



Passport in Time


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The Old Spanish Trail in Northern New Mexico

Carson National Forest, New Mexico, 2010

By Gail Carbiener, PIT Volunteer

Wind, wind and more wind was gusting down the open sage brush slopes near Tres Piedras (Three Rocks) at 8,000 feet during the first week of May, when twenty PIT volunteers began looking for a needle in a very big haystack. Did we find the needle? Maybe!



From 1829 to about 1840 Mexican muleteers left Santa Fe, New Mexico, for the missions in what would become California. Large pack trains of mules loaded with trade goods such as wool blankets, serapes and other soft woven items went west and brought back large herds of horses and mules. The route and various alternates became known as the Old Spanish Trail. Recently the Old Spanish Trail has been congressionally designated a historic trail, so various government agencies are conducting research to help determine where it is and how to manage it in the future.

The early period of the Old Spanish Trail in this area did not have wagons to leave ruts or swales or wagon parts like the better known Oregon, California or Mormon emigrant trails. Very few diaries exist and those that do identify mostly watering places or very general land marks. Tres Piedras is one of those land marks.

So, with the archaeologists knowledge of the land, twenty of us with metal detectors looked out upon a windswept gentle ridge covered with low sage and a few piñon and ponderosa pines. For five days we covered several miles of similar terrain hoping to find something diagnostic of the early time period. We found lots of "stuff" since the area was logged in the early 1900s using oxen to pull logs to a rail spur. There was also an old telegraph or telephone line through the area. These later activities always provided our detectors with enough "hits" to keep our interest high.

The PIT volunteers, all experienced in metal detecting, came from California, Nevada, Colorado, Oregon and Wisconsin. We tore that haystack apart. Here is what we found that could be from the early Old Spanish Trail: several round lead balls used in black-powder rifles; an iron Rowel (above); and an Apache/Ute metal point fragment (right). These items, along with a few more recent artifacts (including a Navajo-style concha), were all "GPS'ed" for location. Not exactly a "route" yet but we have several more miles to cover in future PIT projects.



On Friday, out of the wind in the historic Aldo Leopold house in Tres Piedras, we all relaxed and enjoyed a wonderful potluck organized by Lorrie, with help from Skip and Mike, the archaeologists, and their wives.

Perhaps next time we will find some more needles in that very big haystack.

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