

The Heart of the Southwest

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Magazine

A 1776 SAGA

Domínguez - Escalante Expedition

**MESILLA VALLEY IN COLOR
SAM McCLOUD IN TAOS
THE LADY WHO COLLECTS CAROUSELS**





10 Santa Fe as it was in 1776. Painting by Wilson Hurley from *Without Noise of Arms*, Northland Press.



A 1776 SAGA

by Walter Briggs

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This article is adapted from *Without Noise of Arms, The 1776 Domínguez-Escalante Search for a Route from Santa Fe to Monterey*, by Walter Briggs, illustrated with oil paintings by Wilson Hurley and published by Northland Press. This adaptation concerns the explorers' experiences in what is now New Mexico.

While Revolutionary War was inflaming the East Coast, history was being made in that very 1776 here in what would become our West. Epitomizing it was an event fully as arduous — indeed, as gallant — as almost anything taking place two-thirds of a continent away. We call it the Domínguez-Escalante Expedition.

Colonization of California finally had begun at San Diego in 1769 and at Monterey, New Spain's new headquarters there, the next year. Threats of Russian invasion from Alaska and British penetration via some long-posited Northwest Passage — it was imperative to populate, supply and fortify the new colony.

Obverse winds made transporting settlers by the Pacific altogether too hazardous. Desert stretches from Sonora to present-day Los Angeles made a freshly-pioneered overland route equally hazardous. A way to Monterey had to be traced from New Mexico across what the viceroy in Mexico City called "those mysterious regions" that encompassed latter-day Colorado, Utah, northern Arizona and western California.

Spanish-born Fray Silvestre Vélez de Escalante, about 25, was a missionary at Zuni Pueblo. About 36, Fray Francisco Atanasio Domínguez, a cultured Creole from sophisticated Mexico City, was in New Mexico inspecting their Franciscan order's scattered missions.

Summoned to Santa Fe, Escalante enthusiastically broached an expedition. That very first night Domínguez agreed. They apparently decided without sanction from their civil and clerical superiors in Mexico City. Fray Francisco would lead the expedition, Fray Silvestre keep its diary.

Escalante had recommended 20 well-armed men. That they went with only eight others — unarmed, at that — points up a lack not of able bodies but of funds to equip them. "Going without noise of arms" didn't particularly perturb Escalante, for "there must be a sufficient force or none at all."

They were to have set forth on July 4th, 1776, but a Comanche attack at La Cienega, 15 miles southwest of Santa Fe, contributed to a delay to July 29th.

Their first day's route being well-beaten, Escalante didn't begin jotting down notes until beyond Abiquiu, New Mexico's northwesternmost outpost. We see him now, sitting on a stump as he inscribes his lines at nightfall.

On August 1st, 1776, our travelers headed west up the Chama River. Beneath the 9,857-foot Cerro de Pedernal (Peak of Flint) the Chama makes a sharp S. They scrambled up an embankment a few hundred yards west of one of present-day New Mexico's most photographed escarpments.

Their local Indian guides were well-advised. Though continuing along the Chama would pare distance, the caravan soon would have faced a narrow canyon that, say today's river-runners, offers some of the nation's

wildest, if relatively unknown, white water.

They halted for their daily siesta near Arroyo Seco, Dry Stream. Noting gypsum deposits nearby, they passed through present Ghost Ranch and east of Echo Amphitheater, then returned to Arroyo Seco near where it empties into Arroyo del Canjilón, Deer Antler. The Dry Stream probably was dry at this season but "Today a good (heavy) shower fell upon us." Escalante's "good" means welcome as well.

On August 2nd, their trail parting from the Canjilón for a stretch, our travelers lost it, themselves and "track of four animals" [they were riding horses and trailing pack mules and a cattle-commissary] in a scrub-oak thicket. Having rediscovered the trail and animals,

... we came to a small plain of abundant pasturage which is very pleasing to the sight, because it produces some flowers whose color is between purple and white and which, if they are not carnations, are very much like carnations of that color (probably the pink). Here there are also groves of lemitas (skunkbush or squawbush), a red fruit the size of the blackthorn. In freshness and taste it is very similar to the lemon, so that in this country it is used as a substitute for lemons in making refreshing drinks. Besides these fruits there is the chokecherry, much smaller than the Mexican variety, and another berry which they call manzanita ("little apple," bearberry), whose tree resembles the lemita though the leaf is more like that of celery and the size of the berry is that of ordinary chick-peas. Some are white and others black, the taste being bitter-sweet and piquant but agreeable.

