

Do Not Disturb!

IN THE year 1540 the burning sun of western Papagueria blazed down upon the helmets and breastplates of a cavalcade of Spanish soldiers plodding wearily across the wastes of sand and rock. Coronado, still filled with disappointment at finding only poor drab Indian villages in place of seven golden cities, had sent Captain Melchior Diaz to lead an expedition of exploration toward the West. And so it was that on a hot September day the first white men traveled the route of Camino del Diablo. Thanks to their Indian guides who knew the water holes, they reached the Colorado River. The rugged trail they blazed remained for future travelers to follow—Father Kino, Father Garces, Juan Bautista de Anza, gold seekers and early settlers, one of whom was named Nameer. Tales of the hardships they endured gave the "Devil's Road" its forbidding name.

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The Camino del Diablo is still there today.

My husband, Juel, and I had long wanted to find out to what extent the modern world had intruded upon this ancient route. Inspired by the writings of former travelers—Father Kino's memoirs and his companion Manje's records; Carl Lumholtz, who followed the road in 1910; Godfrey Sykes, who drove it in the 1920s; later Harold Weight (DESERT, Sept. 1949) and Randall Henderson (DESERT, April 1940 and Jan.

1951)—we set out to explore it ourselves.

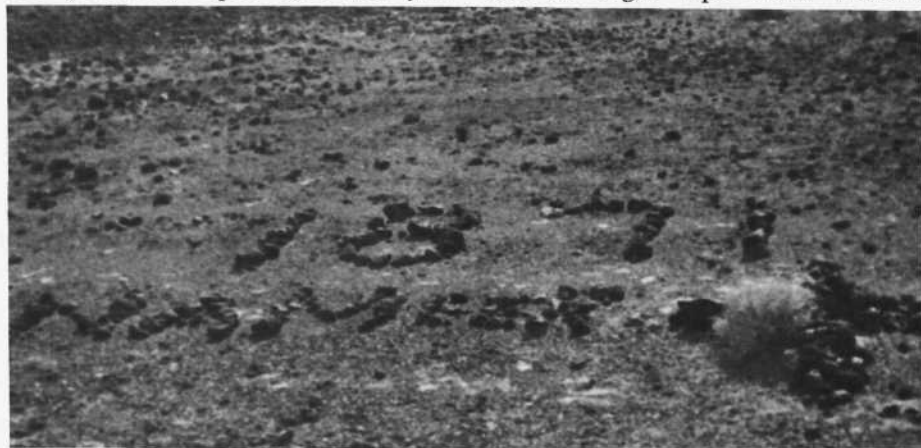
The Old Yuma Trail, as it was sometimes called, now lies within the jurisdiction not only of the Cabeza Prieta Game Refuge, but also of the Luke Air Force Bombing and Gunnery Range. They both gave us permission to enter, although they wouldn't guarantee that our Volkswagen bus would get through, even accompanied by a friendly jeep.

