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# The Locale of Coronado's "Bridge"

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ALBERT H. SCHROEDER

Recent interest in Francisco Vázquez de Coronado's 1541 expedition from Pecos Pueblo into the plains has grown out of several proposed 450th anniversary celebrations. The Coronado routes projected in the past vary in many respects. However, the major point that needs to be established is the "bridge" crossing four days out from Pecos Pueblo, the Cicuye of the Spaniards. The bridge may have been a ford that had to be built up because of the high water the Spaniards encountered there. Most of the reconstructions of the route place the crossing to the south on the Pecos River, such as that of Herbert Eugene Bolton.<sup>1</sup> After making this crossing, projected routes then scatter between east and south at various angles and distances before turning north to reach Quivira near Great Bend on the Arkansas River. In 1962, I published an article reanalyzing the route and placed the bridge on the Canadian River near present Conchas Dam, where the river shifts from southeast to east.<sup>2</sup>

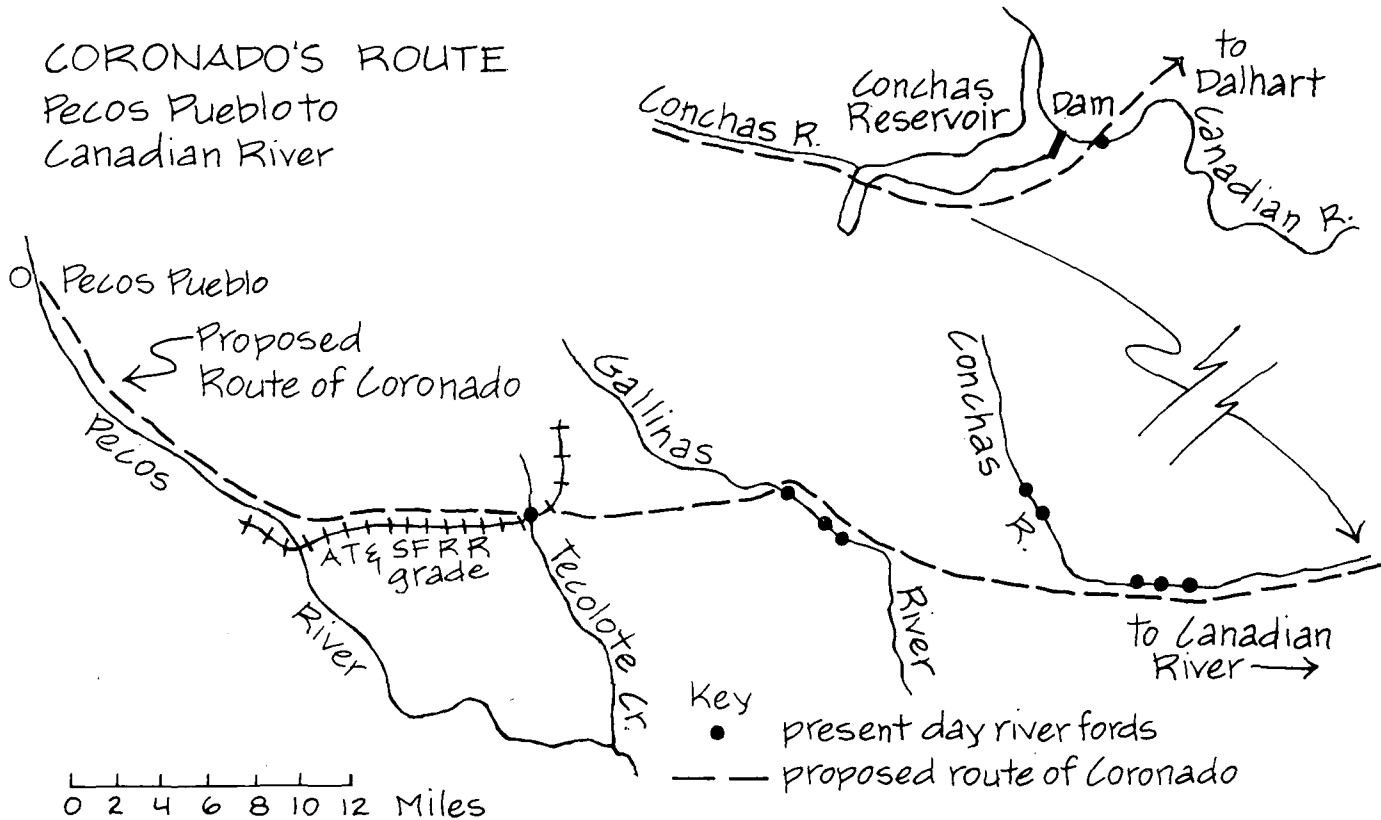
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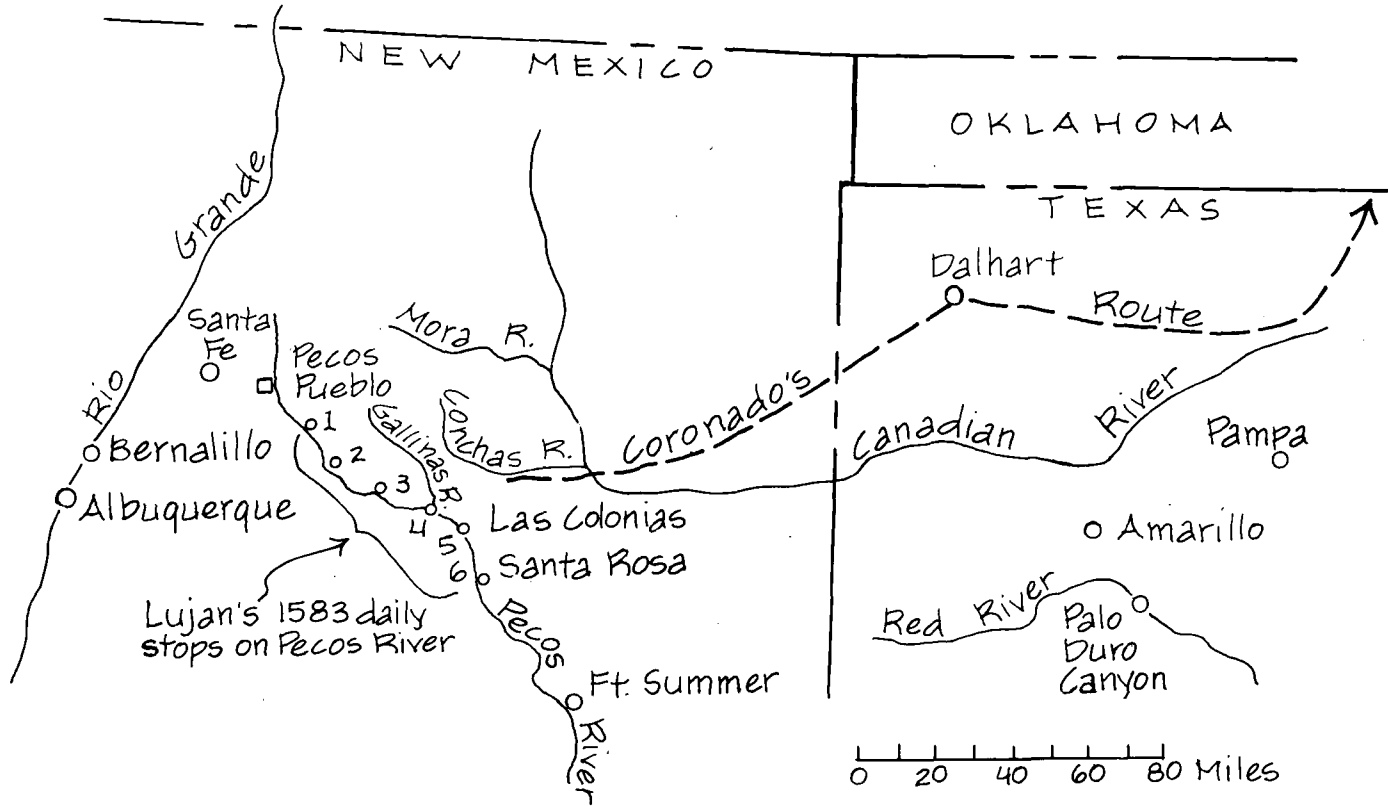
1. Herbert E. Bolton, *Coronado on the Turquoise Trail: Knight of Pueblos and Plains* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1949), facing p. 261.

2. Albert H. Schroeder, "A Reanalysis of the Routes of Coronado and Oñate into the Plains in 1541 and 1601," *Plains Anthropologist* 7 (February 1962), 2-23. See maps.

# CORONADO'S ROUTE Pecos Pueblo to Canadian River



# GENERAL VICINITY MAP



In various group discussions, some historians have expressed doubt that Coronado's army could have covered this leg of the journey from Pecos Pueblo to the Canadian River in four days. One can quibble about the accuracy of distances and/or days traveled as well as directions given in the expedition reports. However, when the information in the documents is examined as it relates to a specific point, many confusing statements standing alone can be clarified by reference to other remarks.

