

# DESERT TRACKS



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SOUTHWEST CHAPTER  
OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ORGANIZATION

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## FROM THE PRESIDENT -

### Doyle Reed

Rose Ann did a beautiful job of presenting the importance of the southern emigrant trails to the National Board meeting in Independence in March. Although no action was taken, the board members now have a good idea of what the Chapter has been trying to promote for some time. Where do we go from here?

It is now more important than ever that we accomplish our goal of mapping the trails in Arizona and New Mexico. It is unfortunate that the mapping outing planned for this month had to be postponed but that should not stop all mapping activity. I urge all of you who might be out exploring trails in your area to map the route as you go.

The mapping procedure may look kind of forbidding but actually the records needed look more formidable than they are. Unless you dis-



*Wagon wheel groves in Cooke's Pass, on the Southern Trail in New Mexico*



## FIFTH ANNUAL PLANNING MEETING

July 17 - 18

Mt. Lemmon, Arizona

cover graves or other landmarks along the way, most of the forms will be blank or virtually so. If you do not have copies of the mapping forms, copies can be obtained from Harland Tompkins, James Byrkit, Jack Root, or myself. Remember that the Chapter voted to reimburse you for the costs of the maps you use and Jim volunteered to file them. Hopefully you will be able to run off copies of the forms after you get a copy.

Fiona and I will be in Arizona starting about May 15 and we will be working on mapping the Butterfield Stage route from Tucson to Yuma. We may be biting off more than we can chew but we can come back later to finish up the job if we have to. We committed ourselves to help mark the California Trail in northeast Nevada starting June 4 so if the heat gets too high, we can head north. We are not immune from high summer temperatures here in Davis but we usually get a cool breeze from San Francisco in the evening which cools things down so you can sleep without the air conditioner running.

See you on Mt. Lemmon in July. Doyle

# AN INTERESTING OBSERVATION

Rose Ann Tompkins

We tend to think of the Gila River Valley as a rather barren place. These days the river bed is usually dry, the waters taken at various points along its course for reservoirs and irrigation projects. Only in times of higher than normal rains, such as 1993, can this river show its abilities to be a river.

Emory was very observant, indeed that was his job, but his descriptions have a business-like tone. He was to "report", and he did his job well.

Simmons was a young man on an adventure. He took Emory's mental picture of the "city on the hills" and, with the help of a sunset, expanded the image into a romantic vista.

**William H. Emory** traveled to California in 1846 with General Stephen Watts Kearny and the Army of the West. They went to California via the Santa Fe Trail and the Gila Trail. Emory was a West Point graduate, a member of the Topographical Engineers; and he made a report to Congress following his journey. His "Notes of a Military Reconnaissance", originally published in 1848, has been a classic in western literature.

On November 18, 1846, Emory made observations from the lower Gila River Valley, as follows:

"High Wind from the northwest all day, . . . Carson pointed to a flat rock covered with fir, and told that he had slaughtered a fat mule there. The names of several Americans were inscribed on the same rock. . . . We found the river spread over a greater surface, about 100 yards wide, and flowing gently along over a sandy bottom, . . . The chain of broken hills still continued on the north side, and when near our camp of this date, circled in an amphitheater, with its arch to the north. The basaltic columns, rising into the shape of spires, domes and towers, gave it the appearance, as we approached, of a vast city on the hills. . . . The hills and mountains appeared entirely destitute of vegetation."

[The area that Kit Carson points out with the inscriptions is now known as Sears Point, and was visited by SWOCTA in 1992.]

Taken from *Lieutenant Emory Reports*, a 1951 reprint by the University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

## PLANNING MEETING - - -

- - -DETAILS COMING!!!

In June, Sheri Lee will be sending out details about the weekend on Mt. Lemmon. Please set aside the weekend for the important time of planning next year's program and plan to attend. The dates again:

**JULY 17 & 18**

**Joseph R. Simmons** traveled to California in 1849 with a wagon train of gold seekers led by John C. Edwards, an ex-Governor of Missouri. This group used Emory's report and map as their guide, although they followed Cooke's road between the Rio Grande River and the Gila River. This put them on the lower Gila River Valley in Emory's wake, three years later.