Coming in from Ajo through the back door of Organ Pipe Cactus National

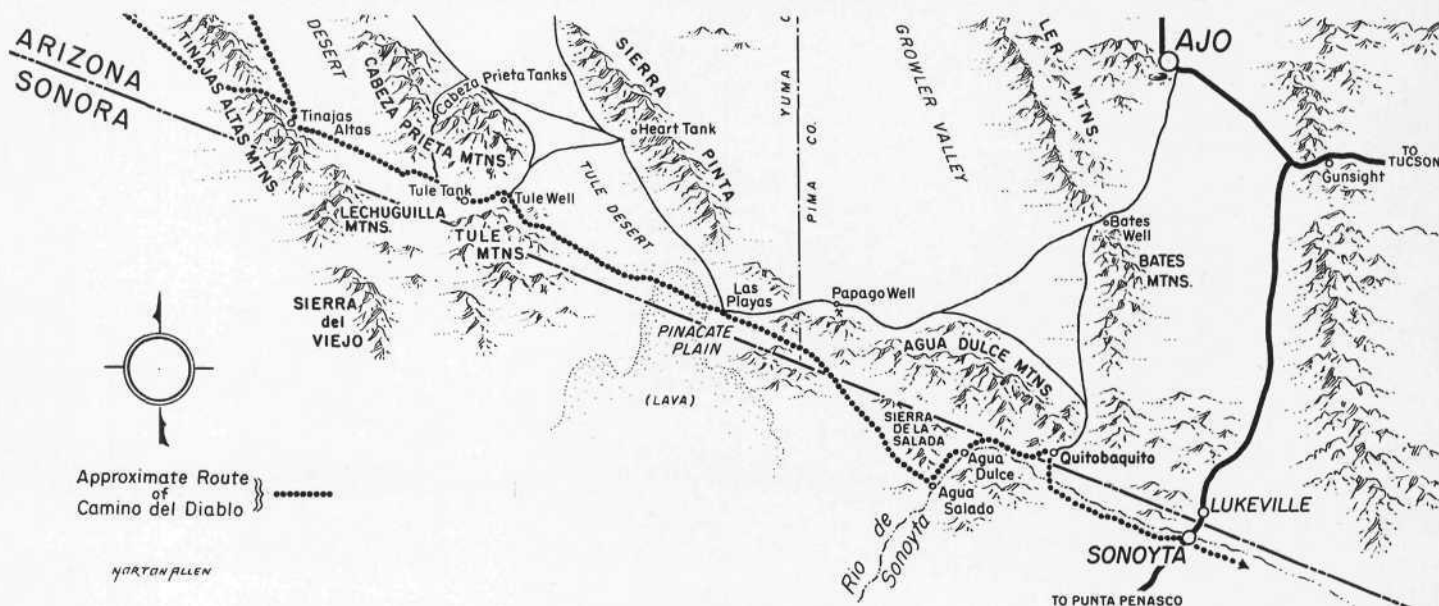
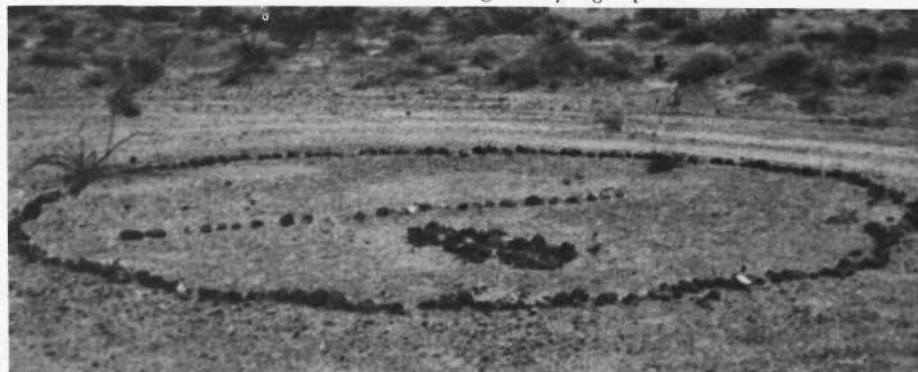
Monument, we found ourselves in wilderness before actually reaching the route of the Camino, which came up from below the border. We made Papago Well by lunch time and found there a modern pump bringing water into a tank complete with faucet. There was an old corral and the ruins of a building. An ancient rusty sign out on the desert facing north indicates U.S. customs on the right. The place was once used as a customs house and border crossing point. To our surprise, we found a California family camped there and enjoying the desert roads in a sand buggy towed behind their camper truck.

Though not yet on the old Camino, we soon came upon the first relic of the drama and tragedy of the desert. About two miles beyond Papago Well we found a pile of stones to the right of the road marked by a cross made of two strips of iron. On the back was written "David L. O'Neil." At this point our map showed the O'Neil Hills and O'Neil Pass and we wondered who this man had been who left his name so markedly on the area. We later learned he was a prospector who died there of exhaustion about 1916. When his burro wandered into Papago Well, his body was found and buried on the spot where he died.

