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# Life and death on the Old Spanish Trail

*Group gathers to trade tales of ancestors' adventures, tragedies along historic trade route*

**By David Collins**  
The New Mexican

OHKAY OWINGEH — One day late in 1843, 12-year-old Serafin Chacón decided to tag along for an unapproved trip from New Mexico to California. Told no, he couldn't accompany his father on the perilous journey to trade woven goods for horses and mules, young Serafin followed anyway, just out of sight of the traders.

About a day into the trip, Santiago Chacón spotted his son trailing the party and escorted him at least part of the way home. The father then

continued on his way to Los Angeles. He never returned.

Serafin grew up an orphan in the hard-bitten Territorial culture of what is now Northern New Mexico. He lived to the age of 102, working as a blacksmith.

Details of Santiago Chacón's demise were mostly lost along the trail. The Chacón family's oral history preserved only the barest notion of what had happened. "We knew they had been on a trading trip to California and had been killed," Claudio P. Chacón, great-great-great-grandson

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**Donald Davidson, right, manager of the Old Spanish Trail Association, hands his card to David Romero, who was attending the group's annual conference at Ohkay Owingeh on Saturday.**

# Trail: Traders developed route to California around 1821

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of Serafin, said Saturday.

The trail on which his ancestor died became known as the Old Spanish Trail, which rambled some 2,700 miles through six Western states.

Claudio Chacón shared stories about that trail at the annual gathering of the Old Spanish Trail Association, held at Ohkay Owingeh's new convention center north of Española.

The nonprofit group was founded in 1994 to preserve the history of three branches of the 19th-century trade route.

At least one association member crossed the Atlantic for this weekend's gathering, traveling from England to join other heirs of families whose history came together long ago on a rugged trail across the Continental Divide.

"An old humble path can become a highway to healing," Donald Davidson, the association's full-time manager, told members of the group.

Today, Claudio Chacón, his three children and the three grandchildren he is raising in northern Rio Arriba County believe they know a detailed narrative of where and how their ancestor died, apparently at the hands of Paiute Indians. This rediscovered history has brought closure to an uncertain episode in his family's past, Claudio Chacón said.

The knowledge gives his family a sense of pride in how their ancestors contributed to the history of the United States, he said, and how they suffered along the way.



Natalie Guillén/The New Mexican

From left, Old Spanish Trail Association president Doug Knudson and members James Jefferson, Cliff Walker and Mark Henderson discuss the trail at the Ohkay Owingeh Conference Center at the pueblo north of Española.

Growing up in Cebolla, Claudio Chacón's childhood imagery of historic encounters between Indians and non-Indians was informed more by media of the era than by family history.

A book about Kit Carson provided the first clue that guided Claudio Chacón down the path that eventually led to the spot where he thinks his great-great-great grandfather died in the Mojave Desert on Resting Springs Ranch, about 60 miles west of Las Vegas, Nev.

Carson had learned of the attack on the New Mexico traders by way of two survivors who had been herding horses at the time and escaped on their mounts. The survivors' tale made it into the records of a

U.S. Army outfit that was scouting the trail in anticipation of the U.S. war with Mexico.

Members of the Old Spanish Trail Association keep alive knowledge of such obscure details. When Claudio Chacón contacted the association, after learning Carson had visited the scene in Nevada and buried the dead, members helped him fill in missing details.

"I was finally able to tell my father how his great-great-grandfather had been killed," Chacón said. "They found my (great-great-great-) grandpa, who had tried to take cover inside the little shelter they had made. He had several arrows in him."

He bears no animosity toward the attackers who

apparently killed his ancestor, Claudio Chacón said. His family had been invaders and, as far as he knows, might have fought and killed Indians during what was a brutal era, he said.

From conflicts of the past, Davidson told association members at their annual session, "what can hold us together is the history we share."

Traders developed the trail around 1821 after Mexico took control of what was formerly Spanish territory, including what now is New Mexico, Arizona, California, Utah and Colorado, National Park Service planner Sharon Brown said.

In 2002, the Park Service helped designate the route a national historic trail and is

## TO LEARN MORE

A display of artifacts and interpretive displays exploring the influential pre-gold-rush route to California at the Palace of the Governors, 105 W. Palace Ave., opened May 25 and continues through Oct. 26.

For more information about the Park Service's effort to draft a plan for developing interpretive sites along the Old Spanish National Historic Trail, visit [nps.gov/olsp](http://nps.gov/olsp).

The Old Spanish Trail Association maintains information about the trail online at [www.oldspanishtrail.org](http://www.oldspanishtrail.org).

developing a management plan that will include interpretive displays in partnership with local volunteers.

Early traders established tentative routes, then subsequent travelers found better ways across the rugged terrain. For about 20 years, pack trains carried woolen goods west and returned with horses and mules of the sturdy stock found in California, herding them back to be used in eastward journeys along the Santa Fe Trail, Knudson said.

When the United States prevailed over Mexican troops, Brown said, traders found more viable southern routes and largely abandoned the Old Spanish Trail's circuitous route north of the Grand Canyon.

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