On November 9 he mentions passing rocks to the left of the trail that had names of "several mountaineers cut in them. Benoit, Hatcher, Maxwell & several others".

On November 11, 1849, Simmons wrote in his diary, as follows:

"Moved 10 m & camped near the river. Several other trains camp close by.

"A scene on the Gila  
Standing on a high rock near the bank of the river. The Sun is just disappearing over the lofty mountains peaks westward. In the distance, a north west course, rises the range of mountains, the tops of which have been compared by Lient. Emory to a 'city on the hills'. Viewed from this spot, at this time of day, it certainly resembles a noble city as much as anything in this wild country possibly could. The different shades & colors caused by this reflection of the setting sun; the majestic peaks rising in irregular order, forming themselves into the shape of spire dome and tower, gives it much the appearance of a distant city. Add to this the gentle murmur of the Gila as it passes by, giving forth sounds which you could easily imagine to be the tolling of bells, the hum of distant voices, & many other sounds which would naturally proceed from the busy life of a large city."

Taken from *Across the Plains from Missouri to California A.D. 1849*, an original diary at the Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri.

## CHANGE OF ADDRESS:

Robert & Betty Lee  
3780 W. Golf Course Rd.  
Thatcher, AZ 85552 (same phone #)

# SOUTHWEST OCTA Hits the Road Again

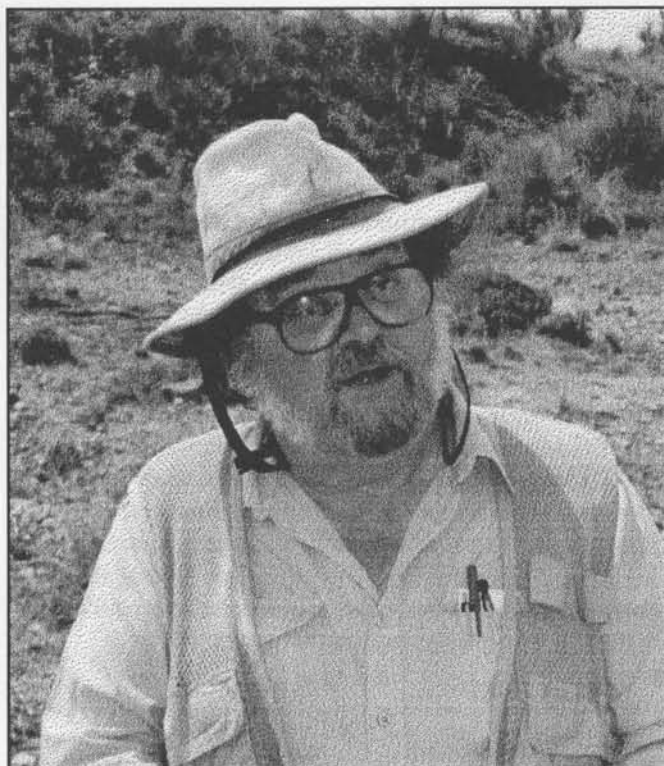
By Pat and Paul Etter

Southwest-OCTA members gathered at the Grand Hotel in Deming, New Mexico, on March 20 and 21, to continue searching for segments of the Southern Trail. We had three items on our agenda: a visit to Foster's Hole; a ride through Cooke's Pass; and a drive over the Coyote Hills toward Playas Lake.

Our intrepid group totalled nineteen: Jim and Marian Carter, Susan Badger Doyle, and Charles Townley joined us from New Mexico; Don Buck and President Doyle Reed and wife, Fiona, came from California; Tucsonans, Jack and Ruth Root, Dick and Mae Chapman, and Bob and Sheri Lee, were there; the Etters and Tompkins drove over from the Valley of the Sun; and, Bob and Betty Lee came in from Safford. Historian Don Couchman came from Mesilla to guide and interpret our tour of Foster's Hole and Cooke's Pass. We were delighted to meet his wife, Darlene.

