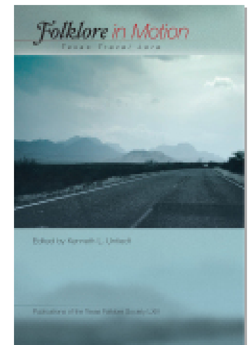
Folklore in Motion

Untiedt, Kenneth L.



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LEGENDS OF THE TRAIL

by Francis E. Abernethy

[A legend is a traditional prose narrative that has a historical setting and real people as characters. It deals with extraordinary happenings, even supernatural events, in a realistic way. Legends are folk history which document heroic or dramatic events of a culture's life.—*Abernethy*]

The following happened in August of 1886 on the Camino Real de los Tejas, where the Trail crosses Onion Creek southwest of Austin.

1886 was the drouthiest year in over a generation, and the wells had dried up, and the black land on Tobe Pickett's farm had cracks in it wide enough to swallow a jackrabbit. María, who with her husband Pablo were Tobe's hired help, walked alongside a great wide crack on her way to cut prickly pear for the hogs. As she looked into the depths of the crack, thinking to see a trapped jackrabbit, her eyes caught the gleam of old metal. A closer look revealed a crack's-width view of a large chest with an iron chain around it.

María had found the chest of gold the Spaniards had buried on the Camino Real when they were attacked by bandits a hundred years earlier—before Spaniards became Mexicans. María marked the spot and told her husband, and they waited and planned how they would get the chest out when nobody could see them.

They waited three days for Tobe to go into Austin and give them some privacy—and the night before the day that Tobe was supposed to go to town, leaving them time and space to dig up the chest and become richer than the governor of Texas—they heard a rumble of thunder in the northwest. It began to rain. It rained for a day and a night. And the creeks flooded and the wells filled and the black land became a gumbo that could bog a burro. And everybody rejoiced. Everybody, that is, except Pablo and María,

who searched for days for evidence of their crack and the hidden treasure the Spaniards had buried along the Camino Real de los Tejas. But the land had swelled with the moisture and the crack had closed.

Finally they searched no more. "Sea por Dios," said Pablo, in resignation. "The gold is not meant for us."

"You are right," said María. "We will live the lives we have."

And that great chest of gold with a chain wrapped around it is still buried alongside the Camino Real de los Tejas. We have had a drouth this year; perhaps the earth is cracked once more down to the old Spanish treasure chest. Es la voluntad de Dios that some traveler—some day—on the King's Highway will find it. Let it be one of us.[1]

Now, I do not absolutely vouch for the veracity of that tale. I tell it as it was told to me. I can also tell you about several pack loads of Spanish church crosses and chalices and plates of gold and silver that to prevent their theft were dumped into the Attoyac River at the Camino Real crossing in San Augustine County.[2] And there are six jack loads of unimaginable wealth secreted at the bottom of a pond that lies close by the Camino el Caballo, the Smuggler's Road that left the Camino Real and looped around Spanish customs in Nacogdoches.[3]

The Camino Real is a corridor of myths and legends as ancient as the tracks of the first people that walked it. The Caddo Indians, who traveled the Trail and lived alongside it over a thousand years ago, have a tale which says that they came to East Texas out of a land of darkness. They brought corn with them and seeds for squash and pumpkins, and they journeyed from their dark, unknown past in the east to a new world of light on the Angelina and the Neches where the Trail crosses those rivers. And they met travelers with their greeting of "*Tejas*"—meaning "friend"—and gave Texas its name.[4]

