colorado River and thus became the focal point of all those who would brave the southern crossing to and from California. No doubt it was known to the indigenous prehistoric people and was a way station along the trail system used to traverse the Colorado Desert and the Cuyamaca Mountains. It was along these same ready-made paths that the late 18th century Spanish *entradas* of De Anza and Fages followed. The first known European penetration of the “Carrizo Corridor” was in 1772 by Fages traveling east from San Diego in pursuit of Army deserters. Following the Yuma uprising of 1781 the trail network was effectively closed until the 1820s when Mexican herders and later overland fur trappers began regularly using the southern route into California. By the 1830’s new branches of the trail were established one of which after passing through the Carrizo Wash threaded the mountains through the San José and San Felipe Valleys. This route became the preferred route by the late 1840s after American settler Jonathan Warner had established his “ranch” and it would be the same route used by the American military expeditions of both Kearney’s Army of the West and the Mormon Battalion during the brief Mexican/American War.

It would be the Carrizo Corridor and “Warner’s Pass” that, beginning in 1848, thousands of gold seekers would travel in route to the placer mines of the Sierra foothills. The travails of this flood tide eventually led in 1855 to the establishment of a small adobe Army outpost at the Carrizo Creek Spring which by 1857 became an important link in the first overland transcontinental mail service along the San Antonio and San Diego Mail Line. In 1858 the Overland Mail Company better known as the Butterfield Line was using the Carrizo Creek Station as part of its much larger and complex string of support stations. The Civil War and intercontinental railroad effectively put an end to this mail service and the Carrizo Creek Station, although still occupied and witness to cattle drives, went into a steady decline. In brief, this report presents the results of archaeological investigations at the Carrizo Creek Station which documents that for a brief period it was a nexus for 19th century Native American, Hispanic, and Anglo-American cultures. In recognition of the importance of this isolated frontier outpost it has been included as part of the Southern Overland Trail Cultural Preserve within Anza Borrego Desert State Park.

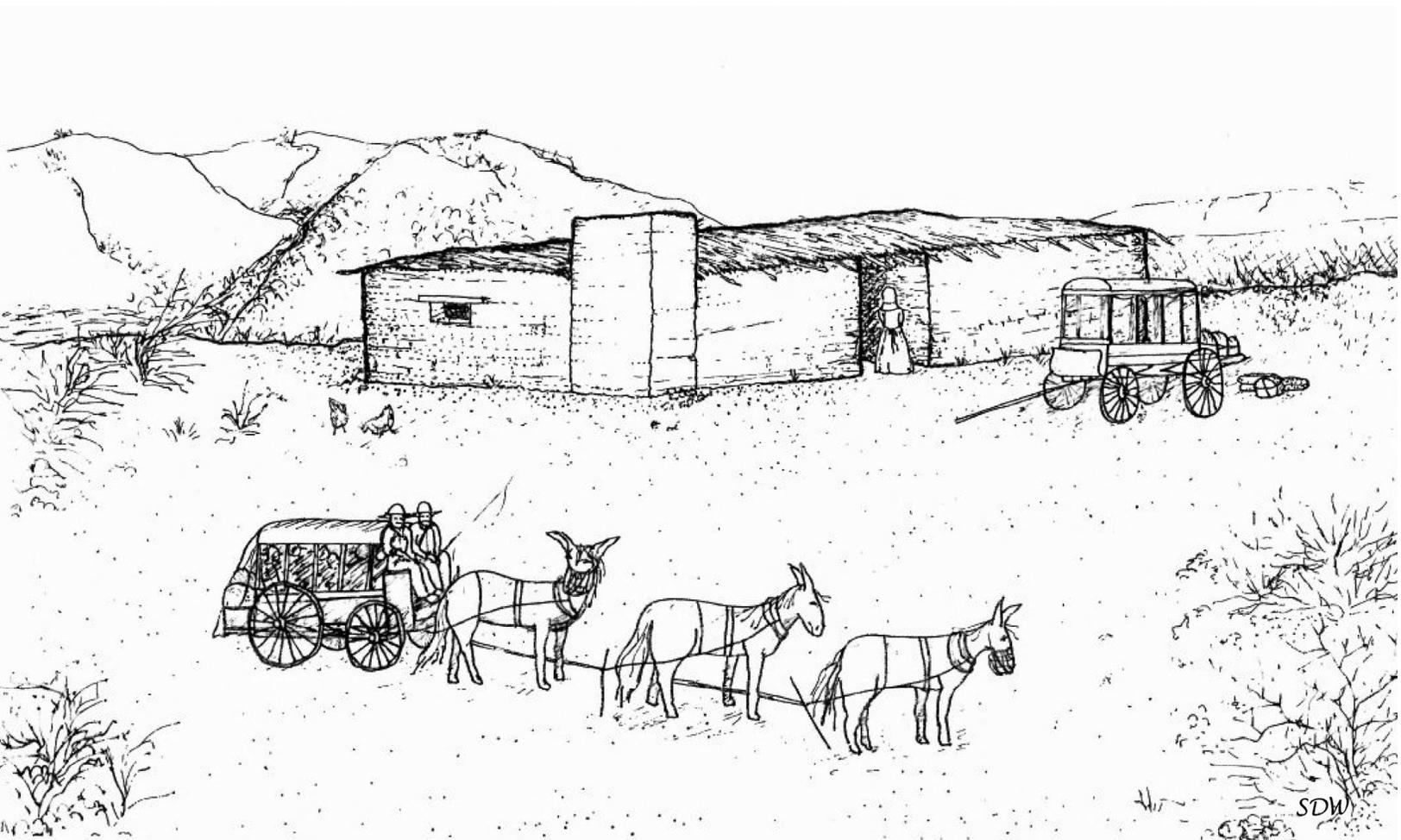
Richard Fitzgerald
Editorial Advisor

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Sue Wade
Author

**AN ISOLATED FRONTIER OUTPOST:
HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS
OF THE CARRIZO CREEK STAGE STATION**



Chapter 1: Introduction

On the western Colorado Desert, at the extreme southeast corner of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, a small stream, Carrizo Creek, trickles along a sandy wash for about two miles and then disappears back into the coarse, dry soil. From 1857 to the middle 1870s, a small adobe stage station stood on the banks of the wash. Dependent on precarious overland supply lines and situated in an unsettled and sometimes lawless country, Carrizo Creek Station was a small isolated frontier outpost, providing fresh horses for the coaches of the Overland Mail, and food, drink, and occasionally a brief rest for weary travelers.

By the 1990s, nearly 130 years since the stage station fell into disuse, the site had suffered greatly from grading and severe erosion and had nearly disappeared from the landscape (Figure 1). With the recognition that if no preservation efforts were undertaken, the site would soon be destroyed, California State Parks archaeologists began investigations to determine what structures and features remained at the site and what protection measures were necessary for its preservation. In 1999, California State Parks Cultural Resource staff and District Archaeologist Rae Schwaderer recognized the need to archaeologically explore the site and to stabilize whatever features might remain. Funding was dedicated to this task and the research and fieldwork, under the direction of project leaders Sue A. Wade (Associate State Archaeologist) and Stephen R. Van Wormer (State Historian II), began in 2000.

The first task was to define the research and environmental context within which the Carrizo Stage Station exists—what historians of the route have called the Carrizo Corridor. The Carrizo Corridor, from Carrizo Stage Station on the south to Warner Ranch on the north, spans approximately 50 miles, nearly 35 miles of which lie within the southern portion of the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park (Figure 2). Three of the stage station sites lie within the park—San Felipe, Palm Springs, and the southernmost, Carrizo. In addition to extensive historic research of the route and stage station sites, during March and April 2001 each of the three sites was surface surveyed and remote sensing and archaeological investigations were completed. This testing was guided by the *Research Design for Archaeological Test Excavations at Three Historic Stage Station Sites Along the Carrizo Corridor of the Butterfield Stage Route* (Wade and Wray 2001), and the test results are documented in *Archaeological Excavations at Carrizo Stage Station, Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, California* (Wade et al. 2001).

