

Escalante Way—An Opportunity for the National Park Service

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THE Southwest offers a rich and varied historical supplement to the scenic and recreational assets of its national parks and monuments. Of all sections of the United States except Florida it has the longest written record. It has been the meeting place of several distinct peoples: the Pueblo Indians, the non-sedentary tribes, the Spaniards, the early Anglo-Americans, and recent contingents. The natives still occupy essentially the same localities in which the Europeans found them, and retain the fundamentals of their early civilizations. Indian and Spaniard have lived here side by side for three and a half centuries; neighbors to both for a century has dwelt the Anglo-American. While all have borrowed from each other, each group retains its characteristic qualities; each has made its peculiar contribution to the most interesting and in some respects the finest culture in the United States.

The history of the Southwest has been colorful. The region has always been a borderland, between nomad and sedentary native, European and Indian, Spaniard and Frenchman, Spaniard and Anglo-American, Mexican and Southwesterner. Its history embraces sharply distinctive epochs, each with its outstanding characteristics: the long period of Indian occupation, the interplay of the Pueblos and their primitive neighbors, the Spanish explorers, the search for fabulous kingdoms, the Spanish settlers and missionaries, the Pueblo Revolt and reconquest, the establishment of the Mexican regime, the Yankee fur hunter and caravan trader, Texan dreams of empire, the United States conquest, the Federal explorers, the day of the cattle man, the Indian wars, the railroads, the mines, the development of the Southwest as a Mecca for archeologists, ethnologists, historians, novelists, poets, and artists.

All these phases of Southwestern history offer materials for enriching any program for the development of national parks and monuments. Nor have they by any means been overlooked by our National Park Service. Indeed, quite the contrary is the case. Nevertheless, the historical values of the region have scarcely been tapped.

Instead of discussing all the general aspects of history in the national parks and monuments, I propose to confine myself chiefly to a single illustration, one which has a very direct bearing on an immediate interest today and which will serve as an example of one historical episode out of many. One of the important projects under consideration by the National Park Service at this moment is the establishment of an Escalante National Monument. It has, therefore, seemed to me appropriate to set forth the historical basis for the name chosen for the area, and at

the same time by the story itself to illustrate the way in which scenic and recreational assets of a park or monument are enriched by historical association.

Remarkable among North American adventures in the later eighteenth century, that time of remarkable adventures in the Southwest, was the expedition made by Father Escalante from New Mexico into the Great Basin in 1776, the year of the declaration of independence by the English colonies. The aim of the expedition was two-fold. The government in Spain—for all this country then was a part of Spain's empire—desired to open direct communication between old Santa Fe and recently founded Monterey in Upper California. Escalante himself had visions of Indian missions in the farther west, beyond the Colorado River. Objectives coincided and forces were joined. The governor of New Mexico contributed provisions for the journey; Escalante furnished ideas and driving power. Nine men besides himself made up his little party. Father Domínguez, the other friar, was Escalante's superior, and he furnished riding horses and pack mules, but actually he was Escalante's faithful follower. It is for this reason that the subordinate and not the official is remembered. Don Pedro de Miera y Pacheco went along as map maker. Two others in the party, Pedro Cisneros and Joaquín Lafn, merited the title of "don"; the rest were of humbler castes, half breeds or Indians. One who knew the Yuta tongue went as interpreter. This proved to be highly important, for all the way through the regions that are now Colorado, Utah, and Arizona, till after the explorers crossed the Colorado on the homeward journey, all the natives encountered were of Yuta stock. Miera made astronomical observations, and drafted a map of curious interest. Escalante himself kept a superb diary which gave the heroic odyssey its place in history. The expedition was made, as Escalante requested, "without noise of arms," and barter with the Indians for gain was forbidden.

To the right and left as they marched along, the eyes of these "splendid wayfarers" beheld much of the most impressive scenery of the Great West, two-thirds of a century before any of it was viewed by Frémont the Pathfinder. The journey covered some two thousand miles, and lasted five months of almost continuous horseback travel. Its memory is one of the precious historical treasures of four States today—New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, and Arizona. To this list a fifth State should be added, for the objective of the expedition was the opening of a new route to California.

The start was made at Santa Fe, then a city already as old as Pittsburgh is now. Mounts were fresh and riders exuberant with the prospect of adventure. Northwest the travelers rode across the Rio Grande, up the Chama, over the San Juan and its numerous branches, to the Dolores at Mancos, down that stream through southwestern Colorado, skirting the Mesa Verde wonderland. Doubt arose as to the choice of

routes, and lots were cast. Chance voted for a wide detour to visit a Comanche band called the Sabuaganas, so east the explorers turned, over Uncompahgre Plateau, and north down Uncompahgre River to the Gunnison.

