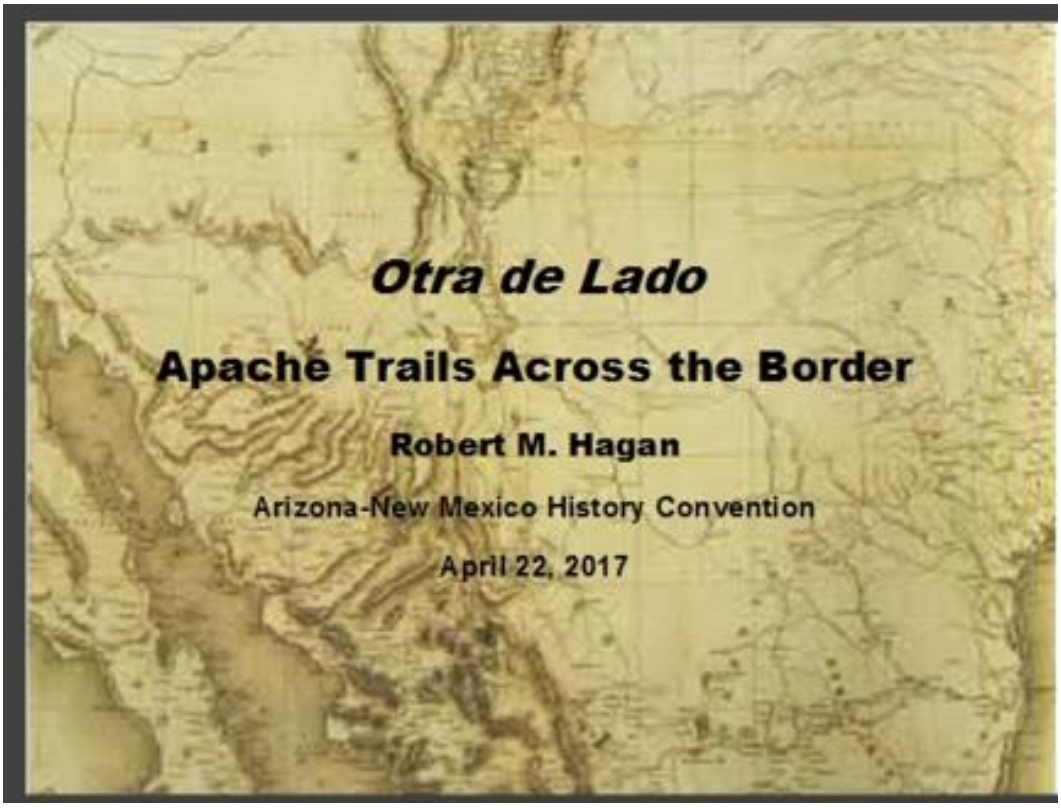
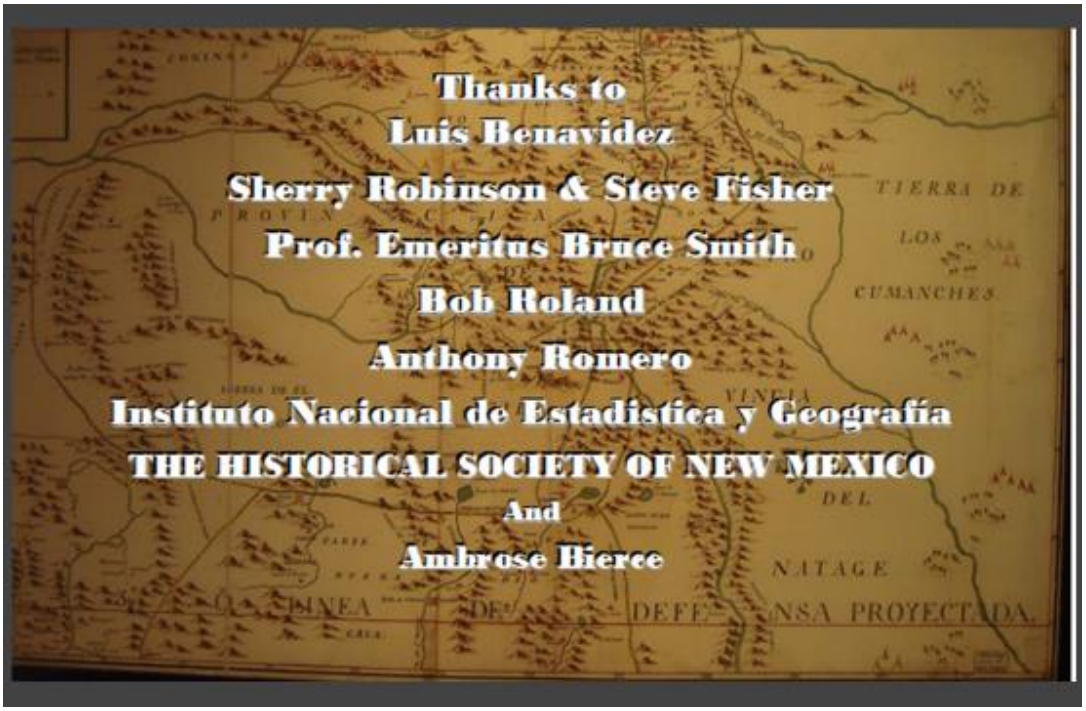

