

University of Northern Colorado

Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC

Bent's Old Fort

Colorado National Parks

New Look Tops Off the Old Navajo Trail

New York Times

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/beol>

THE NEW LOOK TOPS OFF THE OLD NAVAJO TRAIL

By MARSHALL SPRAGUE

DURANGO, Colo. — On Saturday, the last bit of paving should have been laid in the new Four Corners part of the Navajo Trail, which starts at the Colorado border west of Garden City, Kan., and runs 700 miles west and south to Flagstaff, Ariz., in the Painted Desert country.

Motorists are now getting through the new part without much trouble. The dedication is planned for about 2 P. M. on Sept. 16 in the ultimate wilds where Colorado, Utah, Arizona and New Mexico meet. Several buses will be needed to haul to these Four Corners all the people involved in the creation of this romantic trace, which has been thirty-five years in the making.

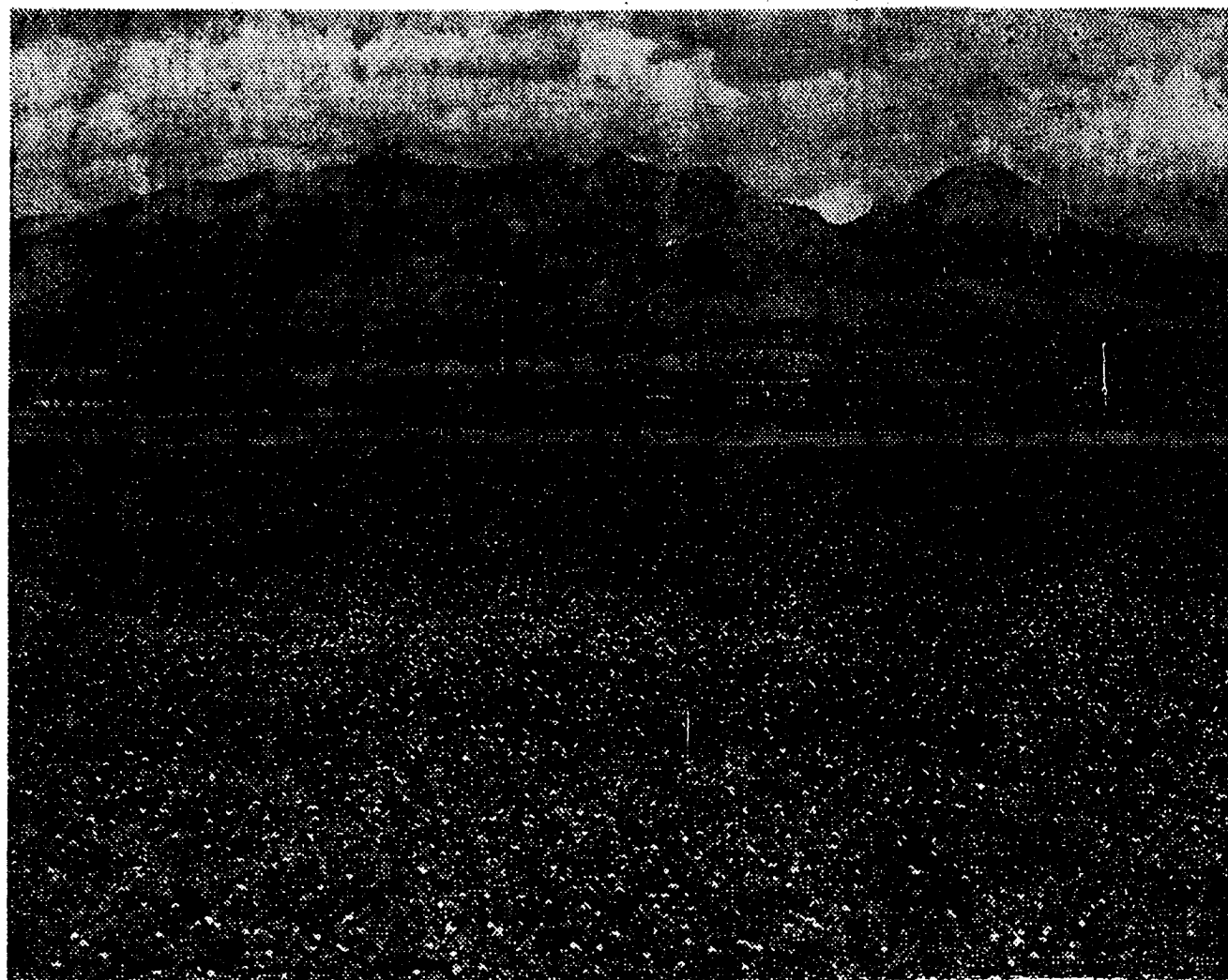
Secretary Stewart L. Udall will be there to represent the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The department put up most of the money to build the new seventy-five-mile section of the trail across the Navajo Indian Reservation in Arizona, plus nineteen miles on Ute Mountain Indian land in Colorado. The latter segment extends from U. S. 666 to Four Corners, which stands 7,000 feet above the sea.

