

Many San Antonians
Freighted Treasure and
Merchandise Over Tedi-
ous Route Which was Put
On Map at Heavy Cost in
Blood and Labor.

By R. FRANKLIN HALL.

TOM CHEWNING, a farmer, plowing in his field near Benton, Mo., last winter, turned up a few old Spanish gold and silver coins. Feverishly digging, he soon unearthed a fortune of them—4,400, valued at about \$40,000. A real "ending of the rainbow" for Chewning, but all these readings of the happy event wondered how the treasure happened to be in that particular locality.

In 1808 Spain experienced the climax, in a series of disasters, when Napoleon deposed the weak Spanish monarch and placed his brother Joseph on the throne. The Spanish colony of Mexico sympathized with the mother country and sent huge sums of gold and silver to the royal family, part of whom were then in exile in Italy. But the coast of Mexico was blockaded by enemy warships and they were compelled to send this money through the American colonies for reshipment to Europe.

Accordingly, three pack trains, laden with approximately \$150,000, were dispatched in July, 1808 for St. Louis. Leaving Chihuahua, they came through San Antonio to Naacodoches, then northward to the Transils Trail to Cherokee Crossing and then through about where Little Rock now stands, to St. Louis.

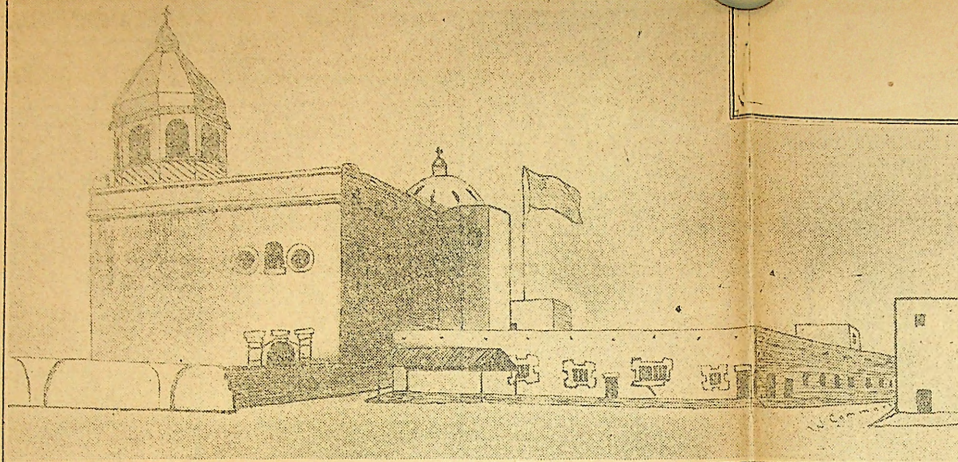
After being on the road three weeks a revolution broke out in Mexico and a detachment was sent to bring the treasure back. Two of the trains were overtaken and returned, but the other, with its \$40,000, was lost in Central Missouri and never heard of again. It was doubtless this treasure that Tom Chewning found.

This, though, was not the beginning of the Chihuahua Trail. For nearly a hundred years a strong trade had flourished between the cities of Monterrey, Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, Coahuila and the more northern towns of San Antonio, Refugio and La Bahia. This trade, previous to 1809, was conducted by means of pack animals, in that year, however, the first of the Mexican carts was seen in San Antonio.

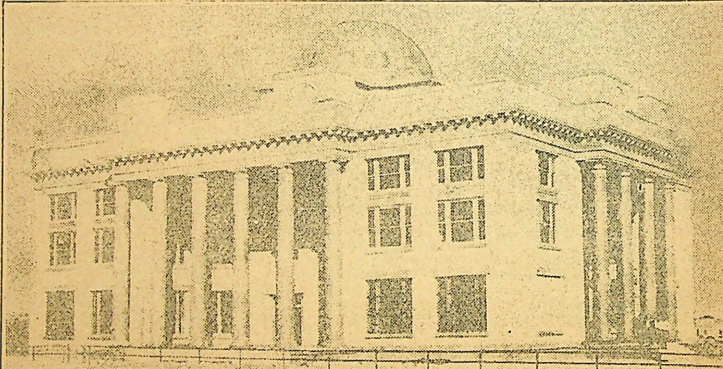
Prosperous Times.

Chihuahua City, in 1790, was a great prosperous Spanish stronghold in Northern Mexico. Larger than New York, it contained more Europeans and Americans than any other city in the country. The great mines in the vicinity were in fabulous production. Nuggets of gold had been found worth \$25,000. At one time miners were paid \$2,000 for a day's work. An ordinary horse sold for \$16,000 and was generally shod with silver shoes. San Antonio, at the time, had

Ford on the Chihuahua Trail at Castroville



Northwest Corner of Main Plaza in Freighting Days



Court House - Ft. Stockton

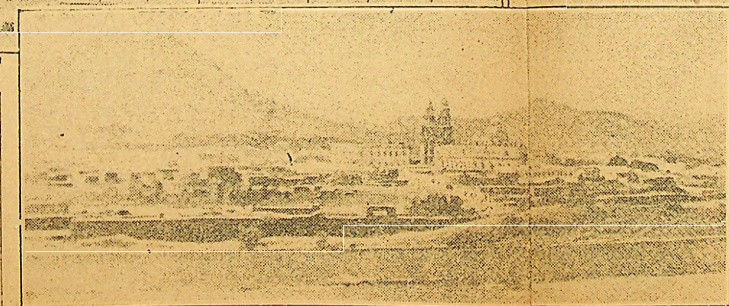
a population of about eight thousand, most of whom were engaged in ranching, growing cotton and sugar cane. Till this time the country was a vast prairie, the growth of any kind of trees was prevented by great prairie fires that swept over the country killing all young shrubbery. Ranching kept the grass down, preventing fires, and the mesquite tree came into its own.

