CAMINO REAL

Seeking the soul of America's first superhighway By Rachel Louise Snyder

I SCRAMBLE GLEEFULLY UP A CONCRETE INCLINE six feet above the cobblestone road, but Hal Jackson saunters. We stand in the ruins of what was once a large house 20 minutes outside Zacatecas, Mexico. The air is cool. Scrubby mountains pocked with old silver mines sweep across the landscape. Jackson is uneasy. I collect several pebbles, fallen pieces of wall. Jackson shakes his head, wanders the brush. "This is disappointing," he says, eyes scanning, GPS in one hand, notepad in the other, camera slung round his neck. Why? "It just seems. . . ." He trails off, gingerly steps over a sharp rock embedded in the earth. He was once a marathoner, and though it's been 13 years since his last, he maintains a runner's lean grace. At 70 he looks perhaps 55. "I thought it'd be bigger," he mutters. "This doesn't seem right."

We are in Pánuco, the birthplace of Juan de Oñate, the last of the Spanish conquistadors, whose hand likely had more influence on the American Southwest and northern Mexico than that of any other single explorer. In 1598 Oñate blazed the Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, a trail that became the most used and most significant route of commerce and culture for 300 years. At its peak the Camino Real ran 1,800 miles from Mexico City north to Santa Fe. Spaniards used the trail to settle towns and villages all along the way, Franciscans used it to spread their gospel, troops from the United States and Mexico used it for waging battles and building forts, Indians used it to fight the swelling tide of foreigners, and traders used it for commerce. All morning Jackson and I have searched for the remains of the Oñate family hacienda, and now, with the Jeep Cherokee parked conspicuously on the narrow road, clouds in full bloom beyond the mountains, and my pocket full of pebbles, Jackson's doubt continues to deepen.

A man in stained white jeans and a thinning white undershirt wanders down the road below us in sandals. He greets the two gringos standing atop a ruined wall in a pool of packed dirt bursting with purple wildflowers. Jackson tells him we want Oñate's villa; the man looks bemused, then beckons us down from our perch.

A quarter-mile up and three minutes later we find the hacienda for real: an enormous hillock of pink cobblestones with a wall running around the circumference, a turret in the middle, the remnants of an ancient pool, a burrowed garden. The place is grand and empty. Silent

Juan de Oñate, below, and his hacienda, opposite. Now a history museum, the Rancho de las Golondrinas (top right) was an important stop outside Santa Fe.

Oñate settled San Juan Pueblo, above, north of Santa Fe, in 1598. Below, Hal Jackson compares an 1850s painting of a mountain in Chihuahua State with the current topography and the author, at bottom, stands before a tower in Oñate's hacienda.

with a cool breeze. It bears not a single marker indicating what it once was or who lived here. We three wander about it. Now Jackson is gleeful, running to take pictures, climbing up on the walls to peer at the vistas, his dusty white baseball hat nearly flying off behind him. "Now this"—he grins, index finger poised in the air—"this is what I pictured. *This . . . is . . . it!*"

Throughout New Mexico and Texas, Oñate's trail is clearly marked, but in Mexico many parts of it remained unknown to modern explorers, and Jackson and I set out on a mission to find them. We carried minutely detailed topographical maps and aerial maps from the early twentieth century, which often showed a trail obvious from a bird's-eye view but elusive on the ground. We also carried copies of travelers' journals that contained specific descriptions of the natural landscape, of mountains and valleys that wouldn't have changed much, and of rest areas for caravans that still bore names Oñate had given them. Thus we had a decent idea of where things should have been if they hadn't been paved or farmed over. "Trail finding," Jackson assured me, "can be an exact science."

Certain facts held true about the trail regardless of any particular location. For example, it always ran above the floodplain. Also, water was a constant concern, so the caravans went for a route where it was accessible and where attacks by hostile Apache or Comanche Indians came infrequently. Acequias—irrigation ditches—often paralleled the trail, and they do even today in pueblos and small towns where they are still used. Oñate's hacienda marked the final discovery of our journey, and the apex above all the others. Without Oñate the trail might never have existed. Without Oñate geographical boundaries, language, culture, battles, history, food, family, ethnic and racial intersection, economics, trade, and travel would have been vastly different. Without Oñate, Jackson and I—a generation and 1,500 miles apart from each other—would have never met 400 years later.