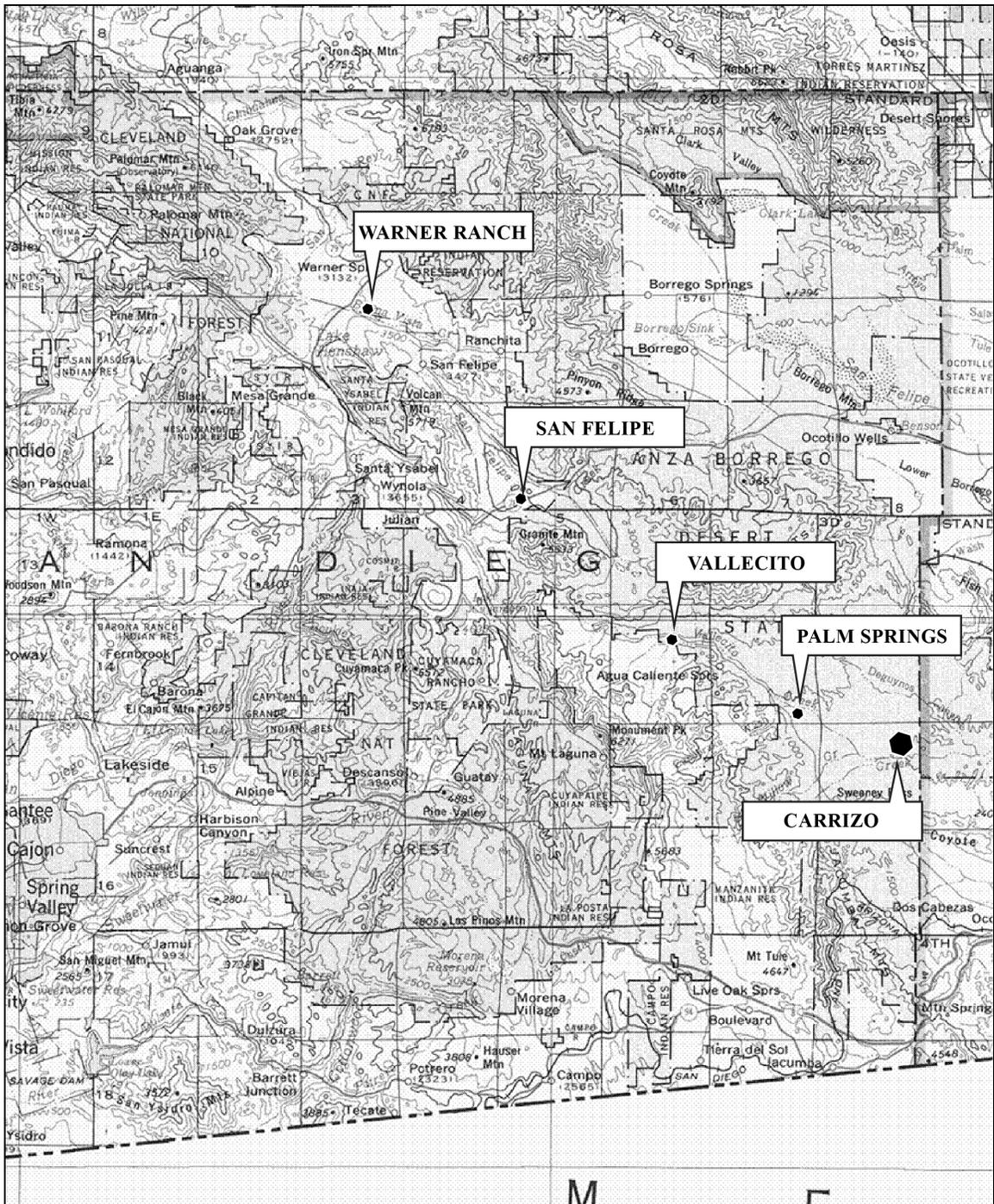


(a) "Ruins of the old Butterfield Stage Station at Carrizo Creek," late 19th century, view to northeast (by Frank Stephens, courtesy of San Diego Historical Society, Booth Photographic Collection).



(b) Carrizo Stage Station Site, 1999, view to northeast (by Christopher Wray).

Figure 1. Carrizo Stage Station Ruins, Late 19th Century, and Site, 1999.



San Diego Region, USGS 1:500,000 Scale Map.

Figure 2. Carrizo Corridor Location.

Surface indications and remote sensing results were sufficient to confirm the location and relative stability of the stage station site at San Felipe. Limited shovel test pit explorations unfortunately located no remains at the Palm Springs site. At the current time, it is unknown if or where remains of Palm Springs Stage Station still exist. A systematic archaeological

testing program was implemented at the Carrizo Stage Station site. The initial field test excavations and artifact analysis confirmed the presence of two structures and artifactual remains of the 1857-1870s Carrizo Stage Station.

At the conclusion of the testing, it was determined that the Carrizo Stage Station site is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places because of its association with significant historical events—transportation of people and goods along the Southern Overland Routes—and because it contains important archaeological data concerning the site function and the past lifeways of the occupants. The testing program also identified impacts from natural and human depredations that threatened the site's integrity and its National Register eligibility. Because of this unavoidable threat of destruction, a data recovery program was recommended for the Carrizo Stage Station site. An engineered erosion control and stabilization plan was recommended to be implemented at the completion of the data recovery effort. Interpretive activities were also proposed including recreation of low adobe walls on the foundation alignment and placement of an interpretive panel. The 150-year anniversary, in 2007, of the construction of the Carrizo Stage Station and the opening of the stage route was identified as an ideal time to commemorate this important segment of California history.

The recommended data recovery excavation program was implemented in 2002 and is the subject of this report. At the completion of the excavations, with assistance by the California Conservation Corps (CCC), the site was covered with porous geo-textile fabric, hand filled with excavation back dirt, and capped with a two-to-four-foot layer of soil. The engineered water diversion measures, to reduce the erosion danger to the site, were constructed by the CCC. While its artifactual information has been removed and documented in this report, the site architecture remains preserved for the future below this soil cap.

Chapter 2: Natural Setting and Site Description

Carrizo Creek is a small stream that surfaces as a spring in a sandy wash bottom and meanders for approximately two miles before it is absorbed back into the desert. The Carrizo Creek Stage Station site (Figure 3) is elevated on a small terrace on the northwest side of the creek drainage. Typical desert scrub plant species are present. These include cholla and saltbush, as well as some mesquite. The nearby creek area could be classified as Desert Riparian or Mesquite Bosque habitat, although after hurricane Kathleen, in September 1976, it became thoroughly dominated by tamarisk (Figure 4). The hurricane also resulted in cutting a braid of the creek channel along the east side of the station site. A small mesa about 30 feet high is located 30 to 50 feet west of the building remains. It is capped with cobble deposits typical of the desert pavement that exists on elevated hills in the surrounding badlands.

Prior to excavation, the stage station remains consisted of a small adobe mound approximately 24 to 30 inches high that covered an area of around 25 by 35 feet. Along the eastern edge, erosion from the braid of the creek cut by Hurricane Kathleen had exposed an alignment of foundation cobbles. About ten feet west of the adobe mound is a large earthen dike about four feet in height and ten feet across that runs along the base of the small mesa for a length of about 350 feet. It was designed to collect rain runoff from the mesa and channel it into a reservoir created by the dike's construction across a bowl-shaped topographic feature at the base of the mesa and directly west of the station site. Water flowed over the top of this reservoir in the 1980s, and cut a 7-to-10-foot-wide channel through the dike and along the north side of the adobe mound to a depth of about six feet. The area on the north side of this channel and along the east side of the dike was relatively level. Excavation would reveal that it had been graded when the dike was built in the late 1950s; this grading impacted approximately 50 percent of the station building's remains. The later erosion by Hurricane Kathleen and the breaching of the earthen dike destroyed about 50 percent of what remained after the northern part of the site had been leveled.



*(a) "Camp at Carrizo Creek," about 1900, view to southeast
(courtesy of San Diego Historical Society, Booth Photographic Collection).*



(b) Carrizo Stage Station site, 2001, view to southeast (by California State Parks).

Figure 4. Camp at Carrizo Creek, 1900, and Carrizo Stage Station Site, 2001.

Chapter 3: Historical Background

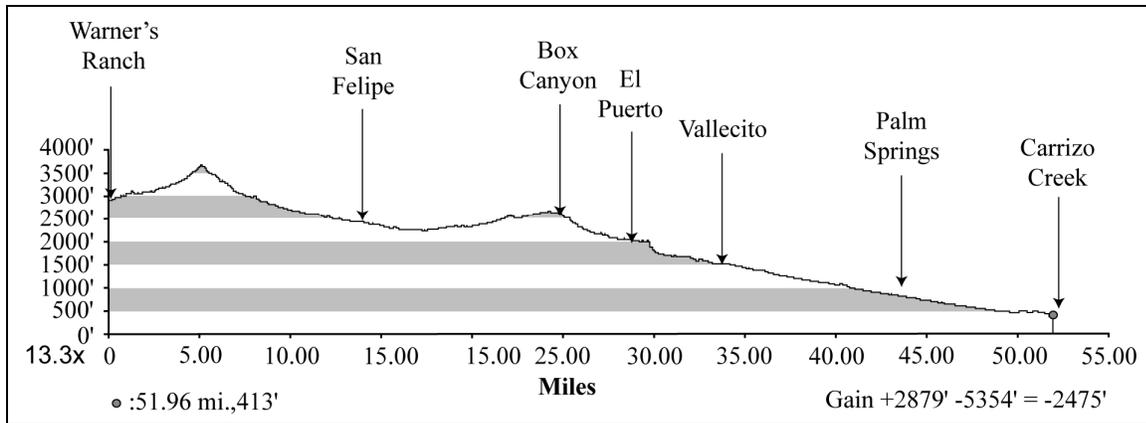
INTRODUCTION

The stage station site is located on the east bank of Carrizo Creek near where a small spring surfaces in the sandy wash bottom, and the resulting stream meanders for approximately two miles before it disappears. Carrizo, in Spanish, refers to a thin bamboo-like reed grass (*Phragmites australis*) that grew in abundance at the spring (Lindsay 2001:107). The location and subsequent stage station constructed there have been known by several variations of the word over the centuries including El Carrizal, Carissita, Cariza, Carrisa, Karissa, Carisso, Carissa, Cariso and Carrizo.