To here Escalante and his followers were in known country; henceforward they were pathbreakers until after they crossed the Colorado on the return journey. On they rode, east and north over majestic Grand Mesa. Here, among the Sabuaganas, they picked up two young Laguna Indians, so-called because they lived on Laguna de los Timpanogos (now Utah Lake). Homeward bound, these new guides led the explorers on another long detour; down Buzzard Creek, over Battlement Plateau, across the Colorado at Una; up the steep sides of Roan Mountain, down the narrow gorge of Douglas Creek, to White River at Rangeley, and still north over a desert plateau to the ford of Green River above Jensen, Utah. The crossing of the stream was made only a few hundred yards from the now famous Dinosaur Quarry, but of these mammoth relics Escalante seems to have had no inkling.

West they now turned, up Duchesne River, and over Wasatch Mountains to Lake Utah at Provo, where the Laguna guides lived. The boys had come home. There under the shadow of imposing, snow-covered Timpanogos Mountain, Escalante spent three days, one of the longest stops of the entire journey. Autumn was advancing, and with new guides the Spaniards continued southwest two hundred miles or more to Black Rock Springs. They were now near the latitude of Monterey, and the plan was to strike west. But here, on October 5, snow fell, and all hope of crossing the great Sierras to California vanished.

So they set their faces toward Santa Fe. Continuing south they discovered and described the sulphur Hot Springs at Thermo, crossed the great plain now called Escalante Desert, entered Cedar Valley, descended Kanarra Creek, climbed Black Ridge, dropped down to Virgin River, and entered the summerland now affectionately called "Dixie." But they could not stop to bask in its autumn sunshine, so onward they urged their sore-footed mounts.

Unaware of the existence of amazing Zion Canyon just a few miles to the northeast, they skirted precipitous Hurricane Ridge, continued south forty-five miles, across the Arizona boundary, into Lower Hurricane Valley, and climbed the cliffs by a trail which a century later became known to the Mormons as Old Temple Road, because down it they hauled timber for the building of the Temple at St. George. On the arid plateau, burning with thirst, they swung east twelve miles and southeast six, finding a welcome draught at some natural tanks on the edge of a cedar-covered ridge. They were at Cooper's Pockets. Here the Indians told them of a great chasm ahead—the Grand Canyon of the Colorado. So they swung sharply north and northeast, to find a crossing of which the natives had told them. A hard march of forty miles carried

them over Kanab Creek near Fredonia. Forty more miles east and northeast took them once more across the Utah line.

Before them for a hundred miles lay the toughest part of the whole journey. They were now on the edge of the area of the proposed Escalante Monument. Buckskin Mountains, the low ridge to the east, looked innocent enough, but to cross their rugged hogbacks almost overtaxed both horses and men. Swinging south and east, they skirted stupendous Vermillion Cliffs. To find a ford across the Colorado cost two weeks of anguish and of transcendent toil. The gorge of Navajo Creek was scarcely easier, as is well known to anyone who has tried it. And in the weakened condition of the men and horses, the long, dry desert thence to Oraibe seemed to stretch out interminably. It is on this segment of the trail, near Kaibito Springs, that explorers have recently been looking for a reputed Escalante inscription.

It is always darkest just before dawn. Supplies obtained from the none-too-friendly Hopis renewed waning strength and revived drooping spirits. From Oraibe home the way was well known. Zuffi, Escalante's own mission, was the next station on the road; and thence, after a brief rest, the familiar trail was followed past Inscription Rock, Acoma the Sky City, Laguna, Isleta, and up the fertile pueblo-dotted valley of the Rio Grande to home and friends. The start had been made on July 29. The day before the wayfarers dismounted in the Plaza at the Governor's Palace the church bells of Santa Fe rang in the New Year.

The high point of this great adventure was the crossing of the Colorado River, a feat which well merits a little more detail. After negotiating Buckskin Mountains, Escalante turned south across the Arizona line, up Coyote Canyon, and down House Rock Valley, then swung northeast along the base of Vermillion Cliffs to the Colorado right at the site of Navajo Bridge. Continuing five miles upstream, he crossed the mouth of Paria River, halted on the bank of the Colorado near a standing rock (Piedra Parada), and with grim humor named the camp Sal-si-puedes, "Get out if you can!" The Standing Rock is still there and is now called "The Urn" because of its shape. The camp was square at the place where Lee's Ferry was established a century later.

Here, at Salsipuedes, Escalante spent a whole week in an attempt to get across the river. Two swimmers were sent to see if they could find a way out over the cliffs on the eastern shore. They swam across the river naked, with their clothing on their heads, lost it in midstream, and returned to camp in a state of nature, without making the reconnaissance. Next day the explorers made a raft of logs, Escalante and others boarded it, and propelled it with poles four yards long, which did not reach the bottom. In three attempts they failed even to reach midstream because the wind drove the raft back to land. Miry banks on both shores were considered dangerous for the animals. So this ford was abandoned. Escalante had missed his best chance.

