Disaster At The Colorado

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Chapter 3

A New Road West

The Rose-Baley wagon train reached the Rio Grande on June 19 at a point approximately thirty miles north of Albuquerque. From here to Albuquerque they would follow the river. Water was plentiful, but Udell complained that the grass had been eaten short, making for poor grazing. He also complained that they had to buy wood since there was none along this well-traveled road; civilization has its price!

On the evening of June 22, they camped two miles from Albuquerque. Udell noted that “according to my calculations by time and gait,” the wagon train had traveled 826 miles since crossing the Missouri River at Westport. June 22 also happened to be Udell’s birthday. Being in a pensive mood that evening, he recorded in his journal, “This is my sixty-third birthday. My three-score-and ten years are almost spent; may I so appreciate it that I may be prepared to leave this earthly house even sooner than that, if my Lord should call me?”

In 1858, Albuquerque was a much smaller town than Santa Fe. It was mainly a military outpost and the headquarters for the Ninth Military District. Dr. William P. Floyd, who served as the physician for Beale’s second expedition in 1859, had this to say about Albuquerque in his journal:

Thursday, March 3, 1859. I left camp this morning and have come to the famed town of Albuquerque. It is inferior to Santa Fe and not much in fact for a Mexican adobe town, three fourths apparently taken up by the military. I see no use in their being here. There are no hostile Indians near and it is one of the furthest points of transportation in the Territory for provisions and therefore should not be made the depot for the supply of food to the other posts. I am no military man, however, and cannot know.¹
The next day, Udell and Emily went into Albuquerque to have some repairs made to their wagon. While waiting for the completion of the repair work, Udell struck up an acquaintance with Judge Samuel Winslow. Udell was able to get himself and Emily invited to the Judge’s home where, Udell wrote: “My Wife and I partook of an excellent dinner [lunch] with them. Judge Samuel Winslow is a gentleman of good attainments, much general information, pleasing in his manners, and benevolent and kind to all. And his lady is also possessed of those graces.”

Judge Winslow was a very important individual in Albuquerque; not only was he one of the town’s leading merchants, but he also was the justice of the peace and postmaster. In addition to these duties, he served as a sutler for the army. Udell’s newly acquired friend would prove to be a godsend in the months to come.

That evening the wagon train moved farther down the Rio Grande in order to find grass for their animals. They planned to spend several days here recruiting their stock and making final preparations for the journey to California. During their stay in Albuquerque, L. J. Rose persuaded some of the army officers to inspect his fine herd of thoroughbred cattle. He had the foresight to obtain letters from two of these officers testifying to the high quality and excellent condition of the animals. This would serve a very useful purpose at a later date.

At Albuquerque the emigrants heard about a new route to California that was recently surveyed by Edward F. Beale at the request of the United States government. This route closely followed the thirty-fifth parallel and was said to be a more direct route to California than the Southern Route usually followed by emigrants. According to its proponents, it would save travelers approximately two hundred miles. At an average of fifteen miles traveled per day, this would be a saving of thirteen days. Both the army officers and the citizens of Albuquerque spoke enthusiastically about this new route, saying there was plenty of grass and water the entire way, and that no hostile Indians would be encountered. Beale was in Washington, D.C. preparing reports on his newly surveyed road for the War Department and Congress, and thus, was not available to give the emigrants firsthand information.

The proposed new road would run from Fort Smith, Arkansas, to Los Angeles, California. It was intended to be used both as a military
and as an emigrant road. It was envisioned that, later, a railroad would be built over this same route. Beale had been given an appropriation of $50,000 and instructed by the War Department to survey that portion of the route from Fort Defiance to the Colorado River. A military road already existed between Fort Defiance and Albuquerque, but it could not be incorporated into the new road because it ran only to the fort and was off the direct route to California. Fort Defiance was located near the present-day New Mexico-Arizona border, and about one hundred and fifty miles northwest of Albuquerque. Beale was chosen to conduct this survey because of his distinguished naval career and his previous explorations and travels in the Southwest.

