

Early Texas Roads Evolved From Trails

by Ross Francis McSwain (1929-2012)

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The Pinta Trail has long been forgotten, but remains today as one of the most picturesque routes through the Texas Hill Country. The trail extended for approximately 180 miles northwest from San Antonio to the site of the Santa Cruz de San Saba Mission near Menard. It has served as a transportation route through the Hill Country from the time of the Plains Indians to the present. Indians, Spanish explorers, Mexicans, German immigrants, Forty-niners, and U.S. soldiers used the trail.

Early-day pioneer Army engineer Lt. W.H.C. Whiting described a portion of the trail when he was ordered

to find a permanent route from the Gulf of Mexico to El Paso by the upper region of western Texas. He was one of the first white men to travel into Comanche territory and live to tell about his ventures. Whiting left San Antonio on Feb. 13, 1849, for Fredericksburg, then a small frontier village populated by German immigrants.

After making sure his expedition was adequately supplied, Whiting and his small party of 16 men headed westward on Feb. 21, 1849. Their first camp was about five miles from Fredericksburg on Live Oak Creek.

Noting in his diary that the countryside was capped by mostly limestone, Whiting and a guide scouted a valley near Threadgill's Creek, a stream that flowed into the Llano River and which is located in what is now Mason County. Whiting was seeing for the first time the Pinta Trail. It would lead him into Menard County toward the Old Spanish presidio and mission.

Many Texas residents have traveled the same trail, but they know it now as U.S. Highways 87 and 290, Texas Highway 29 and Interstate 10.

The Pinta Trail's origin dates back to the time before Spanish explorers came into the area in the 1700s. The pathway was used by nomadic Indians, especially the Comanche and Apache peoples. Later, the trail was the main highway for Mexican expeditions.

The trail has had several names - Pinta, Pinto, Pintos, Pinetas and the Paint Road. Apparently the route was named for the small pinto horse that many of the Indians

rode in early days. The Pinta Trail seemed to be the most preferred name among early settlers.

There is little surviving physical evidence of the trail and no markers designating its location. The orientation of Main Street in Fredericksburg and the house arrangement in the Cain City area provide some clues to the trail's location. Natural geographic features such as river bends and the Cain City Mountain pass in Gillespie County serve as directional indicators. Also, the Puerta Pinta, or Paint Mountain Pass located northwest of San Antonio near the three branches of the Salado River headwaters, was a prominent landmark on an 1829 Mexican map.

Benjamin L. Enderle, a Gillespie County surveyor for more than 60 years, heard about the Pinta Trail from local ranchers and passed on the story about the route to his high school students and friends. In addition, field notes of Republic of Texas land grant surveys and county maps noted the trail location. Enderle referred to the trail as the Pinta Pony Trail.

Ferdinand von Roemer, a German naturalist who explored the Texas Hill Country from 1845 to 1847, described the Pinta Trail as an old Indian trail and related its use by German immigrants, especially teamsters.

There's little doubt that the trail played an important role in the early exploration of West Texas. Spanish explorations through the Texas Hill Country began in 1758. The Spanish campaigns against the Lipan Apaches reportedly followed a northwesterly route from San Antonio de Bexar to the San Saba River.

Among the earliest freighters serving West Texas - by the Pinta Trail - was George T. Howard, who hauled building materials, forage and supplies to Fort McKavett and to Fort Chadbourne in 1856. The end of long-distance army freighting in Texas came in 1884 when virtually every Texas post was just a short distance from a railroad.

In the 1870s and 1880s, mass transit was limited to crowding a lot of people into a wagon or stagecoach. Many of these wheeled vehicles traveled the Pinta Trail, as well as other early-day roadways.

The next time you travel portions of the roads crossing this old trail, try to visualize what those early-day travelers were seeing. It must have been spectacular. ☆

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