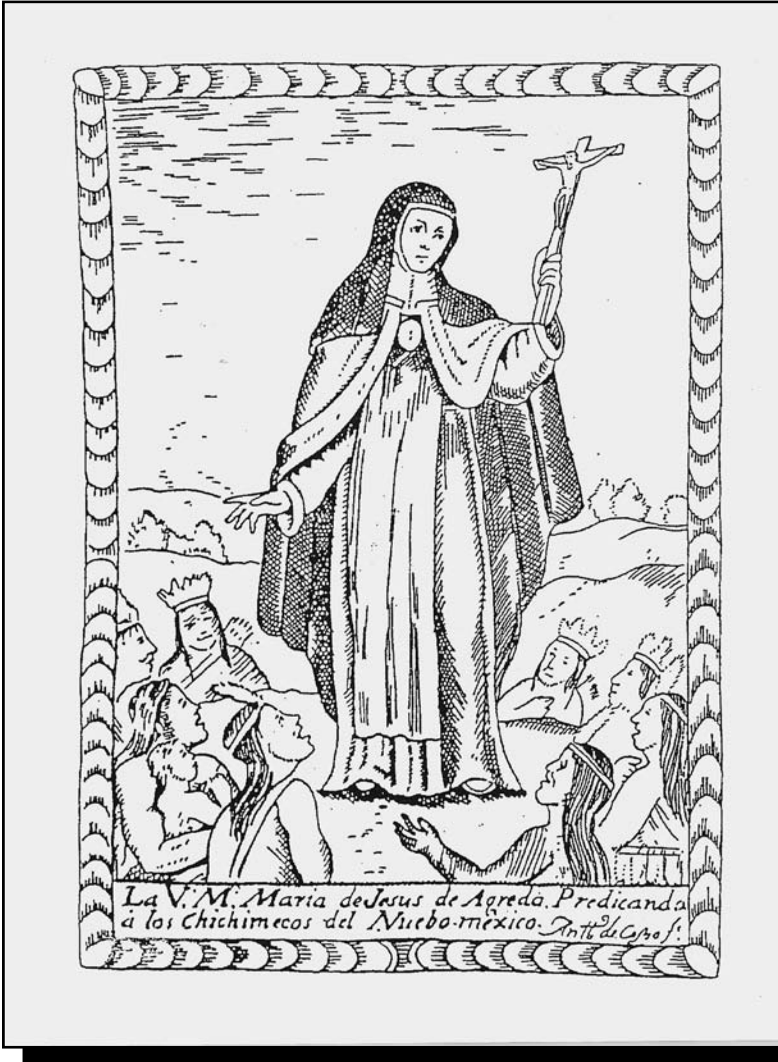
The first Europeans to travel the Camino Real came as the result of the tales of great wealth hoarded among the Indians of the Southeast. Hernando de Soto and seven hundred men set out

from St. Petersburg, Florida, in 1539 to find this wealth. Three years later the De Soto remnants were down to three hundred men and *up* to seven hundred hogs, but no treasure. Now under the command of Luis de Moscoso, they reached East Texas, tattered and torn and much poorer than the Caddo Indians they found at Guasco. These Caddos lived near the Old Spanish Trail where it crosses the Neches River in Cherokee County. Desperately searching for a route back to Mexico, Moscoso sent ten mounted scouts down an Indian trail that would become El Camino Real. They reached the Guadalupe River near present-day New Braunfels, but finding the natives to be as destitute as they were, they turned back up the Trail to Guasco. Moscoso and his men did get back to Mexico, but by boat, unfortunately not by the Camino Real.[5]

In 1690, 150 years later, when the Spanish came again to the Camino Real—this time to the land of the Hasinai Caddo, whom they called the Tejas—they followed the legend of The Lady in Blue. The Spanish began, however, in 1685 following *not* the legend but the reports of the landing of the Frenchman LaSalle on Spanish soil near Matagorda Bay. The Spanish were on him like a hound on a rabbit the moment he landed, and in 1689 Alonso de Leon found his pitiful French remnants at Fort St. Louis.

Franciscan Father Damian Massanet accompanied Alonso de Leon on the 1689 search for LaSalle. Father Damian came to New Spain following the legends of the miracles of Mother María de Jesús of Agreda, Spain. She was The Lady in Blue, who—according to stories she had told sixty years earlier in 1631—had by the miracle of bilocation (an enviable miracle of being in two places at one time) visited the land of the Tejas without leaving her convent in Spain. She said that while she was in the New World she had instructed the Tejas in the mysteries of Catholicism and had saved many souls for Christ. Father Damian encountered a group of these Tejas Indians in the vicinity of La Salle's Fort St. Louis.

The wily Tejas, as eager after gifts as my six-year-old grandson, with utmost sincerity told Father Massanet that they were familiar with the stories of God, his Son, and the Holy Mother—



The Lady in Blue preaching to the Indians of New Spain

and of course, The Lady in Blue. They begged that Father Damian send missionaries among them to teach them Christianity—and don't forget the presents!—even as a Lady in Blue had taught them years before when she had come down from the East Texas hills to their villages. Father Damian, ecstatic and convinced that this was the miracle of the Mother María, promised that he

would return with Catholicism—and gifts—the following year when the corn was ripe.