Otra de Lado
Apache Trails Across the Border
Robert M. Hagan
Arizona-New Mexico History Convention
April 22, 2017


Thanks to
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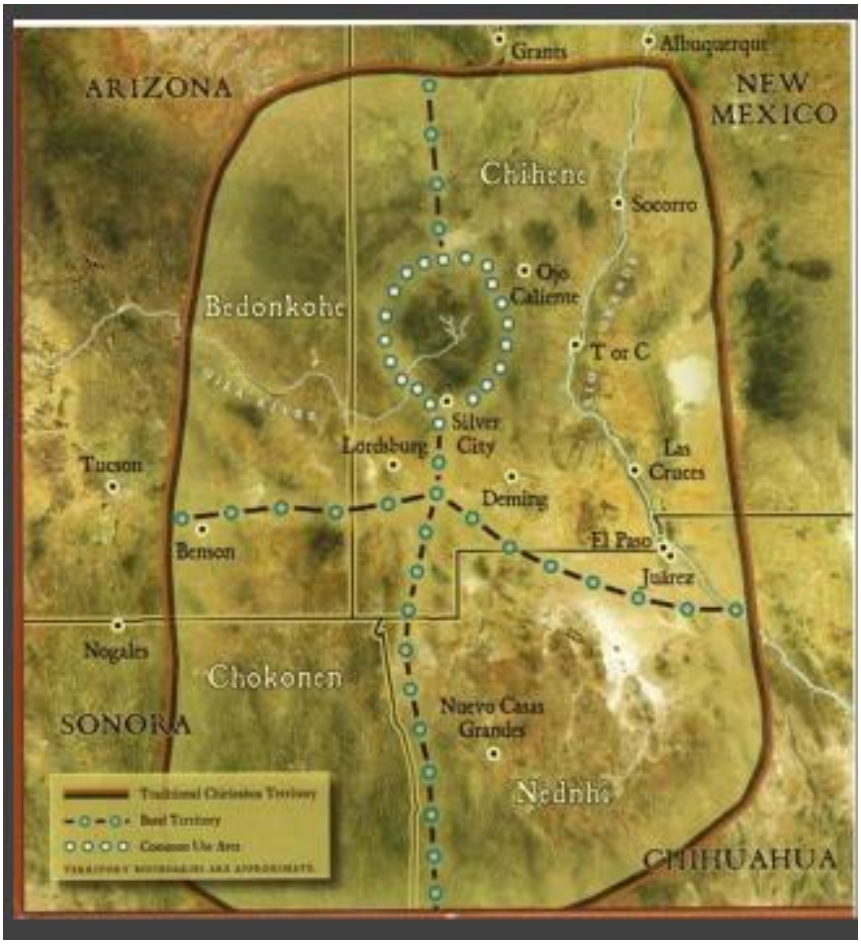
I think of what I'm doing as more a recreational guide than historical research. I want to encourage others to get out and explore Apachería, because I believe that experiencing the terrain directly on the ground can bring new understanding of historical events by placing those events and the people involved in a 3D context.

I'm also interested in the art and science of cartography. I began backpacking and hiking in the Southwest well before the Air Force launched the Global Positioning System in the 1990s and I still enjoy navigating with a paper map and compass rather than relying on my GPS. Although my own mapmaking skills are pretty primitive, I'm fascinated by the way maps shape our perception of the world around us.

This example is the map American and Mexican diplomats used to set the new international boundaries in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. It's hard to think of another map in American history that caused so much confusion and controversy, leaving a legacy of misunderstanding and ill will that lingers today. The map is wildly inaccurate, placing El Paso someplace around where Carlsbad is today. That error cost the U.S. the one thing we wanted most out of the conflict with our southern neighbors: a convenient southern travel route to the Pacific. The controversy over where the real border line lay on the ground continued for five years and was only finally settled by the Gadsden Purchase in 1853.

I began tracing Apache trails five or six years ago in following the path of an 1881 raid through New Mexico Territory led by an old man named Nana. In attempting to reconstruct the trajectory of that raid, I was often frustrated by the maps accompanying published accounts of the Apache Wars.

In many cases, these maps are little more than rough sketches that give the reader little idea of the terrain involved. And in those days, when travel was by foot or horseback, the shape of the land had even more influence on the course of events than it does today.

