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The Chihuahua Highway

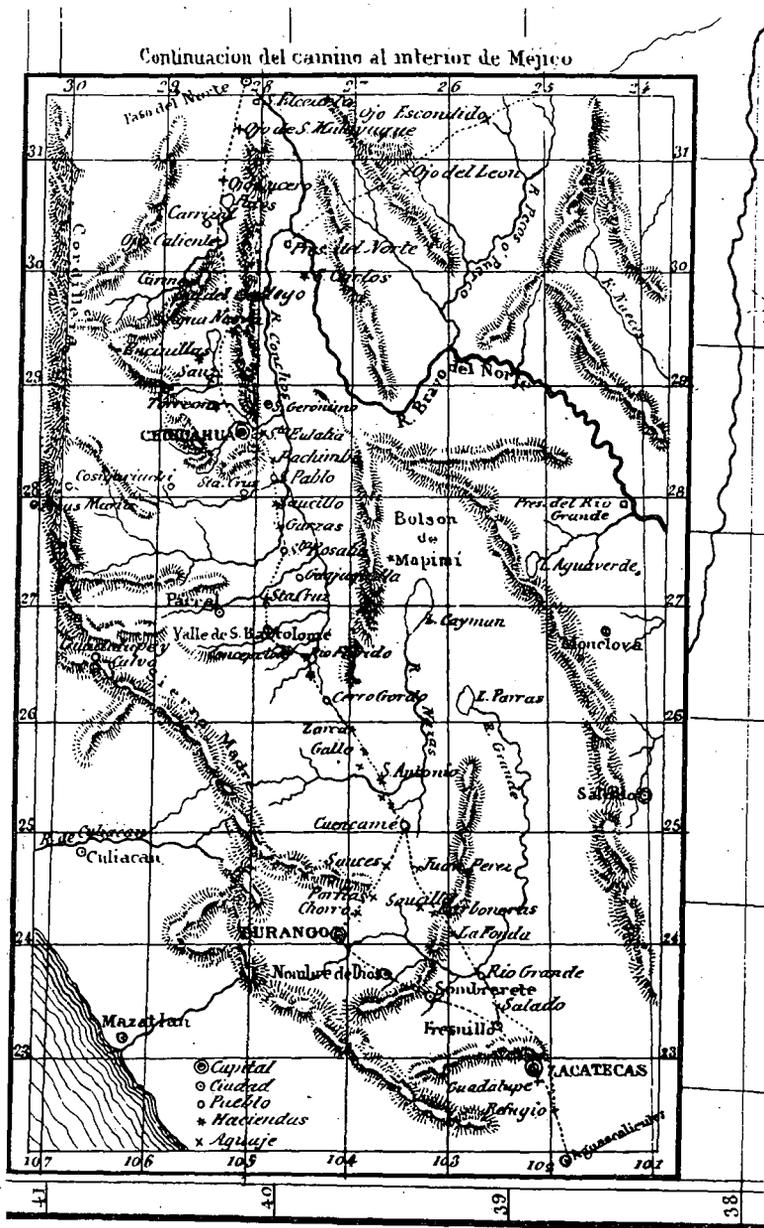
Lansing B. Bloom

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THE CHIHUAHUA TRAIL IN 1849
(from Escudero, Pino: Noticias historicas)

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THE CHIHUAHUA HIGHWAY

By LANSING B. BLOOM

OLD MEXICO, in its geographical configuration, has very aptly been likened to a cornucopia with its opening to the United States. Even before the Pan-American highway from Laredo to Mexico City was officially opened, autoists from the United States were pouring into that country and (to mix our metaphor) Mexico is now rejoicing in the rich harvest which she is reaping. During the present season it is estimated that at least 45,000 automobiles will cross at Laredo, carrying 140,000 passengers. The reader may make his own estimate of how many millions of dollars they will spend; we will venture to put \$10,000,000 as the minimum figure.