Four more days were spent in camp here at Salsipuedes while scouts looked for a route and a better ford upstream. Food was running low, and a horse was killed to supply the lack. On November 1 Escalante and his party ascended Paria River Canyon a league and a half, made camp, and the men nearly froze in the night. Next day the climb of half a league up the Paria Canyon wall to the top of the Mesa cost the adventurers three hard hours. Four leagues northeast "through rocky gorges" and across difficult sand dunes took them to Sentinel Rock Creek. Camp San Diego, made here, was "near a multitude of barrancas, little mesas, and peaks of red earth which . . . looked like the ruins of a fortress."

Going forward, on November 3, they swung down Sentinel Rock Creek to the Colorado and tried another crossing, called by Escalante the ford of the Cosninas. Here Camp Carlos was pitched high on the mesa above the river. The descent to the Colorado was so scarped that two mules which got down to the first ledge could not get back even without their packs. While the Padres watched operations from their perch on the mesa, horses were somehow taken down to the river and across it by swimming. The problem again was not how to cross the stream, but how to get out through the cliffs on the other side. Two men, Juan Domingo and Lucrecio Mufiz, were sent to look for an exit and did not return. The horses in camp on the mesa went without water that night.

November 4 was another day of anxiety for the wayfarers, and hunger stalked in their midst. The horseflesh had been exhausted, and the diet of the Padres was reduced to toasted cactus leaves. In spite of the dangerous descent, that night men and horses, driven by thirst, somehow slid down the canyon walls to the river to get water. In the process some of the animals were injured by slipping and rolling long distances. Before dark Juan Domingo returned without having found an exit. Lucrecio was still absent, and it was feared he was lost, or perhaps had been killed by Indians.

San Carlos was now counted out along with Salsipuedes, for no way up the east canyon wall could be discovered. So, on November 5, Escalante and his party continued upstream, leaving Andrés Mufiz to wait for his brother Lucrecio. This was another grilling day. The explorers traveled a league and a half north, up ridges and down barrancas, descended into a very deep canyon, climbed out of it by an Indian trail, continued north some four miles, found pasture and water at Warm Creek, and pitched camp at a place called Santa Romana near the Utah line. It rained all night and some snow fell.

Next day Escalante moved forward three leagues, and was stopped by renewed rain, wind, and hail "with horrible thunder and lightning." Then, turning east for half a league, he found the way blocked by cliffs, and halted at San Vicente, high up on the mesa above the river, some

two or more miles north of the Utah line. Before night Lucrecio and Andrés arrived, safe and sound, but with no encouraging news regarding a ford.

Here at San Vicente a third attempt to cross the river succeeded, and made immortal both the incident and the place. Cisneros examined the ford and the way out, and pronounced them both good. But the problem now was to get horses and baggage down from their eerie perch on the lofty mesa, for the river could be reached only by a very deep side canyon. This side canyon now came into history, and Escalante literally made his mark on the face of the land.

Here are the words of the historic record. "In order to lead the animals down the side of the canyon mentioned," says the diary, "it was necessary to cut steps in the rock for a distance of three varas, or a little less,"—only about nine feet, but tremendously important under the circumstances. Those historic steps cut in the rocks are still to be seen.

The diary continues: "The rest of the way the animals were able to get down, though without pack or rider. We descended the [side] canyon [using the steps cut in the rocks], and having travelled a mile [down the side canyon] we descended to the river and went along it down-stream about two musket shots . . . until we reached the place where the channel was widest, and where the ford appeared to be." Here they crossed the river without great difficulty. Evidently the Padres were not great swimmers, for the others helped them over, guiding their horses.

So the ford was passable and the Padres were across the Colorado—with their precious diary! But some of the men in charge of the baggage were still in camp at San Vicente, a mile or more away, perched on the mesa as if suspended in mid-air. They were now sent for. The method for getting the baggage down was unique. Mules without packs could descend the side canyon by sliding and using the steps cut in the rocks. But descending with loads was another matter.

The faithful diary tells us how they did it. They let the packs down over the cliffs. "We notified the rest of the companions who had remained at San Vicente," says Escalante, "that with lassoes and reatas they should let the pack saddles and other effects down a very high cliff at the wide bank (*ancón*) of the ford, bringing the animals by the route over which we had come." That is to say, the animals were to descend from the mesa by the steps cut in the rocks, the baggage being carried to the edge of the cliff near the ford and let down by lassoes and reatas. The artist has something to work on here. Escalante continues: "they did so, and about five o'clock they finished crossing the river, praising God our Lord, and firing off a few muskets as a sign of the great joy which all felt at having vanquished a difficulty so great and which had cost us so much travail and delay." They had made one of the historic river-crossings in North American history.

