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THE BRAZITO BATTLEFIELD

By ANDREW ARMSTRONG*

IN early December of 1846, Colonel A. W. Doniphan, acting under orders of General S. W. Kearny, began concentrating a small force at Valverde, twenty-six miles below the present town of Socorro, New Mexico, on the Rio Grande. From there he was to march south about four hundred miles to meet and reinforce General Wool at Chihuahua.

Hearing that a Mexican force was coming north to oppose any American invasion through El Paso del Norte, Doniphan left Valverde without waiting for artillery or additional troops. He began his southward advance in three sections on the fourteenth, sixteenth and eighteenth of December, with a total of 856 effective fighting men.

Below Valverde, Doniphan left the river, which there takes a wide swing toward the west through mountains at that time holding the constant threat of Indian attack. Since the earliest Spanish traffic from Santa Fe to Chihuahua, it had proved expedient to march straight across a stretch of waterless desert and rejoin the river a hundred miles below. This timeworn shortcut had long been known as the Jornada del Muerto, or Journey of the Dead Man because of its lack either of waterholes or of natural shelter from the unshaded heat of summer and the hurricane cold of winter. Accounts of Doniphan's time and earlier mention no settlements between Valverde, at the northern end of this stretch, and Doña Ana, where the trail rejoined the river. Place names marked only camp sites established by two hundred years of steady traffic over the Jornada.

Doniphan planned to concentrate his sections at Doña Ana. There Major Gilpin's detachment caught up with Doniphan and the main body on December 23rd. Doniphan waited no longer for Major Clark and the third section, but started southward again at the head of less than 500 men, still without artillery.

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Now marching close to the Rio Grande, he made one camp on Christmas Eve and another toward noon on Christmas Day. This second camp was pitched where the river, after swinging eastward across the flat valley, divided for a short distance to leave a small island. The east branch had come to be known as the Little Arm, or Brazito.

In the next few hours the Americans ate, rested, and scattered for wood and water. They noticed Mexican scouts, apparently from El Paso on the river below the pass to the south, but paid them little attention. Suddenly, around three o'clock, a troop of Mexican cavalry outlined itself on a rise half a mile off.

Doniphan had been playing three-trick loo with his officers. He threw down his cards and called his men to arms. Forming hastily, they waited until the attacking Mexicans came to point-blank range, then hit them with such accurate fire that they broke and retreated in disorder by several routes back toward El Paso.

Doniphan's loss amounted to seven men slightly wounded; that of the Mexicans to a howitzer captured and perhaps a hundred men killed or wounded; and this farcical brush, lasting thirty or forty minutes in all, has figured in American annals as the battle of Brazito.¹

Where, specifically, did the battle of Brazito occur?

Its sole monument is the state historical marker on Highway 80, at Brazito Schoolhouse, six and four-tenths miles southeast of Mesilla Park. This sign gives only a general indication that the event happened somewhere in the neighborhood. As one looks across the broad valley, he confronts a vast emptiness that could have contained a hundred battles of Brazito's size.

In attempting to locate the site today, we find it obscured not only by the enormous landscape of the Mesilla Valley but by the changes of the intervening century, and further by the confusion of data among the journals of the participants. Despite the seeming permanence of mountains and mesa, the

1. Justin Smith, *The war with Mexico*, I., 302.

country is not as it was in Doniphan's time. The region was greener then. Occasional wooded areas are noted throughout the journey in the diaries of several of his men,² whereas today the mesas are but thinly scattered with greasewood and mesquite. Whatever cottonwoods spot the view are of recent growth, along the edges of irrigated fields.

The river no longer forms the Little Arm by which Doniphan and his soldiers identified the site. Its course moved out into the valley in the floods of 1862 and 1865, and now runs two to three miles farther west.³ The only map of the battle itself, crudely drawn without scale by one of the participants, shows the Little Arm; but it means little when one tries to match it with the traditional site today.⁴

When measuring distances given in accounts of Brazito, the historian can go astray on the place names of Doniphan's time against those of the present. Not only does the adjacent valley contain towns not yet founded in those days; locations that then existed have taken new names.⁵ Some older names designated uninhabited locations.