Back in 1930 when silver pesos were current and exchange was (as today) at 3.60, we rashly cashed a \$100 check in Mexico City and were dismayed at the tray of pesos which was shoved through the window. As a result, we left the bank with coat pockets sagging and using both hands to support our trouser pockets. Fortunately *libres* (taxis) are ubiquitous, so it was possible to rush back to the hotel and unload. One who likes to think himself an optimist must confess that, on occasions, the pessimist who wears suspenders as well as a belt has decidedly the advantage. If the reader doubts it, let him—just once—load up with 360 silver dollars.

On subsequent visits our friends below the border have had an ample supply of paper currency, and this greatly

facilitates the spending process. The 3.60 exchange gives to the "*norteamericano*" an exhilarated feeling, and the rapid disbursement, while disconcerting at first, produces an insidious pleasure. This psychological reaction is only a minor factor, but a very important one, in the recent phenomenal growth of *turismo* in Mexico.

It is not generally known that the Pan-American highway is only one phase of a very comprehensive road-building program which Mexico has had under way for some years past. That program contemplates a similar highway up the west coast, and still another through the central plateau region from Mexico City to Juárez, opposite El Paso, Texas. It is the last of these great national highways which has been brought most recently to our attention.

Upon invitation from Governor Gustavo L. Talamantes of Chihuahua, a highway conference was held in Chihuahua City on May 15 which was attended by governors, or their representatives, from all the Mexican states interested and also from Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. West Texas and the Mesilla Valley were especially well represented—registration showed forty-seven Texans, twenty-two from New Mexico, and several from Arizona. Most of these from north of the border arrived on the special train provided, but at least four groups made the six-hour run by automobile.

During the forenoon, more than 250 officials, representatives, and delegates gathered in the Red Room of the Palace to be received and registered. At noon they proceeded across the plaza to the auditorium of the State Institute where the general session continued until 2 o'clock. Governor Talamantes, presiding, welcomed the members of the conference and, after a considerable number of introductions had been made, he briefly outlined the purpose of the gathering and invited the active coöperation of all those interested.

From statements made by Governor Talamantes, by Colonel Calderón R., governor of Durango, and by representatives from Guanajuato, Querétaro, the State of Mexico,

Hidalgo, and Zacatecas, it appeared that a large part of the preliminary road work was already done; that the federal government of Mexico would aid the various states on the basis of 50-50 in completing their respective sectors; that the necessary funds could be secured from a bank in Washington, provided the money was expended in the United States for supplies and equipment; and that agents of several construction companies were on hand to make bids. Discussion of ways and means was to be taken up in a later executive session.

The theme most stressed by all the speakers in the Chihuahua conference was the great economic benefits which it would bring locally to all the Mexican states interested and, as Governor Talamantes pointed out, it would connect at Juárez with the national highways of the United States. It was the privilege of the New Mexico delegation to call attention to another aspect of the project, namely, the historical features of the proposed highway.

The writer will heartily agree with anyone who becomes enthusiastic over the magnificent scenic grandeur of the Pan-American highway, especially on the stretch where it sweeps southward from Monterey to Victoria in the shadow of the eastern cordillera, or again where it winds up through the mountains from Tamazunchale to Jacala; but what of historical interest has that route to compare with the old cities and mining camps which will be made accessible to autoists by the central Mexico route? Moreover, the new highway is merely the revamping of one of the oldest roads in all North America which did not extend simply from Mexico City to Paso del Norte (now Juárez) but continued on northward to Santa Fé.

Eight years ago, while Dick Dillon was governor, the New Mexico state highway commission issued a finely illustrated booklet with the happy title, "Roads to Cíbola." U. S. Highway 85 was therein described as "America's oldest road" (meaning within the United States), and there are good historic reasons for such a claim.

Florida was colonized somewhat earlier than New Mexico, but her connection with the outside world was by water. New Mexico, on the other hand, was a Spanish province before any of the original Thirteen Colonies were founded, and her only connection with the outer world was by a road 1600 miles long from Mexico City. This road, therefore, was in use earlier than the old Boston Post Road, or the Genesee Trail of New York, or the old Wilderness Road through the Cumberland Gap.

