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Finding the Great Western Trail by Sylvia Gann Mahoney
(review)

Glen Sample Ely

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Finding the Great Western Trail. By Sylvia Gann Mahoney. (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2015. Pp. 300. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index.)

In *Finding the Great Western Trail*, Sylvia Gann Mahoney observes, “myths survive even when confronted by truth” (27). Indeed, this is certainly true in Texas, where popular fiction frequently trumps historical fact, most notably in regard to the state’s legendary cattle trails. Mahoney’s seven-year quest to document one major route, the Western Cattle Trail, encountered a number of myth-busting challenges. Foremost among these is the considerable confusion that exists in Texas regarding the correct names of cattle trails throughout the state.

Mahoney’s introduction provides a standard overview of Texas’s major trails, including the Goodnight-Loving Trail and the Chisholm Trail. Many people (including Mahoney) mistakenly believe that in 1866, Charles Goodnight and Oliver Loving laid out the route to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, that now bears their names. In fact, as this reviewer has documented, this trail was blazed during the Civil War by cowboys working for John Chisum, driving illicit herds from Confederate West Texas to sell to the Union Army in New Mexico.

Mahoney then turns to the Chisholm Trail, a contested topic. Taking a traditionally accepted view, Mahoney states that this legendary route originated in South Texas. However, since the 1930s, a number of cattle drive experts have disputed this claim. They contend that the Chisholm, named after freighter Jesse Chisholm, did not run south of the Red River. Instead they argue that the trail in Texas that connected with the Chisholm at the Red River was known as the Eastern Trail. (This debate continues today, hence it is referenced as both the Chisolm and the Eastern Trail.)

Moving on to the Western Trail, Mahoney notes that over the years some people have also conflated what they understood to be the Chisholm with the Western. In an attempt to clarify matters, she explains that the Western and the Chisholm/Eastern were two parallel trails that ran 90 to 150 miles apart. Both originated in South Texas and ran northward along the western edge of the Great Plains. In Texas, the Western passed through Kerrville, Coleman, Albany, and Vernon, while the Chisholm/Eastern went through Austin, Waco, and Fort Worth.

Citing research by Western Trail historians Jimmy Skaggs and Gary and Margaret Kraisinger, Mahoney says that cowboys began using the Western extensively during the 1870s, after “Kansas legislators closed . . . the Chisholm Trail . . . to herds from Texas” and “trail bosses moved their herds west.” The Western Trail “filled the void left by the Chisholm Trail” (13). Although acknowledging the importance of the Chisholm, Mahoney’s work restores the Western Trail to its well-deserved place in history.

To that end, in 2004, Mahoney and members of the Vernon, Texas, chapter of Rotary International, led a Rotary project to place markers along the Western Trail from Mexico to Canada. *Finding the Great Western Trail* documents this seven-year effort. Mahoney includes engaging and informative historical snapshots of the communities located along the Western as well as pictures and stories of marker dedications by local Rotary clubs.

Mahoney, a former teacher and rodeo coach, founded the Western Heritage Center in Lovington, New Mexico. In *Finding the Great Western Trail*, she has crafted an inspiring story of communities across Texas and North America banding together to help preserve their shared history. The fact that this major undertaking to commemorate and preserve the Western Trail was such a success is a testament to Mahoney and her fellow Rotarians.

Fort Worth, Texas

GLEN SAMPLE ELY

Fort Bascom: Soldiers, Comancheros, and Indians in the Canadian River Valley.

By James Bailey Blackshear. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016. Pp. 272. Notes, bibliography, index.)

In August 1863, a mixed force of United States regular soldiers and New Mexico volunteers established Fort Bascom, New Mexico, on the south side of the Canadian River about sixty miles west of the Texas border. Named for Capt. George N. Bascom, killed eighteen months earlier at the Battle of Valverde, the post was designed to blunt a possible Confederate invasion of New Mexico and to check the flourishing Comanchero trade between residents of that territory and Southern Plains Indians. Chronic shortages of good drinking water, building materials, fresh meat and vegetables, and forage continually plagued the small military garrisons there (usually only two companies). General William T. Sherman described the region as “an awful country from which to draw men before death” (8). Fort Bascom’s independent status was ended in the summer of 1870, but it would thereafter serve as a sub-post of Fort Union until its permanent closure in 1875.

In this first full study of the post, James Bailey Blackshear makes two significant points. First, he demonstrates that while obviously a part of the history of New Mexico, Fort Bascom also played an important role in the history of Texas. As the closest military position to the western Llano Estacado, it served as a base for big army columns led by Col. Christopher “Kit” Carson (1864), Maj. Andrew W. Evans (1868–69), and Maj. William R. Price (1874) into the heart of Comanchería, campaigns that, in conjunction with soldiers from Kansas, Texas, and Indian Territory, eventually crushed the military power of the Comanches and Kiowas. Even more