On maps of this country, many names will be found where, in truth, there is not a house . . . because the places are regular camping grounds for caravans.⁶

Even if the time-wrought differences in the neighborhood were clear, Brazito's story presents additional difficulties in the writings of the men who fought there. The two official reports of the battle, by Colonel Doniphan⁷ and the Mexican commander, Antonio Ponce De Leon,⁸ are not specific on the

2. E.g., Marcellus Edwards, *Journal*, 224; Hughes, *Diary*, entry for December 22, 1846.

3. P. M. Baldwin, *A short history of the Mesilla Valley*. *New Mexico Historical Review*, v. III, no. 3 (July, 1938), p. 319.

4. Accompanying battle map from Frank S. Edwards, *A campaign in New Mexico with Colonel Doniphan*, p. 91.

5. The largest town in the immediate area, Las Cruces, was not founded until 1850. El Paso Del Norte was the name for the present plaza and adjacent streets of Juarez, Chihuahua.

6. F. Edwards, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

7. *Doniphan to Jones*, March 4, 1847: Senate Exec. Doc. no. 1, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., pp. 497-502.

8. *De Leon to Vidal*, reprinted and translated in *New Mexico Historical Review*, v. III, no. 4 (October, 1928), pp. 381-389.

location. Doniphan records no distances after leaving Doña Ana. De Leon refers only broadly to a place, Temascalitos, north of the town he knew as El Paso Del Norte,⁹ but he does not place the battle in relation to that general area.

According to Conkling, Los Temascalitos is the name given by old inhabitants to a hill two miles northeast of the present town of Vado, because of its resemblance to a group of primitive oven-shaped Indian sweat-bath houses, known as Temascales.¹⁰ It also is known locally as Three Buttes, and is marked on modern maps as Vado Hill.¹¹

If it is assumed that De Leon located the battle for his superior officer by referring to this perennial landmark, the battle site of Brazito is related to three localities still existent along the Rio Grande: Doña Ana to the north, the old plaza of Juarez to the south, and Vado Hill between. Seven of Doniphan's men, marching in the various detachments, recorded mileage from Doña Ana south to a camp site between that village and the battle ground. George Gibson, a lieutenant, and Jacob Robinson and William Richardson, both privates, say they went twelve miles to Dead Man's Camp.¹² Another private, Frank Edwards, says ten miles.¹³ Marcellus Edwards, also a private and no relation to Frank, says thirteen.¹⁴ John Hughes says fifteen in his diary published in 1847,¹⁵ and twelve in the reprint a year later.¹⁶ Major Gilpin sets the distance highest of all, at eighteen.¹⁷

These differences may arise from the movements of the

9. See note 5.

10. Short of the *Archiva de Guerra* in Mexico City, no Mexican maps of the time seem to be available. The Bancroft Library at Berkeley and the University of Texas Library at Austin, both of which might be expected to possess such maps, report they do not.

11. Roscoe B. Conkling, *The Butterfield Overland Mail*, v. II p. 95.

12. George Rutledge Gibson, *Journal of a soldier under Kearny and Doniphan, 1846-1847*; December 24, 1846 entry. Jacob S. Robinson, *A Journal of the Santa Fe Expedition under Colonel Doniphan*, entry for same date. William H. Richardson, *Journal*, entry for same date.

