



Big Spring: Crossing of The Comanche War Trails

It is a pretty safe bet that most people born and raised in Big Spring (Howard County) could not tell you much about the Comanche War Trail. A few might have seen a local sign or heard some bid for the tourist trade, or seen a display in the local library. A rare few might know that Big Spring was the heart of a trail that ran south from the Great Bend of the Arkansas River in Kansas to as far as Durango in Old Mexico. One hopes that it was mentioned in Texas History classes required of all seventh graders. Books and journals about Western expansion written by '49ers, the army, cattlemen, the Pony Express, the stage coach lines, the railroaders might make a journal entry such as "today we crossed the Great Comanche War Trail" but not much more. One book, FORT CONCHO, by J. Events Halley, devotes only one chapter to the Trail. Books and articles that dealt only with the Trail are not that easy to find. In fact, the best information is found in journal articles. Be that as it may, what is the best way to share what is important about Big Spring and its part in the Trail? The old five W's may be the best bet: WHO, WHERE, WHAT, WHEN and WHY and not necessarily in that order. Okay, here we go!

WHO:

As the name tells you, the Comanche Indians were certainly a major party to this but some may not know that other Indians were involved. The Kiowas were probably the next tribe in terms of raiding participation. These two tribes did not even speak the same language but often raided together. The literature mentions the Southern Cheyenne as often being raiders. The Apache were raiding into Mexico before the Comanche and although pushed west of the Pecos by the Comanche, they continued raiding until near the end of the 1800s.

WHAT:

A Few dates are always a part of history so let's start with some for orientation. Back around 1700, the Eastern Shoshone split and part of them left Eastern Wyoming and went out east onto the Plains. This group became today's Comanche. An alliance with the Utes started them on the road to getting the horse which ended up with their becoming perhaps the greatest light cavalry in the world. By 1740, they were known to whites and Spaniards as far south as San Antonio, Texas. Reference this for a moment to the fact that this is about 100 years before Texas became a Republic. From San Antonio north to the Arkansas River in Kansas west into all of Eastern New Mexico became Comancheria, a territory of about 600 miles by 400 miles. Around 1790, their peak population was close to 20,000.

White man diseases decimated all tribes and the Comanche suffered greatly too. This, along with male casualties from warfare and raiding, created a need for tribal replacements. They were being driven back north and west by the Mexicans and were under fire from New Mexicans. They found a partial solution by sending raiding parties into Old Mexico. In today's parlance, this almost became a "slam dunk". There was very little opposition, civilian or military, and they found a bountiful supply of horses and mules. Equally important was the supply of young captives, male and female, that often became valued tribal members. Many captives were ransomed. Remember that their main motivation in these raids was always horses and mules. Toward the end of their reign, cattle became another stolen commodity.

In this span of 175 years (1700 - 1875), it is a safe bet that a large percentage of these raiders came through Big Spring on the way south or upon returning north. Hence, the CROSSROAD.

WHEN:

As noted above, this raiding went on for about 150 years. Note that while Mexico bore the brunt of the raids, Texas and New Mexico had their share of depredations. In the fall of the year, after the Comanche commissary had delivered its annual bounty, i.e., buffalo berthing, the raiders were set to go. The families left behind had ample food and hides and would camp out in the high plains until the raiders returned. Also, August marks the start of the rainy season in West Texas. This meant that water would be available all the way into Mexico. This was not true for much of the year. Temperature wise, the days were still very hot. Raiders often rode at night and laid by during the day. Potential victims along the way often kept watch at night to alert arrival of the raiders, hence, the "Comanche Moon" was an unwelcome sight to poor unarmed peons.

Who raided? On occasion, only two men might be the raiders going south. As many as 2,000 raiders were counted in some instances. At times, women went and this was a prime time to break in young men to warriorhood. Routinely, they would stay in Mexico until the grass started to green in early spring. This was also a rainy time so conditions were ideal for driving the immense herds back north. On some occasions, the trips would last a year or more.

On a raid, after crossing the Rio Grande, they split up and eventually ended up camping in foothills of mountains. They raided nearby ranches and drove the livestock into the hidden camps until time to head back north. The livestock was traded into New Mexico and the United States. There was always a market for horses and mules.



Earliest Map (1832) I have so far found showing Comanche territory.
Above the "I" in Comanche Indians is a "river" called Pasigono which has been identified with Beals Creek. --D.Phillips

The traders from New Mexico were called Comancheros. They would wagontrain into Texas, set up camp, and trade for bread, sweets, coffee, guns and ammo, iron goods and other things desired by the Comanche. North of Big Spring across the Colorado River and just South of Gail was a very large Comanchero trading ground.

WHERE:

This is the part that asks you to strap on your map skills. This will show you why Big Spring was the big decision point. Where were the raiders to go from here? First, a brief look at the major ways involved with getting them to this area. If one were to go up on South Mountain in Big Spring and face North, they would have arrived from three directions.

To your left (northwest) is New Mexico and the western Llano Estacado. For years, this was considered to be the Great American Desert by Americans. Little did they know that at least six distinct passage ways were available to the traveler that knew where he was going. Running NW to SE, they crossed the area, provided water and game and were even traveled by wagons and Comancheros. The Spaniards made several crossings from Santa Fe to San Antonio in prestatehood days. Three examples of these passage ways are Mustang Draw, Seminole Draw and Monument Draw. With one exception, these passages got you to Big Spring. The exception, Sulphur Springs Draw, will be discussed shortly. There was a western branch starting from here.