Our fortuitous guide explained what each walled section might have represented in Oñate's day. He showed us how to climb over trees and through holes in the walls where vegetation had overgrown the pathways; he pointed out where the aqueduct ran in from the mountains. Hal took measurements, notes, and pictures; he clicked his GPS. We climbed halfway up a mountain for an eagle's-eye view. Were this hacienda in the United States, historical preservation societies would have tagged, ticketed, and renovated it; it would not be inhabited by local fauna and ignored by humans. This was the home of a man who changed the course of history. For Jackson and me, it marked the end of a long journey, but for Juan de Oñate and his Camino Real, this place was just the beginning.

BUILT ORIGINALLY BY THE SPANish Empire to connect capital cities to one another, camino reals, or royal roads, snaked throughout what is now the Western United States and Mexico. But there is only one Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, the one Jackson and I drove; in addition to its incredible length, it predates the other camino reals by more than 200 years, according to George Torok, president of the Camino Real de Tierra Adentro (CARTA) association.

Beyond simply offering a way to get around, the Camino Real became a palimpsest of cultural, religious, economic, and ethnic crossovers. Skirmishes, business deals, wars, and treaties were wrought along its path. Like the old Route 66 of the United States, it was as much a cultural symbol as a practical method of travel. Unlike America's modern-day expressways, which mostly skirt cities and often divide ethnicities and races from one neighborhood to the next, Oñate's Camino Real, our country's first superhighway, brought states, countries, and people together.

Because of it, Indians went from "hunting grubs to being warriors of the Plains in a single generation after the introduction of the horse," Jackson says; he calls the animal a "technological revolution." Mission churches replaced kivas as community centers, and villages began to gather around central squares. Catholicism flourished. Crops like corn, beans, and squash were introduced. The English and Spanish tongues mingled and eventually overwhelmed pueblo languages. Even food preparation changed, as the Spaniards taught Mexican Indians the concept of frying. Chickens, pigs, sheep, and goats arrived, along with new forms of architecture, new diseases, and new kinds of enslavement by the Spaniards. "There is constant traffic where the trail went up from Mexico," Torok told me. "It's still happening today, the migration, the immigration, the influence. It wasn't a finite time period." The Camino Real grew into a cultural system inscribed on the land itself. As we move forward in the present, it seems to say, we are bound to the past.

Its history can be loosely divided into six periods: 1598–1680, when Oñate and his successors connected the paths that led from village to village into what we recognize as the Camino Real today; 1680–93, when the Pueblo Indians revolted against the invasion of their culture and expelled the Spaniards from northern territories for 13 years; 1693–1821, with the Spaniards back again and the Camino Real once more a thoroughfare for commerce, culture, and war; 1821–80, when Mexico gained its independence and Americans were allowed to trade; followed by the Mexican War of 1846–48, which made the northern stretch of the Camino Real American; and finally, the 1880s when the rails replaced the road. A few paved parts of the Camino Real are still used unchanged today in pueblos and small towns, but for a purist like Jackson, the trail's great days are gone.

CAMINO REALS SNAKED ALL THROUGH THE WEST, BUT THERE IS ONLY ONE CAMINO REAL DE TIERRA ADENTRO. IT'S FAR LONGER THAN THE OTHERS AND PREDATES THEM BY 200 YEARS.

JACKSON AND I BEGAN OUR TOUR in early July, just about the worst time to do a lot of driving through the desert. Having retired as a professor from Humboldt State University, Jackson now spends his days on the trail. He serves as president of the Santa Fe Trail Association, and he wrote the revised version of Marc Simmons's *Following the Santa Fe Trail: A Guide for Modern Travelers*. Last May he helped form the Camino Real Trail Association, and he's now writing a guidebook about that trail, to be published this June by

The cactus-grown ruins of the San Pedro Mission in Santa Fe.