Nor in the early Spanish penetration of our Southwest does any highway have greater age than that from Chihuahua north. The old San Antonio Road of Texas cannot claim an earlier date than 1690, while the famous Camino Real of the California missions did not begin until 1769. It is true that the Coronado expedition came from Culiacán north through eastern Arizona in 1540, but the Arizona sector of that trail did not develop into an established route. From Zuñi east to the Rio Grande valley the Coronado expedition followed the old Indian trail by way of Inscription Rock, and this trail was later used by the Rodríguez-Chamuscado and the Beltrán-Espejo parties; but no wheeled vehicles went that way until the time of Governor Silva Nieto in 1629. Much later, of course, were the Oregon Trail from the Mississippi valley to the Northwest, and the Santa Fé Trail from Missouri to New Mexico.

The old highway north through the central plateau of Mexico may be said to have begun with the discovery of the rich silver mines of Zacatecas in 1548. The famous four discoverers of that city came from the Culiacán region to the west, but direct connection with Mexico City was immediately established. With the opening of one rich mining camp after another, the road advanced northward until in 1567 it had reached Santa Bárbara—where today the enormous tailings of the old Spanish mines are being reworked profitably. In 1820 the mines of Santa Bárbara alone kept 700 *tahonas* busy in the crushing of ore.¹

1. José G. Rocha, *Parral, 1631-1933*, pp. 19, 23. In Twitchell, *Leading Facts of N. Mex. Hist.*, II, 89, is illustrated a Mexican *arrastre*. The older Spanish type (*tahona*) had a single large stone drum, rotated in the same way by animal power. In 1907 the writer saw one in Fresnillo—doubtless it is still there.

Here on the various headwaters of the Conchas river the Spanish frontier paused for a few years. But native labor was greatly in demand for the working of the numerous mines which had been discovered and opened from Zacatecas to Santa Bárbara, and, despite royal orders to the contrary, slave-hunting was persistently carried on by raids among natives beyond the frontier. Professedly engaged in fighting "hostile" Indians, parties sought their victims far down the Conchas river to the northeast, and it was these raiding parties which brought back rumors of large native "towns" somewhere on to the north. Spanish imagination was fired with the vision of another "Mexico," with wealth to rival that of the Aztec world which Cortés had found.

Not all the white men on that old frontier were seeking merely gold or slaves. Credit for extending the highway north into our state of New Mexico belongs to a missionary, a humble lay-brother of the Franciscan Order, Fray Agustín Rodríguez. The year 1580 found him at Santa Bárbara, where he heard the tales of northern "town" Indians; to him it seemed a wonderful opportunity to carry the Christian faith to an entirely new region. Permission for such an enterprise was necessary, so he made the long journey back to Mexico City. Returning to Santa Bárbara, he organized a small party consisting of two companion missionaries and a few soldiers under Captain Chamuscado. In June, 1581, they set forth and after following down the Conchas to its mouth turned northwest and ascended the "Great River from the North." So far as we know, Fray Agustín was the first white man who traveled this long trail all the way from Mexico City north through "the Pass" and on into the heart of the Pueblo Indian country.

Curiously enough, the first wheeled vehicles which followed this road were headed south instead of north. Off to the east lay the recently created frontier province of Nuevo León, of which, in 1590, Gaspar Castaño de Sosa was acting governor. Drawn by the lure of the Northern Mystery, he and his colonists at Almadén picked up, bag and baggage,

and set forth; but instead of keeping along the Rio Grande they turned north along the Pecos river. Reports which reached Mexico city that Castaño was a rebel and was planning to set himself up as an independent ruler caused the sending of Captain Juan de Morlete with fifty soldiers for his arrest, and as a result Castaño and his colonists were brought back down the Rio Grande. The point of interest is that they had a number of the primitive two-wheeled ox-carts with them—the first ever seen in New Mexico.