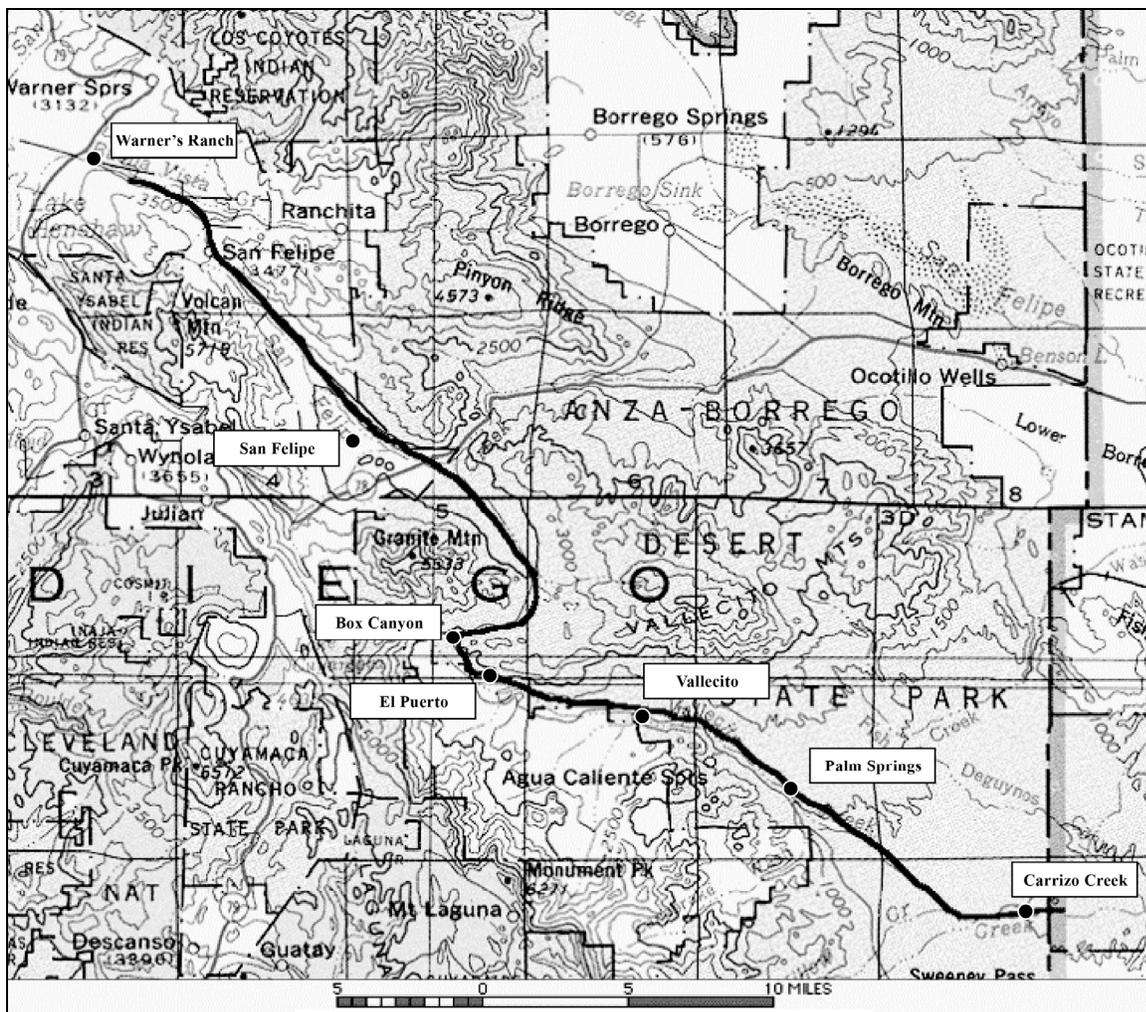
This small stream, which has always been so narrow and shallow that it can easily be stepped across, is one of the most historically significant locations in the Colorado Desert. As the first reliable watering spot after 90 miles of arid wilderness west of the Colorado River, it had been well known and the goal of many travelers on the Southern Emigrant Trail prior to the establishment of the Overland Mail stage station in 1857.

Of the many overland trails used during the vast Gold Rush immigration of 1848-1850, the Southern Emigrant Trail is the least recognized for its importance. Thousands followed it westward from the Rio Grande in New Mexico across the deserts of Arizona and California, and it became the major overland entrance to Southern California prior to construction of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Accounts of travel over the portion between the Colorado River and Carrizo Creek have been considered some of the most difficult records of overland Gold Rush immigration (Wray 2000). After reaching the spring at Carrizo, the overland travelers' situation gradually improved. From this point, at approximately 500 feet above mean sea level, the trail followed the Carrizo Corridor and Warner's Pass through a series of elevated valleys, including Vallecito, El Puerto (present day Mason Valley), Box Canyon, and San Felipe. This route provided reliable water and gradually lifted the emigrants out of the desert until the top of the mountains and good pasture land in San José Valley were reached at Warner's Ranch, 50 miles to the northwest at around 2,800 feet above sea level (Figure 5). Here the arduous desert crossing ended.

The Southern Emigrant Trail's origins preceded the Gold Rush by many decades. Late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Spanish and Mexican military explorations first established the route by following Native American trails. It became well used by traders and trappers who journeyed between California and Sonora in the 1830s.



Elevation Profile Map of Carrizo Corridor and Warner's Spring Pass.



Map of the Southern Emigrant Trail Through the Carrizo Corridor and Warner's Pass.

Figure 5. Elevation Profile and Map of the Southern Emigrant Trail.

The 1840s and 1850s saw invading American armies follow the route to California during the Mexican War, followed by thousands of Gold Rush Argonauts (Figure 6). In 1857, overland mail service was established along the road. This narrative documents the significance of Carrizo Creek within the historical development of the Overland Trail from the late eighteenth century, through establishment of the transcontinental railroad lines in the 1870s.

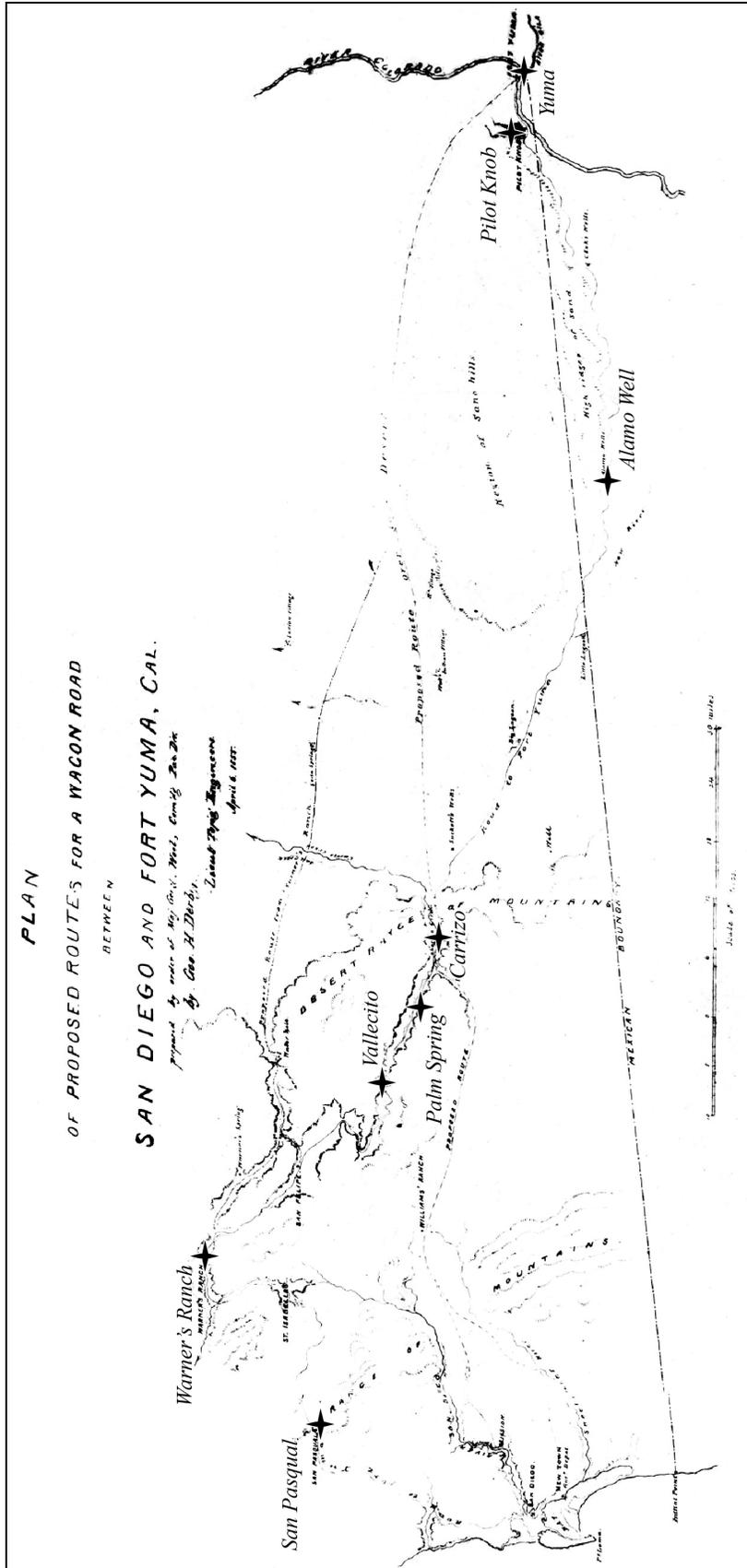
SPANISH AND MEXICAN EXPLORATIONS

A series of unrelated explorations by Spanish and Mexican military forces followed original Native American trails and discovered routes and passes that would eventually be connected to become the Southern Overland Road (Tamplin 1979:11-23). The first Spaniard to enter present day Anza-Borrego Desert was Lt. Pedro Fages of the San Diego Presidio, who left San Diego Mission with three soldiers on October 29, 1772, in pursuit of army deserters. They followed Native American trails across the Cuyamaca Mountains and desert via Oriflamme Canyon, Mason Valley, and the Carrizo Wash. Fages traveled over this route two more times, in 1782 and 1785. He discovered many of the points along the Carrizo Corridor that would later become landmarks on the overland trail, including the marshes and springs at Carrizo Creek, Palm Springs, and Vallecito. Continuing southeast into the desert, Fages' route joined the Anza Trail, established in 1776 between Mexico Sonora and San Gabriel Mission (Rensch 1955; Ives 1975; Lindsay 2001).