Some confusion exists as to Beale’s actual title at this period. He is sometimes referred to as Lieutenant Beale of the U.S. Army, and sometimes as Lieutenant Beale of the U.S. Navy. To add even more confusion he was also sometimes addressed as General Beale. In actuality, Beale was not a member of any military or naval unit at the time. When he resigned from the navy in 1852, he held the rank of lieutenant. In 1852 he was appointed as the superintendent of Indian affairs for California by President Fillmore. In this position he frequently had to deal with army officers. To give him more clout in dealing with these officials, he was assigned the rank of brigadier general in the California State Militia by Governor Bigler. He apparently liked this title and was never known to scold anyone who addressed him as General, even long after he had left the Department of Indian Affairs. He also served as surveyor general of California, and this title might have helped reinforce the title of general in the public mind.

This was not the first to attempt to open up a route along the thirty-fifth parallel. Lieutenant Lorenzo Sitgreaves, of the U.S. Army Topographical Engineers, led an exploration team across this area in 1851. Lieutenant Ariel Weeks Whipple, also an army topographical engineer, came through this area in 1853–54 while searching for a transcontinental railroad route. Even private individuals got involved. Francois Xavier Aubry, a Santa Fe merchant, made two trips, one in 1852–53, and another in 1853–54, over this proposed route. Each of these expeditions gained valuable knowledge about the area, but none was successful in opening a railroad route or a wagon road.
Beale succeeded where the others failed. His well-equipped expedition, escorted by twenty soldiers from Fort Defiance, had little trouble in getting wagons across Northern Arizona. He started his survey from the Indian pueblo of Zuni on August 31, 1857, and arrived at the Mojave Villages on the Colorado River on October 17, 1857, having completed the trip in a little more than six weeks. For this expedition, Beale was authorized the use of twenty-five camels for the purpose of testing their usefulness and endurance on the Western deserts. This is the famous camel experiment about which much has been written. However, as Dennis G. Casebier carefully points out in his book, *The Mojave Road*, the main purpose of Beale’s expedition was to survey a wagon road and not to experiment with camels.

Beale described the Mojave Indians living along the Colorado River as, “fine-looking, comfortable, fat, and merry.” Although he didn’t feel threatened by them, he did insert this caveat in his report to the secretary of war:

> I regard the establishment of a military post on the Colorado River as an indispensable necessity for the emigrant over this road; for, although the Indians, living in the rich meadow lands, are agricultural, and consequently peaceable, they are very numerous, so much so that we counted 800 men around our camp on the second day after our arrival on the banks of the river. The temptation of scattered emigrant parties with their families, and the confusion of inexperienced teamsters, rafting so wide and rapid a river with their wagons and families, would offer too strong a temptation for the Indians to withstand.

Beale’s instructions were to go to Fort Tejon (near present-day Bakersfield) if he were in need of supplies, and then go back over the road which he had just traveled. His supplies being low, he exercised this option and proceeded to Fort Tejon. This was convenient for him since he owned a large cattle ranch nearby. After crossing the Colorado River on inflated India rubber rafts, he proceeded to Fort Tejon. The camels and other livestock swam the river.

He detached two camels and sent them with their handlers to Los Angeles. The people there were disappointed since they had expected him to come to their city with his full camel corps. They
accused him of going to Fort Tejon just so he could visit his ranch, but these charges were unfair because he had been instructed to go to Fort Tejon for his supplies and not to Los Angeles.

Beale left Fort Tejon for the return trip on January 10, 1858. He waited until then to go back because he wanted to prove that the thirty-fifth parallel route was an all-season road and could be traveled in the dead of winter as well as any other season. He must have had some second thoughts about the peaceful intentions of the Mojave Indians, however, because for this trip he brought along fifty dragoons from Fort Tejon. Camels were included on the return trip. Although Beale wasn’t overly enthusiastic about the camels in the beginning, he had by now formed a very favorable impression of these exotic beasts.

When the expedition reached the Colorado River, the men were pleasantly surprised to find a steamboat, the *General Jesup*, with Captain George Alonzo Johnson in charge, waiting to ferry them across the river. Captain Johnson was on a private exploration trip at his own expense to determine the navigability of the Colorado River. He had stopped to take on wood for the engines of the *General Jesup* when he saw Beale’s party coming over the horizon. What a surprise it must have been for Beale to have such an easy crossing of the Colorado River!

The expedition encountered no severe weather on the return trip and arrived safely back in Albuquerque on February 24, 1858. By mid-April Beale was in Washington, D.C., writing his reports for the War Department and Congress. In his report to Secretary of War John Floyd, Beale stated that the thirty-fifth parallel route would inevitably become a great emigrant road to California. To relieve the emigrants of some of the hardships of travel, Beale recommended that the government establish military posts, build bridges, and construct dams to insure a more reliable water supply, and as previously stated, he reported that the establishment of a military post at the Colorado River was an indispensable necessity before the road be opened to emigrant travel. It is quite clear from this report that Beale did not expect emigrants to use this road until all of these things were done.