13. F. Edwards, *op. cit.*, December 24, 1846 entry.

14. Marcellus Edwards, *op. cit.*, pp. 227-228.

15. Hughes, *op. cit.*, December 24, 1846 entry.

16. Hughes, reprint cited in *Doniphan's Expedition*, by Wm. E. Connelly, December 24th, 1846 entry.

17. Connelly's Appendix B, *op. cit.*, p. 595, containing Major Gilpin's speech at Jefferson City, Mo., August 10, 1847.

various detachments, which were not cohesive in the modern military sense. Men straggled along the line of march in groups of less than company strength. Ruxton had met them earlier, above Socorro, and notes that five hundred men were strung out over a hundred miles of road.¹⁸ This haphazard progress may account for the lack of agreement in mileages recorded, since not all of these men camped together at night after the same distance covered on any particular day. However, among these seven men, we find three agreeing on a twelve mile distance from Doña Ana to the next night's stopping place. A fourth says it was two miles shorter. A fifth says it was one mile more. A sixth says it was three miles more. A seventh says it was five miles more.

From Dead Man's Camp to the Brazito, two of the seven diarists drop out, recording no mileage for the day.¹⁹ Each of the remaining five gives a different distance. Marcellus Edwards calls it twelve miles.²⁰ Lieutenant Gibson calls it fourteen.²¹ Frank Edwards says fifteen.²² John Hughes says eighteen.²³ Major Gilpin, highest again, says nineteen.²⁴

If we were to accept the figures of the highest ranking officer, Gilpin, on the assumption that he is the best qualified judge of distance travelled, we would get a total of thirty-seven miles from Doña Ana to the battle site. This would place Brazito eighteen miles south of De Leon's Temascalitos and make his designation of the battle area an unreasonable choice, since he had other landmarks farther south to place it better for his superiors.²⁵ This same consideration tends to throw doubt on John Hughes' original reckoning, since his total for the two days' march is thirty-three miles, only four miles closer to Temascalitos, or Vado Hill, and still fifteen miles south of it. In the reprint of his diary, his total of thirty

18. George F. Ruxton, *Adventures in Mexico*, p. 184.

19. Jacob Robinson and William Richardson.

20. *Op. cit.*, p. 224.

21. *Op. cit.*, December 25th entry.

22. *Op. cit.*, December 25th entry.

23. *Diary*, December 25th entry.

24. See Connelly's Appendix B.

25. For example, he could have referred to the Pass, where the river enters a narrow gorge between mountains, much closer to Gilpin's location than the hill.

miles would put him farther north, within eleven miles of the hill, but even this is not close enough to fall within the area for which the hill might be considered a landmark.

Lieutenant Gibson's total for the two days is twenty-six miles from Doña Ana to the battle ground. This is one mile more than the totals of Frank and Marcellus Edwards. In these three accounts we find a close pattern of locations roughly five miles south of Vado Hill. If De Leon encountered Doniphan's men in this area, he might reasonably feel, in relation to the surrounding terrain, that he had reached the neighborhood known as Temascalitos.

This handful of participating reporters—the two commanders, Doniphan and De Leon; the officers, Gilpin and Gibson; the men in the ranks, Hughes, Richardson, Robinson and the two Edwardses—are the only on-the-spot sources that have come to light. Their stories occur, sometimes anonymously, sometimes in citation, sometimes in paraphrase, in all the secondary sources analyzed.

Six years after the battle, Bartlett says he camped on the Brazito site while surveying the international boundary.²⁶ However, judging by his context for this remark, he does not locate Brazito with any exactitude.

About the same time, we find a young soldier stationed at Fort Fillmore noting his impression that the fort stood on the same ground as Brazito, but apparently he bases this on hearsay, a local legend of a fairly recent event.^{26-a}

Other than the historical marker on Highway 80, opposite the Brazito school building, and a reference in the WPA travel guide, Conkling seems to satisfy local residents as an authority for locating the battle ground today. His distances and directions are specific, pointing straight to an area beginning little more than a mile northwest of Vado Hill, although it is so dominated by the hill that its omission in Edwards' battle plan is inexplicable. Conkling asserts that relics have been recovered, but cites no finders.²⁷ No authenticated relics are on view in museums where objects of such

26. John Russell Bartlett, *Personal Narrative*, v. II, p. 394.

26A. Citation mislaid.

