

KUNM Radio Essay Transcript:
Written and Read By Rosie Dempsey

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THE OLD SPANISH TRAIL PORTAL

"I marked my ninth spring roaming the folds of the high desert of the Southwest by observing an ancient native people's calendar. Directed by a crevice in the two-story boulders above, the light grew, reaching across a stone into a hard-carved pocket.

"This season, instead of the flora and fauna, my mind's eye seeks a corridor of New Mexico history. I look for The Old Spanish Trail and find an extensive exhibit just opened at the Palace of the Governors on the Santa Fe plaza.

"Near Abiquiu, where the first roundtrip expedition set off overland in 1829 to the coastal missions of Los Angeles, I find informative signs and displays at Bode's Store, Abiquiu Dam and the Piedra Lumbre Education & Visitors Center at the Ghost Ranch compound.

"In Espanola, the annual meeting of the Old Spanish Trail Association hosts the President of the National Congress of American Indians. Spotlighting the importance of tribal communities, this gathering also marks the 40th anniversary of the national historic trail system enacted under President Johnson in the heady year of 1968.

"Much more recently designated, The Old Spanish Trail is less well-known than the four other national trails that transect our region. Yet, the Old Spanish Trail made Santa Fe the epicenter of overland continental trade at a pivotal point in history. Previously, all trade went south to Mexico City to connect with international markets.

"The Old Spanish Trail traversed ten rivers and six states, through arduous terrain. Its traders built lucrative relationships with the coastal missions, and ranchos, herded east thousands of wrangled horses and mules.

"With the end of war with Mexico, the U.S. took the whole of the southwest as our prize, and easier routes to the coast opened.

"Critical to our knowledge of The Old Spanish Trail are the dairies and letters of the early literate explorers: Friars Domínguez and Escalante, Santa Fe traders Armijo and Robidoux, trappers Rivera and Yount, and surveyors Fremont and Carson.

"Thinking of the surefooted, lowly mule that carried the high-quality woolen serapes, blankets, quilts and rugs of New Mexico to the lucrative coastal missions and ranches, I recall the pet burro in the front yard of my childhood, me in pigtails astride him. But it is in hiking chunks of vast desert myself, that I can more fully imagine the men and their mule pack trains trekking twenty-miles a day, from spring to seep.

"Today, sections of The Old Spanish Trail corridor still convey the kind of solitary strength such journeys necessitated. You'll find them embedded in footpaths that were once Pueblo, Ute, Apache, Navaho, Paiute and Mohave provenance.

"Bearing witness to the same horizons as those Old Spanish Trail travelers, I sit silently with the knowledge of brutalities wrought on indigenous peoples, of the slave trade practiced by all sides, of the fur trappers who plundered the west, and became the vanguard of the Anglo thrust to the Pacific.

"The Old Spanish National Historic Trail gathers together subtle threads of history more complex than the mythic version so favored by popular culture. A much richer tapestry of origin emerges for all to explore and contemplate."