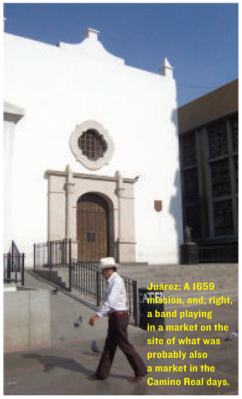
OVERLEAF: LEFT AND TOP RIGHT—HAL JACKSON; BOTTOM RIGHT—BETTMANN/CORBIS. BACKGROUND—MICHAEL MELFORD/GETTY IMAGES. INSET—RACHEL LOUISE SNYDER; OPPOSITE PAGE: GORDON WHITTEN/CORBIS

IN A LONG-ABANDONED ACEQUIA WE HEARD VOICES, FOLLOWED BY TWO DISTINCTIVE POPS OF A SHOTGUN. "GUESS WE'D BETTER NOT LINGER," SAID JACKSON.

the University of New Mexico Press. He has been a political geographer, and he wrote his dissertation on a squatters' village outside Mexico City, so his idea of place is inextricably linked to people and policy. He's a diehard liberal, but his biggest complaint about archeologists, anthropologists, and sociologists—all of whose subjects overlap with cultural geography—is that they just don't make good maps.

To say that Jackson is a map man is like saying that astronauts enjoy air travel. He doesn't just *like* maps; he lives by them. He keeps topographical and aerial maps organized by route in a box in the back seat of his car, next to atlases, road maps, Lonely Planet maps, and historical maps. In his home office, he has maps framed on the walls, maps in filing cabinets, and maps laid out over his desk. Each morning after breakfast, maps cover his dining room table. He has computer programs to make maps. At various points during our journey, he offered to make me maps including or excluding such features as power lines, bodies of water, villages, and mountains. He doesn't like to be lost. He told me once that he figured he looked at maps a hundred times a day. "I'm the where guy," he says. He respects maps, and they in turn have given him the assurance of one who always knows his place in the world.

Our route began north of Santa Fe in the San Juan Pueblo, which Oñate occupied in July of 1598. Large excavations have been done in this area, so the location of the original mission church and central square are denoted by a marker, in the midst of a field of chamise and juniper beside a graveyard. "In northern New Mexico there's still a lot of resentment today toward Oñate, whose soldiers were said to be savage," Jackson said. He illustrated this with a story about the Acoma Pueblo just outside Albuquerque. The tale claims that the Indians were living peacefully when Oñate's men descended on them and chopped off the right foot of every man over 16. As the Spanish tell it, the Acomas attacked the Spaniards first, and the latter were merely retaliating. Several years ago, on the eve of the opening of a new Oñate museum, north of the San Juan Pueblo along the road to Taos, someone chopped off the right foot of Oñate's statue.



Juárez: A 1659 mission, and, right, a band playing in a market on the site of what was probably also a market in the Camino Real days.

LEFT (BOTH) AND TOP RIGHT: RACHEL LOUISE SNYDER. BOTTOM RIGHT: CORBIS

WITH CLOSE TO 500 PEOple following him, Oñate, whose soldiers often marched in full body armor through the desert heat, averaged 15 miles a day. Jackson and I covered 15 times that. Remarkably, Oñate managed to establish the first American thoroughfare, predating the colony of Jamestown, yet has never received much historical credit. The author Marc Simmons, who wrote of Oñate's perilous journey in *The Last Conquistador*, said that along with everything else the conquistador did to establish the shape and character of North America, he also "made a notable contribution, through his wide-ranging explorations, toward an understanding of the true geography of western America."