Beyond the low pass, we came down into a sandy playa which we traversed, with our fingers crossed, until we reached the safety of a rocky mesa that spilled across the border from the Pinacate lava flow. Our map informed us that this road now was following the actual route of the Camino del Diablo. On the lava flow, we noticed a pattern of rocks laid



Above: Grave of the mysterious Nameer in the Pinacate lava flow. These stones have remained undisturbed for almost 100 years. Circle below lies near base of Tordillo Mountain and marks the grave of eight persons.

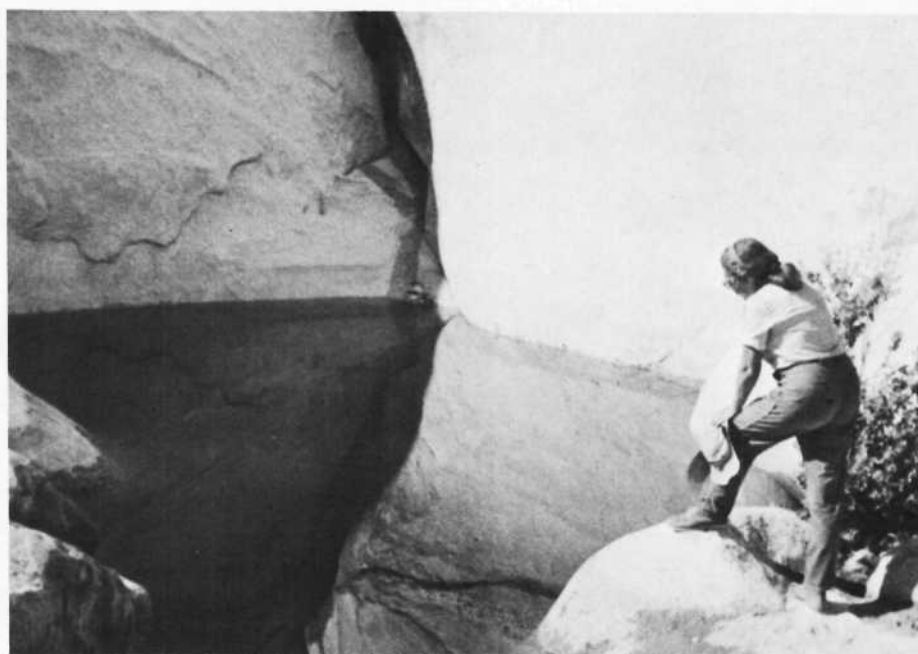


out which spelled the name "Nameer" and the date 1871. Beside them was a pile of stones in the shape of a cross. Who was Nameer? One man, or a family? And who placed these stones where they had lain for 97 years marking the grave? In the same area, embedded in the ground, were also rows of stones forming parts of squares and rectangular shapes, possibly bits of letters that might have marked other graves. Had disaster struck here in 1871, or were these the graves of lone travelers brought to die by strange coincidence in the same spot?

Crossing another sandy playa we paused to admire the glowing pinkish granite range of the Sierra Pinta and, ahead, forbidding Sierra de la Cabeza Prieta. As we approached the moun-



The giant ironwood tree is still a landmark on the Camino. The Tinajas Altas loom in the background.



Some of the tanks hold a generous supply of water.

ains, several branches of the Camino wound into low passes. We picked the most northerly, which looked like the best, and came upon another pile of stones, apparently a grave.

As the sun dropped low, we bounced into a small valley dominated by a windmill and two small buildings of corrugated iron. One is a cabin for Game Refuge personnel who stop here occasionally; the other is a neat little out-house. Under the water tank of the windmill an enclosure contains a very practical, through primitive shower. This is Tule Well. Civilization had reached the Camino after all! A nearby hill is

crowned by a monument commemorating the dedication of the Game Refuge, including plaques from various Boy Scout troops. An old custom's house sign identified Tule Well as another former border crossing point.

