

Rancho Santa Fe's El Camino Real: California's Oldest Road

by Richard Carrico

Most of us have driven north on El Camino Real from Via de la Valle and wound our way through the hills beyond Linea Del Cielo, pass San Dieguito Park, and over to La Orilla Road. For many of us, the route is nothing more than an asphalt convenience, a paved way of getting somewhere. Few travellers realize that El Camino Real is more than just another quaint Spanish name on another Rancho Santa Fe back road — it is a link with our Spanish heritage, a segment of the oldest road in California.

There were Indian trails that spanned the length and breadth of California and ancient paths across Rancho Santa Fe's rolling hills thousands of years before a Spaniard set foot on California soil — but not true roads. And even though these prehistoric trails were not roads in the conventional sense, it was just such a worn trail that stretched along our coastal plain and became El Camino Real (The Royal Road).

The odyssey of El Camino Real, from prehistoric trail to Spanish road, and ultimately to state highway populated by Pintos and Mercedes, began on July 14, 1769. On that date Spanish explorers commanded by Don Gaspar Portola and led by Indian guides began a trek from their outpost on what is now Presidio Hill in Mission Valley north to Monterey Bay.

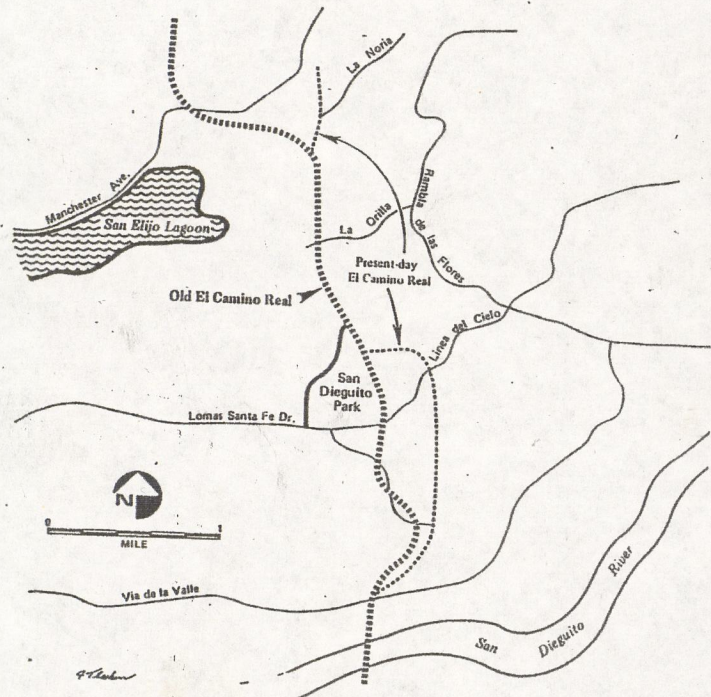
On their way to Monterey, Portola and his men, including a priest, Juan Crespi, and a cartographer, Miguel Costanso, followed rutted Indian trails through San Diego County. In search of fresh water and pasturage for the animals, the explorers travelled inland, avoiding the salt water lagoons on their left and the steep hills to the right.

Arriving at the broad and lush

Dieguito, Portola's party crossed the sandy valley and made their way into the hills on the north side and entered today's Rancho Santa Fe. The explorers generally followed present day El Camino Real to Sun Valley Road, then veered west up Sun Valley to a canyon near Echo Hill Lane. At this point the troops traversed canyons and hills through what is now San Dieguito Park and again linked up with today's El Camino Real. Portola's route basically paralleled El Camino Real up until La Orilla Road.

Spanish colonial capital at Monterey. The officially recognized road was named El Camino Real and became a link between the far-flung Spanish empire on the west coast.

This travel corridor stretched across space and time. Over the years Indian runners carried mail through Rancho Santa Fe's hills on their way to the pueblo of Los Angeles. Spanish and Mexican messengers and militarymen marched along our back roads as they sought in vain to hold their dwindling empire.



Somewhere north of La Orilla, the Spaniards headed along the outer margins of San Elijo Lagoon and left the Rancho Santa Fe area. It would be months before Portola and his men finally arrived at their destination in far off Monterey. They did not make the journey back south on

In later years, El Camino Real fell into disuse as travel moved more westerly and the troublesome lagoons were bridged. The dawn of automobile and train travel relegated the once noble El Camino Real to the status of country backroad.

El Camino Real is still well