Just 10 miles outside Santa Fe, Jackson showed me my first swale, a carved-out bowl of earth, where deep cuts from wagon wheels could still be detected. "I get excited about swales," he told me, "but not everyone does. Standing where something happened is very powerful to me." In the distance La Majada Mesa loomed black and foreboding. In Oñate's time the mesa was a near-insurmountable challenge to cross. Wagons had to be emptied, and their goods carried steeply uphill on horseback while the carts were routed through the shallow river that cleaved the mesa. Loaded with their cargoes, the carts would have gotten mired in the riverbed. In *Commerce of the Prairies*, perhaps the best traveler's account of the Camino Real, Josiah Gregg, a mid-nineteenth-century trader, wrote of the treacherous crossings: "In some places, if a wagon is permitted to stop in the river but for a moment, it sinks to the very body. Instances have occurred when it became necessary, not only to drag out the mules by the ears and to carry out the loading package by package, but to haul out the wagon piece by piece—wheel by wheel."

We drove to the base of La Majada Mesa, parked in the dust, and got out to walk along the old trail. "Look at this." Jackson shook his head, pointed to where the trail had created an obvious swale, then disappeared from view round the bend of the mountain. Jackson believed few people even noticed the mountain. "Ten miles outside Santa Fe and not a single footprint," he said.

As we drove, the terra-cotta countryside gave way to rich, red clay hills and low cliffs, and I began to learn how to read a landscape. Jackson pointed out that curved roads in a grid city, for example, were very likely just old trails paved over. The entire city of Boston is the most famous example of this. Parts of the Camino Real that are paved prove the fact. "The caravans took the best route, not necessarily north, east, south, and west," Jackson told me, as we drove trail areas near his home in Placitas, New Mexico, just outside Albuquerque. "A crooked street in a city laid out by gringos? You can be sure it predates the grid."

In a flat plain, carved-out swales often collected rainwater and runoff, so a long row of green bushes in a mostly barren landscape might mean the trail had run through there. Or a straight cut through a lush green area might signal the trail's presence. Jackson was a landscape detective alert for clues. An oddly shaped mountain had been mined; a mound of dirt was a melted adobe house; a shallow gully, an ancient trail. In nature, context is everything. We scanned the land for the easiest route, the most level, and then we looked for angles. Where north-south paved roads ran, the Camino Real often bisected them today at 45-degree angles. We spent a lot of time in the Jeep slowing down, reversing, advancing, retracing our path. At one point, south of Socorro, Jackson remarked that the oxen from trail-day caravans ate beans off the mesquite tree, and the beans left behind in the cattle's droppings eventually grew into trees, so there were areas where long, straight rows of mesquite trees amid otherwise random vegetation were obvious clues to the Camino Real.

Later we drove to San Pedro, a ghost town in New Mexico and once a stop along the trail, where a field of long-abandoned adobe houses has slowly dissolved during years of rain, sun, and neglect. One small ravine, once surely an acequia, was now host to tangles of

Discovering the trail near Santa Fe: A straight brown swale flanked by mesquite.

The silver mines at Zacatecas were booming and known throughout the world when this picture was taken about 1885.

The border cities of El Paso, Texas (foreground), and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.

weeds, paddle cactus, and thornbushes that crackled under my hiking boots. In the far distance Jackson and I heard voices coming from several trailers, followed by two distinctive pops of a shotgun. "Guess we'd better not linger," he said, making his way slowly back toward the car. I was reluctant to leave. There are places on the trail today still populated, some large, some small, but none that I had seen like San Pedro, whose ravaged buildings so powerfully suggested the sad place between existing and forgotten.

FROM NEW MEXICO, JACKSON and I made our way south toward Mexico, via the infamous Jornada del Muerto — in English, the Journey of the Dead Man. Christened after Oñate's day, it maintains the name still. A 90-mile swatch of desolation between Socorro and Las Cruces, this was one of three long *jornadas* through enormous chunks of desert. The flat, sandy plain was punctuated by paddle cactus and what Jackson called, in geographer's parlance, "desert pavement"—rocks blown by the wind off nearby mountains. Caravans often left after 4:00 P.M. and traveled through the night to avoid the *jornada*'s relentless sun. Water was a constant worry, and travelers' journals again and again described the white bones of man and beast littering the landscape. Even I, a modern traveler with all the conveniences, did not escape the *jornada*, when I pulled out a blood-tipped mesquite thorn that had gone through the sole of my shoe and lodged in my foot. Gregg's section of the Jornada del Muerto told of the luck his party had had in not losing a single person during the crossing. "One thing appears very certain," he wrote, "that this dangerous pass has cost the life of many travelers in days of yore . . . we felt truly grateful that the arid *Jornada* had not been productive of more serious consequences to our party."