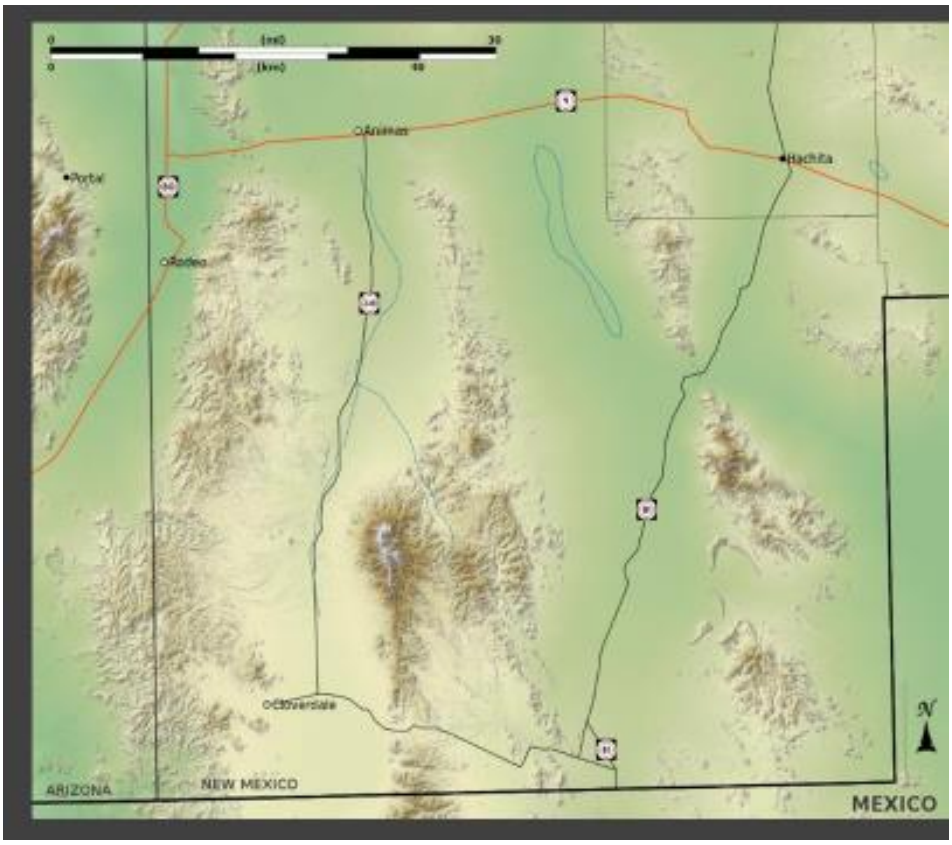


The Treaty Map vaguely recognizes that a chain of mountains runs north to south across the new border, and that this country was inhabited by the Apaches. But American politicians badly underestimated the significance of those two facts when we promised Mexico we would control the ‘wild tribes’ in our new territory. Five years later we had to confess failure.

The Apache homeland encompassed large parts of four separate states in two nations. Centered around their sacred spring in what is today southwestern New Mexico, the four bands generally grouped together as the Chiricahua traditionally migrated north and south through this range according to the seasons and the opportunities.

While there was some element of predation in these movements from the earliest contacts, the Spanish kept these generally under control by establishing presidios in northern Sonora and Chihuahua. After Mexican Independence, however, the security situation on Mexico’s whole northern frontier deteriorated badly.

By the time Americans arrived on the scene, the Apaches had established a well-developed pattern of raiding deep into Sonora and retreating into the canyons of the Sierra Madre or escaping north into the Gila country when pressed.



This map of the New Mexico Bootheel shows why this should be so.

