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MANCO BURRO PASS: NEW MEXICO OR COLORADO?

JOSEPH L. CRAMER

JANET LECOMPTE's fine article on the Manco Burro Pass Massacre of 1848, the only modern account of this episode,¹ raises a question as to the location of Manco Burro Pass and early routes through the basalt-capped drainage divide along the Colorado-New Mexico line. This high divide, which separates the southern tributaries of the Arkansas River on the plains of southeastern Colorado from the northern tributaries of the Canadian River on the plains of northeastern New Mexico, has been responsible for a significant interruption to the flow of travel in both prehistoric and historic times. Archaeological investigations now in progress will undoubtedly clarify its influence on the migration and subsequent settlement patterns of aboriginal populations.²

During historic times travel over Raton Pass along the Mountain Branch (the Bent's Fort cutoff) of the Santa Fe Trail has been well documented. There is fairly easy access over the divide at the head of Raton Creek, a tributary of the Purgatoire River in Colorado, thence over Raton Pass on the Colorado-New Mexico line at an elevation of 7,834 feet, and southward down New Mexico's Raton Creek (originally known as Willow Creek), a northern tributary of Chicorica Creek.

The first break in the divide to the east of Raton Pass is San Francisco Pass, located in Colorado approximately eight miles to

the east-northeast, and about two and a half miles north of the Colorado state line.³ The altitude of this high, narrow notch is approximately 8,250 feet (over 400 feet higher than Raton Pass) at the head of San Francisco Creek. The southern approach is by way of the main channel of Chicorica Creek, making a rather gentle grade to the crest. The northern approach along San Francisco Creek is very difficult owing to a steep grade through a growth of scrub oak and scattered pine trees. Even today a vehicle equipped with four-wheel drive is necessary, and we can safely assume that in the middle 1800's access to the pass would have required considerable brush removal and road making before any wagon could have reached the crest.

Mrs. Lecompte identified Manco Burro Pass with San Francisco Pass. On the basis of her source material, which contains certain ambiguities, this was a logical deduction; however, the legal proceedings over the determination of Maxwell Land Grant boundaries contain data which definitely place Manco Burro Pass in the next break in the divide to the southeast.⁴ This location is in New Mexico, approximately eight and a half miles southeast of San Francisco Pass.⁵

Access to this pass from the north is by way of Rathbun Creek, a small branch of San Isidro Creek which is a southern tributary of the Purgatoire River. The crest of the pass is at an elevation of approximately 7,875 feet (less than 50 feet higher than Raton Pass and more than 350 feet lower than San Francisco Pass). The route then goes west and southwest by way of the east fork of Chicorica Creek to the main fork, and then south and southwest to the Canadian River. The approaches from either side are easy, and it is unlikely that much clearing would have been necessary for the passage of wagons, even in early days. In short, San Francisco Pass is a difficult route even today, while Manco Burro Pass has always provided an easy way over the divide. Therefore, there is little likelihood that the Manco Burro Pass Massacre of June 19, 1848, occurred in present day Colorado, but rather in Colfax County, New Mexico, on the upper reaches of the east fork of Chicorica Creek, near the crest of the pass.

Pertinent data from the Maxwell Land Grant testimony which specifically fix the location of Manco Burro Pass at the head of the east fork of Chicorica Creek rather than at the head of the main (west) fork follow:

TESTIMONY OF FAUSTÍN JARMILLA, TRINIDAD, COLORADO, OCTOBER 30, 1883:

Jarmilla stated that the name "Ahogadera Creek" made its appearance about 1848 or 1849, and that this creek became known as San Francisco Creek at a later date. "They did not travel *this trail* (i.e., the San Francisco drainage), but through Raton or down through the Manco de la Burro Pass."

TESTIMONY OF RICHARD [RICHENS] L. WOOTTON, JR., TRINIDAD, COLORADO, NOVEMBER 1, 1883:

Wootton stated that San Francisco Creek and Sugarite Creek (old name for Chicorica Creek) head exactly opposite one another. He also stated that there was another break at the common headwaters of Manco de la Burro Creek (old name for San Isidro Creek), Uña de Gato Creek, and a *branch* of Sugarite Creek (i.e., the east fork of Chicorica Creek). He was then specifically asked: "What branch of the Chicorica, or Sugarite [*sic*] as you call it, is the one that comes through the Manco de la Burro Pass?" His answer was: "That is *not* the main one. The *Main* branch of the Sugarite heads right opposite the main branch of the San Francisco."

TESTIMONY OF CALVIN JONES, TRINIDAD, COLORADO, NOVEMBER 26, 1883:

Q. "What is the Mesa called that lies immediately south of Manco de la Burro Pass?"

A. "This Mesa here, east of here by the Uña de Gato Mesa" (pointing on the map to the Mesa south of Manco de la Burro Pass at the head of Uña de Gato Creek).

Q. "Where does the Manco de la Burro Mesa lie?"

A. "It lies south of the Manco de la Burro Pass. . . . The Uña de Gato Mesa and the Manco de la Burro Mesa lie together. The Uña de Gato (Cr.) heads on one side of the Mesa and the Manco de la Burro (Cr.) on the other."

Q. "Point out on the map, exhibit No. 22, the Manco de la Burro Mesa."

A. "He points to that part of the Mesa lying immediately south of San Yocidro Cr. (San Isidro Cr.) and the Manco de la Burro Pass."⁸

NOTES

1. Janet Lecompte, "The Manco Burro Pass Massacre," NMHR, vol. 41 (1966), pp. 305-18.
2. Galen R. Baker, "The Archeology of the Park Plateau in South-eastern Colorado," *Southwestern Lore*, vol. 30 (1964), pp. 1-18; Fred Wendorf, "The Archaeology of Northeastern New Mexico," *El Palacio*, vol. 67 (1960), pp. 55-65.
3. NW/4 Sec. 33-34S-62W, Las Animas County, Colorado.
4. *U.S. vs. The Maxwell Land Grant Company, et al.* Supreme Court of the U.S., Oct. Term, 1886, No. 974. Transcript.
5. The United States Geological Survey 15-Minute Topographic Quadrangle titled "Raton," dated 1912, clearly shows the position of Manco Burro Pass in the SW/C Sec. 3-31N-25E, Colfax County, N.M., and so labels it. This topographic map is made on a scale of 1:62500 and is excellent as a reference to the various drainages and topographic features referenced above. Data from such topographic maps are compiled from Government geographic information and collected from local inhabitants living in the area during the time of compilation and survey. This particular map furnishes good evidence that the local people in the early 1900's still considered Manco Burro Pass to be located at the designated spot. The San Francisco Pass region in Colorado is shown on United States Geological Survey 30-Minute Topographic Quadrangle titled "El Moro" and dated 1897.
6. The initial confusion created by Mr. Jones' first statements concerning the identity and location of Manco Burro Mesa and Uña de Gato Mesa arises from the fact that these two names apply to the *same* mesa. Manco Burro Creek (today's San Isidro Creek) heads against the north face of the mesa and Uña de Gato Creek heads against the east face. This mesa is now known as Johnson Mesa.