In the spring of 1690, an entrada under Alonso de Leon and Father Damian Massanet came to "Cenis," a large Hasinai Caddo settlement near the Neches River (in the same general area as the village of Guasco that Moscoso had visited), and established a Franciscan mission. The Spanish dedicated Mission San Francisco de los Tejas on June 1, 1690. This tribute to The Lady was the first permanent European establishment in Texas on the Camino Real.[6]

Now that the Spanish had this Imaginary Kingdom at the far end of what was to be the Camino Real they decided to equip it with a governor. Consequently, in 1691 the viceroy appointed Don Domingo Terán de los Rios as the first governor of this newly created province among the Tejas. Terán planted the royal standard at every campsite on his gubernatorial entrada, claiming the land for Spain. His standard was *not* the flag of Spain, however, but was a banner that had the Crucified Christ on one side and the Virgin of Guadalupe on the other. Then he gave the land of the Tejas the unhappy title, "Nueva Reyna de Montaña de Santander y Santillana." Imagine, if you will, singing "The Eyes of Nueva Reyna de Montaña de Santander y Santillana are upon you"!

Governor Terán's bitterly cold tenure in Texas was not a happy one. His explorations in the winter of 1691 were expeditions out of hell, if there is an icy hell, and he reported to the viceroy that "the difficulty was so great that I [can] not find words to describe it." Our first Governor of Texas concluded his report with words to the effect that if he owned hell and Texas, he'd rent out Texas and live in hell. This catchy insult was later copied by other intruders into the Lone Star State.[7]

According to popular legend, Louis Juchereau de St. Denis is the trailblazer of the Camino Real. He was not, of course. The many trails from East Texas to the southwest had been traveled for centuries, but St. Denis, with his Frenchman's élan and panache, became the most famous. In 1714, St. Denis and a small band of Frenchmen and Caddo Indians rode the Camino Real corridors

In this sketch by Charles Shaw, St. Denis arrives at San Juan Bautista on the Rio Grande after traveling the Camino Real through Nacogdoches from his Red River trading post at Natchitoches, Louisiana

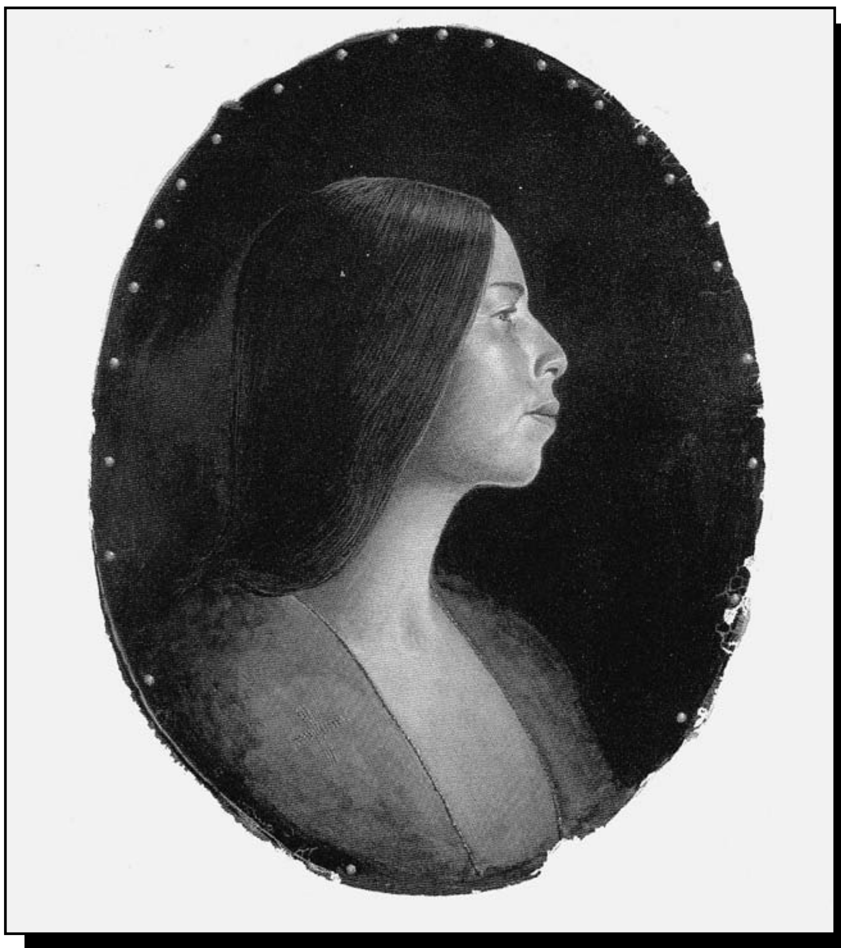
from Natchitoches through the camps of the Nacogdoches, then through the southern route to Paso de Francia and Mission San Juan Bautista on the Rio Grande.