27. *Op cit.*, v. II, p. 97.

interest in local history would be expected, either in Las Cruces, only eight miles from the highway marker for the supposed site, or in El Paso. If local people possess relics of Brazito, no expert seems to have examined them for their location in time, in a region known for relics of all other periods from the Pre-Columbian through the Civil War to today.²⁸

If we ignore Conkling's reference to relics and weigh his opinion solely against the mileage entries in the diaries of the soldiers, we must assume that he worked with uncited primary material that disagrees overwhelmingly with the facts as Doniphan's men saw them. The general location these men indicate is southeast of Vado Hill, while Conkling's—and the historical marker's, and the WPA's—is northwest of it. Moreover, the pattern of reckonings from the separate diaries places the soldiers' battle site at least seven miles away from Conkling's, and even farther from the marker.

Although two writers mention Brazito *before* the battle happened, they invite consideration because they are closer to it in time than those who have written of Brazito since.

Ruxton went north along the Rio Grande just above El Paso Del Norte a few months before the battle, during the period when Doniphan and his men were coming south from Santa Fe to assemble at Valverde. Like all followers of the river trail, Ruxton camped at long established sites, including the site known as Brazito. He says he passed the battle ground a short time afterward, indicating he knew this because of later conversations with Doniphan's contingent.²⁹

28. In this region, most relics are scraps, mostly brass, if older than fifty years, or lead. Leather and iron are from the more recent past, largely found in stages of great deterioration. The proximity of the Fort Fillmore site accounts for the discovery of many fragments of army material issued up to thirty years before the fort was established in 1851; many of these items were available for inclusion among the equipment of Doniphan's men, but their presence would not necessarily indicate their use in the Brazito battle. Many fragments dating back through Mexican and Spanish periods of the region could well be mistaken by the amateur collector for relics of a later date. It seems remarkable that although Conkling refers to relics locally attributed to his site, none appear to have been reported as found on the westward line of the Mexican cavalry retreat, toward the Franklin mountains, where, Doniphan's troops were told when entering El Paso, Apaches watching the battle cut down straggling survivors. If this actually happened, the plains just to the north of the Franklins would appear to be a fertile ground for the relic hunter.

29. Op. cit., p. 170.

He saw these troops as he went farther north, while they were still advancing past him to their later encounter with the Mexicans.³⁰ Where he saw any of them after the battle, he does not say, but since he moved slowly toward Santa Fe, a messenger hurrying north after the battle may have overtaken and passed Ruxton, giving him enough information to add the battle mention to his published diary.

All we can draw from Ruxton's remarks concerning Brazito is that according to his location of it the Mexican force must have advanced beyond the little arm of the river, and must have appeared first to the north of Doniphan's encampment, rather than to the south, as is inferred whenever their first appearance is described in the diaries of Doniphan's men. This, however, if we accept their reckoning, would have placed the hill close behind the Mexicans. The hill would have figured in the pursuit of De Leon's fleeing soldiers, making its absence from the diaries a strange omission.

More compatible with the diaries is the record of another writer who travelled southward past the spot that a few months later was to become the battle ground.

Adolph Wislizenus, a young doctor from St. Louis, left Santa Fe on July 8, 1846, travelling to Chihuahua by the well worn trail down the river, over the Jornada, past Doña Ana, and through El Paso Del Norte. In his diary he steadily and scientifically noted his observations: the temperature each night and morning, the barometric reading for altitude at every camp site, and the mileage from each to the next.³¹ When Wislizenus reached Chihuahua, he was arrested with other Americans by Mexican authorities made nervous by the state of affairs between their country and the United States. He was held for about six weeks in a village not far from the city, and liberated at the end of February, 1847, when Doniphan arrived. A footnote later appended to his diary entry for the preceding August 7th³² indicates that he talked to

30. Op. cit., p. 184.

31. Adolph Wislizenus, *Memoir of a tour to Northern Mexico* . . . 30th Cong., 1st Sess., Misc. no. 26, appended charts and tables.