Given the slow means of transportation available during that period, it is doubtful that a copy of Beale’s report had yet reached Albuquerque at the time the Rose-Baley wagon train arrived there on
June 23, 1858. Some of the army officers had talked with Beale and members of his expedition about the proposed new route when Beale returned to Albuquerque in February. Just what claims Beale made for the road in conversations with army officers, or what they understood him to say about it, is unknown. What is known is that the U.S. Army officers stationed in Albuquerque and the citizens of that town had the impression that the road was ready for emigrants.  

No name was given to the road by Congress, nor did Beale suggest any. He simply referred to it as the thirty-fifth parallel route in his report to Congress. However, the army and the citizens of Albuquerque began calling the new route Beale’s Wagon Road or the Beale Road, which must have made Beale proud. We, too, will call it Beale’s Wagon Road. It is only fitting that the road was named for him since he was the one who led the successful survey.

The town of Albuquerque had much to gain from Beale’s Wagon Road. All the traffic moving between Fort Smith, Arkansas, and Los Angeles, California, would have to pass through Albuquerque. It was already on the Southern Route and on El Camino Real, the ancient trade route between New Mexico and Mexico City. Had there been a chamber of commerce in Albuquerque at that time, it too, would have been assiduously promoting Beale’s Wagon Road.

The army might have had an ulterior motive in advising this new route to the Rose-Baley wagon train. In past years the army had furnished escorts for emigrants taking the Southern Route, since this road traversed territory inhabited by the feared Apaches. But this year (1858), because of possible trouble brewing with the Mormons in Utah, the army might have felt that it was not in a position to fight Mormons and escort emigrants at the same time. Besides, there was no known tribe of Indians on this new route that could match the ferocity of the infamous Apaches. Most of the Indians in this part of the country were thought to be harmless. They might be a nuisance because of their proclivity for thievery but presented no real threat to the lives of the emigrants. Problems with the Navajos would seem to have put this theory to rest, but apparently they hadn’t.

For their protection, the emigrants were advised by the army to stay together along the route and not wander off in small groups. The equipment and livestock of the Rose-Baley wagon train appeared to
the army to be of very high quality, and the emigrants presented a hardy appearance. Although there were women and young children and some older people in the group, they were outnumbered by the young men. The army did insist, however, that the emigrants procure the services of a guide before they would be given permission to travel this new route.

After hearing the glowing reports about Beale’s Wagon Road from the army and the citizens of Albuquerque, all the members of the Rose-Baley wagon train agreed that they would travel together over this new route—all but one, that is. As the reader might have already guessed, the lone dissenter was the old Baptist preacher, John Udell. Udell argued that it was unwise for them to start so long a journey with so many women and children over a new and completely unproven route. He recited an experience of his own when a group that he was crossing the plains with took a cutoff. Indians stole all of their horses leaving the emigrants to suffer many days of hunger before they could return to civilization—and they had no women or children with their party! Udell, having made three previous trips across the plains, clearly considered himself the elder statesman of the group. But when even his own wife and hired hands urged him to accept the group’s decision, he had little choice but to agree.¹²

Udell was perfectly correct in his opposition to traveling a new and unproven route for such a long distance accompanied by so many women and children. Although Beale had taken a few wagons over the route, the road was little more than a survey trail marked only by faint wagon tracks, an occasional stone cairn, and perhaps a few axe blazes on trees. For much of the way it followed existing Indian trails, which in turn followed animal trails. Little or no road work had been done and not a single bridge had been built anywhere along the route. Water could be found in most places along the way, but there were long waterless stretches (jornadas), and in many of the places where water did exist it could be found only by experienced desert travelers. In the area between the San Francisco Mountains and the Colorado River, wood and grass as well as water were scarce. Another disadvantage of this proposed route was the fact that between Albuquerque, New Mexico, and San Bernardino, California, a distance of nearly six hundred miles, there existed not a single outpost of civilization, except the
small pueblos of Laguna and Zuni. Even these were located near Albuquerque, not far into the journey. This meant that there would be no friendly trading post where supplies could be purchased or fresh horses or oxen obtained, and no protective fort where travelers could take refuge in case of an Indian attack.