The trail from Vallecito to Warner's Ranch was not established until the mid-1820s. Father Juan Mariner of Mission San Diego and Captain Juan Pablo Grijalva of the San Diego Presidio entered the San José Valley in 1795 during an exploratory expedition. They named the place El Valle de San José and recorded ten Native American villages as well as the hot springs at Agua Caliente (Pourade 1961:115; Roth 1981:179; Hill 1927:App. I). By the 1820s San Diego and San Luis Rey missions used the valley to graze cattle and sheep (Engelhardt 1920:223-225; Pourade 1961:122). It was not until Mexican military parties began to travel on to the desert that a route would be opened from the mountains to the Colorado River linking the Carrizo Corridor with Warner's Pass and San José Valley.

In the 1820s, explorations established San José Valley as a gateway through the mountains for an overland trail to Sonora and the Mexican interior. In 1825, San Diego Presidio *Alférez*, Santiago Arguello, while in pursuit of Native American horse thieves, discovered the pass leading from Valle de San José to the desert via the San Felipe Valley. Later, José Romero, captain of the Tucson Presidio, and Lt. of Engineers Romualdo Pacheco, delineated the trail via the San José Valley through Santa Ysabel to San Diego as the official route for overland travel from Sonora to California. An alternative route for travelers wishing to bypass San Diego and reach the coast at a more northerly point led from El Valle de San José through Puerta La Cruz, Cañada Aguanga, and Temecula to San Gabriel and Los Angeles. This would become the main branch of the overland trail 20 years later (Warner 1886:3; Beattie 1925, 1933; Pourade 1961:174).

In spite of establishment of the route, travel between California and Sonora remained infrequent through the 1820s (Tamplin 1979:11-23). Starting in 1827, Sonorans used the route to move to California in order to escape Native American uprisings. Communication regularly came through from 1827 to 1828 (Bean 1962:87-88), but in 1830



*"Plan of Proposed Routes for a Wagon Road between San Diego and Fort Yuma, Cal.," April 6, 1855
 (by George S. Derby, National Archives, Records of the War Department,
 United States Army, Washington D.C., Commands, Department of the Pacific, Document File)*

Figure 6. Plan of Proposed Routes for a Wagon Road, 1855.

Father José Sanchez reported that Native Americans had murdered four Sonorans on the west bank of the Colorado and that travel on that road had decreased considerably in light of this (Beattie 1933:68). The last official use of the road took place in 1834 when Rafael Amador carried dispatches from Mexican President Santa Anna to California governor Figueroa (Hutchinson 1969:65).

In the early 1830s, the Sonora trail became the path of overland traders. In 1832, the Jackson-Young party from Santa Fe, New Mexico, followed the old Anza-Sonora Trail along the Gila River, through present-day central Arizona, to its junction with the Colorado River. They then crossed the desert along the route established by Romero and Pacheco to the San José Valley and continued to Los Angeles. The route was so little used at his time that no one who had traveled between Tucson and the Colorado River could be found to guide them. West of Tucson to the Pima villages at the Gila River, the trail became obscure and difficult to follow. From the Pima villages down the Gila River to the Colorado River and then westward into the desert there was no trail, “not even an Indian path,” until they came to within a 100 miles of San Diego (Warner 1908:189). As a member of this expedition Jonathan Trumbull Warner first crossed the valley that would later become his ranch. Jackson returned by the same route with 600 mules and 100 horses.

Traffic increased during the 1830s and 1840s as livestock traders drove herds of horses eastward to Sonora and New Mexico. Yearly caravans carried “blankets of various colors and qualities, and other coarse woolen goods manufactured in New Mexico” to California where they were exchanged for “Chinese silk goods, fine bleached grass cloth, mules, horses and money” (Warner 1908:189). The route between the Colorado River and Warner's Ranch became permanently established (Beattie 1925; Cleland 1963:236-237; Weber 1982:135). Water holes were discovered and maintained, and the names assigned, many of which are still known. West of the river, the most difficult part of the trail lay across the Colorado Desert, until the waters of Carrizo Creek were reached. The 90 mile stretch of windblown sand drifts, stone covered terraces, and salt flats with little or no vegetation, had no permanent sources of running water.

After crossing the Colorado River the trail headed south, paralleling the river for about seven miles, to avoid immense sand dunes located directly to the west. The route then turned westward across fine, soft, windblown sand along the southern edge of the dunes. Water along this stretch was obtained from crude wells dug into dry arroyo bottoms. These deep channels had been formed, and flowed occasionally over the millennia, when the Colorado River flooded its banks. The shallow holes, excavated into soft sand that easily caved in, had to be reopened each time they were used. The first well, Los Pozos de la Rajadura (the wells in the cleft), sat in a cleft at the base of a 30-foot cliff in the dry bed of the Alamo River, about 15 miles from the Colorado River (Ellis 1995a). Continuing westward across a barren gravel plain, the road passed through occasional drifts of blown sand for another 24 miles until once again it came to the dry channel of the Alamo River. Here a stunted cottonwood tree marked the location of a second source of shallow ground water. Mexican livestock traders named this spot Alamo Mocho, Spanish for the stunted or short cottonwood, after its most obvious descriptive feature.

Beyond Alamo Mocho, the trail crossed a salt encrusted plain almost destitute of vegetation before it reached the next water hole at El Pozo Hondo (the deep well), some 25 miles further west. Midway in between, at the center of the plain, was La Laguna, a small

pond of saline water unfit to drink. From here the trail veered slightly northwest and shortly reached El Pozo Hondo in the bottom of a dry streambed now known as the New River. The route followed this dry northwesterly trending channel for approximately ten miles, then left the wash and crossed a flat plain of soft gravely sand covered with stunted creosote and other small desert shrubs until it entered the dry bed of Carrizo Wash. From this point, it followed the sandy streambed as it wound between weathered hills of ancient mud sediment until it reached the flowing spring and marsh known as El Carrizal (the cane grove), around 20 miles from El Pozo Hondo (Figure 7). This was the first permanent flowing water source that could be relied upon west of the Colorado River (Couts 1849).

From Carrizo, conditions gradually improved. Water sources could be counted on at regular intervals as the trail rose gradually out of the desert until it reached the summit of the mountains at Warner's Ranch. Continuing in a northwest direction, the route followed Carrizo and then Vallecito Washes for another nine miles before coming to a small spring located in a palm grove. Later travelers named this location Palm Spring. After another nine miles along the same dry streambed, the trail came to the pasture and springs known as El Ojo Grande at Vallecito, where a semi-permanent Native American settlement was located.¹

Beyond Vallecito, the terrain gradually began to change. Granite outcrops replaced the sandy hills, and desert vegetation gave way to juniper woodland. The road crossed a granitic boulder ridge, today known as Campbell Grade, and reached another marshy area called El Puerto where water could be obtained. Beyond this valley the trail entered a narrow gorge, now known as Box Canyon, and then continued in its consistent northwesterly direction until it reached the waters of San Felipe Creek and another Native American village. Beyond San Felipe the trail left the desert floor and rose gradually into the mountains. The juniper woodland and creosote gave way to chaparral and oak trees. At Warner's Ranch, 15 miles from San Felipe, the San José Valley opened into broad flat grass-covered grazing land.

In the 1840s, Jonathan Trumbull Warner established a ranch in San José Valley. As already noted, he first saw the region in 1832 as a member of the Jackson-Young party. Warner remained in California, settling in Los Angeles. In 1844 he received a grant for the valley and moved there with his family during the winter of 1844-1845. They lived in an adobe house near the Native American village of Cupa at Agua Caliente Hot Springs (Warner 1886:30; Ortego 1856; Bibb 1976; Roth 1981:194). Since that time the area has been known as Warner's or Warner's Ranch and the north end of the San Felipe Valley, leading down into the desert, has often been called Warner's Pass.² Although the Mexican livestock traders who established the trail left almost no written documentation of their travels, the fact that the route was well established by the 1840s, and that most of the major watering holes and landmarks had been identified and given Spanish place names that were well known by that time provides testimony to the untold number of successful livestock drives that these hearty Hispanic pioneers completed during the 15 years prior to the American invasion of 1846. Born and raised in the desert, they knew how to drive large herds across arid expanses with little loss. In the decades following 1846, American immigrants drove their own livestock herds across the same terrain, and often met with disastrous results. Until establishment of the railroads in the 1870s, the dead carcasses of horses, mules, sheep, oxen, and cattle marked the trail and every water hole between the Colorado River and Carrizo Creek. When the first American armies traveled this same route



(a) Carrizo Wash and Mud Hills, 2002, view to west (by California State Parks).