Those dense scrub oaks are still to be seen; the meadow, alas, has been plowed under. Escalante would glory in nature's wonderment again but nowhere with such sustained eloquence. Perhaps it's that, as fatigue compounded and conflicts arose, he was not up to it after long marches.

From "where these flowers begin" our caravan veered northwest to the Rio de la Cebolla, Wild Onion, then camped along the Rio de las Nutrias. Beavers, for their numerous ponds. Beavers, it is a pleasure to relate, still dam the Nutrias' upper reaches.

Next day, descent to the familiar Chama.

... its pretty meadow ... is of good land for crops with opportunities for irrigation. It produces much flax (for linen and cordage) and good and abun-

dant pasturage, and there are also the other advantages necessary for the founding and maintenance of a settlement.

Near the ford were "large hidden sinks" in which one companion's horse was "completely submerged." Diarist Escalante, lacking the piñon-pungent wit of observer Domínguez, made nothing of the raillery doubtless directed at the unlucky hidalgo for his misadventure in pebble-covered quicksand.

Three pine-covered mesas, fronted by three small hills to the north, curved around the valley toward the Chama. They are landmarks to this day near Los Ojos village. The guides told of two lagunas behind the mesas, today's Stone and Stinking lakes on the Jicarilla Apache Reservation. Escalante took their word that land thereabout was "very suitable for raising large and small stock." He was ever the land-developer.

Riding between the two more northerly mesas, our journeyers on August 4th came to a third lake also on the Jicarilla reservation. They named it for a companion named Olivares. "Although its water has not a very pleasant taste it is fit to drink." Today it is Horse Lake but its water is still brackish.

At some 7,760 feet they crossed the Continental Divide, of course without knowing it, and emerged at the Arroyo del Belduque, Hunting Knife — perhaps for its sharply-eroded defiles. They descended what is now the Amargo (Bitter) River through Dulce, present Jicarilla Apache reservation headquarters, to Cañon del Engaño. Escalante gives no clue to why the canyon was called Deceit.

Gushing down from the northeast and crooking an elbow here is the Navajo River. On August 5th our cavalcade forewent following the Navajo, perhaps because its canyon was deemed too narrow for their cattle, and clambered up a mesa to the west.

... we continued ... through canyons, over hills, and through very difficult brush. The guides lost the trail and even seemed to have forgotten the slight knowledge which they appeared to have of the country.

Escalante's petulance is to be appreciated. This writer, while searching out landmarks of the mesa route, led friends astray several times over.

Though the trail was known generally, it was no Camino Real, no King's Highway deepened by two-wheeled carretas.

The lost ones finally spied the San Juan River below and descended, crossing into a Colorado-to-be and a Southern Ute Reservation-to-come just short of a ford.

The expedition wandered far to the north and even east — away from Monterey — in search of Utes who could guide them to another Ute tribe that lived beside a lake "in pueblos like those of New Mexico." Past the Cunnison River, the farthest any known Hispano had wandered, they became true explorers. East of Colorado's Grand Mesa they found those Utes and a guide to those lakeside Lagunas.

After crossing into today's Utah near Dinosaur National Monument,

Right — The ruins of the chapel of Santa Rosa de Lima de Abiquiu, the original Abiquiu church. **Below** — The distinctive contour of Pedernal marks the horizon.



Sheila Tryk





they hopped amid the Uintas' foothill crevasses and descended the Wasatch Mountains to our Utah Lake. Here they found no multiroomed, multi-storied pueblos, but a people of "docility" and a valley lush for the settling. The Lagunas told them of a "noxious" lake to the north, our Great Salt Lake.

H.L. James

Coming up on what we call the Escalante Desert, they met a band of full-bearded Utes whom they took to be a mysterious colony of Europeans long believed to exist somewhere up here.

On October 8th, victims of a three-day blizzard, they looked up to heavy snow on the San Francisco Mountains rising 5,000 feet above the plain to their west.



... we (friars) feared that long before we arrived the passes would be closed and we would be delayed for two or three months in some sierra ... and so we would expose ourselves to death from hunger if not from cold.

Sheila Tryk

They would turn back to Santa Fe. When some of the companions objected, lots were cast. [By what means we don't know, but they weren't too far from a Las Vegas-to-be.] God's will prevailed in the gambling.

Climactic to their adventures — the canyonlands of the Colorado River. On November 7th, just north of the present Arizona line, they forced a crossing after 13 days' searching for a ford. To this day the site, now under man-made Lake Powell, is known as The Crossing of the Fathers.