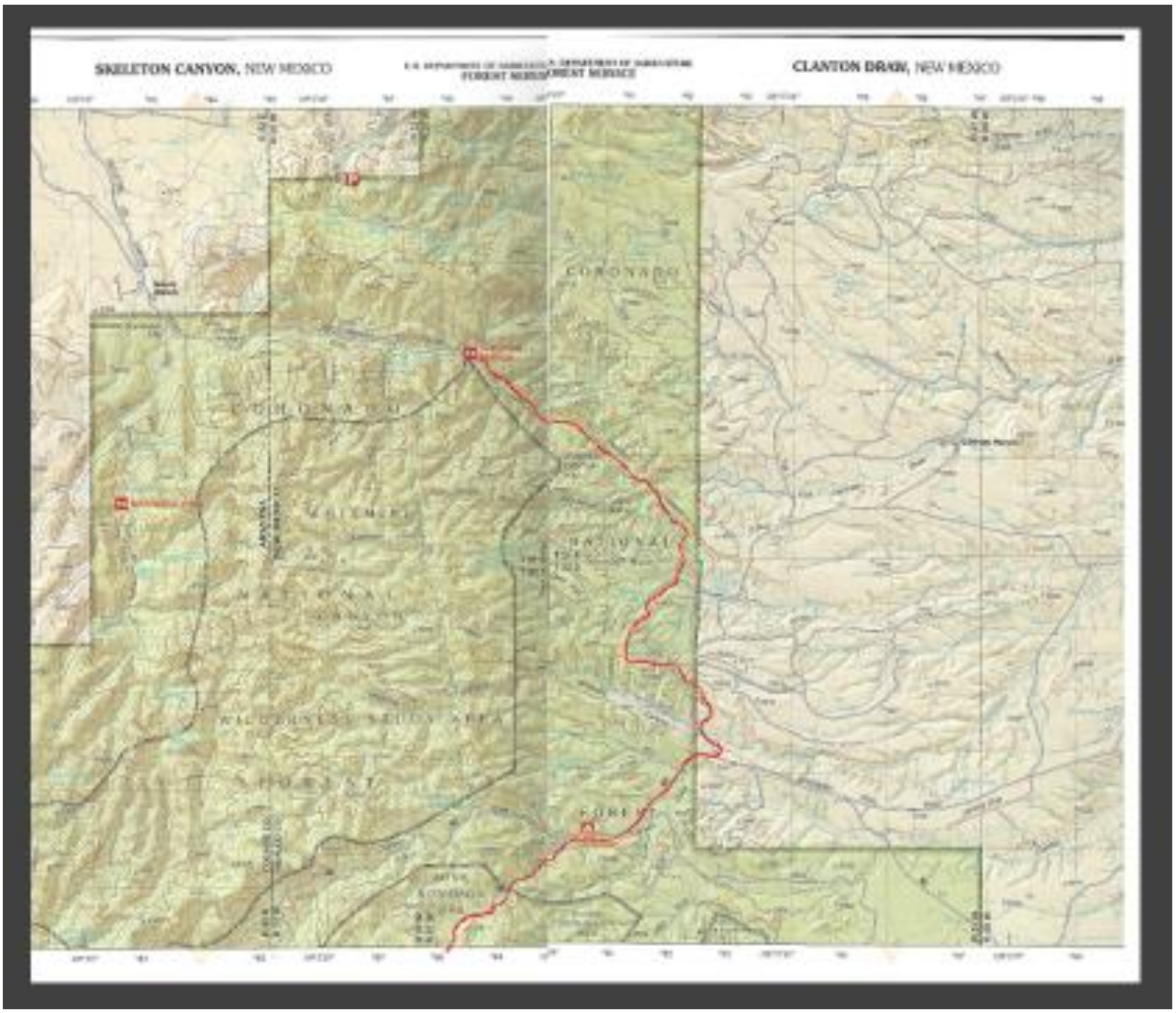
While the international border runs ruler-straight east to west, the mountains run north to south, forming natural pathways along the valleys between them. The San Bernardino and San Simon Valleys in southeastern Arizona offer similar avenues of travel.

The Chiricahua were a little confused by the new rules after the Mexican War, but they soon saw the advantages of the new international boundary running right through their territory. For years they had been accustomed to dealing with Sonora and Chihuahua as separate states trading in one and raiding the other, and chiefs like Cochise and Mangas Coloradas were prepared to accept the same kind of arrangement with the people of New Mexico and Arizona. But they objected to the Americans interfering with their war with the Mexicans south of the line.

The raiding into Sonora and Chihuahua continued after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and may have gotten worse despite the U.S. government's promise to prevent it. We canceled that part of the treaty five years later and settled Mexican claims for Indian damages as part of the Gadsden Purchase.

As the pressure of settlement increased in the north the pattern of raiding shifted. Unwilling to accommodate their way of life to American demands, the Chiricahua increasingly based in the Sierra Madre and raided into United States territory. At the same time, they were unable to reach any resolution of their old grievances with the Mexicans. As a result they found themselves at war with both nations.

The final exile of the Chiricahua was a drastic solution imposed because the Army never achieved effective control of the illicit border traffic whichever direction it was moving. The reservation system worked everyplace else in the United States but failed with the Chiricahua because of the proximity of the international boundary.



The question is: What Paths Did The Indians Use?

Today's network of roads and trails provides some clues in identifying traditional Apache travel routes. In general the more modern a road is the less it conforms to the terrain, while back roads and Forest Service trails are more likely to follow the natural shape of the land.

For example, in looking at this map of the Peloncillos it's easy to understand why Geronimo chose Skeleton Canyon for his surrender talks with General Miles in 1886. Today's Forest Service hiking trail leads up the canyon to connect with Forest Service Road 63, known as the Geronimo Trail, which runs southwest to the border.

If you follow it in the other direction the road crosses the Peloncillos into the Animas Valley and on north through the Burros and finally into the Gila country.

Not surprisingly, the same route is still used today by smugglers seeking to avoid the Border Patrol.

The scarcity of reliable water sources in the border country is another important clue in tracing traditional travel routes. While the Chiricahua were justly famed for their stamina and ability to travel over the roughest country on little or no water, returning raiding parties were constrained by the herds of stolen livestock they were moving with them.