At the Dedication

The four State Governors and their highway officials will attend, as will Paul Jones, Navajo Tribal Chairman, and Albert Wing, chairman of the Ute Mountain Utes. The rest of the dedication crowd will consist of happy boosters from the thirty towns along the road, all of whom worked so long to put it together.

To increase the solemnity of the rites, a twenty-eight-foot-square stone monument is now rising over the old Four Corners bench mark. This is a small circle of printed brass imbedded in cement, and many tourists have sat on it to see how it feels to perch in four states at once.

The Navajo Trail is a synthetic hodgepodge of routes. From the Kansas line to La Junta, Colo., it follows U. S. 50, then Colorado 10 to Walsen-



Colorado Department of Public Relations

NAVAJO TRAIL—Mount Blanca overlooks Rio Grande and potato fields in Colorado.

burg, U. S. 160 to Durango and U. S. 666 to the latest Four Corners-Flagstaff portion. It deserves to have a fuss made over it by Secretary Udall and the others, however, for it offers an almost overwhelming variety of scenic, historic and cultural attractions.

Almost at the start, the trail passes one of Colorado's largest lakes, John Martin Reservoir, where disconcerting signs read, "Watch Out For Snakes." A few miles farther on, Pikes Peak appears as a small white cloud 120 miles to the west, and the traveler knows that he is approaching the Rocky Mountains.

Near La Junta, the motorist can detour briefly to the site of Bent's Fort, the great trading post of the Southwest during the trapping period of the Eighteen Thirties.

The noble 13,000-foot Spanish Peaks, which the Indians called "Huaajatolla" or "Breasts of the World," stand guard over Walsenburg. The charming adobe Francisco Fort, a museum, is

at La Veta, a town below La Veta Pass.

The Navajo Trail uses La Veta Pass (altitude: 9,383 feet) to cross the Sangre de Cristos, a magnificent spur range of the Rockies. It then proceeds down to Fort Garland and the vast gray-green basin of the San Luis Valley.

Restored Fort

Fort Garland was one of the first Army posts in the Southwest, and it has been reconstructed by the Historical Society of Colorado. It was here that the post commander asked a mountain man, Tom Tobin, to do something about two murderers called the Espinosas.

When Mr. Tobin reported their death and asked for his bounty, the commander demanded proof that he had attended to them. Mr. Tobin took a sack from his saddle and dumped the contents—the heads of the two Espinosas—into the commander's lap.

San Luis Valley is where the Great Sand Dunes are, as well as Blanca Peak (14,317 feet) and many farms growing po-

tatoes, onions and celery. The forested mountains to the west, which the trail enters by way of a Rio Grande fork, are the San Juans and the Continental Divide. The highway pass over them is Wolf Creek, which is 10,850 feet above sea level, and the forty-two-mile traverse almost to timberline is a modern one, dating from 1913.

Colorado has many highway passes much higher than this, but none is quite as lovely as Wolf Creek's west side. Far below lie the beautiful green pastures of At Last Ranch, framed in tawny rimrock cliffs and with the San Juan River winding through it. In the sunlight of a crisp blue day, it is a sight to soothe and comfort any anxious soul.

Pagosa Springs, below Wolf Creek, is a helter-skelter cowtown where the public buildings are heated in winter by the town's own natural hot waters. Twenty miles beyond is the daffy spire, Chimney Rock.

The Navajo Trail then passes Bayfield, a very small town at the edge of an elaborate six-

lane interchange that is big enough for Brooklyn. The reason is the exceedingly heavy traffic.

The road south goes through Ignacio, the Southern Ute Indian capital, on its way to the vast Navajo Dam project on the San Juan River in New Mexico. The road north leads to the Vallecito Lake resort area and to Lemon Dam, which is starting to rise on the Florida River.

Also to the north is a superb segment of San Juan Mountain wilderness that is accessible only to hikers. It is called The Grenadiers, because its several 14,000-foot peaks look like crack soldiers marching on to war.

After Bayfield comes Durango, the Paris of the San Juans. This is a bright metropolis in which visitors ride the ding-ding, narrow-gauge steam trains to Silverton by day and go to the melodrama at night. There is fine fishing, too, and countless roads to explore.

West of these pleasing attractions, the Navajo Trail passes the entrance of Mesa Verde National Park, a high, dry mesa that contains the ancient dwellings of prehistoric Indians.

First Road

At Cortez, the trail dips south to Four Corners, and then plunges bravely into a rolling part of the Navajo nation. No road ever went there before. The terrain is the ridge dividing drainages of the San Juan River and the Little Colorado; the landscape is dotted with strange sandstone shapes and with Navajo hogans (homes) that are shaped like beehives.

Modern man will sense something terribly amiss in these seventy-five miles just short of the trail's end in Flagstaff. There are no billboards and no signs of any kind, big or little. For once, nobody is trying to peddle anything, and the relief from this perennial irritation is like remembered pain.

The new Navajo Trail has, just beyond its end, Grand Canyon National Park, and its creators claim a second great ace in the hole. It is the shortest way—2,200 miles—from Chicago to Disneyland. Who could ask for anything more?