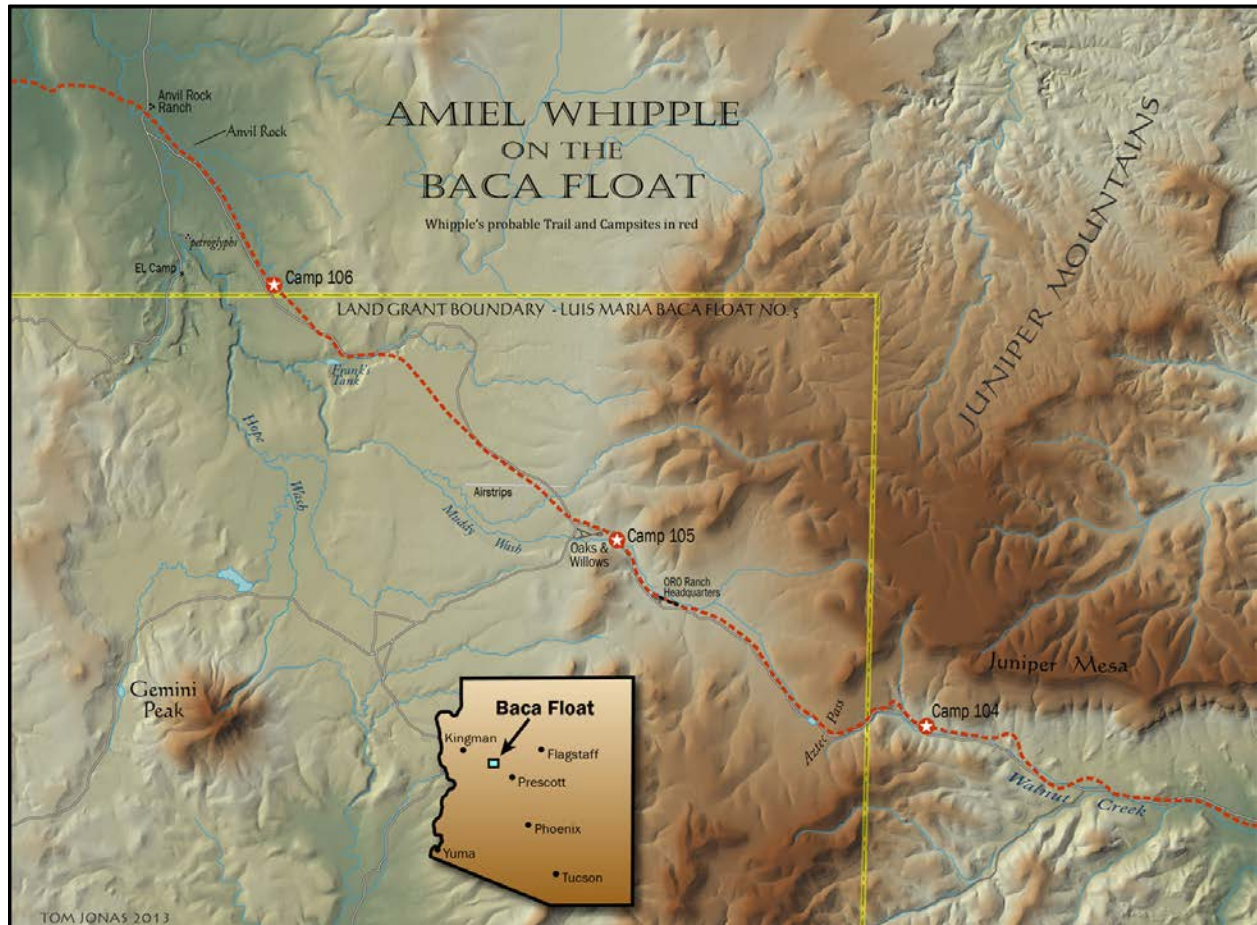


A Visit to the Luis Maria Baca Float #5

June 19, 2006

Personnel: Andrew Wallace, Tom & Becky Geiler, David Miller, Stan & Ruth Brown, Jerry Snow, Tom Jonas.

Purpose: To study Amiel Whipple's Pacific Railroad Survey route and the Prescott-to-Hardyville Toll Road that pass through the historic Baca Float No. 5 northwest of Prescott.