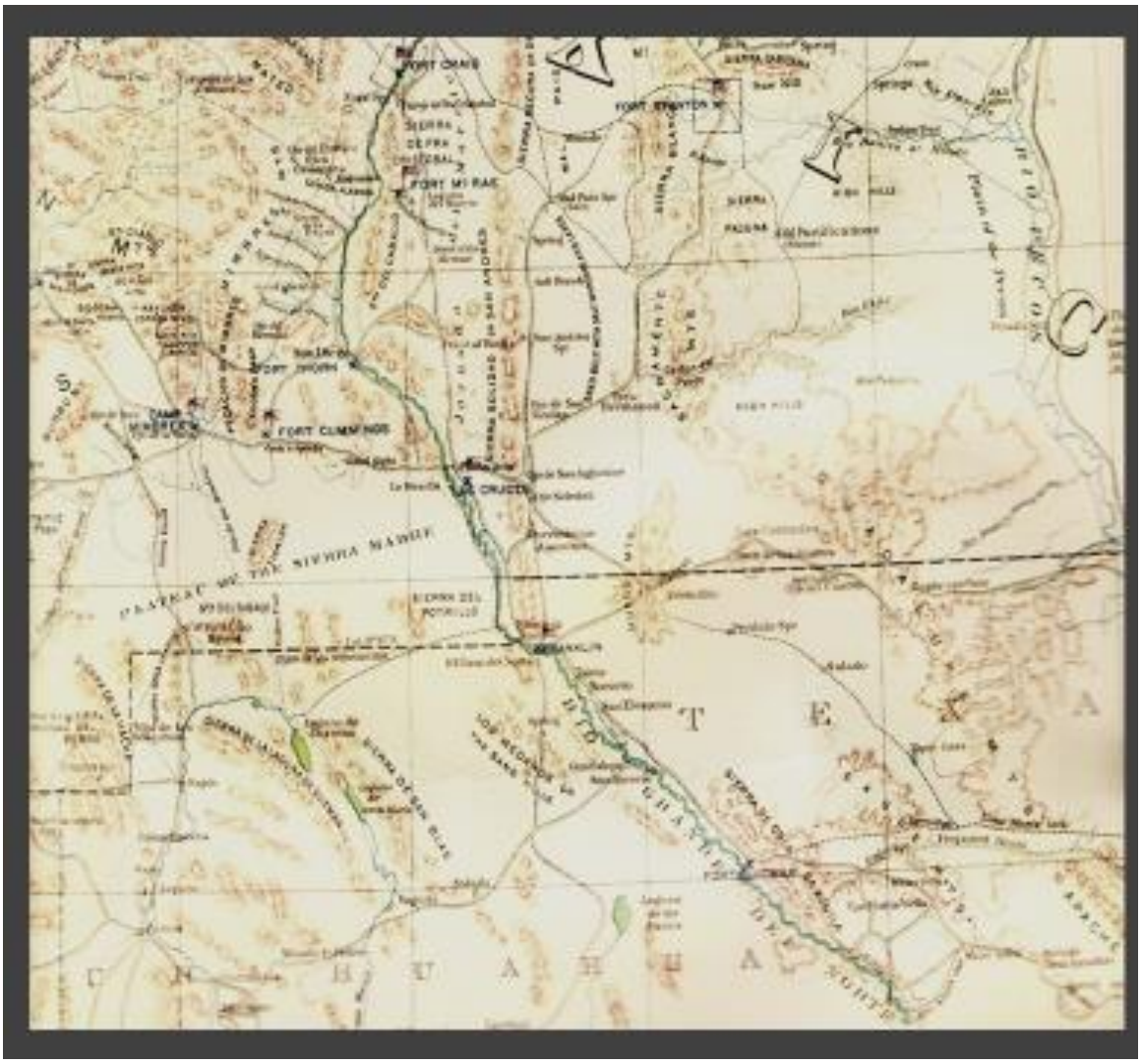
Driven hard in hot weather a mule needs 10-12 gallons of water a day, a horse 15 and a cow 20 or more to keep going. While the Apaches were always ready to kill or abandon these animals, just as today's human traffickers are callously indifferent to the fate of the people they are moving across the desert, enough had to get through to make the passage worthwhile.

Some of the historic water sources in Apachería, like the famous spring in Apache Pass and this one farther south in the Chiricahuas are now mere seeps, but others are still flowing.