As to the length of daily travel, Pedro de Castañeda states it took thirty-seven "days of from 6 to 7 leagues each to this point" on the "last barranca." He further remarks that "A man had been detailed to make the calculations and even to count the steps. . . . The distance [back] to the settlements was 250 leagues."<sup>3</sup> These figures corroborate his 6 or closer to 7 leagues per day. This figure, however, is lower when compared to that of the *Relación del Suceso*. It recorded the distances as 330 leagues on the outgoing trip in thirty-seven days and 200 leagues in twenty-five days on the return route.<sup>4</sup> The daily average respectively then would be 9 leagues per day and 8 leagues per day. Using 7 leagues per day for four days to reach the crossing times 2.63 miles per league, they covered 74 miles. At 8 leagues a day, the figure is 85 miles. At 9 leagues a day, the travel for the outgoing trip, the result is 95 miles. The actual distance is about 80 miles. If the crossing was on the Pecos River, this would place it somewhere near Villanueva as others have suggested, or farther south.

When the direction of travel to the bridge crossing is considered, Castañeda tells us "they traveled in the direction of the plains, which are on the other side of the mountain range." He also states "the distance from Cicuye to the beginning of the plains"<sup>5</sup> is 30 leagues or 80 miles. The distance given fits a relatively straight line route, skirting the mountains, and the direction east, rather than southeast as Bolton suggests.<sup>6</sup>

Also to be kept in mind is Hernando de Alvarado's prior entry into the plains. The *Relación del Suceso* notes that Alvarado "found a small river running southeast." He followed it for one hundred leagues. Later, this account says the army traveled 100 leagues east and 50 to

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3. George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, *Narratives of the Coronado Expedition 1540-1542* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1940), 239-40.

4. *Ibid.*, 291.

5. *Ibid.*, 235, 261.

6. Bolton, *Coronado*, 242.

the south (the Buckingham Smith Muñoz copy says southeast).<sup>7</sup> Under Coronado's order Alvarado had eighty days in which to explore. This provides a figure of 7 leagues a day from Zuni,<sup>8</sup> assuming he did not make many stops along the way. The small river flowing into the plains could easily have been the Canadian.

The bridge site could not have been on the Pecos River. When Castañeda described Pecos Pueblo, he wrote that it was located "in a small valley between sierras and mountains covered with big pines. There is a brook which abounds in excellent trout and otters,"<sup>9</sup> no doubt the Pecos River. Moreover, Juan Jaramillo, who accompanied Coronado into the plains, states that after four days' travel from the Rio Grande to Cicuye "we proceeded in three days to another river which we Spaniards called Cicuique." He further notes that "to reach this river, at the point where we crossed it, we went somewhat more to the northeast."<sup>10</sup> These statements alone, "to another river" approached by traveling northeast, are sufficient to eliminate the Pecos River as the stream that was bridged. Because the name of Pecos Pueblo was applied to a river thirty leagues away, reconstructions of Coronado's route across the Pecos River are on shaky ground.

The *Relación de Cíbola*, like most other narratives, mentions four days' travel from Cicuye "to some land as level as the sea."<sup>11</sup> Castañeda reports four days' march from Cicuye "to a deep river carrying a large volume of water flowing from the direction of Cicuye. The general named it the Cicuye River."<sup>12</sup> The contrast in the descriptions of this river four days from Pecos Pueblo in the Alvarado and Castañeda references relates to the season of travel. Alvarado reached the river in the summer of 1540, during which season the Canadian River carries a modest amount of water. Coronado reached the locale of the bridge crossing in late April. Shortly before departing from the Rio Grande to go to Pecos Pueblo, "the river was thawing, after being frozen for almost four months."<sup>13</sup> Undoubtedly, the many tributary streams of the upper Canadian, flowing out of the mountains on the west, contributed considerable amounts of snowmelt. This would account for

7. Hammond and Rey, *Narratives*, 289, 291.

8. *Ibid.*, 217; eighty days less twenty-five (Zuni to bridge and back to Tiguex) into 380 leagues (eighty from Zuni to bridge and to Tiguex).

9. *Ibid.*, 258.

10. *Ibid.*, 300; see also p. 235.

11. *Ibid.*, 310.

12. *Ibid.*, 235.

13. *Ibid.*, 234.

Castañeda's deep river and large volume of water, which the Spaniards had to cross.