The "Luis Maria Baca Float No. 5" is a 100,000 acre 19th century land grant that is now part of the ORO Ranch (pronounced "oh-are-oh"). A history of the grant and ranch can be found on the Sharlot Hall Museum website at <http://www.sharlot.org/library-archives/days-past/ranch-history-o-ro-ranch-doing-things-the-old-fashioned-way/>. It has been closed to outsiders for many years but the owners kindly granted permission to our group to visit and study thanks to the efforts of local rancher and optometrist Tom Geiler. The trip was organized by Mr. Geiler and Professor Andrew Wallace.

We all met for breakfast at Waffles and More on Iron Springs Road in Prescott. After a hearty breakfast and a preliminary discussion of the trip we traveled out Miller Valley Road in three vehicles. Tom Geiler, our guide, stopped us at the American Ranch to point out the location of a waypoint and post office on the Hardyville Road. We continued on to the northwest until we reached the K4 Ranch on Walnut Creek. We stopped at several places in this vicinity to take pictures from the bridge over Walnut

Creek (Whipple's Pueblo Creek) and to view the ruin on top of Indian Peak with binoculars. Tom G. theorized that Whipple's trail passed around the east side of Indian Peak to the creek before following the creek west.

The first Whipple campsite (#103) was probably near the site of Old Camp Hualapai which has a few buildings on it today. There are ruins and creek courses in this area that match Whipple's descriptions. We took two short side road detours in the area of the confluence of Walnut and Apache Creeks to observe possible campsites. The most likely campsite spots are at Camp Hualapai and within ½ to ¾ mile west.



John & Mary Hunt at Box L Ranch

Continuing down the road about 1.5 miles, we stopped at the LO Ranch and visited with John & Mary Hunt who are long-time friends of the Geilers. They invited us in for coffee, which we had to decline, and showed us a photograph of a mountain lion treed in a saguaro cactus by hunting dogs. These ranchers are often forced to hunt down lions that come into the valley and kill their livestock.

As we headed up the road for the pass we watched for areas along the creek that might provide a good camp for Whipple's large party. A couple of possible areas were found around 1.5 – 2 miles below the summit of Aztec Pass. Whipple's wagons had much difficulty reaching this campsite. The canyon here becomes narrow, steep, and rocky.

Tom G. suspects that the wagons were emptied at Camp 104 and then driven a couple of hundred feet above the north bank of the creek to avoid the steep ravine. They then would have to drop back close to the creek just before today's ORO Ranch gate because of impassable terrain higher up (Tom has been up there). The wagons would have to be tied off to trees to traverse the steep slope in this area. After the traverse, they could probably have resumed driving the wagons up the pass near the north bank of the creek beginning near the Baca Float boundary.



David Miller and Andrew Wallace at the east gate to the ORO Ranch (Baca Float No. 5)

Just past Aztec Pass there is a large tank on the south side of the road. Tom told us this tank is spring-fed and he's never known it to be dry. Arizona is in the middle of a long and severe drought and this tank still contains ample water. He suggests that this would have been a tempting campsite from a stock-management standpoint. Whipple had a large herd of cattle in addition to his harness and riding mules and this area would have provided good water and grass (snow-cover permitting) for the train.



"Oaks & Willows" on the ORO Ranch. Looking southwest toward Gemini Peak.

As we continued along the road following Muddy Creek we were treated to our first view of Gemini Peak through a gap in the mountains to the west about ¾ mile before reaching the headquarters of the ORO Ranch. As we took pictures, Tom went ahead to check in with the ranch owners. We continued along the road and stopped about ½ mile beyond the HQ. This was just before road curved left around a hill as it approached the historic Oaks & Willows Ranch (as I understand it this is an older name for what is now the ORO). Tom says anywhere from this spot to the Oaks & Willows around the curve would have made an excellent camp for Whipple's group. I'm guessing they would have picked the O&W because of the greater availability of wood in that area. There is a fairly dense cluster of cottonwood, oak, and willow trees on the north side of the hill here as opposed to the very sparse juniper, pine and scrub vegetation in the surrounding area. This area is filled with many ranch houses, bunk houses, barns, corrals and such. Near its western edge Tom pointed out a small cabin which was the first ranch house here and has been carefully preserved by the owners.