The St. Denis story is hard to believe, even now. Can you imagine Diego Ramon's surprise when this *Frenchman* showed up on his doorstep at San Juan Bautista? Now look who's coming to dinner! And then St. Denis spent two years successfully playing

bureaucratic politics with the Spanish, marrying Diego Ramon's granddaughter, and finally being hired (Can you believe it?) in 1716 to guide the Domingo Ramon expedition up the Camino Real, this time all the way to the founding of six missions and a frontier outpost at Los Adaes, the end of the Trail for the Spanish. I think St. Denis fully qualifies as a semi-legendary figure on the Camino Real.[8]

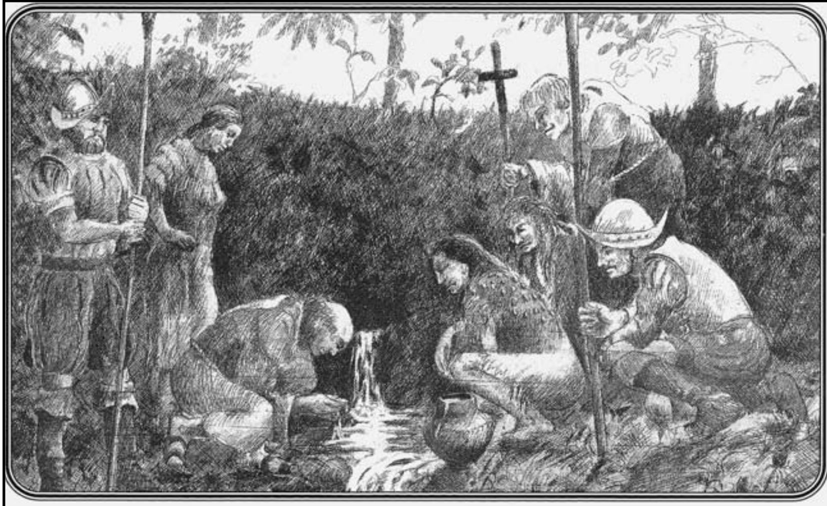
I would like to cite the St. Denis-Domingo Ramon entrada of 1716, as the coolest, most casual and laid-back expedition that ever went up the Camino Real. It has to be legendary in some sense. The troops were supposed to march twelve to fifteen miles per day, but they were continually stopping to chase deserters or find lost horses, or children. They spent all day March 17 fishing, and the churchmen claim that they caught 300 fish. Several other days were spent hunting and fishing—or when somebody got sick. March 26–29: "These four days," Ramon says, "I remained in this place because a soldier's wife gave birth to a child." Ramon camped on the Conchas River five days "so that all of the people would have plenty of time to confess their sins and pass Holy Week." They also went wild horse hunting on this stop. May 5 was a wedding day: "a soldier was to be married to Anna Guerra, an occasion that was celebrated with a feast prepared by his companions." June 2: "This day I remained here, because it was such a fine day." Eight days later: "This day I remained here, because it was a good camping place and because we wished to celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi." Captain Ramon almost did not finish his diary because on the fourth of May he ran a horse race with a Frenchman that included snatching his hat from the ground while riding at full speed, and Ramon fell off his mount.[9]

The Domingo Ramon travelers were welcomed to East Texas—when they finally got there—by an Indian woman speaking Spanish. This was Angelina, an enduring legend of the Camino Real. Friar Isidro Espinosa tells in his trip's diary about "a learned Indian woman of this tribe (Hainai Caddo), reared in Coahuila," who met the Domingo Ramon entrada and thereafter acted as an aide and interpreter between the Spanish and the Indians.[10]



Artist Ancel Nunn's painting of Angelina, who helped shape the Spanish frontier in East Texas. ***Commissioned by Claude Smithhart of Lufkin Printing Company for Bicentennial Project***