They next came to the Hopi mesas,

H.L. James

Opposite top — The travelers crossed here, in the area now known as Ghost Ranch. **Opposite bottom** — Echo Amphitheater was known to the local Indians, who were said to have practiced their oratory in the big echoing hollow at the base of these cliffs. **Top right** — On August 2, 1776, Escalante wrote: "Having passed through the grove, we came to a small plain of abundant pasturage ...". **Center** — The travelers followed the Rio Chama on their journey north. **Bottom** — The explorers called this lake Laguna de Olivares, noting, "Although its water has not a very pleasant taste, it is fit to drink." Today known as Horse Lake, it is on the Jicarilla Apache Reservation.



then a part of New Mexico's Franciscan jurisdiction and so much a part of the New Mexico environment today as to seem perversely willed to Arizona. The Hopis, once vassals of New Spain, were perhaps the most politically obdurate and anti-Christian of all Indians encountered by the Spaniards anywhere in this hemisphere. Escalante had returned from a 1775 visit to report: "I achieved only the sorrow of leaving them in their obstinacy."

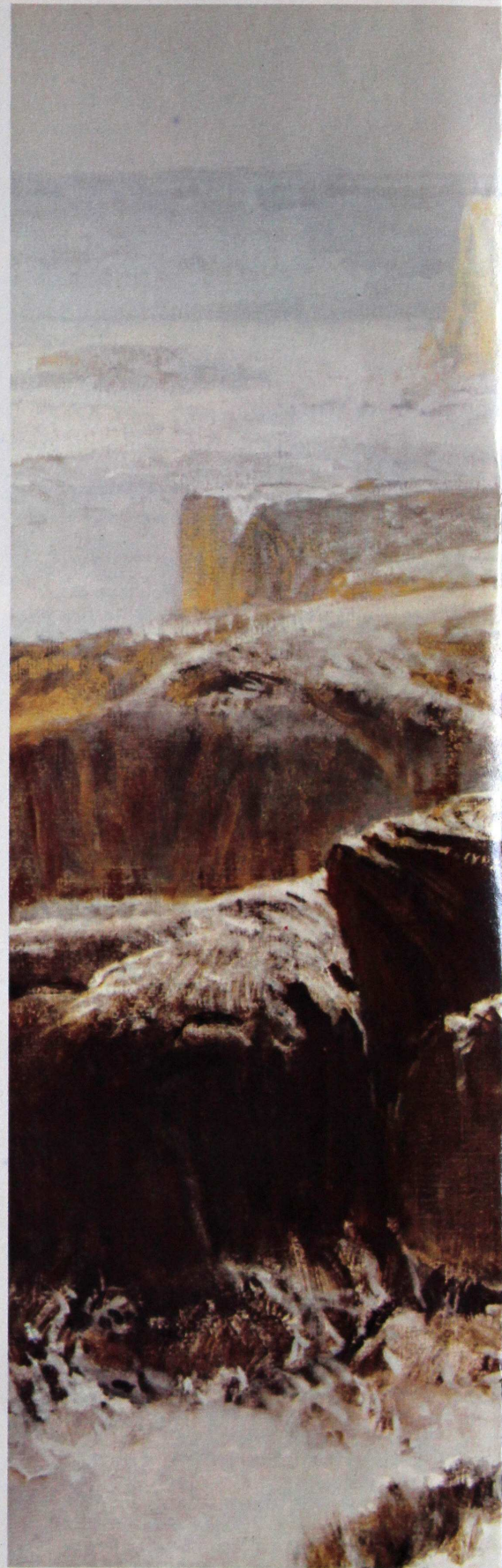
At Walpi Pueblo on November 18th our travelers were told that the Hopis "were now at fierce war" with



The travelers were homeward bound when they reached Zuni, a pueblo known to them. James Zar goes back in time to paint a Zuni Indian as he might have looked in 1776.

the Navajos, "who had killed and captured many of their people." The Hopis had been hoping for just such a visit "to beg from the Señor Governor (in Santa Fe) some aid or defense."

Seeing in the plea "one of the finest of opportunities" to induce the Hopis to return to the faith and to colonial obeisance, the padres promised to speak to the governor on