Since first reaching the Colorado at Lee's Ferry (Salsipuedes), the wayfarers had spent thirteen hard days, tried the river at three places, and zig-zagged along its western banks for fourteen leagues, or some forty fearful miles, before they could get across. The Padre's Crossing is a justly celebrated spot in the history of early adventure in the Southwest. But few persons ever see it, for it is still nearly as inaccessible as it was in 1776.

This extraordinary feat of exploration through the Great West, accomplished "without noise of arms" by Escalante and his little band, has tremendous historical value which can be utilized by the Park Service. Much of this value might be realized by designating an Escalante Way through the four States of New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, and Arizona, and this without special expense for road building by the Park Service or by any other agency. A map of Escalante's route, projected on the road maps of these four States, shows that even now the motorist can follow exactly, or with surprisingly close approximation, almost the entire Escalante itinerary of two thousand miles. The most inaccessible portion of the route is that between Lee's Ferry and Kaibito Springs. In other words, we have the constituent elements of an Escalante Way already built, and they merely await synthesizing in a map, and under a unifying name.

Escalante and his party passed through or near many of the conspicuous natural features of the Great Basin and the Southwest, a considerable portion of which are now embraced in our National Park System. A visitor to the parks and monuments of this vast region will find his interest and profit greatly enhanced if, as he travels from park to park or monument to monument, he knows the thrilling story of Escalante.

One of the increasing difficulties of national park administration is that these areas are becoming over-crowded with visitors at the height of the seasons, and relief is being sought in supplementary attractions easily accessible from the park areas. Much relief of this kind could be found by utilizing to the full the historical assets of the regions within or adjacent to the parks and monuments.

The Escalante Way would be a string on which a whole rosary of national park jewels could be strung by the motorist in the West. The trail starts from Santa Fe, one of the most historic spots in all the Western Hemisphere. Going north it passes through or close by a whole line of historic Pueblos. Capulin National Monument, Wheeler National Monument, Mesa Verde National Park, Aztec Ruins, Yucca House, Hovenweep, Natural Bridges, the Arches, and Colorado National Monument are close at hand as one follows Escalante north. Coming south and east from central Utah, between Cedar City and Santa Fe the Escalante Way would run right along the main street of national parks and monuments. Near at hand on one side of the trail or the

other, within easy reach, lie Cedar Breaks, Bryce Canyon, Zion National Park, Pipe Spring, Grand Canyon, Rainbow Bridge, Rainbow Lodge, Wupatki, Sunset Crater, Walnut Canyon, Montezuma's Castle, the Hopi Pueblos, Canyon de Chelly, Petrified Forest, Zuñi, Chaco Canyon, El Morro, Acoma the Sky City, Laguna, Isleta, and the historic Tiguex pueblos, not to mention other attractions within or outside of the park areas along the Way. This enumeration is illustrative rather than exhaustive.

A map of the Escalante Way might be printed, showing in colors, or in appropriate symbols, the Escalante Trail and the corresponding highways. On the reverse side a brief and vivid account of Escalante's historic feat would accentuate interest and multiply the profit as well as the pleasure of the traveler. Gasoline companies or other private agencies would perhaps be glad to print and distribute such a map. Markers of Escalante's campsites or the scenes of outstanding episodes in the expedition, with appropriate data, might be erected along the Way.

The Escalante Expedition is but a single example chosen out of many romantic, interesting, and important episodes and phases of Southwestern history which could be drawn upon to supplement the scenic and recreational values of the national parks and monuments and to put these areas in their historical setting. Any one of the epochs of Southwestern history which I have mentioned above would furnish a long list of episodes and subjects capable of utilization. If such a program were to be developed, the descriptive bulletins such as are now issued by the Park Service might properly include a considerable amount of material regarding the history of the regions within and roundabout each national park or monument.

The study of history in its broader meaning has a high cultural value for the simple reason that culture is nothing more nor less than the epitome and the resultant of human experience. The rich materials of history are lying all around us, and one of the things needed is to make our citizens history conscious. The Park Service has made a magnificent contribution toward this end through the creation and intelligent administration of its archeological and historical parks. And it seems to me that much might be done to supplement the utilization of historical materials within the individual parks, by coördinating them with the broader historical resources of adjacent areas. If my simple suggestions should appear to be out of order so far as the National Park Service is concerned, as they may well be, possibly they may be of interest to the American Planning and Civic Association, whose province and vision are all-embracing.