(b) Carrizo Wash, 2002, view to west (by California State Parks).



(c) Carrizo Marsh and Stage Station Site, 2002, view to west (by California State Parks).

Figure 7. Carrizo Wash and Mud Hills, 2002.

in the mid-1840s they did not find the water holes surrounded by dead livestock, or the trail lined with bleached bones. This fact attests to the skill, knowledge, and ability the Mexican herders who had established and drove large herds along the trail from California to Sonora Mexico and New Mexico in the 1830s and 1840s

THE FORCES OF MANIFEST DESTINY AND THE MEXICAN WAR

During the 1830s and 1840s a belief in the concept of Manifest Destiny became a dominant aspect of American culture and political thought. Proponents were convinced God had willed the American continent, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, to the Anglo-Saxon Protestant population of the United States. They saw the acquisition of new lands as indispensable to the complete liberty of Anglo-Saxon Protestants benefiting from life under the United States Constitution. America's ordained mission called for an expansion of "the area of freedom," but British designs on Oregon and the unstable and weak Mexican Republic were obstacles (Ruiz 1963:55). In 1845 voters elected James K. Polk President on a platform that included the acquisition of Oregon and California. Oregon was obtained through negotiation. When the Mexican government refused to consider an offer to purchase California, the President provoked hostilities through a dispute over the southern boundary of Texas. A joint resolution of both houses of the United States Congress declared that a state of war existed between the United States and the Republic of Mexico on May 13, 1846 (Harlow 1982:55-57).

The United States' conquest of Northern Mexico and the subsequent settlement of California that followed had a major impact on development of the Southern Overland Trail, as the forces of Manifest Destiny took over the west. Beginning with the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848 and until the completion of the Southern Pacific railroad in the mid 1870s, the Carrizo Corridor and Warner's Pass became part of a major passage for overland migration and communication along the Gila River route. The movement began with military expeditions. Following earlier trails established by Spanish and Mexican explorers and Sonora and Santa Fe traders, invading American armies marching to California established an overland route from Texas through Arizona along the Gila River to where it joined the Colorado River at present day Yuma, Arizona (Trafzer 1980). From the junction of the two rivers, the trail followed the already well-established route across the Colorado Desert and northward along the east side of the Peninsular Range through the Carrizo Corridor, San Felipe Valley, Warner's Pass, and San José Valley. The trail to San Diego forked to the southwest at this point, running through Santa Ysabel, while the main road continued northward to Temecula and Los Angeles (Warner 1886:1-6, 19-20; Bibb 1995). General Stephen W. Kearney's Army of the West crossed the desert between the Colorado River and Warner's Ranch in early December 1846, followed by General George Cooke's Mormon Battalion in January 1847 (Tamplin 1979:24-34; Pourade 1963:124; Beattie 1925, 1933).

The Army of the West

The Army of the West, under the command of Brevet-Brigadier General Stephen Watts Kearney, consisted of 1,658 men that included horse-mounted dragoons and a detachment of topographical engineers headed by Lieutenant William Hensley Emory. Following commencement of hostilities with Mexico, they left Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in June 1846, with orders to secure New Mexico and continue on to California. Meeting little resistance, Kearney easily established United States military rule and took possession

of Santa Fe on August 18. Leaving most of the detachment behind, he headed west on September 25 with 300 men, including Emory's engineers. After eight days on the trail they met the famous overland scout Kit Carson. He had been sent from California to Washington D.C. with dispatches from John C. Fremont stating that the Pacific Coast had been conquered. Kearney sent 200 of his men back to Santa Fe and ordered Carson to guide him to California.

When the Army of the West arrived at the junction of the Gila and Colorado rivers in late November 1846, they found the latter to be a wide, shallow, muddy, dingy red-colored stream resembling the Arkansas and Missouri Rivers. It flowed through a wide valley covered in a dense growth of mesquite and other "bushes" with an occasional cottonwood tree. After crossing at a ford some six miles south of the junction with the Gila, the army continued westward along the southern edge of the sand dunes to the first well, at La Rajadura, and camped (Wray 2000). Lt. Emory recorded that they "encountered an immense sand drift, and from that point until we halted, the great highway between Sonora and California lies along the foot of this drift, which is continually encroaching down the valley" (Emory 1848). The Lieutenant's use of the term "the great highway between Sonora and California" indicated the trail could be easily followed as a result of the extensive use it had received by Mexican traders during the previous decade. Upon reaching the first watering spot, the soldiers found a hole five to six feet deep in the bottom of a dry arroyo located a few feet to the left of the road. By digging, they obtained enough water for the men and animals (Turner 1846; Emory 1848).

The march resumed at dawn the following morning. The trail followed the base of the dunes for another four miles and then veered slightly northward until it reached Alamo Mocho. In the mesquite-filled arroyo, Kearney's forces located a large hole. They reopened this well and excavated another. Both reached a depth of 15 to 20 feet below ground surface before encountering water. The Dragoons wove a "basket work of willow twigs" around the sides to hold back the caving sand (Emory 1848). Water was finally obtained late that night "...the very worst it was ever my misfortune to drink. It took all night to water the animals—two buckets full each was all that was allowed—and an officer stood by to see division fairly made. Some of our mules being wild and unused to such attention refused to have anything to do with the water." For these the bucket had to be buried in the sand or covered with grass or mesquite beans (Griffen 1846).

Over the next two days the Army of the West faced the hardest section of the road. Both men and animals suffered from fatigue as a result of water, food, and sleep deprivation. For reasons unknown, they crossed the salt flat of La Laguna but missed the water hole at El Pozo Hondo, traversing the entire 54 miles from Alamo Mocho to Carrizo Creek without replenishing water supplies. This part of the desert was practically destitute of vegetation. The soft sand exhausted the horses and mules and many began to collapse. The Army reached the brine-filled pond at Laguna at around 8 o'clock that night. Finding its water unfit to drink, they rested until 4 a.m. and then continued. Emory wrote "we groped silently our way in the dark. The stoutest animals now began to stagger, and when day dawned scarcely a man was seen mounted." As the sun rose a heavy fog blew in from the Gulf of California. The men's hair and the manes of their mules became "quite wet", providing some relief. When the fog lifted they found themselves entering a "gap in the mountain which had been before us for four days," formed by the course of Carrizo Creek. The first members reached the waters of the spring and marsh at noon (Emory 1848).

At Carrizo the Army halted, making camp “at the source, a magnificent spring, twenty or thirty feet in diameter, highly impregnated with sulfur... The spring consisted of a series of smaller springs or veins.” Emory described the vegetation as “cane, rush, and a coarse grass, such as is found on the marshes near the sea shore.” The water flowed for only a short distance. “Within a half a mile of one of its sources ... the sands had already absorbed much of its water, and left but little running.” A mile or two below the spring the creek disappeared entirely (Emory 1848).

The running creek refreshed both men and livestock. The horses and mules grazed on the cane and grass and enjoyed the first water they had seen in more than 36 hours. In his journal, Henry Smith Turner described the relief and ecstasy all felt:

November 28, Saturday—Started an hour before day, marched 22 miles to Karissa Creek, the west end of this laborious journey. We have lost many animals in crossing it but thanks be to God we are through it, and have made fewer sacrifices than any of us expected. We have great cause to be thankful to Almighty God for His goodness to us, and from the bottom of my heart I feel gratitude. [Turner 1846]

John Griffen recorded conditions in camp:

After getting in camp we all felt quite comfortable, and as we had had nothing like cooking for several days every man turned out the best he had—a canister of potted meat and a cup of tea—with a brandy toddy were the greatest luxuries that could be found—and we went at them with a will. We supped out. I took one supper at home—drank penola with Carson—& wound up in the evening by eating again with Captain Moore—it seemed to me that there was no such thing as quenching my thirst. I drank tea and water until I could stand no more, and yet I was thirsty and every one complained of the same. Many of the messes had nothing but a pure vegetable diet—that is to say, bread—made of salt & flour & water or a little boiled corn, or beans, with not even meat enough to grease it—among the number in this situation was the general. The Engineer camp were even worse off it was reported that they had nothing at all for the men employed in the department, a Mexican who they had to herd their mules had stolen from them, and sold the provisions to another Mexican trader who was allowed to travel with the troops ... the question was seriously mooted whether a mule should be killed or not. It was not done—but I suppose will be at the next camp—as we are fully seventy miles from any settlements. [Griffen 1846]

Overall the Army had suffered badly, forced to leave many animals “on the road to die of thirst and hunger” between Alamo Mocho and Carrizo “in spite of the generous efforts of the men to bring them to the spring. More than one was brought up, by one man tugging at the halter and another pushing up the brute, by placing his shoulder against its buttocks.” Emory felt that the most serious loss had been “one or two fat mares and colts brought with us for food; ... Major Swords found in a concealed place one of the best pack mules slaughtered, and the choice bits cut from his shoulders and flanks, stealthily done by some mess less provident than others” (Emory 1848).