Angelina assisted the Spanish and the French during the period of exploration and settlement between 1712 and 1721 and was described by contemporaries as being "learned," "sagacious," and "famous." She was obviously greatly valued by the Spanish who named the Angelina River after her, and she would have shaken her head in wonderment had she known that she achieved such legendary stature that a county, a college, a river, and whole page in a Lufkin telephone book would carry her name—and that



In this etching by James Snyder, Father Margil is joined by the Indians and the Spanish to drink from the holy springs

nationally famous artist Ancel Nunn would draw a picture of her that made her look like a movie star. I think I see Linda Darnell in that role.[11]

If the Camino Real ever decides it needs its own saint or the blessing of one who definitely has the ear of God, it should appoint Father Antonio Margil de Jesus as its guardian angel. Father Margil walked the length of the Texas Trail twice—barefooted! sixty years old! and with a double hernia!—and this was after he had walked all the way from Costa Rica, with side trips through the Yucatan. Father Margil carried no food, only a staff, a cross, and a breviary. He ate one meal a day consisting of a broth of herbs and greens. He slept only three hours a night, the remaining time being spent on his knees in prayer with arms outstretched in remembrance of Christ's suffering on the Cross. Father Margil's religious zeal was already legendary before he traveled the Camino Real to East Texas, and stories about his walking on water and turning water to wine had sprung up wherever he had preached.

Margil's Nacogdoches legend grew out of the terrible drouth of 1717–18, when the Indians' crops failed and La Nana and

Banita creeks dried up and the Spanish were surviving on crow meat. According to legend, Father Margil spent a night in prayerful supplication and received a vision. On the next morning he proceeded to a high bank of La Nana Creek, about a hundred yards upstream from the Camino Real crossing. Here he struck his staff against the rock bank and two springs began to flow. The people were saved, and the springs were known thereafter as Los Ojos de Padre Margil, the Springs (or Eyes) of Father Margil. The City of Nacogdoches has purchased the traditional site of the Holy Springs, and it has now been cleaned and protected. The holy waters still flow (or trickle or seep), and I regularly bottle some for my friends who need its curative and procreational powers.

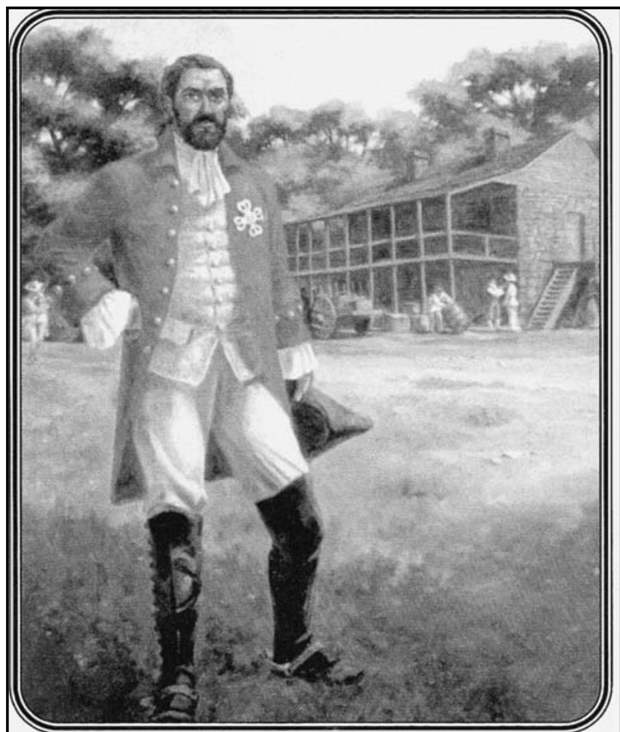
Another legend of Father Margil of the Camino Real was the tale of his encounter with the panther. The padre was traveling the Trail from Nacogdoches to Bexar when during the night a panther (sic "tiger") killed his baggage mule. When Father Margil awoke to the deed the next morning, he indignantly summoned the panther in from the woods, ordered him to kneel, and then loaded him with the dead mule's baggage. That panther had to carry the gear all the way to San Antone, where he was finally unloaded, pardoned, and allowed to return to his hunting ground. He was also sternly lectured about molesting mules that belonged to Roman Catholics.[12]

Legends on the Camino Real stuck to Father Margil like ticks on a bird dog. He is credited with starting the flow of the San Antonio River[13] and with conferring the name on the Brazos River.[14] I would strongly recommend that the name of Father Antonio Margil de Jesus be invoked at all deliberations involving El Camino Real.