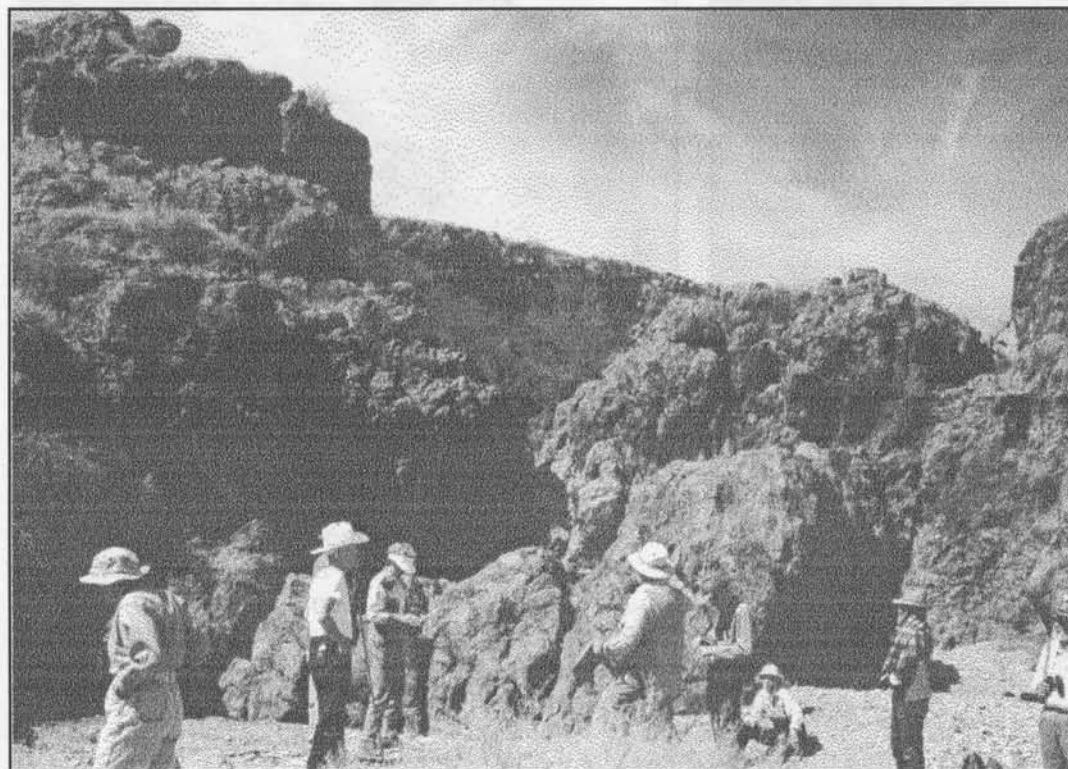
On Saturday we split up into 4WD vehicles. Happily, everything worked except one CB, which was quickly replaced. We drove along NM #26 to a place called Nutt Corner. Here we found a lone building named "Cafe - Middle of Nowhere - Bar." It was aptly named, since it was the only sign of civilization for miles.

Our destination was Jug Canyon, where we expected to find Foster's Hole and to be among the few who



had actually seen and photographed the long-lost watering hole.<sup>1</sup> Philip St. George Cooke named it after a member of his staff, Dr. George B. Foster, in 1846. It is about 15 miles from the Rio Grande and was used by early emigrants for a few years after that. We saved the directions

continued on next page



*Above:  
Don Couchman of Las Cruces, NM led the group to Foster's Hole and through Cooke's Pass, adding color and depth to our day. photo by Pat Etter*

*Left:  
At Foster's Hole, the group listens to Don explain the history of the site.*

to Foster's Hole, mapped it, marked it, and photographed it. It should not get lost again.