With rations low and the forage at the spring inadequate for their livestock, the Army of the West resumed their march on the morning of November 29 toward Vallecito.

Still fatigued, they continued “at a snail’s pace,” passing the grove of palms at Palm Springs. “The day was intensely hot, and the sand deep; the animals, inflated with water and rushes, gave way by scores.... It was a feast day for the wolves, [actually coyotes] which followed in packs close on our track, seizing our deserted brutes and making the air resound with their howls as they battled for the carcasses.” Although only 19 miles from the water at Carrizo many members of the detachment did not reach the “little pools” of Vallecito until 10 o’clock that night (Emory 1848).

Vallecito is a picturesque spot, nestled in a small flat plain approximately a half-mile wide. Granite boulder hills border the edge of the valley on the east. On its western side the granitic peaks of the Peninsular Range rise abruptly to heights of more than 3,000 feet. Although described as salty, the grass that grew here seemed suitable for the livestock and extended for a mile or two along the valley. Kearney halted for a day to rest men and animals. A horse was killed to feed the famished dragoons (Emory 1848).

As they camped, winter set in. A heavy, dark cloud bank covered the mountains on the west side of the valley and a cold wind blew a “hurricane” from that direction. Yet the sky above the camp remained clear as the threatening clouds stayed over the peaks and did not move eastward on to the desert valley. The crossing continued on December 1. The clouds had cleared, revealing the western mountains covered in snow. The soldiers marched into a cold wind from the northwest, passing through the narrow gorge at present-day Box Canyon and reaching the Native American village at San Felipe at dark, which they found deserted. The following day they followed the San Felipe Valley northward and reached Warner’s Ranch. Emory described their relief at leaving the desert:

We commenced to ascend another divide and as we approached the summit the narrow valley leading to it was covered with timber and long grass. On both sides the evergreen oak grew luxuriantly, and, for the first time since leaving the States we saw what would even there be called large trees. Emerging from these we saw in the distance the beautiful valley of Agua Caliente, waving with yellow grass, where we expected to find the rancheria owned by an American named Warner.... The rancheria was in charge of a young fellow from New Hampshire named Marshall. We ascertained from him that his employer was a prisoner to the Americans in San Diego, that the Mexicans were still in possession of the whole country ... that we were in the heart of the enemy’s stronghold, ... and that we were now in possession of the great pass to Sonora....

To appease hunger, however, was the first consideration. Seven of my men eat, at one single meal, a fat full grown sheep. Our camp was pitched on the road to the Pueblo [Los Angeles], leading a little north of west. To the south down the valley of the Agua Caliente, lay the road to San Diego. Above us [at the hot springs Indian village] was Mr. Warner’s backwoods, American looking houses, built of adobe and covered with a thatched roof. Around were the thatched huts of the more than half naked Indians.[Emory 1848]

The Army of the West had not yet seen the last of its hardship. While marching from Warner’s Ranch to San Diego they engaged a band of Mexican Californio guerilla fighters under the command of Don Andres Pico at San Pasqual with disastrous consequences.³

The Mormon Battalion

Following six weeks behind the Army of the West was Colonel Phillip St. George Cooke with the Mormon Battalion (Tamplin 1979:30). Their mission was to open a wagon road to California. The widening and leveling of the original trail so wagons could pass made possible the incredible overland migration that would occur in less than a decade (Pourade 1963:124; Beattie 1925, 1933).⁴

The Mormon Battalion consisted of 500 volunteers of that religion attached to the Army of the West for 12 months, by order of President Polk. Kearney originally placed Captain James Allen of the First Dragoons in command. Following behind the regular troops, the Mormons left Council Bluffs, Iowa, on July 20, 1846, marching to Fort Leavenworth where they trained. On August 12 they left for New Mexico. Captain Allen died en route and Lieutenant Smith took command. The battalion reached Santa Fe after Kearney had departed. Upon receiving word of Allen's death, General Kearney ordered Colonel Philip St. George Cooke to return to Santa Fe and take command of the Mormons. They were to follow and open a wagon road (Tamplin 1979:21).

The Mormon Battalion reached the Colorado River on January 8, 1847, with 350 men and five officers' wives. They crossed the river on January 10 and continued westward on the afternoon of December 11. The soft windblown sands along the southern edge of the dunes proved to be exceptionally difficult for the mule teams pulling wagons. They began to give out before reaching La Rajadura, and two teams were abandoned (Cooke 1847; Bigler 1847).⁵

An advance party, sent ahead of the wagons to find and prepare the well for their arrival, encountered the hole filled in with a dead coyote in it. They dug out the old excavation and started another. The first wagons began to arrive at sundown. However, the caving sandy side made it impossible to accumulate more than a couple of inches of water until Colonel Cooke ordered a wash tub, with the bottom knocked out, to be placed in the first well. This worked for a while, but then the water ceased. Finally the second well reached a flow of water more than ten feet below ground surface that could be dipped out with a camp kettle. At 10:30 that night Cooke ordered a group of 13 to leave in the morning for Alamo Mocho and prepare that source (Cooke 1847; Bigler 1847).

By 11:30 the following day, three companies had watered their mules and began the days' march, leaving the rest of the battalion to follow. Two more wagons and a trunk of tools were abandoned. The soft sand continued to be a burden for the wagon teams. After covering only 11 miles, Cooke established camp at a patch of "scant straw colored grass" at sunset in "a wilderness of sand, mixed with gravel and small stones; the only vegetable production a slim bush, which the New Mexicans call 'stinking wood' " (Cooke 1847; Bigler 1847).

The crossing resumed the following day at sunrise. The Mormons traveled the remaining 13 miles to Alamo Mocho by 2 o'clock that afternoon. The advance party had also found this water source filled in, with four dead coyotes in it. They cleaned it out and began another. Cooke noted: "The Alamo Mocho well is near the foot of a very steep bank, perhaps eighty feet down to a remarkable depression of great extent and as wide as a great river; and most likely it is the bed of one, or of a dried up creek of the Gulf. The flat bottom is grown up with mesquite" (Cooke 1847). Although the wells produced sufficient water, Cooke complained that "Now after eight hours, the watering is still going on; the poor

animals after drinking the impure water, seem unsatisfied, and have to be driven away to the bushes on which to browse” (Cooke 1847).

Livestock watering continued all night. Early the next morning an advance party of 25 left to locate and prepare El Pozo Hondo. The battalion continued to draw “the scant water” from the wells for the mules and cattle until 11 o’clock when the march resumed. As with the Army of the West, the 55 miles from Alamo Mocho to Carrizo Creek proved to be the most difficult section of the trail for the Mormons. Deprived of sufficient food, water, or rest, the fact that they found the watering spot at El Pozo Hondo did not relieve their toil. The battalion followed the “tracks of hundreds of mules and horses; herds believed to have been driven within a few months to Sonora.” They crossed “some bad sand” and then “a great flat of clay.” After 17 miles, sundown found them at a mesquite thicket where they dry camped (Cooke 1847).

Marching at sunrise the next day, the battalion covered the seven remaining miles to El Pozo Hondo by 11 o’clock. Here they found two Mexican Californio vaqueros with a herd of 35 horses and mules and some beef cattle, sent for their relief by General Kearney (Pourade 1964:125). In spite of the best efforts of the advance party, the well failed to produce sufficient water. As with all previous water holes, this one had a dead coyote in it. After removing the carcass the mules sent by Kearney were allowed to drink from the well in order to “clean it out.” After this, in spite of repeated excavation, the small trickle that remained did not suffice even to fill canteens (Cooke 1847; Bigler 1847).

The new livestock did provide fresh meat and animals to replace the exhausted wagon teams. For the first time the Mormons witnessed the skill of the Californio vaqueros. “Most of the animals had never been broke and were tolerably wild, and it was diverting to the soldiers to see how handy the Spaniards were in throwing the lasso and catching the animals the Colonel wanted to use.” One of the fresh beeves was killed and dressed, “with orders to cook and eat and be on the march in one hour and a half for the next water and grass” (Bigler 1847).

The march continued that afternoon. They covered an additional 11 miles by nightfall and made a dry camp for the second evening. Cooke noted that “...the mules were kept tied and some bunch grass was cut and fed them.” Besides being nearly starved, the mules had gone without water since the previous morning at Alamo Mocho. Now “the men too,” were without it. The Colonel determined it necessary to go on “in the cold night speedily to end this terrible state of things” (Cooke 1847).

At 2 a.m., January 16th the march resumed. Cooke described the hardship and confusion:

I had a large advance guard and all the guides on duty, telling Weaver not to lose sight of the leading wagon; it was starlight. Four miles from our bivouac I stopped until all had passed, and found that even then a team or two had apparently given out. I gave various orders of relief, transferred mules, etc.; toward daylight it was exceedingly cold, too much so to ride; then the guides got lost, and, by their not obeying strictly my orders, the wagons lost at least a mile; here the new teams seemed almost exhausted; two companies had lost harness and I managed to find some for them. I found the road was about to prove much longer than I had been informed. About 10 o’clock in the morning as usual, it became of summer heat. Finally, near eleven, I reached,

with the foremost wagon, the first water of the Cariza;—a clear running stream gladdened the eyes, after anxious dependence on muddy wells for five or six days. One company, which met with an accident, was so far delayed into the heat of the day, that the mules entirely failed several miles off; a new team had to be sent, and the wagon came up at sunset. I found the march to be nineteen miles; thus without water for near three days, (for the working animals) and camping two nights, in succession, without water, the battalion made in forty-eight hours, four marches, of eighteen, eight, eleven, and nineteen miles, suffering from frost, and from summer heat. Considering this, it seems certain that the fifty-six miles from Alamo Mocho, could have been made without great loss in no other way;—the divisions of time for rest, the stop only for a drink and refreshment of meat in the heat of the day, and the cold night marches. [Cooke 1847]

This was the worst day of the crossing. Men and livestock were strung out all along the trail and it took the rest of the day for them to straggle in. Some had collapsed “for want of water - tired, weak, faint, and hungry.” Twenty mules had to be left, too weak to continue (Bigler 1847). They found the pasture at Carrizo to be “dry and salty” (Cooke 1847).