The road passed the ranch along the north side of the hill we got an unobstructed view of



Gemini Peak

Gemini Peak with its split top at our closest approach to it. This is where Lt. Whipple's field diary mentions a peak he calls "Gemini" and Lt. Tidball calls "Castor & Pollux." Since Whipple's map shows both "Gemini" and "Mt. Hope" there is some confusion in our group about the place names.

Tom tells us that the soil in this area has a high content of fine volcanic ash. The roads here are muddy and difficult when wet but he says if you leave the graded road you'll sink to the floorboards. Lieutenant Sherburne mentioned similar problems with the wagons. As we approached the ranch's new airstrip we stopped for lunch under a lone Juniper along the road. The Geilers had brought the fixings for a nice lunch and we all ate sandwiches, fruit, and cold drinks under the tree.



Frank's Tank

We were now approaching Frank's Tank. Whipple's trail in this area is a little unclear to me. This tank is bounded on the south by the abrupt escarpment of a lava flow that is impassable for wagons along most of its length, although I saw a couple of places where a mounted rider could probably descend and wagons could be let down by ropes. The modern road detours about 1.5 miles to the east around the end of the escarpment and then follows the ravine back to Frank's Tank. At this point I'm

not sure whether Whipple followed this same detour. Soon after passing this tank we reached the north gate of the ORO and we entered the Anvil Rock Ranch.

Just before we reached Frank's Tank, Stan spotted something and we all pulled over where the road reached the top of a low rise. About 100 feet south of the road was a trace of an old road. The trap rocks had been moved to the sides to make a smoother surface for horse and wagon travel. This trace was visible for some distance east but quickly disappeared to the west.



Stan Brown at the Hardyville Road trace

My current (August, 2006) suspected locations for Camp 106 are either at Frank's Tank or on a small tributary that enters Muddy Creek just north of the ORO fence. Muddy Creek flows in a canyon at this point which makes it inaccessible for a road in most places. The canyon is eroded through the lava that caps this area and its banks are worn into fantastic shapes of standing columns, balanced rocks, and a myriad of passageways and catacombs in the cliffs.

Balduin Mollhausen reports finding an entry point into the canyon some distance north of the campsite where he and Dr. Kennerly descended and explored the "labyrinth of chambers" in the canyon walls. They became lost for a time and when they finally emerged to the surface of the plateau they found themselves again near camp. Although it is impossible to determine the place where Mollhausen and Kennerly got down into the canyon, it must be near the mouth of the canyon (the northern end) where walls get lower since Mollhausen mentions that the wagons later got into the creek near the same place.



Anvil Rock Ranch

The road took us north past the end of the red rock canyon and across Muddy Creek. To our right a short distance away was Anvil Rock. This is apparently not the same feature of that name that was mentioned by early travelers, but is a low, isolated bluff of lava rock. The original rock nearby is reportedly tipped over due to water undercutting. A short distance brought us to the Anvil Rock Ranch where we were warmly received by the owners, Pete and Jean Mestas. Pete said he had a photo of the original Anvil Rock and brought out his photo albums for us to look through. Their living room contains a large mountain lion pelt and several other artifacts and photos from the region.

Pete directed us to a road into the red rock canyon that would take us to the abandoned EL Ranch, which he said was the original Anvil Rock Ranch. As we entered the canyon we stopped in several places to marvel at the red rocks along the canyon walls. The setting of the EL Ranch was very



EL Camp on the Anvil Rock Ranch



Rhyolite columns and petroglyphs on Muddy Creek

picturesque. After a little investigation we turned back north and followed a side road to the northeast, beginning just outside the EL gate. This took us across the bed of Muddy Creek and on to the foot of the canyon wall of rhyolite columns. At its base we found Indian

petroglyphs chipped into the desert varnish on the flat rock faces. Before ending our trip we took the road south again past the EL Ranch and all the way to the ORO gate in the canyon.

It was getting late so we ended our investigations here and headed back to Prescott on the road we came in on. On the way out of the Baca we stopped again at the home of ORO Ranch owner Mrs. Jane I. Groppo and had a chat with her and ranch foreman Wayne Word in front of her beautiful home. We owe them a big "thank you" for allowing us to look around on their property.

-Tom Jonas, August, 2006



The Baca Float Explorers at Aztec Pass. Left to right: Jerry Snow, Tom Geiler, Stan Brown, Ruth Brown, David Miller, Becky Geiler, Andrew Wallace, Tom Jonas