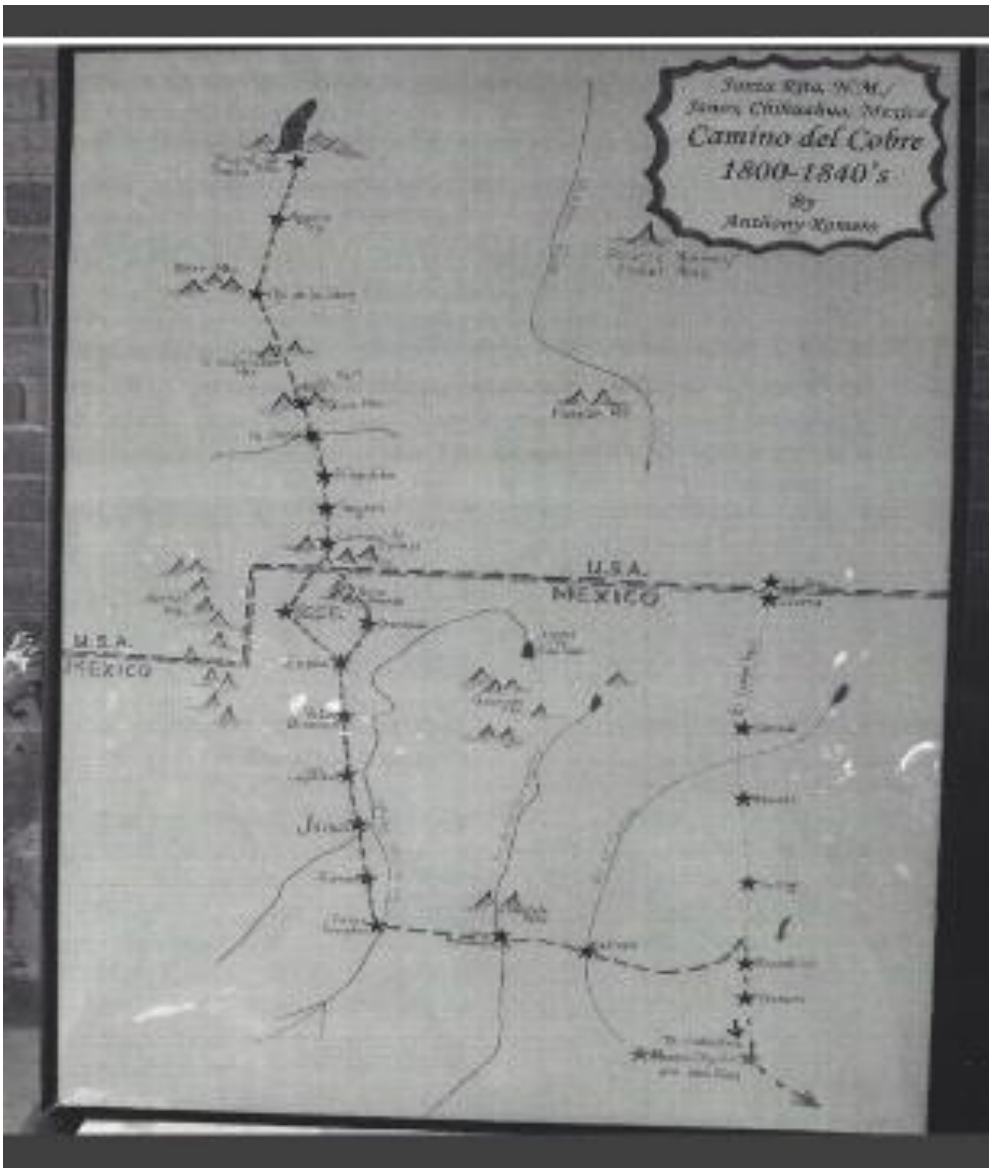
Unfortunately, many have dried up and are difficult to locate today. This is a *tinaja* Anthony Romero located on the old Janos Road, and you can see where the sand has filled in what once would have been a catchpool.

There is sometimes evidence of Apache occupation in the vicinity of these sites. The Apache rarely camped directly on a spring or stream but preferred to locate somewhere nearby that was both more sheltered and defensible, with a convenient escape route in case of surprise. These sites may still be identified by the presence of old fire pits together with traces of the characteristic rock circles the Indians used to anchor their brush wickiups.

According to long-time local residents there are similar sites on the peaks of the Peloncillos and Animas Mountains in the New Mexico Bootheel. Returning from a raid a prudent war leader would send scouts up to vantage points along the route from which they could survey the country ahead and report back to the main party with mirrors and smoke signals. Some of these same sites are still in use today by the drug cartels, which post observers equipped with satellite phones and high-powered binoculars to warn the *mulas* of Border Patrol activity in the area.



As the Army struggled to get a grip on the Apache problem the soldiers began to produce more accurate and detailed maps of the Southwest. This dates from 1859. Locating the various military posts and trails as they were established, moved and abandoned over the years offers some clues as to the routes the Army was trying to interdict.



The older the road, the more clues it provides to the routes Apache raiders took across the border. This is Anthony Romero's map of what he calls "El Camino del Cobre," the trail first Spanish and then Mexican mule convoys took in hauling ore from the Santa Rita mine down to Janos.

This is likely the route Nana took on his escape into Mexico in the summer of 1881. He was burdened with stolen horses, captives and plunder, including a heavy load of ammunition captured from the soldiers at Gavilan Canyon, and he would have wanted the fastest, easiest and best-watered path. The aquifer fed by the Hatchet Mountains in the Bootheel feeds southeast into Mexico, where it surfaces as numerous springs and shallow playas.

From there rather than continue south toward Janos, Nana turned right and plunged into the Sierra Madre.