After a brief rest, the battalion resumed its journey the following day, January 17th, starting about noon. Finding no grass at Palm Springs, they continued to Vallecito; “a wet swampy valley, with willow bushes, bad rank grass and no fuel.” Wagons and mules continued to struggle in the sandy washes. “That this fifteen miles of very bad road was accomplished under the circumstances, by mules or men, is extraordinary. The men arrived here completely worn down; they staggered as they marched, as they did yesterday” (Cooke 1847).

Many of the men did not reach camp until the next morning. Like the Army of the West, the battalion rested here for a day and the men mended clothes and cleaned guns (Bigler 1847). Supplies were low and only eight wagons remained. Rest brought some relief and Cooke noted that “The men, who this morning were prostrate, worn out, hungry, heartless, have recovered their spirits to-night, and are singing and playing the fiddle” (Cooke 1847).

Continuing toward San Felipe on January 19th, the battalion crossed two major obstacles for the wagons. After the first four miles they came to the granite ridge of El Puerto Grade.⁶ Wheeler, the guide, reported to Colonel Cooke that he could see no way through and believed them to be “penned up.” The Colonel ordered him to find a crossing (Cooke 1847). “Ropes were fastened to the wagons, and every man that could get a hold pulled until all got over,” falling into the small valley of El Puerto on the other side (Bigler 1847). In a few more miles they turned and entered the wash of present day Box Canyon. Here the steep walled passage became too narrow for wagons to pass through. After a few yards the canyon opened again only to run against a steep ledge that blocked their way. A hill on the east side of the canyon had to be ascended to get around this obstacle. A “great rock” blocked the steep slope of this hill and, so, also had to be broken away before wagons could pass. The Mormons began to cut the rock away at both points with picks and axes. As the road crews worked, others lifted wagon boxes from their running gear and carried them through the narrow passage. They were then reassembled. The “great rock” proved to be less of an obstacle and was quickly removed. Colonel Cooke saw a wagon pulled “up the very steep hill,” where the “great rock” had been, “and down again into the canyon.” Finally enough stone had been chipped away from the narrow canyon walls that the last two wagons

were pulled through by mules, “with loads undisturbed” (Cooke 1847). They camped that night, once again, without wood and water (Bigler 1847).

The next day they continued northward. The wagons negotiated another steep narrow rocky pass, presently known as Foot and Walker Grade, with the aid of ropes. A “good descending road for seven miles led to San Phillippi (sic.)” and the still deserted Native American village. They camped by the flowing creek and killed two “beeves” for breakfast. The following day the battalion marched up San Felipe Valley for seven miles and camped. “Everything began to look like there was life in it. The mountains began to show timber and along the creeks the live oak was abundant” (Bigler 1847). On January 21 they marched another 10 miles and arrived at Warner’s Ranch.

GOLD RUSH MIGRATION – INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY AND RAILROAD SURVEYS

The Mexican War ended while the Mormon Battalion had been engaged in its desert crossing. On January 24, 1848, three days after the battalion reached Warner’s Ranch, gold was discovered at Sutter’s Mill in northern California, launching the California Gold Rush. Nine days later on February 2, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo transferred ownership of California, along with territory that included the present states of Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Colorado, and Utah, to the United States. The Mexican Republic had lost approximately one third of its territory to the forces of Manifest Destiny.

The discovery of gold dramatically changed the dynamics of overland travel along the Gila River and Sonora trails. Within a year 80,000 people had traveled to California from around the world (Greeley 1987:14). Thousands of gold rush emigrants from the U. S. and Mexico used the Gila River route. Mexicans were among the first to learn of the strike, receiving the news from passing ships. Exact numbers are difficult to estimate. Some sources claim that between six and ten thousand Sonorans from Mexico followed the route during 1849 and 1850. Traveling in family groups, many migrated to the Northern California gold fields each spring and returned to Sonora in the fall (Roske 1963:198-199; Beattie 1925; Kenny 1967). Another source says that more than 12,000 Argonauts followed the route in 1849 (Pourade 1963:142). Dr. A. L. Lincoln, who had established a ferry to cross the Colorado River at its junction with the Gila, claimed that in three months during 1850 he crossed more than 20,000 people (Roth 1981). This would have averaged over 200 a day.

Known as the “Gila Trail” or the “Southern Route,” the way to California through New Mexico and Arizona had various points of beginning. The road was fed by a number of trails, including those followed by Kearney and Cooke from the Missouri River, others originating in Texas at San Antonio and El Paso, and overland tracks out of central and northern Mexico. The various trails converged on the Gila River Valley, which funneled the emigrants into Yuma Crossing, where the Gila River joined the Colorado River (Ellis 1995a).

Crossing the Colorado Desert

Beginning in 1848, the Overland Trail between Warner’s Ranch and the Colorado River began to experience its most intense period of use, which would last for the next 15 years. The thousands of gold seekers on the route required constant protection and assistance. Military commands continually traveled between San Diego and the river, adding to the immense amount of traffic already on the road. The need for a military

presence in the region brought the permanent establishment of Fort Yuma, overlooking the junction of the Gila and Colorado rivers, in January 1852. In addition to military activity, this period also saw additional government expeditions. Detachments assigned to map the new boundary with Mexico, and explore probable railroad routes, followed the road. Finally in 1857, the Southern Route became part of the first transcontinental overland mail service.

Many emigrants, exhausted and out of supplies, left the main overland trail and headed west to San Diego, where they could get a ship to San Francisco or re-supply and head northward up the coast to rejoin the trail to the gold fields at Los Angeles. Between Carrizo Creek and Warner's Ranch were four distinct cutoffs to San Diego: one left the trail at Carrizo Creek, one at Oriflamme Canyon just north of El Puerto, one at San Felipe, and one at Warner's Ranch.

Andrew B. Gray, Official Surveyor of the United States Boundary Commission, pioneered the Carrizo cutoff, a trail for horses, mules, and pack trains, in the fall of 1849. The route followed Carrizo Wash to Carrizo Canyon, then up present-day Rockhouse Canyon, and across McCain Valley, through present-day Campo and Tecate, and down the Tijuana River Valley to San Diego. (Ellis 1995b; Gray 1849). This route was followed by H.M.T. Powell in November 1849 (Ellis 1995b:29-31; Bachman 1849; Powell 1849).

The Oriflamme cutoff followed Fages' original route up present-day Oriflamme Canyon, through Cuyamaca Valley, Green Valley and Descanso, then westward through present-day Viejas Valley and Alpine before descending to the bed of the San Diego River near current Lakeside (Ellis 1995b:31; Audubon 1849; Durivage 1849).

The trail from San Felipe headed west from the Native American village San Felipe and followed present-day Banner Canyon, reaching the top of the mountain near the current town of Julian. From here two trails led westward down the mountain to Santa Ysabel and joined the wagon road from Warner's Ranch (Ellis 1995b:29-31).

A trail from Warner's Ranch via Santa Ysabel and the San Pasqual Valley to San Diego had existed since Spanish missionaries discovered the San José valley in 1795. It became the only way to get wagons from the desert to San Diego. In September 1849 Lt. Cave J. Coats, commanding Company A of the First Dragoons, pioneered a road from Mission San Diego to Rancho Santa Maria, at present-day Ramona, which intersected the trail to Warner's Ranch and shortened the trip (Bibb 1995; Ellis 1995b:29). The San Pasqual Valley trail also became a wagon road and was later used by the overland stage (*San Francisco Herald* 11-25-1857).⁷

During the first year of the gold rush, travelers on the Gila trail consisted largely of people from Sonora and other regions in Mexico. In November 1848, a battalion of Army Dragoons, under the command of Major Lawrence P. Graham, en route from Chihuahua, Mexico to California, arrived at the Colorado River. Colonel Cave J. Coats' diary of the journey noted the large number of Mexican gold seekers on the road. On November 25, they met a small party "...going after their families in Sonora." A San Francisco newspaper carried by this group reported that gold dust, valued at \$16 an ounce, was the circulating medium in San Francisco. During the arduous desert crossing, not unlike those experienced by the Army of the West and the Mormons, Coats noted that "Persons, Mexicans from Sonora, are passing us daily on their way to the *abundancia*, the gold mines. This is all we hear, the Mines" (Coats 1848:12-10). Graham's battalion suffered substantially during the crossing, abandoning livestock and wagons. On December 1, with "the mules ... dropping

dead in harness, their tongues swelling up & etc., and the men nearly as bad off for water,” they reached the spring at Carrizo Creek. Here they rested for a day and, although “a little brackish, ... the men ... declared it the finest water they ever drank.” At Carrizo, they found a contractor sent to meet them with a herd of “40 odd beeves.” The Dragoons “had been on a single pound of flour for their rations for over two weeks and ... beef, beef, beef, flew through the camp like fire! A smile was on everyone’s countenance” (Couts 1848).