32. *Ibid.*, entry for August 7, 1846, and note.

Doniphan or some of his men about their own march down the river and determined to his own satisfaction that their camp site at Brazito corresponded to his.

Adolph Wislizenus was a careful man, exact in his observation of the topography, geology, flora and fauna, and all other natural peculiarities of the regions through which he travelled. His brother tells us of Adolph's full kit of scientific equipment accompanying him on his journeys, and shows him pursuing experimental physics with important results all his life.³³ Senator Benton of Missouri was so impressed by Wislizenus' ability to document the unknown West that he caused the Senate to order five thousand reprints of his journal, with tables and maps.³⁴

Bartlett pays Wislizenus the following tribute:

I take this occasion to express my acknowledgement to Dr. Wislizenus, whose "Memoir of a tour through Northern Mexico, connected with Colonel Doniphan's Expedition, in 1846-47," has been of great service to me, and was my only guide from Chihuahua to Guajuquilla—and again after leaving Parras. I have great pleasure in testifying to the accuracy of this memoir, which is a model of its kind; and I do not hesitate to say, that no official report has ever been published by our government, which, in the same space, embraces so much and such accurate information.³⁵

By Wislizenus' reckoning of his daily mileages from Brazito to El Paso Del Norte,³⁶ his camp site and Doniphan's lay five to five and a half miles *north* of Vado Hill. By his reckoning from Doña Ana to Brazito, his site falls almost the same distance *south* of Vado Hill.

For an observer so strongly recommended, this discrepancy seems impossible on the face of it. It brings into sharp focus, however, a similar discrepancy in each of the reports of the two soldiers who noted their mileages from Brazito

33. Frederick A. Wislizenus, *Sketch of the life of Dr. Wislizenus*, p. 12, in his translation of A. Wislizenus' *A journey to the Rocky Mountains* . . .

34. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

35. *Personal Narrative*, v. II; note, p. 455.

36. *Memoir, etc.*, August 7th and 8th entries, 1846.

south. Frank Edwards and John Hughes join Wislizenus in the incompatibility between their total mileages from Doña Ana to Brazito and from Brazito to El Paso Del Norte. All three diarists show an overlap that no amount of checking on modern maps of the area accounts for. The total mileage from Doña Ana to the old plaza in Juarez, taking the normal advantages that a foot traveller would search out in the topography, can not be stretched more than fifty miles. Yet Hughes' daily records total sixty-one miles in his original publication, and fifty-eight in his reprint. Frank Edwards' total is sixty-one. Wislizenus' is fifty-nine.

The impossibility of explaining away this overlap in the mileages of each of the three men necessitates plotting two locations for each: the first from their distances between Doña Ana and Brazito; the second from their distances between Brazito and El Paso Del Norte. In the second instance, Hughes' battle site falls just short of Vado Hill. Wislizenus and Edwards overshoot it to land five and a half, and seven and a half, miles beyond it, respectively. In the first instance, Hughes lands over ten miles south of the hill, while Wislizenus and Edwards land together less than five miles south of it.