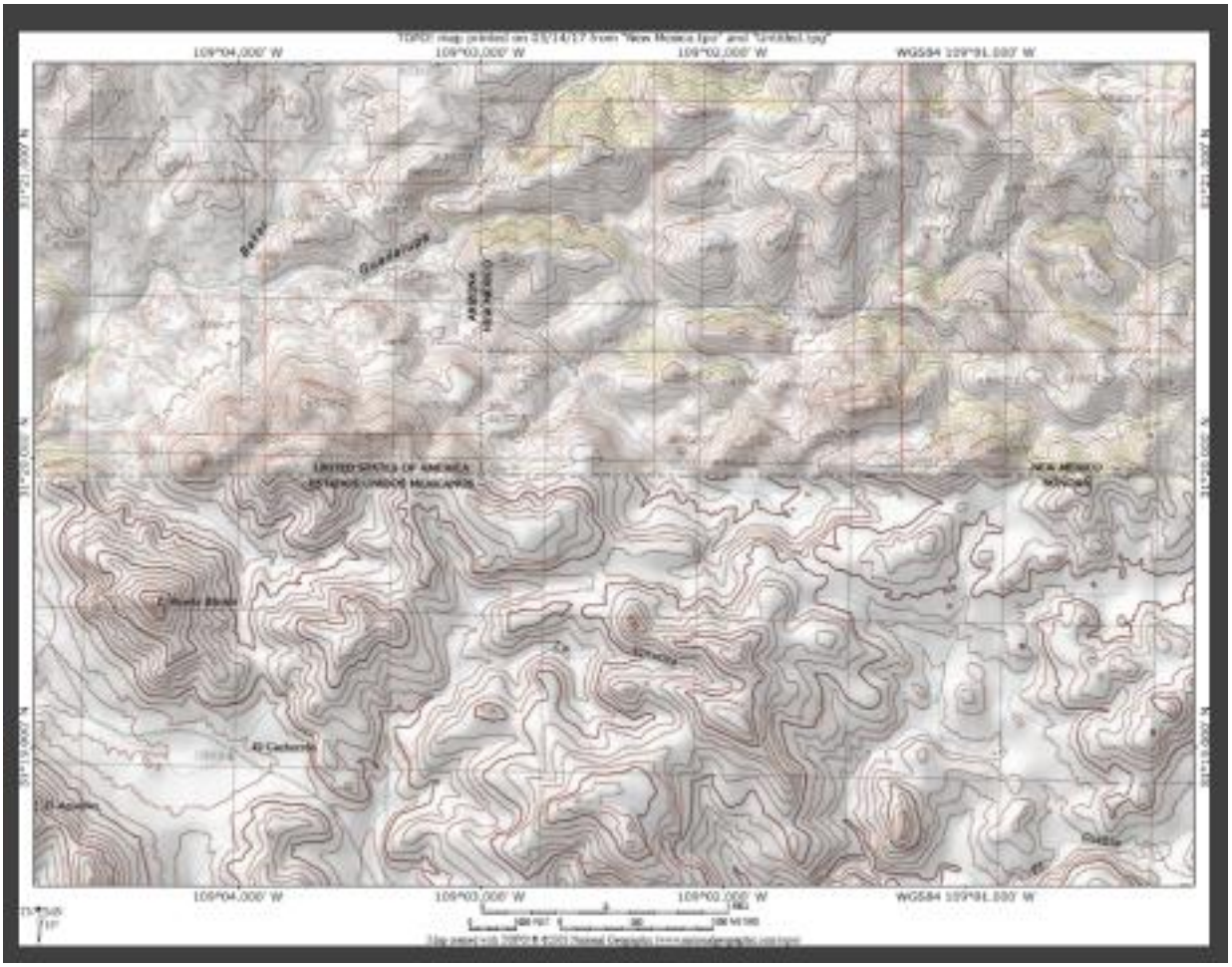
Even people familiar with the mountains of New Mexico and the Grand Canyon of Arizona are awed by the mountain chain that flows down the spine of Mexico for hundreds of miles. In all that distance, there are just two roads that cross the range.

It’s no surprise that this was where the Chiricahua made their last stand. An Army officer campaigning in the Sierra Madre in the 1880s complained that these knife-sharp ridges and deep canyons brought even the strongest, toughest men to tears. It was only the use of Apache scouts by the U.S. and Tarahumaras by the Mexican army that the last hostiles were finally rooted out.