Graham’s battalion continued to Vallecito where they remained while detachments returned to bring in wagons and livestock that they had been forced to abandon between La Rajadura, now also known as Cooke’s Well, and Carrizo Creek. Coutts complained of snow, cold northerns, rain, “and no wood, with bad water, and horses and mules dying all around us” (Couts 1848).

The gold frenzy continued and began to create additional problems as all available supplies and personnel were diverted to northern California. Coutts ranted on December 17:

No corn, provisions scarce, men all deserting and going to the gold mines! Everybody crazy on the subject, rather hard for us to contemplate upon! Four fine companies, with nearly two hundred horses, all to be now lost! Men for gold, horses for want of forage! The mania that pervades the whole country, our camp included, is beyond all description or credibility. The whole state of Sonora is on the move, are passing us in gangs daily, and say they have not yet started. Naked and shirttailed Indians and Mexicans or Californians, go and return in 15 or 20 days with over a pound of pure gold each, per day, and say “they had bad luck and left.” In Los Angeles and San Diego a man in fitting out a party of 5 or 10 men for the mines has only to go to a merchant and borrow from one to two thousand dollars and give him an “order on the gold mines.” Nothing apparently sells for less than an ounce of gold. If the Government manages it properly, or luckily, it will be the richest nation on earth, if unluckily, California will prove an ulcer that will follow her to her long and unhappy home. [Couts 1848]

On December 21, a party passed that was led by two Americans traveling from Sonora, “with 60 Hiaqui Indians and Mexicans for the gold regions. The cry is ‘Still they come!’ ” (Couts 1848).

By the summer of 1849, thousands of Argonauts from the United States had joined the migration to California. As the weather grew warmer, throughout the spring and summer, the desert between the Colorado River and Carrizo Creek became a formidable barrier. Temperatures in the region breach 100 degrees Fahrenheit by the middle of June and by August highs above 115 are a daily occurrence. None were prepared for the hardship that awaited them. Many tried to cross at night but often lost their way after the moon set. Daytime crossings in the life threatening oppressive heat pushed all to the extremes and it is miraculous that no deaths are recorded. John E. Durivage, correspondent for the *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, described his passage between Cooke’s Well and Alamo Mocho on June 24, 1849:

The heat was intense.... By ten o’clock in the morning the rays of the sun poured down upon our devoted heads with the utmost intensity. The animals faltered and staggered in their tracks; one half of our little party were on foot; and the signs of the times around us were such as to alarm the most intrepid.

The scorching, seething sun provoked the most intolerable thirst, and none had that with which to allay it; those who had supplied themselves most liberally with water having exhausted their precious store. The dejected countenances, the unnatural brilliancy of the eye, and the inflamed veins in the face gave token to the sufferings of the men—of those on foot, especially. [Durivage 1849]

The following day, the crossing became even more difficult when “A hot and disagreeable wind” that had been blowing all day “became perfectly dreadful. Charged with the most intense heat, it came across the plain with the greatest violence, and it was with difficulty that the pedestrian could breast it . . .” It became “oppressive to breathe and move, and the strongest limbed staggered under its withering influence” (Durivage 1849).

As exhaustion, thirst, hunger, and disorientation overcame the emigrants, many became overwhelmed with desperation and panic. A number of Durivage’s companions grew frantic from thirst and fatigue. “There was many a quailing and sinking heart, . . . and many a fervent, silent prayer offered up to the Throne of Grace. . . . A young friend of mine told me that he felt he must give out, and begged me for God’s sake to bring him water if he did. The froth stood on his lips, and he could hardly articulate, while his blanched cheek denoted the dreadful thirst and exhaustion under which he was laboring” (Durivage 1849:6-24). Following three days behind, on June 27, the party of A. B. Clarke suffered equally from oppressive heat. They stopped in the afternoon, some in the shade of an abandoned wagon, others under a blanket hung from a creosote or mesquite, resuming the trail after sunset before the moon rose. In the darkness it became “difficult to keep the trail.” As fear and apprehension set in many began to cry out “in the most extravagant expressions, declaring that we had lost the way—should never find water—all perish & etc. Others said nothing, but jogged steadily on with a fixed determination to persevere” (Clarke 1849).

As with the Army of the West and the Mormons, the 49ers found the desert wells at La Rajadura—which they began to call Cooke’s Wells—Alamo Mocho, and El Pozo Hondo to be shallow holes in the sand that had to be continually re-excavated before a trickle of muddy water could be induced to flow. The “intolerable stench of dead animals” now permeated the air around these water holes, as livestock abandoned in the desert had returned to caved-in wells to die (Durivage 1849:6-24). The water at El Pozo Hondo was “a tincture of bluelick, iodides of sulfur, Epsom salts, and a strong decoction of decomposed mule flesh.” Although “detestable at any other time,” the dehydrated and exhausted Argonauts found it a “delectable compound. We were quite as greedy for it as our animals and it worked a most remarkable change on our spirits—sighs, gloomy looks, groans and lamentations were changed to laughter, jokes, and thanks giving” (Durivage 1849:6-25).

The march from Pozo Hondo to Carrizo Creek remained the most difficult of the horrible passage. Dead mules surrounded the spring at Carrizo. The cane and grass “was extremely scarce and very young,” having been grazed to the point of obliteration by groups passing earlier in the year. Durivage’s party reached the water at 9:30 a.m. on June 26. Several had fallen behind on the trail and “suffered much from thirst, and water was carried back to them in order to get them in” (Durivage 1849:6-26).

There is little doubt that the summer of 1849 should have been a historic disaster on the Colorado Desert. The fact that there were no recorded human deaths among those who made the 90-mile crossing between the Colorado River and Carrizo Creek in May and June

is unfathomable given the conditions. As the summer heat continued to increase through July, August, and September there certainly would have been a dreadful human toll had not the environment changed radically west of Alamo Mocho.

The winter of 1848-1849 was exceptionally wet throughout the west (Couts 1849). Heavy winter snows in the Rocky Mountains caused an unusually high flood stage on the Colorado River that summer, causing it to overflow its banks on the delta. The excess water followed the course of the New River northward into present-day Imperial Valley. The desert, for more than 20 miles west of Alamo Mocho, was transformed into an oasis, with a running stream, lakes, and grassy pastures (Ellis 1995a:25).

This occurrence was not unknown. Colorado River overflow had occasionally run through these channels in the past, although the recent arrivals in the country from the United States had been unaware of it. When the Army of the West reached Alamo Mocho in 1846, captured Mexican horse traders claimed that they had previously found running water a few miles to the west (Emory 1848). Although it could not be relocated, the Mexicans had seen the flowing stream, indicating it had probably run within the previous year. Native American informants, interviewed in 1849, claimed that water had run in the New River channel for many years prior to 1829 (Ellis 1995a:25). Lt. Coutts noted that “The Indians about speak of it as an old thing, and are much astonished at our wonder” (Couts 1849).

In 1849, the phenomenon appears to have occurred on June 29. When the party of A. B. Clarke passed through, they left Alamo Mocho on the 28th, and reached El Pozo Hondo on the morning of the 29th, where they watered their livestock and continued toward Carrizo Creek, arriving at noon the following day. They did not encounter any streams or ponds of water between Alamo Mocho and Carrizo Creek. An anonymous diarist traveling behind Clarke’s group left Cooke’s Well on the morning of the 29th and arrived at Alamo Mocho in the afternoon. They left at 5 p.m. and journeyed 22 miles to “a large and beautiful lake of water, and encamped on the east side of it in a pleasant grove of mesquite trees.” A small river flowed northward out of the lake. The next morning this group of emigrants followed the stream for 15 miles and then crossed at a point where they found it to be “about 30 feet wide” and swimming depth (Anonymous 1849 in Ellis 1995a:26). Others, who may have encountered the stream further to the northwest when it first appeared, found the original flow to be quite formidable. Major Heintzelman, in San Diego, recorded in his diary on July 18th that “Some men just in from the Gila” told “of a river which has sprung up in the middle of the desert. It is 150 yards wide and breast deep, with a rapid current. It had not yet reached the road when the first party saw it, but the next were detained four days and had to build a raft to cross” (White 1975). Word had first reached San Diego around July 4th. Claims from overland emigrants of a flowing river and a series of lakes where none had previously existed were, at first, met with skepticism, until later arrivals continued to confirm the reports (Emory letter of August 20, 1849 quoted in Ellis 1995a:25).

The New River provided both water and grazing. Fields of “buffalo grass” sprang up along its banks and around the edges of ponds, and lakes formed along its course. A variety of ducks and other migratory water fowl began to inhabit these wetlands (Couts 1849). Three main camping spots evolved (Marcy 1859). The first at Little Lake (Laguna), lay 16 miles beyond Alamo Mocho, where the Army established a station called Government Camp. Next came New River, four miles beyond. Here many groups stopped to rest and let their animals graze (Marcy 1859). The location became known as Emigrant Camp, which