

## The San Carlos Trail

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2006

Several 19th century travelers mention seeing a well-traveled Indian Trail near the Gila River between San Carlos and the San Pedro River. This trail was one segment of a larger trail system that criss-crossed Arizona connecting northern villages like Zuni and Moqui (Hopi) with southern Arizona and northern Mexico.<sup>1</sup> Early travelers followed Indian trails whenever possible so the location of this trail can be pieced together from brief references to it in their diaries and maps.



The trail discussed here was mentioned in several diaries kept by members of General Kearny's "Army of the West" in 1846 and Lt. Whipple's boundary survey of 1851.

The trail began on the San Carlos River at the mouth of Gilson Wash - the location of today's San Carlos Indian Community. It followed Gilson Wash west and then turned south along Ranch Creek. Lieutenant Whipple mentions a large Indian village at the junction of Ranch and Tulapai Creeks in 1851. Ranch Creek and the trail turn west at that point and follow the creek to its head near today's highway 77. Area residents tell of several Indian ruins on hills along this section of the trail.

At the head of Ranch Creek there are three or more possible valleys to follow south to the Dripping Springs Valley and beyond. The most obvious is El Capitan Wash which heads straight south to the valley. This canyon, however, is steep, narrow and brush-choked and the surrounding hills are rugged. The more likely route seems to be the Silver Creek or Pioneer Creek valley. An old trail that passes along the north side of Old Baldy is a good candidate for the location of the Indian trail. This was the route between the Ranch Creek and Pioneer Creek drainages in the early 20th century. The Old Baldy path drops into Silver Creek and then continues on to Pioneer Creek. It then makes its way south to the Dripping Springs Valley - the later route of the Old Pioneer Road between Globe and Winkelman.<sup>2</sup>

The Ranch Creek segment of the trail is inferred from Kit Carson's presumed shortcut route in 1846 and by observing the trails followed by General Kearny and the boundary surveyors. The Gilson Wash leg is hinted at by Captain A. R. Johnston, who mentions Kit Carson's shortcut: "As he [Carson], on his route from California, made 60 miles to a point 8 miles up the San Francisco without water." Eight miles up the San Carlos (then called the San Francisco) would put Carson's point of emergence at the mouth of Gilson Wash.

The trail follows Dripping Springs Wash until it meets the Gila River and then turns down the Gila going southwest. After 6 miles it turns south on Ash Creek, probably to avoid difficult travel along the river due to excessive vegetation and deep water. Ash Creek provides an easy road for about two miles and then the trail takes a tributary toward the west and passes into the Piper Springs Wash drainage. It follows this wash to the San Pedro River about two miles from its junction with the Gila. This trail segment is documented by Doctor John Griffin in his diary entry for November 4 & 5, 1846. Griffin writes on the 4th:

*"we saw in the [Dripping Springs] valley--a large trail of cattle & Indians," and on the 5th: "we left camp about 9 AM travelled down the [Gila] river, through a canyon -- still continued on the cattle trail."*

Lieutenant Emory writes:

*"The dry creek by which we crossed to the San Pedro river was the great highway leading from the mountain fastnesses into the plains of Santa Cruz, Santa Anna, and Tucson, frontier towns of Sonora. Along this valley was distinctly marked the same fresh trail, noted yesterday, of horses, cattle, and mules."*

There is also some indication of the existence of a secondary trail that splits off of the main trail in the Dripping Springs Valley and heads west across the Dripping Springs Mountains to join the Gila River near today's town of Riverside. This trail is hinted at in Amiel Whipple's diary of the boundary survey. When the surveyors reached the Dripping Springs Valley their Indian guide turned west toward the mountains instead of southeast toward the Gila River. When Whipple realized this he stopped the guide and camped for the night. The next day he wrote "Our Indian guide evidently intended to lead us to the Gila River below the mouth of the San Pedro." In 1846 Kit Carson took a 60-mile shortcut from the Gila River near Riverside to the San Carlos River. An Indian trail over the Dripping Springs Mountains would explain the first part of this route.

This trail was in use by the Apache Indians when the first American explorers arrived in the mid-1800s. Studies of other Indian trails such as the Palatkwapi<sup>3</sup> and Zuni-Hopi trails show that they were in use for centuries before the Europeans came to the southwest. These old trails certainly connected to the San Carlos Trail and others to form a transportation and trade network that covered the entire southwest.

#### END NOTES

1. Byrkit, James, "The Black River Funnel and the Old Military and Mormon Wagon Road from Fort Apache to the Upper Gila River Valley," (paper delivered at the Arizona History Convention in Safford, Arizona, 2004).
2. My later investigations have suggested that the trail could also have followed El Capital Canyon near the alignment of Highway 77 south of El Capitan Pass.
3. Byrkit, James, "The Palatkwapi Trail," Plateau, Volume 59, Number 4, Museum of Northern Arizona Press, 1988