In El Paso we met up with CARTA's president, George Torok, and Ben Brown, an archeologist employed by Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (Instituto Nacionale de Antropologia e Historia), whose work has led him to study various areas around or on the Camino Real. Brown and Torok showed us around several border areas where the Spaniards took up residence after their expulsion in 1680 during the Pueblo revolt.

We drove first through pecan groves and cornfields, to Ciudad Juárez, the Mexican urban extension of El Paso and, after the Pueblo revolt, the northernmost boundary of the Spanish territory. Two Camino Real routes led south from Juárez. One, through sand dunes, has horrific accounts of carcasses in the sand like those in the *jornada*; the second was less direct but easier. Next to Juárez's enormous cathedral in the central square stands the original whitewashed mission church built in 1659 and the oldest mission along the trail still functioning. In the square this day, preachers shouted Protestant theology into crackling loudspeakers, and pigeons commanded the immediate airspace. Just south of the mission a three-story covered market sat where the central market had stood during trail days, when it marked an important resupply spot famous for El Paso's wines, brandy, and fruit. Then it was the only place between the Mexican city of Chihuahua and Santa Fe, New Mexico, where lush green vegetation flourished, a fact no longer true in modern-day Juárez, with its increasingly short water supply. "The Camino Real is really a communication trail," Ben Brown told me. "Its social impact was with knowledge and items going north and south. It's not just a trail in the physical sense; it's really a concept of communication."

We drove through various settlements where the Spanish retreated after the 1680 revolt. Ysleta del Sur, Senecú, San Elizario, San Lorenzo, and Socorro del Sur all were small communities and are laid out today as they were in trail days, with a mission-style church, a central square, and a small but growing sense of their place in history. At these settlements, Torok told me, the names had changed, the Camino Real path had changed, the river had changed, and the people and the culture had continually changed. The Rio Grande, which is the established border between the United States and Mexico, constantly shifts its location. The earth is not silent, not static, even if we wish our boundaries to be so. The river is far south of where it was in Oñate's day and, as a result, makes for a rather odd choice for an international boundary line.

In a little town called Bracito, which was a resting stop along the trail in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a small but significant battle took place during the Mexican War of 1846–48, right in front of today's Bracito School. Brown and Jackson stood at the mouth of an acequia respectfully debating the trail's location (Brown: underneath the acequia; Jackson: alongside it) and why the Americans who were outnumbered three to one by the Mexicans won the battle in 20 minutes (Brown: Mexicans were an ill-treated peasant army with low morale; Jackson: Americans were Missouri volunteers well used to their weaponry). As they talked, each with one leg resting atop the modern concrete wall of the old acequia, the sun began to set, lighting up the school. Lightning shot down from the clouds in the distance, and sheets of rain rolled in. Whether the Camino Real ran below or adjacent to the acequia, today a railroad track crosses where we all stood discussing what happened here once, watching as the storm and nightfall came on.

In Mexico, Jackson and I were alone again, searching for the first of many areas we hoped to find that had eluded modern-day explorers, including Ojo de Lucero, a spring that nearly every journal mentioned that had watered a rest stop from Oñate's day. In the Mexican state of Chihuahua, Jackson scanned the placid golden landscape, and I felt the Jeep slow. He pulled the car off the highway onto a two-track dust road in the middle of the desert. I hadn't even seen the two-track, let alone whatever infinitesimal clue between this swatch of desert and the last had made him turn off for closer inspection. To Jackson each new vista of desert offered a slightly altered landscape, a tiny promise of discovery. The Lucero spring would have once held enough water for a thousand people or more to drink, wash, and cook from for a few days in a trailside camp, but today it would be only an enormous indentation in the earth. If we found Lucero, we would be among just a handful of people in the world who knew where it was now and who knew that it once meant, for many thousands of people, survival.

