

Analysis of Whipple's Route from October 28-30, 1851 In Light of Field Observations

October 28: I begin tracing the trail of Lt. Amiel Whipple at the on top of a mountain ridge above Mescal Warm Spring at approximately N33° 09' 28" W110° 37' 22." This is the ridge at the top of the picture below. Whipple's United States Boundary Survey crew had reached this point by climbing mountainsides



and following ridge tops from their previous campsite on top of the mountain west of Dick Spring. The trail that seems easiest on the topographic map would have brought them almost directly to this point.

Below and west of this mountaintop spot is a relatively gentle slope leading down to the spring. The picture at left shows the slope as seen from a clearing at Mescal Warm Spring

(that's my brother Steve). This looks like the best route down the mountain both on the map and at the site. They would have descended this slope, crossed a small creek and found themselves on the plateau at the clearing shown in this photo. Nearby is the spring, surrounded today by a tangle of underbrush and guarded by a huge Cottonwood tree.

At the time of our visit the rivulet (right) that flowed from the spring was about 1 foot across and 6 inches deep and flowing briskly. We followed it southwest from the spring until it entered an impassable thicket of sticker bushes not far from the edge of the plateau. We assumed it must fall over the cliff but found no waterfall below so it apparently sinks into the plateau during times of low flow.



Around the rivulet is a haphazard grove of fruit trees that I suspect are the Walnut trees described by Whipple (see picture at right). The Indians of the last century could have easily dug trenches to irrigate these trees and other crops from the spring's output, although I didn't notice any canals when I was there. According to Whipple's diary, it appears that he camped on the plateau, possibly in the area the top picture was taken from.

October 29: Whipple writes: "300 feet below us the water from the spring in the bounds leaps over a precipice 50 feet high turning to stone everything in its course." Since the spring is only about 350 feet above the creek this waterfall would have to be located at Mescal Creek. I walked near this area and saw no waterfall or cave, although when I was there I was looking for the cave higher up, at the base of the spring plateau. The picture at left shows Mescal Creek where we reached it after descending from the

spring. I was not looking for the cave in this area but I now believe it was near here, possibly a little south of this picture, which was taken at N33° 9' 9" W110° 38' 21". We followed an arroyo that is the likely path of the spring rivulet down to the creek and saw nothing. It is possible that subsequent



erosion has obliterated the cave Whipple described although further investigation might be desirable.

It is also possible that when Whipple was there the Indians had diverted the rivulet to flow into the creek to the east and thence down to Mescal Creek. In this case the waterfall and cave would be near N33° 9'2" W110° 38' 11". We did not investigate that area. Although Whipple says the waterfall is ¼ mile from the Gila, it is actually a mile or more, depending on its actual location.

In their travel this day I had originally thought that the surveyors would have followed the approximate path of the jeep trail north along the hillside to the ranch house and beyond but the creek makes a much easier trail for foot and mule travel. I believe they followed Mescal Creek (Whipple's Cascade River) to the point where our road from the north meets it.

Whipple continues: "Our path led over another range of mountains, the gorge of the ravine being impassible." I'm not sure if the "gorge" Whipple refers to is that of Mescal Creek or of the tributary that comes in from the north. If he is referring to Mescal Creek, as I think is the case, there are two possible routes out of the canyon. One is the ridge followed by the dirt road on the USGS map and the other is



the tributary arroyo that parallels the road on the east side. Both routes appear navigable by mules although there are parts of the arroyo that were not visible to me from the road above it.

As they topped the dividing ridge they would be looking north down the gentle valley of Tulapai Creek (left), whose headwaters are nearby. This

valley offers an easy trail to the north as shown in the photo at right. The valley continues much like the photo with Sycamore trees appearing more frequently in its lower reaches.

Whipple says "At length as we descended an arroyo densely lined with Hackberry and Sycamore and entered a grove at its delta where is a cool & flowing spring...". This description is a puzzle to me. The mouth of Tulapai Creek does not appear anything like a delta as Whipple describes it. The word "delta"

conjures an image of a wide fan of sand at the mouth of a river. The confluence of Tulapai and Ranch Creeks consist of typical rocky beds with very little sand. There is, however, a grove of Sycamore trees here. The photo at right shows the confluence of the two creeks - Tulapai Creek is on the left and Ranch Creek is on the right. The USGS map shows no spring in this area.



This is a great spot for an Indian village, being at the junction of four valleys, each leading to an important pass:

Tulapai leads to Mescal Spring, upper Ranch Creek to Pioneer Pass and the Dripping Springs valley, lower Ranch Creek to the northern mountains, and an unnamed tributary from the east comes from a mountain pass on the way from their village on the San Carlos.

Since the description of this campsite does not fully fit the Tulapai-Ranch location, I checked the map to see if there might be a "delta" with a spring farther downstream. Ranch Creek widens and gets sandy as it approaches the airport but I don't recall a grove of Sycamores and I don't see a spring on the map. Without mileages from the diary in this section it is difficult to be sure of their route. Until further data is available, I will assume they camped at the Tulapai-Ranch confluence. Whipple may have used the word "delta" simply to describe the mouth of the creek and the "spring" might have been the creek emerging from underground.



October 30: "Turning westward we followed a branch of Pinal Creek which was densely covered with mezquite & sycamore and higher up with live oak walnut ash and fir." This apparently describes upper Ranch Creek. The appearance of this creek is much the same as at the Tulapai-Ranch confluence

as far as we followed it to the Indian Reservation fence near Van Winkle Ranch (see picture at right). The valley is enclosed by gentle hills and would provide an excellent trail to the west. Whipple's route would have crossed State Highway 77 near the crossing of upper Ranch Creek. I have not yet been able to investigate the route west of the highway but I believe they may have roughly followed the future path of the old Pioneer Pass Road south to the Dripping Springs Wash.

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