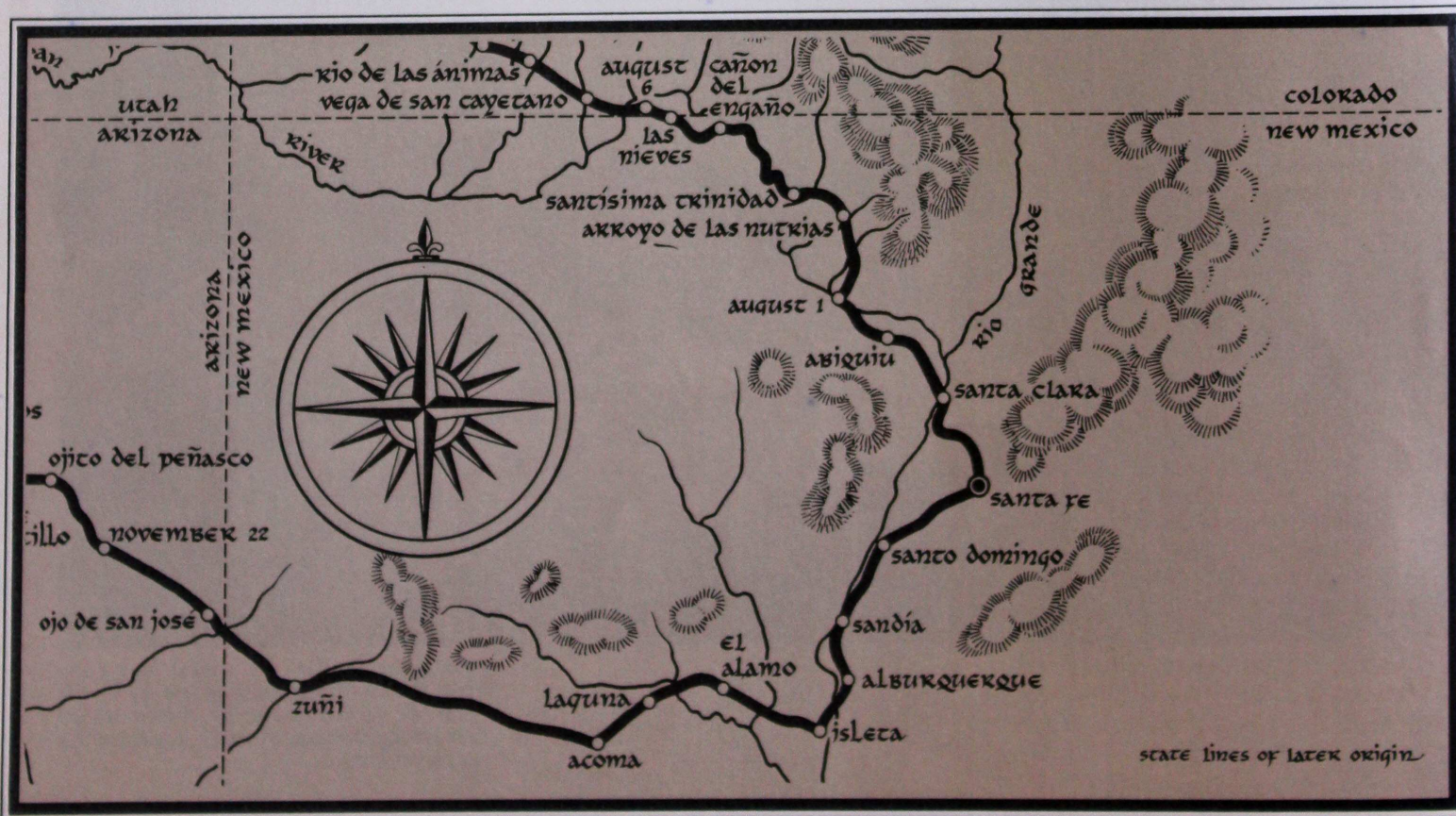


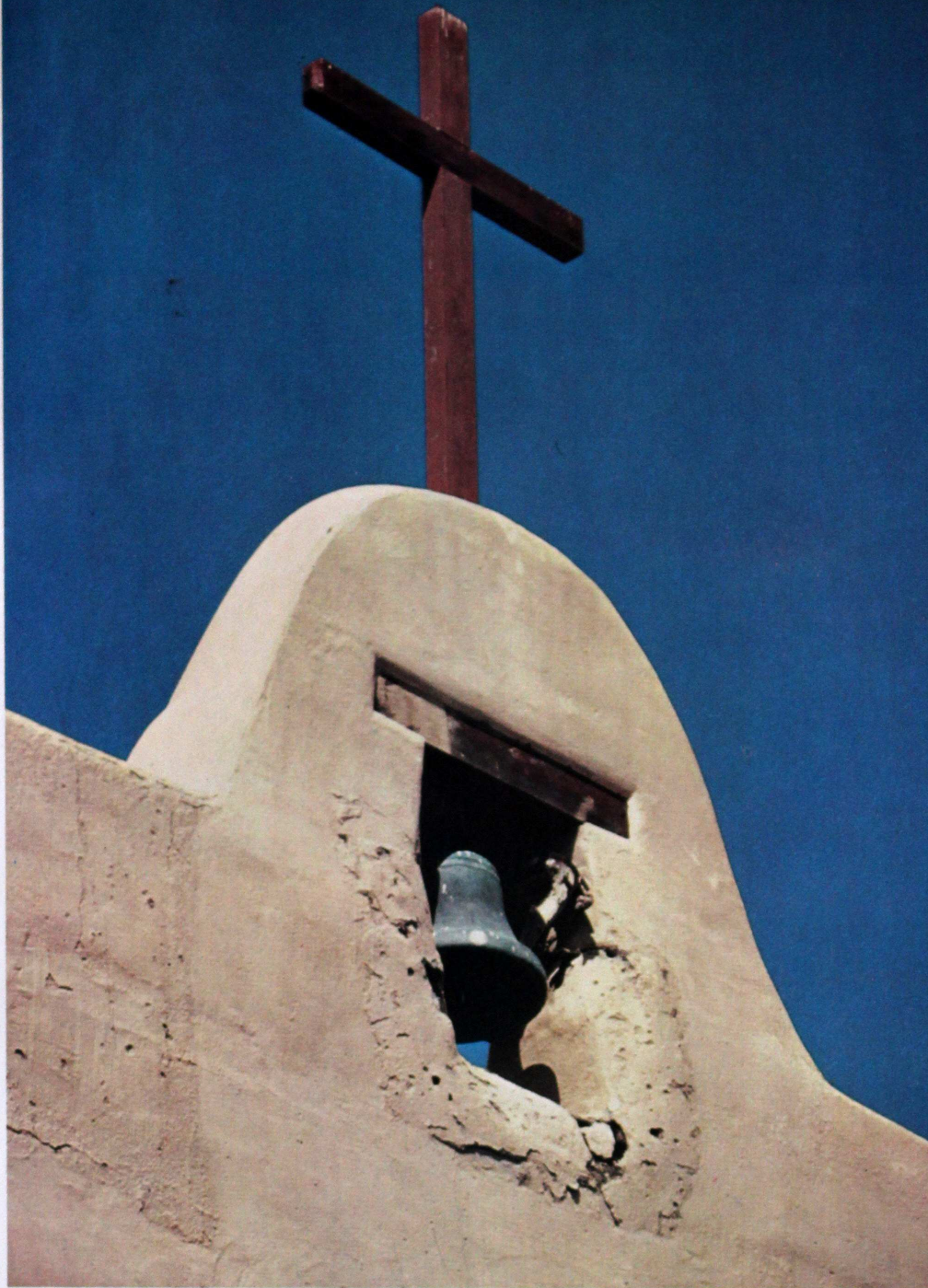
Acoma, the Sky City, as it must have been when the tired travelers marched by in the winter of 1776. Painting by Wilson Hurley from *Without Noise of Arms*, published by Northland Press.



Tired, cold and hungry, the weary men marched across the December landscape west of Albuquerque.

Mark Nohl





the basis of these conditions. Despite the Navajo peril, the Hopis would have none of Spanish rule. And, says Escalante,


... they gave us to understand that, since there were many more heathen nations than Christian, they wanted to follow the more numerous party ...

In seeking to take advantage of Hopi afflictions, the friars had, in our parlance, overplayed their hand.

Continuing on to Zuni, the expedition holed up for three weeks while Escalante completed the diary. Then it was on to Acoma, Laguna and Isleta pueblos, what Albuquerqueans today call Old Town, finally Sandia and Santo Domingo pueblos. [Of all this final stretch Escalante tells us nothing, obviously because the route was well-known.] They reached Santa Fe on January 2nd, 1777.

They had traveled upward of 2,000 miles, covering more virgin territory than Lewis and Clark would pioneer three decades later. Yet the viceroy's northerly route through those mysterious regions never would be achieved, for Spain shortly became bogged down in war with the British. [Not in the cause of American independence, Heaven forbid!]

Escalante died at 30 while en route to Mexico City. Domínguez, having stressed priestly drunkenness and sexual misconduct in his visitation reports, was consigned to the oblivion of frontier parishes; he died at about 65 at Janos presidio in Chihuahua.

Our expedition — what did it accomplish? If nothing more, it left to us a tale of high adventure on a high road that exposed the unknown. In these technological times, many of us demand such romance as spiritual sustenance ... sustenance in the sense of Homer's epics and the narratives of a Frémont in our West, a Stanley in Africa, a Lawrence in Araby. What better Bicentennial gift might we ask from our West than the Domínguez-Escalante saga? 



← The missions of Laguna (below) and Isleta (above) doubtless were welcome sights to the small band of men, anxious to get home.