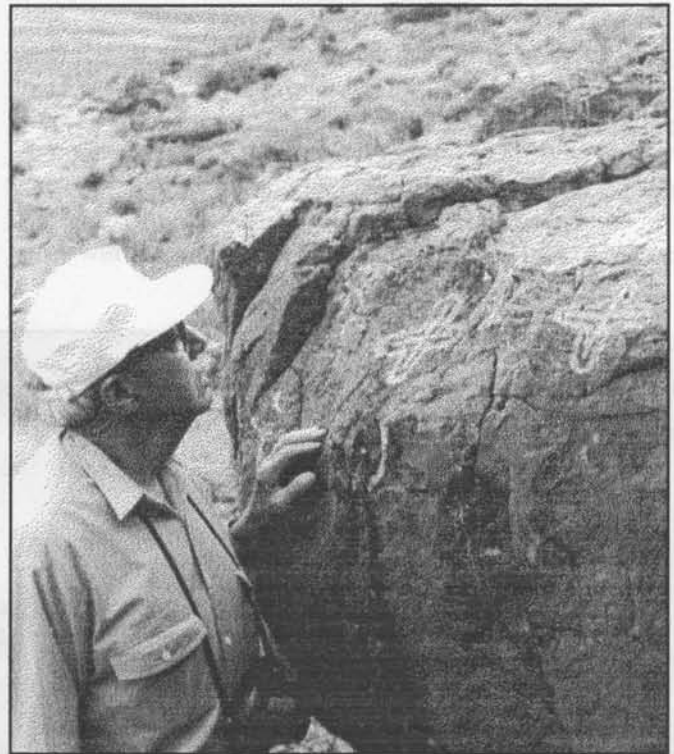
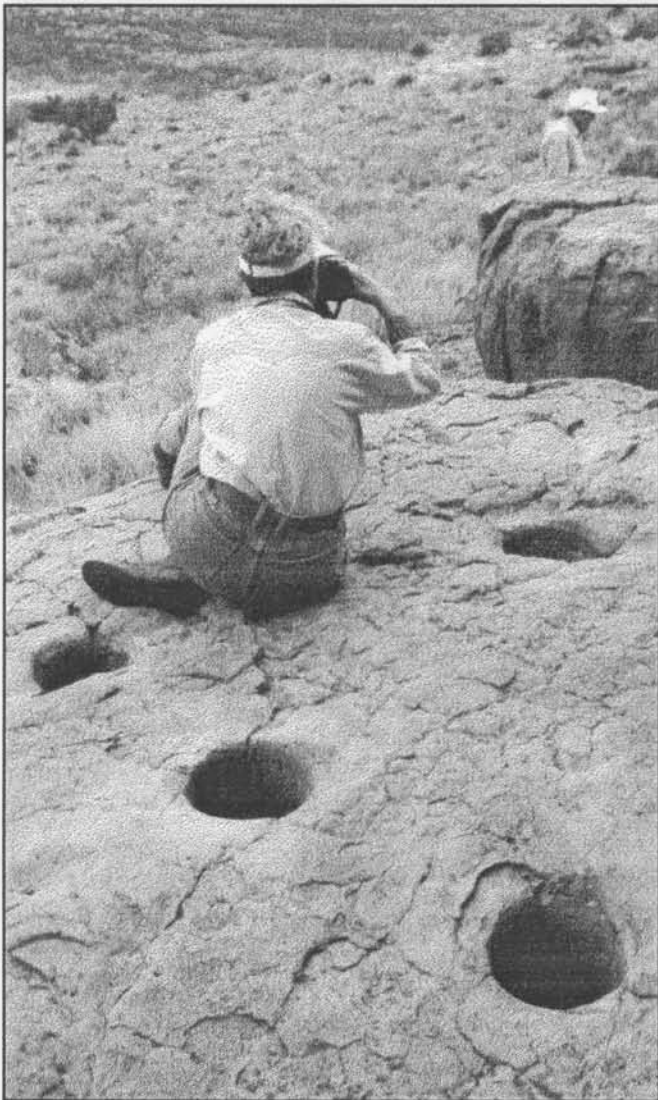
We drove over rolling gamma-covered hills, gradually descending into a wash and rocky defiles, which became more canyon-like as we moved in. We finally left our cars and clambered (carefully) a couple of hundred feet down to find a catchment basin surrounded by a perpendicular rocky wall on three sides. There was no mistaking it, since it matched a reliable sketch and photograph that Don Couchman brought along. There was one disappointment, however. We were not the first to rediscover the long-lost site. Boy Scouts got there shortly before us and left a shiny new sign, which told about the Mormon Battalion's stopover!

One of Cooke's men had written that Cooke sat on top of those rocks and "for two hours gratuitously cursed the soldiers while they watered the animals."<sup>2</sup> Rose Anne Tompkins was the gutsy one among us who climbed to sit on the spot she said Cooke had parked on (we have photographs to denote her effort).