Jackson drove a mile off the highway on the two-track until we reached a private ranch in the midst of new construction. A man in a construction hat walked briskly to our car and peered in suspiciously. Jackson waved a greeting, rolling down his window. The man told us that what we wanted was across the highway. "*No aquí,*" he said several times in a voice meant to warn us away from our folly. Jackson gunned the engine, backed up, and retraced our route to the highway, at which point he grumbled, "He doesn't know what the hell we're looking for."

Moments later he spotted a flash of aqua blue up ahead. "Aha," he said enigmatically. Jackson read the landscape as an artist reads a blank canvas, wrought with possibility and inherently full of layers and details that the rest of us non-artists could not imagine. The blue dot became clearer as we drove, and I saw that it was an *alberca*, a public swimming pool. Jackson conversed with the *alberca*'s maintenance man, and he pointed in the direction we had come from. Afterward

EACH NEW VISTA OF DESERT OFFERED A SLIGHTLY ALTERED LANDSCAPE, A TINY PROMISE OF DISCOVERY.

In Valle de Allende, Jackson chats with a local resident in the shade of a building that dates back to 1570. Above, a woman bears a water jug near Zacatecas a century ago.

A relative newcomer to an ancient land, the severely handsome Santa Rosa church in the region of Ojo de Caliente was built in 1950.

TOP LEFT: GERALD FRENCH/CORBIS; BOTTOM LEFT AND BOTTOM RIGHT: RACHEL LOUISE SNYDER; OPPOSITE: MALCOLM MACGREGOR/CORBIS

WE FELT AS IF WE HAD BEEN GRANTED THE MEMORY OF EVERY TRAVELER WHO EVER WALKED THAT LAND.

Jackson turned to me rather as a superhero might to his faithful but somewhat ineffectual sidekick and said, "Let's get the maps!"

Ten minutes later, Jeep parked askew amid mesquite trees and choya cactus with pipe-cleaner arms, we stood at Ojo de Lucero. We'd driven along a two-track past scattered ranches, then turned into the desert until the trees got too thick to drive, and then we walked, carrying bundles of papers, maps, and Jackson's digital GPS. Several hundred yards away was a tiny village, so Jackson knew there was a water source from somewhere. We noted nearby power lines, which showed up on the topo maps, and after a brief tromp through the desert, we stood at a shallow dry indentation in the earth, a small pipe pumping water through the desert.

The finding, though, was remarkably anticlimactic. Jackson marked the spot in his GPS device, then grinned for a moment until his mind jumped to what we had yet to find. In the world of Hal Jackson, if something hadn't been found in 400 or so years, it wasn't so much a matter of its concealment as that no one had ever really bothered to look. Lucero was an auspicious sign of things to come.

We drove on through the Mexican desert. At Carrizal we stopped at what had once been a presidio. The walls had dwindled to a rectangular speed bump in the earth. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Spaniards bribed Apaches with food to ward off thievery in what was likely the first real attempt at social welfare. Later, in 1916, Americans—mostly Buffalo Soldiers—lost a small battle to Mexicans here. In the distance, dust devils flitted across far-away plains. You could watch your dog run away for days in land like this, I told Jackson, a phrase often said of the Midwest, where I happened to live. Jackson laughed, then grew thoughtful. Every place you ever go will be compared with where you came from: the weather, the architecture, the context. "You never escape your own landscape," he said. "It's like gum on your shoe."

Later we searched for another *ojo*: Caliente. Like Lucero, it was mentioned in every journal; unlike Lucero, Jackson didn't know of many people who had ever managed to locate it. Using topo maps, we pulled off the highway onto a two-track and searched through the flat-planed dust for a road shown on the map. We drove up, looked, reversed, drove back up, looked again, and reversed, over and over. Between the irrigated alfalfa fields, the russet land managed only an occasional barrel cactus. Suddenly a migrant worker appeared at the window of our Jeep. After the man gave us directions, Jackson and I easily spotted the tiny road that had eluded us. We lifted a metal-wire gate off its wooden hinge and drove in till we had to hoof it through the mesquite. Two things appeared in front of us: an enormous ocher-and-bronze-colored church—too new to be Caliente—and a lone brown cow.