Trade had been carried on between Chihuahua and Santa Fe since a very early date, and in the year of 1822 was opened to Independence, Mo., over the famous Santa Fe Trail. In order to encourage trade, and to find a shorter trail from Chihuahua to the frontier on Red River, the Mexican government reduced duties to a very low level and promised to

furnish an escort of dragoons for traders attempting this route.

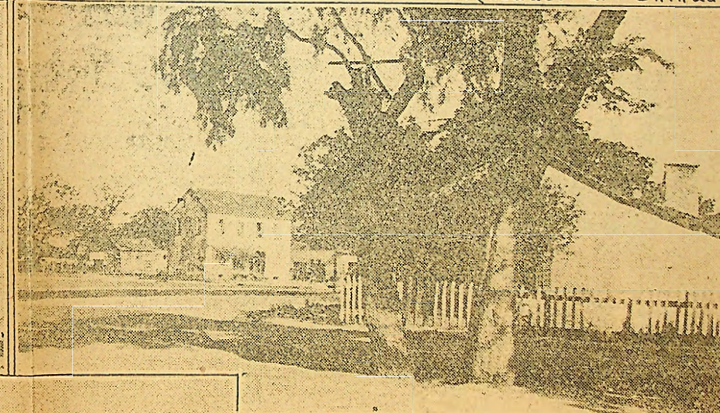
Trail Blazed in 1839

Dr. H. Connelly, an American merchant, and a number of Mexicans of means, undertook this trip

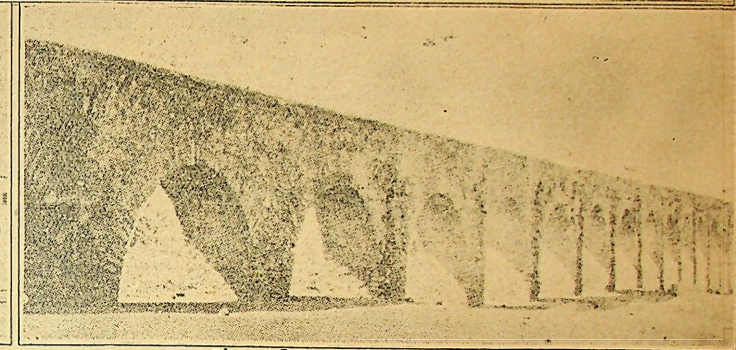


Chihuahua Mexico at the Time of the Chihuahua Trail

and left Chihuahua on April 3, 1839, with one hundred men, accompanied by 50 dragoons. This train consisted of seven wagons and carried \$300,000 in specie and bullion. They crossed the Rio



Castroville - The Trail Ran Down Road in Distance



Aqueduct at Chihuahua

returned, after going to St. Louis to Chihuahua.

While this expedition was not a financial success, it served to divert trains from the Santa Fe Trail to the new route so that by the end of 1849 the great Chihuahua Trail was firmly established and pouring its ever-increasing stream of merchandise, gold and silver across Texas.

This trail developed into two equally used routes; one from Chihuahua crossing the Rio Grande at Presidio, through Leon Water Hole; Horseshoe Crossing to the headwaters of the Concho River. Here the trail split, one branch turning south to San Antonio, while the other continued to Fort Towson by way of the Copper Mines on the Brazos, the Waco village and to the northeast. The San Anto-

nio route followed the old San Antonio Road to Naacodoches.

In 1850, Henry Skillman was awarded a contract for the first San Antonio-El Paso mail route. The first run on this route was made in a Concord Coach guarded by 18 men under Big Foot Wallace. Due to the fact that traveling was done only in daytime and with wild mules, it took just thirty days to make the initial run of 675 miles. This time was steadily cut down, and by 1857 the trip to San Francisco was made in less than a month. And 16 El Paso in six days.

Prairie Schooners

In 1859 a stage route was placed in operation between San Antonio and Eagle Pass, but was abandoned in 1861 when the Civil War came and called the mail contract. By this time the northern route through Fort Concho was practically elimi-

nated in favor of the shorter way by Castroville, Beside, Fort Clark and San Felipe Springs. This route crossed Devils River and the Pecos just above the present bridge of the Southern Pacific—north, up the west bank and joined the old trail at Horseshoe Crossing. Freighters used this route exclusively throughout the war, and after that conflict it developed into that mighty artery of commerce—the Chihuahua Trail.

Mexican ox-carts were used for freighting till John Monier introduced mules and the "prairie schooners" just before the war. These wagons were imported by Mr. Stancke, who ran an implement and vehicle store on West Commerce Street. These prairie schooners had wheels about six feet high in rear and five feet in front. Tires were of solid iron, five inches wide and an inch thick. Their axles were three inches in diameter. The bed was 24 feet long, four and a half feet wide and five feet high. A heavy canvas passed over the top bows and fastened to the side, making it waterproof. When pulled by 10 mules—the average team—a wagon could haul 7,000 pounds of freight.

As stated, the great ox-carts were the common conveyer of freight along the trail. They were huge, two-wheeled affairs, made entirely of wood. Not a particle of metal was used in their construction. Even the seven-foot wheels were cut from three pieces of flat timber, and fastened together in a crude circle by wooden pins and buckskin thongs.

Early-Day Freighters.

These carts had a hole cut in the center of the wheel, through which passed the wooden axle. As no lubricant was used, the screeching and yawling they made can be imagined—as there are no words in use that can describe it. When heavily loaded, friction would become so great that the axle be-