More information was gained about this river from the Querechos in the vicinity of Dalhart, Texas, where I placed them. "They said that by going down in the direction in which the sun rises there was a very large river, that the army could travel along its banks through continuous settlements for ninety days. . . ." By traveling east from Dalhart, one would encounter the Canadian River due north of Pampa, Texas. In 1583, Antonio de Espejo left Pecos Pueblo and followed the Pecos River south, crossing over to the Rio Grande through the Davis Mountain area, Texas. In 1590, Gaspar Castaño de Sosa traversed the entire length of the Pecos River from south to north en route to Pecos Pueblo. Neither of these reports mentions any settlements along the Pecos River.<sup>14</sup>

On its return trip, Coronado's army arrived "at the Cicuye River more than thirty leagues below the town—I mean below the bridge which had been built. . . ." They also were informed "that this river joins the Tiguex [sic—Quivira (Arkansas) River] more than twenty days travel from there, and that it flows to the east again." This is followed by another statement, "It is believed that it empties into the mighty Espíritu Santo which Don Hernando de Soto's men discovered in Florida."<sup>15</sup> The description of these two rivers (Canadian and Arkansas) joining and flowing east again and in turn emptying into the Mississippi River certainly cannot be applied to the Pecos River and the Rio Grande.

Another confusing aspect is the terminology used by the chroniclers to refer to streams. Some identify the same stream as a river, or an arroyo, and/or a barranca. The last was not a canyon or a gorge, but a river valley, often wide, with more or less vertical sides. An example is found in the hailstone episode "in a ravine." The horses "were swept away until they ran into a *barranca* [cliff]. Some climbed to places from which they were brought down with great difficulty."<sup>16</sup> Jaramillo describes Castañeda's "last barranca which extended a league from bank to bank" where the army turned back as "an arroyo flowing

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14. *Ibid.*, 236–37; George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, *The Rediscovery of New Mexico 1580–1594* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1966), 206–9; Albert H. Schroeder and Dan S. Matson, *A Colony on the Move: Gaspar Castaño de Sosa's Journal, 1590–1591* (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1965), 54n; Albert H. Schroeder, *A Study of the Apache Indians*, Part I (New York: Garland Publishing, 1974). Also see various maps for the sixteenth-century Spanish expeditions.

15. Hammond and Rey, *Narratives*, 243.

16. *Ibid.*, 238.

between some barrancas in which there were good meadows."<sup>17</sup> Castañeda remarks that it was a league wide and "a small river flowed at the bottom."<sup>18</sup> That barrancas were not necessarily deep ravines is indicated by the fact that at one "barranca" a stampede of bison "fell into it that it was filled and the other cattle crossed over them."<sup>19</sup> At no place in the narratives is there any mention or description of canyons on the plains that would match Palo Duro Canyon which historians propose that Coronado entered.

In addition to the points discussed above that eliminate the Pecos River as the Cicuye River, there is another statement that supports this situation. "Quivira is at forty degrees and the river at thirty-six."<sup>20</sup> Simply put, a latitude can be applied to a specific place or to a west-east flowing river like Coronado's Cicuye River, the Canadian, but not to the south-flowing Pecos River.

Another item, relating to the Antonio de Espejo expedition, should be considered. In 1583, he left Pecos Pueblo to return to Chihuahua.<sup>21</sup> According to Luxán's journal, two Pecos Indians were taken "to direct us to the cattle." The Indians led them down the Pecos River on daily travel: (1) six leagues through a dense forest of pines and junipers over a bad trail (riding horses) and camped by the river (near San Isidro); (2) five leagues through the forest and sometimes along the river to Las Rosales (near Villanueva); (3) five leagues through the forest on a good trail to El Arroyo de Alamillo (Tecolote Creek); (4) six leagues to a stream (Gallina Creek) close to a small saline named La Salinilla, where there were large holes of brackish water; (5) four leagues to a stream lined with cottonwoods named El Arroyo de las Garroches because of cattle goad sticks found. This was very level land with some fine pastures and waterholes (vicinity of Las Colonias). In the past four days they found many buffalo tracks; and (6) six leagues to the junction with another fair-sized stream flowing from east to west (Los Tanos Creek near Santa Rosa).

As is obvious from the above, Espejo's party began seeing buffalo tracks on the second day out from Pecos Pueblo and goad sticks on the fifth day. When Coronado went from Pecos Pueblo into the plains, he traveled four days to a river where a "bridge" was built, and then went on another four to five days to the first sighting of buffalo. This

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17. *Ibid.*, 302.

18. *Ibid.*, 239.

19. *Ibid.*, 236.

20. *Ibid.*, 292.

21. Hammond and Rey, *Narratives*, 207.



adds up to a total of seven to nine days to buffalo from Pecos Pueblo as compared to two days for Espejo.

Also to be noted, the description of the country along Espejo's 1583 trail fits the geography of the country along the east side of the Pecos River. *If* this trail was in use in the 1540s, and *if* Coronado had traveled along the Pecos River for four days, as a number of historians have proposed, Coronado would not have found it necessary to build a bridge across the Pecos River to reach the east side, since the Indian trail was on the east side of the river. The Espejo information is a further indication, in addition to the many other details pointed out above in regard to Coronado's narratives, that the Pecos River route is not applicable to Coronado's trip into the plains.