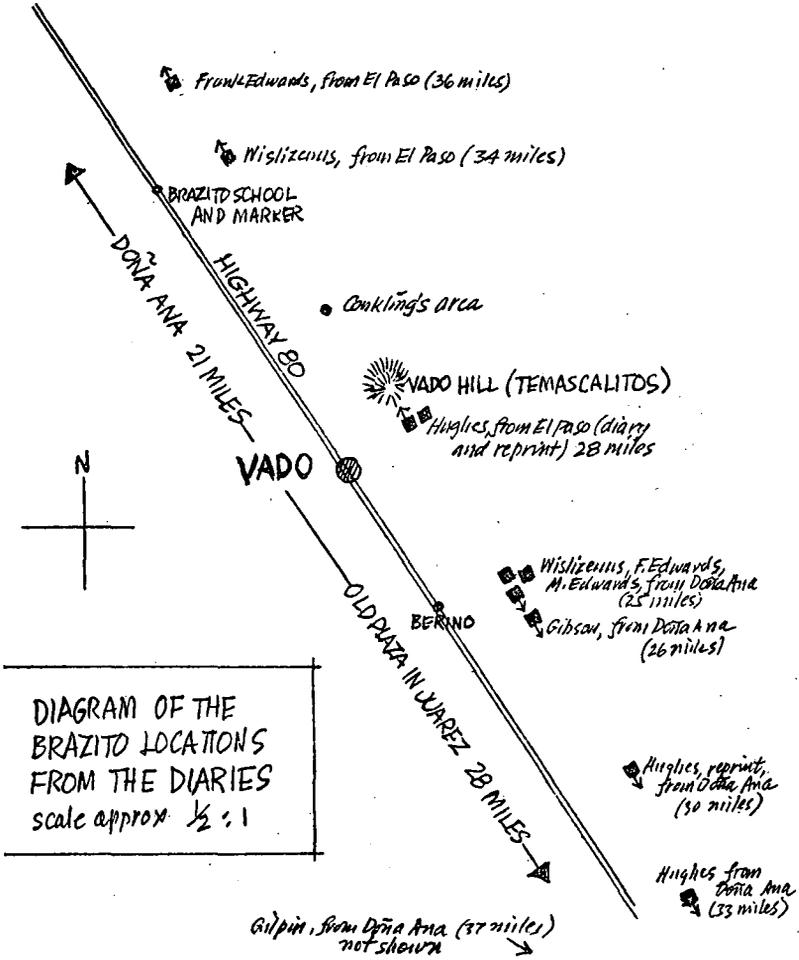
Among them, then, the seven soldiers and the young physician-scientist have left us eleven locations for the battle of Brazito, as shown on the accompanying map.

Only two are north of Vado Hill, and probably west because of the direction in which Doña Ana lies. Nine are south of the hill, and probably east, since El Paso is in a southeast direction down the valley.

Of the nine south of the hill, the two nearest it are really one, since they are Hughes' journal and reprint mileages counted back from El Paso, which, unlike his mileages counted forward from Doña Ana, agree.

Four other reckonings form a cluster about five miles south of the hill and due east of Berino—three of these twenty-five miles from Doña Ana, and one twenty-six.

Farther south by four miles is Hughes' reprint version of



his mileage from Doña Ana. Three miles south of that is his original entry for the same march.

Gilpin's reckoning from Doña Ana puts the battle four miles still farther south.

The major weight of the evidence favors locating the battle of Brazito to the *southeast* of Vado Hill, rather than to the northwest, as has been popularly supposed. Moreover, the terrain appears to fortify this view. Opposite the Wislizenus-Edwards-Gibson reckoning for the distance from Doña Ana, the configuration of bottom land and mesa strongly support the possibility of a bend in the old river at that point. Even Frank Edwards' crude map makes sense here, while it cannot easily relate to the area northwest of the hill.

A final location of the battle of Brazito may never be fixed, since the debris of the struggle which would constitute the best endorsement of its site may now be scattered irrecoverably through the sifting soil of the mesa and eroded away by the acids of time.

Furthermore, the question of Brazito's exact position may be of little historical importance. Perhaps Brazito was what Justin Smith has called it—"a farcical brush." Only the men who died there would protest.

Nevertheless, from the existing data, one seemingly inescapable conclusion is that the position of the historical marker opposite the Brazito Schoolhouse, in the face of the evidence, is ill chosen. The marker might be less suspect if it were moved ten miles down Highway 80 to Berino.