And in the dramatic history of the Old Spanish Trail, who can forget that bloody conflict, The Chicken War. Two mighty nations,

Spain and France, faced each other in an uneasy truce across a gulley called the Arroyo Hondo, the eastern boundary of the Province of Texas. In Europe, this fragile truce broke into warfare, and the French in Natchitoches happily heard about it before the Spanish got their news. Thus, on the morning of June 19, 1719, French Lieutenant Philippe Blondel mounted a sneak attack on the mission at Los Adaes on the Spanish frontier. His army of seven soldiers surrounded the mission and captured all the occupants, which consisted of a lay brother and a soldier. The battle fought and won, the dastardly Frenchmen raided the mission's henhouse and captured all of the chickens. Unfortunately, when the lieutenant tied his squawking brace of hens across his saddle, they made such a racket that it spooked his horse, which plunged bucking through the pines and dashed the Frenchman to the ground. In the confusion that followed, the lay brother escaped and spread the word through San Augustine, Nacogdoches, and finally to Domingo Ramon's fort on the Angelina. Panic ensued and the Spanish fled down the Camino Real to Bexar. East Texas was once more devoid of Spaniards, which vacuum gave the bellicose French second thoughts: they had *won* the war but they had *lost* their best and only market.[15]

Antonio Gil Y'Barbo was the founder of Nacogdoches, a mercantile village begun in 1779 at the crossroads of the Camino Real and Trammel's Trace. The enduring and much circulating legend of the Y'Barbos—and all of the old Spanish families of East Texas—was that they were pure Andalusian Spanish, who had come straight to East Texas from Seville, through French New Orleans, if you can imagine! This put them a cut above the more recent Mexican imports.



Antonio Gil Y'Barbo, founder of modern Nacogdoches, as drawn by Charles Shaw

As it turned out, the Aguayo entrada of 1721, which was the time of the arrival of the First Families, brought a very mixed package of beggars, debtors, and jailbirds—much like colonials elsewhere. Of the 110 men recruited, 107 were taken from the jail at Celaya and one was sent by his father. As to the legend of ethnic purity: forty-four of the settlers were indeed classified as Spanish. The rest were classified as such ethnic mixtures as *mestizos, coyotes, mulattoes, lobos,* one free Negro, and one Indian from Sapotlan. These settlers reproduced and married among the French in Natchitoches and the Indians all around them. They soon created a Spanish-Creole colonial culture that grew along the Camino Real from Los Adaes back toward the missions around Nacogdoches.[16]

In East Texas, "A True-Born Spaniard is a Contradiction."

These "Spanish" settlers were brought up the Camino Real by the legendary Marques de San Miguel de Aguayo, who (as one story goes) excused himself from a card game in Mazapil, rode fifty miles back to his hacienda near Saltillo on the Camino Real, slew his wife and her lover, rode back to Mazapil and finished the card game. He rode ten horses to death and silenced five mozos in the process, and his card playing friends never knew he had left the building.[17]

All the tales of the Camino Real have not been told. Spanish treasures still lie hidden along the Trail—and The Lady still walks. The Lady in Blue appeared at Sabine Town, at the Camino Real

Uncle Matt Pantalion. ***Photo by the author***

crossing of the Sabine River, two hundred years after she had first appeared to the Caddos of East Texas. She came this time in 1844 to nurse and care for the victims of the black-tongue plague. And when the sickness was over, she disappeared again.[18]

Seventy years later, in 1916, Uncle Matt Pantalion of Nacogdoches saw The Lady on the Camino del Caballo on the dusk of Christmas day. She was dressed in a flowing white and blue robe, and she was standing by a large white-oak tree on the side of the road. She looked at young Matt, sighed sad and lonely, and then ghostily faded away into the darkness of the forest background. You very well might question some of the tales I have told, but I *know* that this legend of the Camino Real is true because I took a picture of Uncle Matt standing by that very white-oak tree.

Endnotes

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8. Donald E. Chipman and Harriet Denise Joseph. "Louis Juchereau de St. Denis: Canadian Cavalier." *Notable Men and Women of Spanish Texas.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999.
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Consuelo Samarripa