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Desert Survivors, Explorers & Adventurers

NATIVE AMERICANS, SPANIARDS AND MODERN TRAVELLERS

> "In the last two decades, they [the Chemehuevi] ran simply for the joy of running in each other's company, taking the old trails well back from the River."
>
> Carobeth Laird, 1940
> *The Chemehuevis*

WHO FIRST EXPLORED the forbidding, albeit spectacular, deserts of North America? The Spanish missionaries of the 16th Century, and later the mountain men and pathfinders, were not the pioneers we sometimes think they were, the first to explore the Sonoran, Mojave, and Great Basin Deserts. Nor were American explorers and surveyors Major John Wesley Powell, Lieutenant Joseph C. Ives, and Lieutenant W.H. Emory the first people to attempt to map the dry country west of the 100th meridian. Centuries before the first Spanish *entradas* traversed the Chihuahuan Desert and made contact with distant tribes of Native Americans—cursing them with devastating scourges of smallpox—and long before the onset of Euro-American settlers, indigenous desert dwellers explored the far reaches of

Seri elder Antonio López

their ancestral desert domain for trade, hunting, spiritual renewal, or simply for the joy of seeing new country.

Native Americans

Archaeologists who study such matters tell us that approximately 5,000 years B.C.E, *maíz* (corn) was cultivated in the Tehuacán Valley of central Mexico. From 1,500 to 3,500 years ago, pouches filled with the precious kernels were passed hand to hand—along with beans, squash, and cotton seeds, and the knowledge of how to cultivate them—by ancient traders who trod the narrow footpaths of the Chihuahuan Desert and Sierra Madre Occidental to trade with the Hohokam, Mogollon, and Puebloan peoples who lived 2,000 miles north. But the ancient corn path was only one leg of an intricate network of prehistoric trails and trade routes that crisscrossed Mesoamerica and the Great American Desert. The traders brought a steady stream of intertribal commerce of valuable, easily transported goods. Such trade items also included abalone shells that were collected on the beaches of the Pacific Ocean, macaw feathers from birds hunted in the jungles of Mexico, and red ocher paint that was mined in the depths of the Grand Canyon. And every item had to be carried on foot by traders who walked or ran across daunting deserts expanses.

BY FOOT. Following trails that led two hundred miles south from Arizona's lower Gila River to Mexico's Sea of Cortés (also known as the Gulf of California), the Hohokam crossed the starkest reaches of the Great American Desert from trail shrine to trail shrine, across the searing creosote flats of the Camino del Diablo region, the scorching black lava and shimmering desert pavement of the Sierra del Pinacate, and the vast undulating sand sea of El Gran Desierto. At the head of the Sea of Cortés near Bahía de Adair, the Hohokam collected the shells of bivalves *(Glycymeris gigantea)* they fashioned into bracelets, beads, and

sacred pendants while retracing their steps across the desert to reach the hub of their great desert civilization in the Valley of the Sun. Their route later became known among archaeologists and aficionados as the Hohokam Shell Trail. Yet little is known of the difficulties they encountered, the hardships they endured, or the songs they undoubtedly sang during prodigious desert treks that would overwhelm many present-day adventure enthusiasts who embark on endurance quests such as the Eco-Challenge and Raid Gauloises.

Closely paralleling the Hohokam Shell Trail to the Sea of Cortés was the salt trail of the Pápago. They, too, crossed the stark creosote flats and vast sand sea. They traveled to the gulf from the desert villages of Topawa and Santa Rosa (Arizona) on grueling four-day-long spiritual quests to collect salt and sing for power at the edge of the ocean. But it was the Pápago who first described the power they prayed for in order to recross the desert and return to their villages alive (Underhill 1979: 54).

> Done, I emerged and stepped on the
>   west lying road.
> Someplace got tired and evening came
> Then took my burning stick
> Made a fire and towards it bent over
>   and sat
> In my bag reached and took my reed
>   cigarette
> Stood and puffed it, breathed on the
>   west lying road
> Asked for the man my made father
> Asked for different kinds of strength
> Hungerness, thirstness, coldness, strong
>   carrying legs, strong arms, clear eyes.
>
> José Moreno, Santa Rosa

Other desert-dwelling people crossed California's Colorado and Mojave Deserts to reach the Pacific Ocean, but none became more famous for their fleet-footed journeys than the Mojave (also known as the *makháv*, "people who live along the river"). Credited by such lettered ethnographers as Alfred L. Kroeber with the ability to run one hundred miles a day, the Mojave traversed the desert from their villages along the lower Colorado River to trade with Pacific Coastal tribes such as the Gabrieleños, Ventureños, and Barbeños. What later became known as the Mojave Trail to mountain men and American settlers who toiled across it was only one part of a vast trade route that extended eastward from the Pacific Ocean 1,200 miles to the distant pueblos of the Hopi in Arizona and the Zuni in New Mexico. But the Mojave, at least according to the account of Padre Francisco Hermenegildo Garcés, did not speak with the humble pride of the Pápago. After encountering a small group of Mojave traders somewhere in the forlorn sweep of the Mojave Desert during Feb-ruary 1776, Garcés made this journal entry: "Here I met four Indians who had come from Santa Clara to traffic in shell beads. They were carrying no food supply, nor even bows for hunting. Noticing my astonishment at this, where there is nothing to eat, they said, 'We Jamajabs can withstand hunger and thirst for as long as four days,' giving me to understand they were hardy men."

BY SWIMMING. Centuries before the Badwater Ultra Marathon became a popular mid-summer endurance rite —a 130-mile run on pavement linking Badwater at -282 feet below sea level in Death Valley with 8,360-foot Whitney Portals—the Mojave Indians, instinctive desert runners, were natural triathletes. The Mojave not only survived off the meager fruits of the land while running across the breadth of the Mojave Desert to the Pacific Ocean, they

crisscrossed the lower Colorado River by swimming and rafting its cold, strong, tricky currents. Assigned by the War Department to survey the head of steamboat navigation from the Sea of Cortés, Lieutenant Joseph C. Ives steamed upstream from the Colorado River Delta on December 31, 1857. While paddling an inflatable raft across the river, Baldwin Möllhausen, a writer and naturalist attached to the 1857—1858 Ives' Expedition, described a Mojave mother introducing her children to the dangers and rigors of swimming the frigid Colorado River during winter. On February 25, Möllhausen made this journal entry. In part, it reads:

> A young woman . . .had very quietly and innocently disencumbered herself of her petticoat in our presence, and folding it up laid her baby upon it in a little flat but strongly made basket, and with her under one arm, a little thing of about four years old held by hand, and two elder children of seven or eight following her, had taken to the water, and giving a glance backward occasionally at the two youngsters, who were romping and splashing as they followed in the track she made on the surface of the water. I watched them as they landed on the small island, walked quickly across it, and then plunged into the river again on the other side. It was a pretty family picture.

BY BALSA RAFT. Over three centuries earlier, Spaniard Melchior Díaz first witnessed the Mojave crossing the Colorado River on balsa rafts. In 1540, Díaz described what was called the *Río Tizón*, "Firebrand River," and the Mojave who navigated it: "They called this great river the *Tizón* because the natives cross it, in spite of its width, on great rafts of agave. On this day they cross paddling with their feet and carrying a lighted torch in their hands in order to keep fires on both sides."