Being the first emigrant party to use this route, they knew there would be no one in advance whom they might overtake in case of trouble, nor could they be sure there would be others following them. They knew only one thing for certain: They were in for the adventure of their lives! But in spite of all its disadvantages, the new route, with its promise of shorter distances, plenty of wood, grass, water, and friendly Indians all the way, was too much of an inducement for these emigrants to ignore.

About the only thing that Udell and his fellow emigrants could agree upon was the need for hiring a guide. A meeting for this purpose was held in Albuquerque on June 25:

"We all agreed that we could not travel it [Beale’s Wagon Road] without a guide, so I, with the other heads of families and owners of property, assembled for the purpose of hiring one. Mr. J. L. [L. J.] Rose and Mr. Gillum Bailey [Baley] were the largest owners in the train. We all expected to participate in the hiring of the guide; but as I commenced talking on the subject, says Mr. Rose: "Mr. Udell, Mr. Bailey and I can attend to this business without your help, and after the guide is hired, you can have the benefit of him with the rest, by paying what we think is right." Such an insulting expression from a German aristocrat caused the blood of a free-born American to rankle in my bosom. But under my circumstances I thought it best to pass it over in quietness."

Udell was even further incensed when he learned how much he was to be assessed for his share of the guide’s fees. He believed that it was at least double what it should be, based on the value of his property and the number of persons in his group. He appealed to Gillum Baley, and through the latter’s influence, a considerable amount was deducted from his assessment. Udell recorded in his journal, “It appeared that the latter [Rose] wished to make a speculation off us poor people, just in hiring the guide.” Udell then says that he resigned from Rose’s train and enrolled in Gillum Baley’s train. He also persuaded his
friends, the Dalys and the Hollands to do likewise. Actually, the change made little difference since they all agreed to travel together.

Not only did the army recommend Beale’s Wagon Road as the safest and shortest route for the emigrants to travel to California, but it also recommended a guide. According to L. J. Rose, the emigrants were advised by the commanding officer in Albuquerque, Colonel B. L. E. Bonneville, that:

The Beale Route or 35th Parallel Route was a much pleasant and safer route, and shorter, too, and that there was plenty of grass, wood, and water all the way—and the Indians were friendly. Well, they were so much in earnest in this matter that they recommended a guide who had been over the route before, and paid part of his expenses.

The guide recommended by the army was one Jose Manuel Savedra, a fifty-eight-year-old Mexican. Savedra’s credentials as a guide were impeccable. Some years before he had accompanied the Moqui (Hopi) Indians to the Colorado River country in a raid against the Mojave Indians. He had been one of the two guides on the Whipple expedition in 1854, the other guide being the famed mountain man, Antoine Leroux.

More recently Savedra had been the sole guide for Beale’s expedition which had just completed the survey for Beale’s Wagon Road. With qualifications like this, Savedra must have seemed like a godsend to the eager emigrants. Not only was his résumé impressive, but also his fee was quite reasonable for a guide with this kind of experience. He was willing to serve the emigrants as their guide for only $500, to be paid in advance, of course. This fee also included the services of Savedra’s friend, Petro, who would act as interpreter. (What languages Petro spoke have never been revealed.) This was quite a bargain because only the year before Savedra had been paid $1,200 for his services on the Beale expedition. Making the deal even more tempting was the fact that the good citizens of Albuquerque, including some of the army officers, agreed to pay $180 of the guide’s fee. How could the members of the wagon train pass up a bargain like this?

What the emigrants didn’t know was that both Whipple and Beale had found Savedra’s services as a guide to be less than satisfactory. Whipple hired Antoine Leroux, a friend and frequent companion.
of Kit Carson, as his principal guide. Antoine Leroux had served as guide for Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke’s famed Mormon Battalion in 1846. Neither Whipple nor Leroux had traversed the entire thirty-fifth parallel route before, and having heard that Savedra had accompanied the Moqui Indians in an expedition against the Mojaves, Whipple hired him as extra insurance. “In order to omit nothing that may contribute to success, we have secured the services both of Leroux and Savedra for the journey,” Whipple wrote in his journal.17