We drove back on NM #26 to Florida Station, marked by a tank filled with water from Cooke's Well. Turning north, we topped first at Fort Cummings, built in 1863 to protect mail carriers and emigrant trains from Apache attack. Cooke's spring is nearby. It has changed since '49, when Cornelius Cox said the spring was in a marshy spot, the water was bad, and there was no wood of any kind.<sup>3</sup> A hogan-shaped wood structure now shields the well, which is surrounded by a forest of mesquite. Wire netting is nailed over the entrance. The latter is a change from two years ago, when Paul Etter was able to climb down to the water source.

We munched our luncheables here before climbing back into our "wagons" and a drive through Cooke's Pass. The road passes through the southern extremity of Cooke's Peak and winds over and around the foothills. A good deal of the trail still exists, but the face of the country has changed because of diversion dams, natural erosion, and an 1983 flood. Nonetheless, our gang got a good

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*Left: Sitting amid the Indian molar holes in the Cooke's Pass area, Betty Lee catches a photo of Jim Carter, above, examining one of the many Indian petroglyphs that also were found in the area. Photo of Betty by Rose Ann Tompkins, photo of Jim by Betty Lee - of course.*

feeling of what it must have been like to roll over mile after mile in the direction of California, not knowing what lay ahead. Moreover, as Don Couchman told us, the Apache were a fearsome threat, and his stories of their massacres got our attention.

Many of us can't call ourselves, spring chickens. Nevertheless, at one point, the gang spread out like mountain goats and bounded over the rocks to the top of a hill to find some very good petroglyphs, probably left by ancestors of the Mimbrenos.

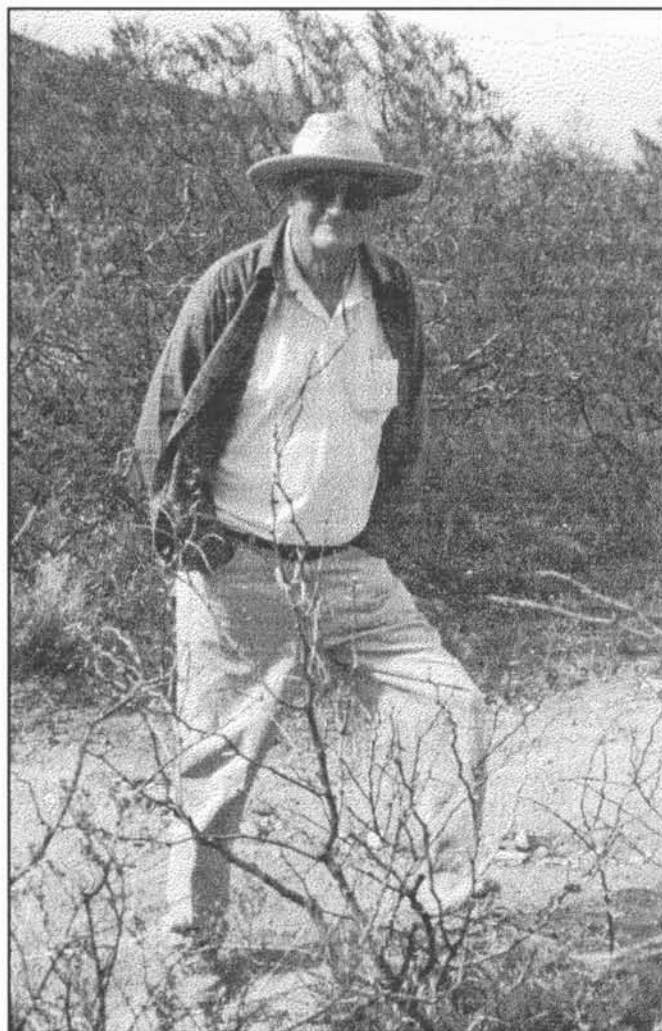
We drove home to what we feared might be the Not-So-Grand Motel, but discovered they had given Ruth Root a handicapped room, where she could wander with ease on her crutches, and even provided us a room where we could have our meeting. And the dinners—well! Believe it or not, the Grand has earned three stars on the Mobile guide, and the steaks were superb.

It was great that Ruth could come to Deming and participate in the activities. She's now out of the sling and the exercise machine and is ready to roll.