Next, look due North. Over the horizon is Gun Sight Pass, the Colorado River and Mushaway Peak. Here was the Comanchero meeting place and the area acted as a staging ground for the trip to Big Spring. North of here? The East side of the Caprock and north to the Arkansas River with the western part of Oklahoma thrown in. Names such as Roaring Springs, Tee Pee City, Antelope Hills were homes to the travelers.

Finally, look to the NE along what is now the Snyder Highway. This brought in anyone else including the Oklahoma Reservation Indians.

It is decision time for the assembled raiders. As with the incoming routes, the raiders had three choices on where to go. For the sake of brevity, we will leave here and take you site by site to Mexico. First would be what was called the Eastern Trail. East by Signal Peak down Beals Creek to the Colorado. Now south to Hackberry Springs, Shelving Rock, North Concho, San Angelo*, Kickapoo Springs, Brady Creek, Menard, Junction, Camp Clark and on to Del Rio/Eagle Pass/Laredo area and to Mexico.

*According to Halley, at the junction of the three Concho Rivers (San Angelo), some turned due west up the Middle Concho River, Centralia Draw and into China Springs Draw and Castle Gap. We will leave them here for the moment.

Those that opted to go due west went to Mustang Springs at Stanton, joined with those from Sulphur Draw Springs that did not go to the Big Spring, then north of Midland, west to the Sand Hills in Menahans and now south to the Pecos River at Grand Falls, and on into Ft Stockton. We shall leave them here for the moment. Back to Big Spring.

Looking at your map, you have raiders going in every direction but SW. Since the ultimate destination for most of those going the "Western Trail" is Castle Gap. Why is there no indication or record of the shortest most direct route? A southwest trek? Looking at springs and other water stops, you can travel what is called the YATES SHORTCUT. By going over the actual ground, it was shown that they left the Big Spring, went to Edwards Ranch, Shewey Lake, Beck's Lake, Rock Springs, and on to Castle Gap to join the others. Each of these sites has bedrock mortars, fire cracked rock, lithic debitage so this cutoff has as much validity as other documented trail segment.

Through Castle Gap and a short trip to Horsehead Crossing on the Pecos. A few went south from here along the Pecos through Meyers Spring and Lozier Canyon into Mexico. The larger parties continued from Horsehead to Ft Stockton, Marathon Spring, Pena Colorado, into the Big Bend and into Mexico at one of three places cited in the literature. The western most Rio Grande crossing is at Lajitas and into Mexico to San Carlos. From here, they split and went west and further south, The central crossing was at the west end of Mariscal Canyon and was called the Vado de Chisos. One more main crossing was in the Boquillas Canyon area.

THE RETURN:

Any of the entry points into Mexico could be an exit point going back north. It has been said that Comanche cosmology favors circular things. Thus, exit might likely be at a different point than entry. Weather, grass, Mexican pursuit, etc. all figured in this. Two examples: west of Ft. Stockton, a wagontrain journalist spoke of looking to the south and seeing a huge plume of dust. Four Kiowa eventually rode up and explained that this was a herd coming back with over 2,000 animals. Another example east of Ft. Stockton tells of a wagon train that came upon the trail. It was described as being as wide as two miles. Many are familiar with the origin of the name Horsehead Crossing on the Pecos. A long dry drive could cause pandemonium when the animals smelled water. A stampede and with the Kickish wind in the Pecosmany, many carcasses were seen all over the place.

WHY? (Conclusion)

To the Indian, this would be obvious: They raided in Mexico because that is where the loot was. All through this paper, "raiders and raiding" have been used, yet the name of the subject is "War Trail". Is there a difference? Yes and No. Comanches were quick to avenge any deaths in their milieu caused by outsiders. This was war. Raids into Mexico were not usually raids of revenge so it is logical to call them "raids". However, documents from Mexico cast doubt on this assumption. It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that if it walked and they could, they killed it! Chickens, sheep, cows, peons, little if any mercy was shown. The lives were simply left there to rot. For this reason, "War Trail" seems to be the better choice.

In this respect, mention might be made about all of the treaties signed with great pomp and ceremony and then promptly violated. With Comanches, the Whites never understood that they really answered to none but their own little group. While one local Chief would make his "x" on the paper to get his goods, it was not binding on any other Comanche. Of course the treaty was violated every time some young Brave decided he wanted some of the Mexico action. The Whites were equally as bad. They would sign this big treaty promising sums of money, annuity goods, etc. and then go back to Washington where Congress would never ratify the Treaty. The annuity goods were often late and then might be inedible. Their commissary was gone—no more buffalo. In 1874, the U.S. Army launched an endall campaign to get them on the reservation.

A final comment about Big Spring. Put yourself in the caravan of Randolph B. Marcy traveling from New Mexico. An old Comanche is leading him over a new route back to the east. You drop off the hill on the east side of the present day Stanton and you see the mountains where Big Spring is today. Shortly thereafter, as Marcy noted as far as the eye can see is a huge campground surrounding this incredible spring of life. What a sight that must have been.

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May 2009
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