Savedra had difficulty finding water for the Whipple expedition. Once, while they were on a scouting expedition, Whipple stated, “Savedra thought that he recognized a point on the route he pursued with the Moquis twelve years since, and a few of us followed him to the top of a high hill to reconnoiter. He was entirely lost.”18 A guide who gets himself and his companions lost does little to inspire confidence in his leadership or improve the expedition’s morale. Had Whipple investigated Savedra’s claim more thoroughly, he would have found that Savedra had accompanied the Moqui Indians on a raid for the purpose of stealing children from other Indian tribes and selling them into slavery or keeping them as their own slaves. The slave-procuring expedition was thoroughly routed by the Yampai Indians, and the slave stealers were lucky to have escaped with their scalps intact. Child stealing and slavery hardly speak well of Savedra’s moral character. Fortunately for the Whipple expedition, it also had the services of Leroux.

In comparing the value of the two guides, Savedra and Leroux, Lieutenant David Sloane Stanley, a member of Whipple’s staff, had this to say about Savedra: “He pretends to know the country we are to explore, but he knew nothing, and Lieutenant Whipple, to utilize him, put him to work with the pack train.” But about Leroux, Stanley had this to say: “Leroux was a man of another sort. He pretended to nothing he did not know. His knowledge and experience were wonderful, and yet part of the route he had never seen.”19

Beale, who had allotted only one guide for his expedition, let himself be talked into hiring Savedra by the citizens of Albuquerque. What qualities Savedra lacked as a guide he made up for as a public relations man. Beale soon realized his error, but unlike Whipple he had
no Leroux to fall back upon. As a consequence he was forced to do his own scouting and exploring. He, too, soon relegated Savedra to the pack train as a simple packer. In his report to the Secretary of War, Beale was much more critical of Savedra than Whipple had been. He said this about Savedra:

> We unfortunately have no guide, the wretch I employed at the urgent request and advice of everyone in Albuquerque, at enormous expense, being the most ignorant and irresolute ass extant. This obligates us to do the double duty of road making and exploring which is very arduous, besides adding infinitely to my anxiety and responsibility.  

Fortunately for Savedra, but unfortunately for the members of the Rose-Baley wagon train, neither Beale nor Whipple was anywhere near Albuquerque at this time. Beale was in Washington, D.C., writing his reports to the secretary of war, while Whipple was serving at another post far from Albuquerque. Careful inquiry might have turned up deficiencies in Savedra’s résumé—but then, the unsuspecting emigrants had no reason to suppose that Savedra wasn’t everything that he was represented to be. Even if Savedra’s poor performance as a guide on the Whipple and Beale expeditions had been known to the emigrants, it is doubtful that they could have found another guide in Albuquerque or Santa Fe who was familiar with the thirty-fifth parallel route all the way from Albuquerque to the Colorado River and to California. Neither Kit Carson nor Antoine Leroux was available at that time.

The *Santa Fe Gazette*, in its July 10, 1858, edition published the following letter to the editor from a citizen in Albuquerque who claimed to be a member of the Committee of Information, whatever that was.

Albuquerque, N.M., June 28, 1858

Mr. Editor:

I am happy to inform you that the Great Central Route to California, is in a fair way of being opened at last. There is here now a large train of emigrants who will start tomorrow by Zuni for the Colorado. They have nearly forty wagons, and over fifty men and a great many loose cattle. Their stock is all in fine order, the wagons new, light and strong, the men, women and
children in the best of health and spirits; and at last, but not least, they have for a guide, Laavedra [Savedra] who took Mr. Beale over so successfully.

Please insert in your valuable Gazette, that persons intending to emigrate, may feel assured of finding hereafter a beaten road over the shortest route.

Respectfully, Sir yours,
W.H.B. for Com. of Information

The Gazette also saw fit to publish in the same edition a few comments of its own regarding the arrival of the emigrants in Albuquerque and their intent to travel Beale’s Wagon Road to California.

It will be seen by our Albuquerque correspondence, that a large number of California emigrants arrived there during the past week and have determined to take the Beale or 35th Parallel route to accomplish their journey. This circumstance is a flattering indication of the prospects of the route as the great overland highway to the Pacific. The emigrant party seemed to be much pleased with their reception at Albuquerque and the interest manifested in their success by the citizens of that city. They employed the services of an experienced and valuable guide, and doubtlessly will have a prosperous and pleasant journey.

Thus, with the hiring of the guide, the Rose-Baley wagon train made its final preparations for plunging into the unknown and its date with destiny.
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