The next carts which used the trail were the eighty-three brought by Governor Juan de Oñate and his colonists in 1598. After that date they were a sight of common occurrence because of the caravans which came north from Mexico City every three years, loaded with supplies and equipment needed by the missionaries and colonists. South-bound, the carts were loaded with salt, sacks of piñon nuts, bales of buffalo hides and deerskins, and great bundles of woolen stuffs manufactured by native labor. Such consignments were shipped south to agents in Parral (founded in 1631) and later to Chihuahua; to Durango, Zacatecas, and even to Mexico City. From its founding in 1610, Santa Fé became the northern terminal of this *camino real* and the distributing point for the province of New Mexico.

This earliest Santa Fé trail was the life artery for the whole region, its only line of communication with *la tierra afuera*, the outer world. Occasionally during the eighteenth century a small party of French trappers found their way across the eastern plains into Santa Fé, but with few exceptions, they were not allowed to go back; usually they were sent south for examination. At times also, especially toward the end of Spanish rule, there were efforts to connect Santa Fé by trail with other parts of the northern frontier—with Texas, Sonora, and even with California—but these attempts had little practical result. From 1581 to 1821 the Chihuahua Trail, as it came to be known, was the line of travel for missionaries, officials, and traders.

The importance of the Chihuahua Trail even after 1821 has been forgotten. Students of Southwestern history well know the phenomenal trade which developed across the plains between Missouri and Santa Fé, but do we remember that Mexican merchants and traders controlled a very important part of that business, and that American traders like Josiah Gregg and the Magoffin brothers extended their activities as far south as Chihuahua, Durango, and even Zacatecas? Of the goods to an estimated value of \$450,000 which crossed the plains to Santa Fé in 1843, *two-thirds* were carried on to the southern markets. The accompanying map shows the places between Paso del Norte (Juárez) and Zacatecas still being served by this old trade route in 1849. The larger folding map of which it is an inset shows the Santa Fé Trail from Independence, Missouri, and south to the border, and was published in the Escudero edition of *Pino: Noticias históricas y estadísticas de la antigua provincia del Nuevo-México* (Mexico, 1849).

The old highway fell into disuse, of course, except locally after the establishing of telegraphic communication and the building of the Mexican Central Railway. Through the influence of automobile travel it has now been revived as part of the great national system of highways in the Republic of Mexico and it ties up at El Paso with U. S. Highway 85. The hope was expressed at the Chihuahua conference that it may be completed and open in good time for the Cuarto-Centennial to which New Mexico is looking forward in 1940.

Doubtless great numbers of the *norteamericanos* who visit Mexico will welcome the chance to add central Mexico to their itinerary. Many, of course, will rush along with an eye only for the scenic grandeur along the highway, but those who travel more leisurely with thoughts of the long past centuries will find many a historic shrine. The very mountain ranges on which they gaze were landmarks of the first Spanish explorers and of the countless travelers who followed them along this trail.

Indeed, the modern tourist may catch again the old, old vision of the Northern Mystery, the land of the Pueblo Indians, of the Seven Cities of Cibola and the Quivira country; in Santa Fé de Nuevo Mexico he will find the end, or the beginning, of this ancient highway. This may be true also of many of our Mexican neighbors who will follow the example of Sr. José G. Rocha, editor of *El Correo de Parral*. Two years ago, he became so deeply interested in old New Mexico records which he found in the public archives of Parral that he made a pilgrimage to Santa Fé. Others, as he did, may find it the realizing of a dream.²

Culture knows no international boundary, and it was a happy recognition of this fact that Governor Talamante's should invite representatives from north of the Rio Grande to his highway conference in Chihuahua City. There is truth in the old Spanish saying that "Tomorrow is the flower of its yesterdays," for underlying a century of Anglo-American influences are three long centuries when Spain was dominant and a still longer development of native life—New Mexico of today has three lines of heritage which in large part is common with that of Old Mexico. The cultural fabric woven by the shuttle of time cannot be severed arbitrarily by a political frontier. The Chihuahua Highway may well be regarded as symbolic of this historic unity.

2. See below, poem by Sr. Rocha.