We camped in a clump of trees in the middle of the clearing and enjoyed a sumptuous dinner cooked over a campfire while a brilliant moon illuminated our first night on the Old Yuma Trail.

Resisting the temptation to tackle a road to the north that led, according to a U.S. Geological Survey sign, to the Cabeza Prieta Tanks and uncertain water, we continued east. Though a sign

said only three miles to Tule Tank, it was not at that spot. A couple of roads to the right seemed possible, but while trying one of them we stuck in the deep sand of a long arroyo. After much digging, jacking-up and roadbuilding, we turned back and finally found a little track between the two roads that led to a narrow canyon a few hundred yards off the road. There a sign told us we were at Tule Tank.

A short walk up the drainage took us to a pleasant spot among the rocks, surrounded by vegetation and edged by a sandy beach. We recognized it as Tule Tank from the photograph in Lumholtz's *New Trails in Mexico*, but now there was no water. By digging about a foot down we managed to create enough of a pool to have bolstered the life of a parched traveler, though hardly enough to fill his water bottles. Up the canyon we did find a little water in a small tank, but quite inaccessible to a weary wayfarer.

There is some controversy as to whether Tule Tank is the one Kino calls the *Tinaja de la Luna*. Many feel that the *Tinaja de la Luna* is the Heart Tank in the Sierra Pinta, but the Game Refuge identifies it with Tule. Considering that Kino had to build a trail of rocks up to the tank for his mules to reach the water, it would seem that this is not the place, as it looks reasonably accessible to animals. Because of this, our vote went to Heart Tank.

To assist future travelers, we stopped

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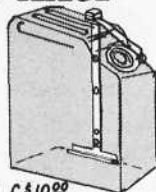
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back at the road and made a sign of rocks on the ground at the turn-off. We hope it will be durable enough to be of help.

In the Tule Tank area we found ourselves in a region of spectacular mountain formations where sharp white granite ranges contrast with neighboring peaks, like chocolate sundaes. It is the white rock at the base, capped by dark brown volcanic flows splashing down the sides in irregular streaks, that give it the name of Cabeza Prieta, or "Dark Head." Most spectacular along our route was Tordillo Mountain, a towering steep mesa with chocolate dripping down its sides. In the lava beds near this mountain there are interesting fields for rock hunters and we spotted a beautiful cluster of garnets on a large boulder in a nearby canyon.

The old road has disappeared into the desert somewhere past Tule Tank, but we found it again near the base of Tordillo Mountain. At an intersection we came upon another piece of history—a large circle of rocks with a straight line of smaller ones inside it, and another cluster that looked like a broken figure 8. Here, again, legend has taken over, whatever the true facts may be. Lumholtz recounts a story told by his Mexican guides of some prospectors killed here by marauding Indians and buried at this spot. Weight tells a colorful tale of this being the grave of a Mexican pioneer family who died of thirst because their water jug had broken. In any case, a grave it is and whatever its origin, it is part of the tragic history of the Camino del Diabolo.

From here the old road looked as though it hadn't been traveled for years, although it was visible. Less than three miles to the west we came upon a huge ironwood tree at the edge of an arroyo. Here we made our second night's camp.

The desert here is wide and flat and the Tinajas Altas range crosses the western horizon. Vegetation is mostly low greasewood, though some palo verde has sprung up. The ironwood tree, described and photographed by Lumholtz in 1910, is a landmark. Henderson mentioned it in *DESERT* in 1950 and photographed it to see if it had grown since Humholtz's day. We followed suit and added our photographs to the record. It has grown some, but

its shape and pattern of branches are clearly the same. Lumholtz relates the story of a family of 14 who were either killed by Indians or died of thirst buried near this tree, but we were unable to locate any sign of their graves. Seven miles further, however, we came upon an immense figure 14 laid out in large stones. Could this have been where the family died? If so, how could Lumholtz have confused it with the area of the ironwood tree? Another mystery of desert and legend. Near the 14 are a couple of piles of stones, one in the shape of a cross, the other a small circle. Straight ahead is the steep shallow canyon where the Tinajas Altas tumble like irregular steps down the mountain-side.