LEFT AND TOP RIGHT: RACHEL LOUISE SNYDER; BOTTOM RIGHT: HAL JACKSON

Opposite: The main cathedral in Chihuahua, built in the mid-1700s hard by the Camino Real, is still in use. Above: The trail runs down this street in Valle de Allende. At bottom, the author joins the dancing in Zacatecas.

We split up and searched through the trees, more animals appearing as we wandered: horses, cows, quail, a black-eared jackrabbit. Suddenly, in the distance, I heard Jackson hollering. He was buried deep in the trees, so I followed his voice and saw first the old church. It was just as Gregg's journal and so many others had said: graveyard next to the church, padre's home opposite. If this was really Ojo de Caliente, we could expect an enormous *ojo* and the Camino Real trail leading smack-dab into the church.

I found Jackson standing in the middle of the hole. It was dried up now, probably 40 by 20 feet, but huge trees around its circumference suggested that water abounded deep down. Jackson was downright giddy. Around the *ojo* and church were mounds that had once been adobe houses. "It's probable that no modern explorer has ever been here," he said. "And certainly no settlement for 90 or so years." He jog-walked from end to end in the *ojo*, measured the whole thing, and took a GPS position. Lizards darted across the ground. We felt as if we had been granted the memory of every traveler who ever walked that land. We ran atop and through the *ojo*, took pictures in the padre's quarters, padded over the mounds where houses once stood. Then we wandered around to the back of the church, and there it was, clear as day: a single straight brown swale surrounded on both sides by overgrown mesquite trees. The Camino Real with all but street signs pointing it out. Our elation was so great we simply stared, overwhelmed, silenced.

We found other things: the route of the trail in a charming, colorful village called Valle de Allende, where the air was cool, the trees were voluminous, and the town smelled of wet earth and roasted chilies. Oñate and his minions had crossed a stream there. We drove on past rolling green hills, out of the desert and into a land of eucalyptus and pine, to a town called Villa Hidalgo today and Cerro Gordo back in the trail days. We found the makings of an old presidio wall possibly from those trail days.

On a side road made of what appeared to be a scattering of stones embedded at random in the dirt, Jackson peered so close for so long that a pattern emerged. "Here," he told me, "a straight line of rocks. You see that? That's not accidental." He got so excited he had to take a breath. "That was put there by someone. *On purpose*." A moment later an old Indian couple walked out of a nearby doorway and greeted us. Jackson pointed to the rocks. "*Camino Real, aquí?*" he asked. The woman shrugged and invited us into her home, where her husband, in peasant hat and beat-up jeans, confirmed that indeed his home was on the trail. The rocks, he told us, were the old method of paving. We sat then and talked with them about what we were doing: a fusion of generations, cultures, and languages, exploring a history of generations, cultures, and languages.

That night a band of musicians walked through the streets of Zacatecas, Mexico, where Oñate's family was once famous for its silver mines. There are still Oñates there today, and the pink-stoned buildings of Zacatecas are still surrounded by mines whose silver is coveted the world over. Tomorrow we would head to Oñate's birthplace, Pánuco, and search for the spot where everything started, but tonight we would celebrate. As the band marched, people in the streets followed until the crowd was more than a block long. Car horns wailed as the entourage passed. Jackson and I were swept up with the throng, hurrying along the cobblestones behind the band. On the sidewalks, people danced, and the band stopped and played for several couples. A Mexican man in a white shirt pulled me by the hand and swung me around to the music. I laughed, and Jackson snapped a picture, and then the skies opened and raindrops the size of pebbles crashed over our heads and all around us. But the band played on, and I kept dancing. ✶

Rachel Louise Snyder's "My Brush With History," an account of visiting My Lai, ran in the February/March 1998 issue; she lives in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.