We had real adventure on Sunday. Our plan was to find the route from Separ to Playas Lake through the Coyote Hills. The Etters, Tompkins and Roots had gone through the area over Thanksgiving weekend. Except for ranchers who use the road, we have been the first to go over this road with the knowledge that it had been used by emigrants, the Mormon Battalion, and, before that, the Mexicans and Spanish on their way to Chihuahua.

We did what all good trail trackers do: We attempted to obtain permission from local ranchers to drive on their land. In spite of the remoteness of the area, all of the fences have locked gates and we needed a key. One rancher said his gate had a lock with a combination but would not give us the combination without permission of the rancher on the other side of the fence. After this was obtained, the first rancher caved in and said, "Okay, you can drive on my ranch." During these negotiations, Pat Etter had the distinct feeling that the locals thought we were strange folk with nothing better to do.

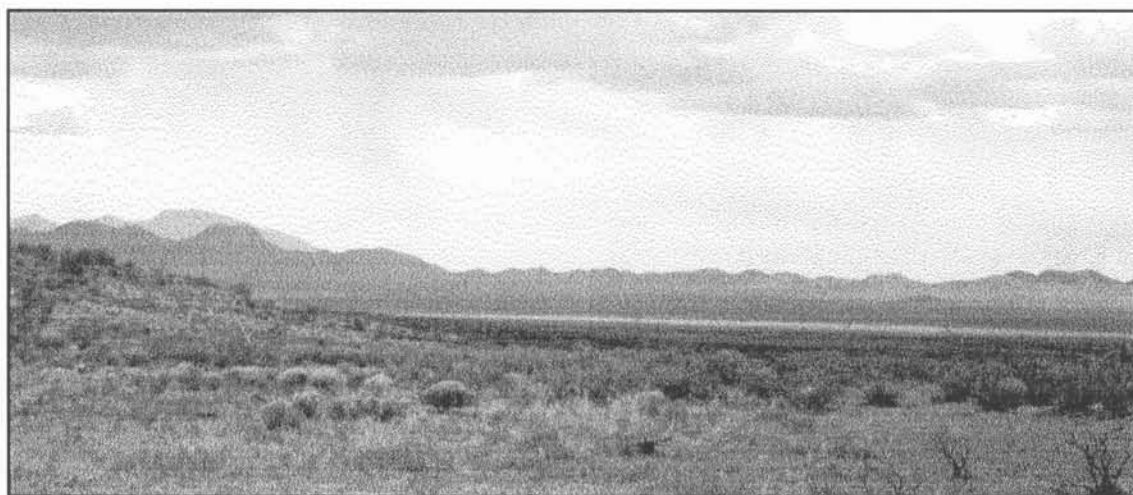
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*Above: Jack Root sports a big grin in Cooke's Pass, a site he wanted badly to visit. Just ask Ruth!*

*photo by Pat Etter*

*Below: As the Southern Trail headed south out of Coyote Hills, travelers could see the shimmer of the lakebed at Playas Lake.*



When we reached the gate we found many locks, each one requiring a key! The combination padlock was attached to a lone link on the fence post. We tried it, 9056, but it did not work. Furthermore, if it had, it would not have opened the gate...

Undaunted, we found a ranch road that led to the Coyote Hills road. Harland Tompkins used his new longitude/latitude position locator to tell us exactly where we were on the topo map. We bounced over the Coyote Hills road, which Don Buck said was probably the Real McCoy for the Southern Route, and soon after found Vista Tank, where Emory noted "water for 50 animals." It was a very pretty scene, with ranchers' horses gamboling about. Near the end of the road we saw Playas Lake, a glistening streak in the distance. Don was excited to note some good swales, which would rate a 2-1/2, according to OCTA standards.

Now it was time to leave. The gang drove back to Bowlins Trading Post, where we had left our cars, munched more lunchables, voted the trip a success, hugged everyone all around, and reluctantly left for home.

1. It can be located in section 36, Jug Canyon Quadrangle, New Mexico-Sierra County, 7.5 minute series, 1989.

2. Charles S. Peterson, *The Mormon Battalion Trail Guide* (Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society, 1972), p. 33.

3. Cornelius Cox, "From Texas to California in 1849," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 29 (1925-1926), 135.

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