Deep grain storage holes are evidence of early Indian habitation.

The Tinajas Altas appeared to Lumholtz as a rather depressing place. Perhaps the gruesome history of travelers dying at the foot of the rocks, unable to reach the water in the upper tanks when the lower one was dry, gave it a tinge of foreboding. In his time, too, the ridge opposite the mountain, closing in the end of the canyon from the east, still showed the graves of those who had died there, marked by stones and crosses. He counted nearly 60. Now the ridge has been leveled off on top and during the 1940s a camp was maintained there as a control post for checking hoof and mouth disease of cattle. The graves disappeared, though those buried in them may not all have been disturbed. The ruins of the camp consist of old chicken wire, cracking cement floors, and a few ancient boards and corrugated iron sheets. Rusty tin cans are everywhere and the place is quite a mess.

The Tanks themselves are impressive. There are nine of them. The lowest is reached by a short hike up a rocky trail. Its sides are steep, but the water in it was high. The second tank requires a walk up the face of a sharply sloping rock. This requires some effort and travelers weakened by thirst might have had difficulty making it. We climbed up as far as the fourth tank, but went no further as the cliffs become steep and dangerous to cling to. The third and fourth tanks held good quantities of water, but they were difficult to reach.

Giving up this route, we headed up a draw to the right of the ridge north of the tanks. This took us up over a higher ridge, where we came out far above the upper tanks and had to drop down into the valley below. Lumholtz was told of caves with petroglyphs to the south of this valley. We failed to find them, but this upper canyon is well worth further exploration.

Looking down from above we could see several of the highest tanks. The top one was dry. We managed to get down to the next one which held water, but the three middle ones we could only admire from afar, as they seemed as inaccessible from above as from below. So we climbed back over the ridge and descended to camp.

Below the tanks, we discovered evidence of Indian habitation. Many flat rocks are covered with grinding holes—one rock contained 128 of them, some a foot or more deep. Here and there broken manos turned up and some metates lay among the stones of a former camper's fireplace. High in the cliffs to the right we came upon a cave decorated with several interesting petroglyphs.

For our third and final night in the desert, we camped on a small ridge at the base of the mountain. Moonlight did strange things to these weird mountains that stood out in a sharp, silver white. It was easy to imagine Indian ghosts forever grinding their corn on the flat stones, or thirsty travelers clutching at the smooth rock surfaces in an attempt to reach precious water. This is a place of ghosts, of history and memory, and of awesome beauty.

Returning to civilization the next day by a straight, though rough, road up the Lechugilla Desert to Wellton, we left all this behind. There is a movement to make this area into a National Park. If

this should happen, we can only hope that the Park Service will preserve the unusual feature of this one—the feeling that time has not moved on, that nothing has changed, that the days of the old Camino are still here, and that Father Kino on muleback, a Mexican settler's oxcart or the pioneer wagon that may have been named Nameer's will be coming down the moonlit trail any moment. We hope it will respect this sense of timelessness and not disturb the ghosts who live here, for it is they and the hard dusty road they traveled that make this land something special to visit. □

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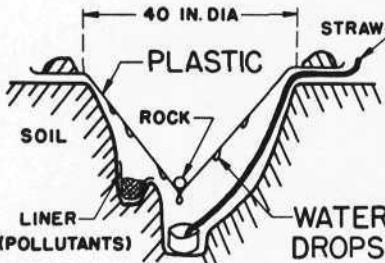
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