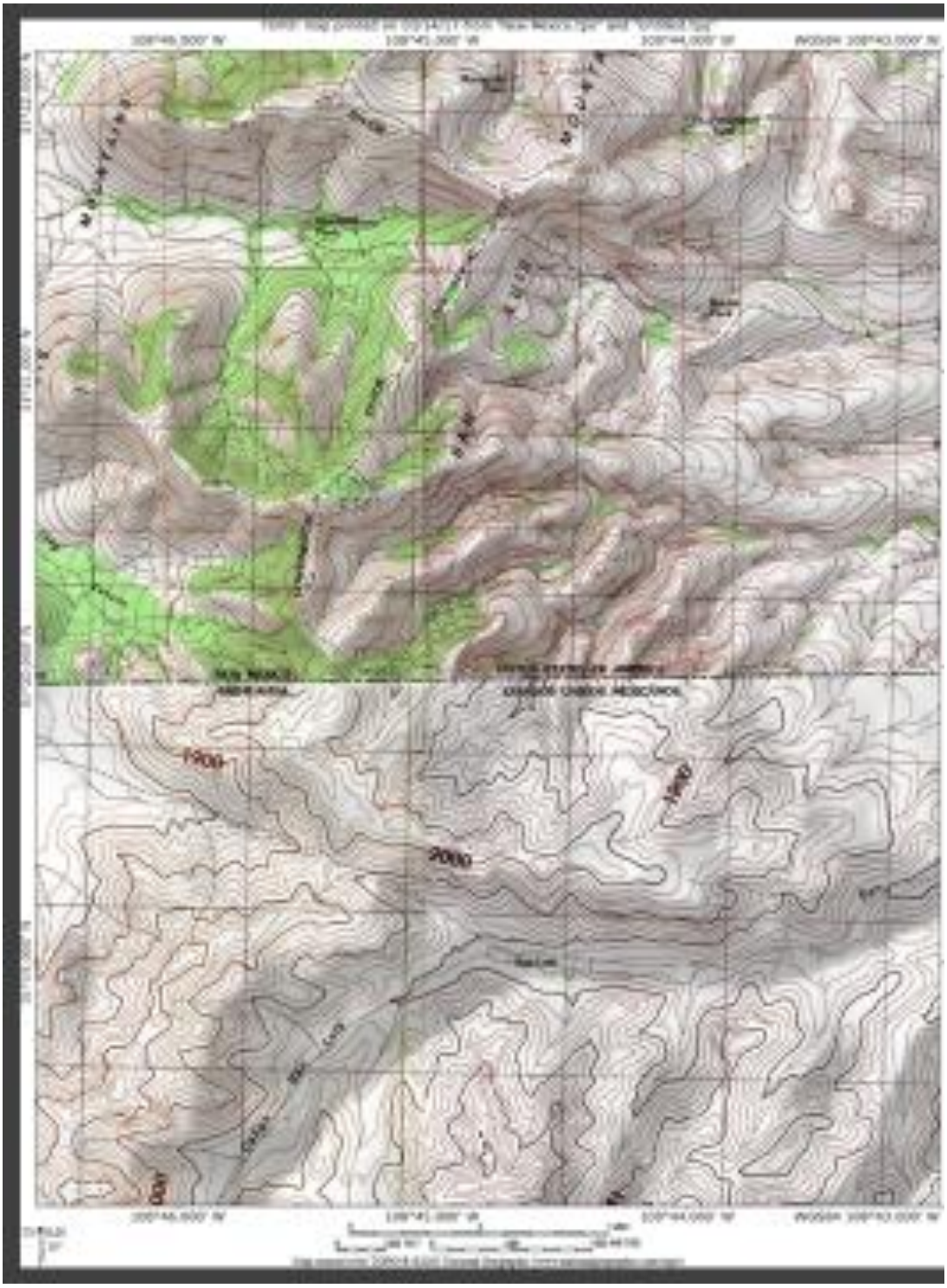
And few people in the American Southwest realize just how close these mountains are to the U.S. Border. From the top of the northern-most pass over the Sierra Madre at 6.500' you can look down and see the thin black line of the border fence running along the plain in Sonora far below. We're a little fooled by our own geography in this. Since the Continental Divide is scarcely noticeable on Interstate 10 and the nearby mountains are relatively low and isolated, we assume that terrain continues to the south.

Since we're looking south on a map, we unconsciously assume we're headed downhill.

But that's not the case.



As you can see from this map, the mountains of southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico lead straight into the Sierra Madre.



The same is true farther east on the Continental Divide where the Animas Mountains flow seamlessly into the San Luis Mountains and on into the equally steep Canyon San Luis on the other side of the line.

The old Apache trails are still in use today by some hardy smugglers and occasional migrants, but most of the illicit traffic crosses into south Texas and farther west in Arizona and California. Interestingly, some of the drug *mulas* caught by the Border Patrol in the Bootheel and southeastern Arizona have been Tarahumaras, the Sierra Madre Indians once deadly enemy of the Chiricahua.

My next step in the Apache Trails project is to create a detailed topographic map that encompasses all of southeastern Arizona, southwestern New Mexico, northwestern Chihuahua and northeastern Sonora. Incorporating information drawn from historic maps and plotting the approximate locations of recorded encounters between the Apaches, Mexicans and Americans on that map may ultimately yield some new insights into the dynamics of that long conflict.

As for our present border challenges, I suggest we bring the Chiricahua back to southern New Mexico. The Fort Sill Apache already have won back a tiny reservation on I-10. Let them build a casino there and give them several thousand acres of the desert scrub between the interstate and the border. They can use their casino money to buy out some of the private ranchers in the Bootheel -- I suspect more than a few of those families would like to sell if they could – and make the border an Apache problem once again. If anybody can handle it, they can.