

Cremony's Ride

. . . through the Jornada del Muerto

Originally published in El Defensor Chieftain newspaper, Saturday, October 3, 2009

By Paul Harden, na5n@zianet.com
For El Defensor Chieftain

This is the story of a young newspaperman turned adventurer who became highly involved in the American conquest of the Southwest – including a harrowing chase along the Camino Real through the Jornada del Muerto.

John Carey Cremony was born in Portland, Maine in 1815. Little is known about his early life except he chose journalism as a career, working as a reporter for the Boston Globe in the 1840s. In 1846, Cremony departed his newspaper job to join the Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry as a lieutenant. The “Fighting Irish,” as they were called, were sent to Metamoros, Mexico under Brigadier General Caleb Cushing to fight in the Mexican American War.

The Mexican-American War

The actions of the Mexican American War in northern Mexico and along the Rio Grande were well reported in the Boston Globe, presumably due to regular reports filed by reporter, now soldier, Lt. John Cremony.

However, the service of the Massachusetts Volunteers proved to be less than stellar. About a third of the regiment, consisting of Irish immigrants, became notorious for their continual drunkenness, rowdiness, and absences from military duty for days at a time. After several murders in local bars, including the fatal stabbing of a bar maid that outraged the citizenry, Brig. Gen. Cushing was forced to issue the following order from his headquarters in Vera Cruz, Mexico:

“The following (65 men) of 1st Regiment Massachusetts Infantry, being incorrigibly mutinous and insubordinate, will of course prove cowards in the hour of danger and they cannot be permitted to march with the column of the army. They are disarmed and detached from the Regiment – who are found unworthy to carry arms, and are a disgrace and a nuisance to the army.”

Lt. Cremony was not part of the regiment “drummed out” of the army. He served Brig. Gen. Cushing with distinction, learning the Spanish language and served as an army interpreter. His enlistment ended in July 1848. He returned to his job as a reporter at the Boston Globe, and shortly thereafter for the Boston Herald.

This was an interesting time in American history. With the opening of the Santa Fe Trail in 1821, American's got their first peek into the unknown Spanish world of the Southwest. Newspaper and magazine articles were the first to describe the roaming herds of buffalo, the magnificent Indian Pueblos, and the charming Mexican villages along the Rio Grande to the Americans “back East.” Upon the conclusion of the Mexican-American War, the doors were opened to visit the Territory of New Mexico. For years, newspapers were filled with stories and images of the New Mexico wonders.



Photo Courtesy Bohemian Club
John Cremony was a newspaper man, Spanish and Apache interpreter, and soldier in New Mexico during the 1850–1860s.

John Cremony had a unique perspective as a journalist, and as a soldier that experienced life along the Rio Grande, to write stories of the American West.

Learning the Spanish language showed he had a deep respect for the heritage and culture of the native people. One wonders if he yearned to return to the west. That question was answered by Cremony himself, who wrote, “In the year 1849, I was prevailed upon by Dr. Thomas H. Webb, Secretary of the Massachusetts Historical Society, to forego my position on the Boston Herald, and accept an appointment on the United States Boundary Commission, then being re-organized under the Hon. John K. Bartlett.” Cremony accepted the position as Spanish translator for the boundary commission and packed his bags for Dona Ana.

Finding the Mexican Border

The Mexican-American War ended on February 2, 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Article five of the treaty set the boundary between Mexico and the United States and provided for the establishment of a joint Mexican-United States Boundary Commission to survey and mark that boundary.

The western side of the territory was easy. The border was drawn from San Diego bay eastward to the Gila River. From there, the Gila River became the boundary between the two countries. In New Mexico, the boundary was a line drawn from the Gila River to El Paso, the border then following the Rio Grande River to the Gulf of Mexico.

There was only one problem. The map submitted with the treaty, called the 1847 Disturnell map, misplaced El Paso by a mere 100 miles. It was shown located on the Rio Grande near the Big Bend region, giving the United States an unfair claim to thousands of square miles of land. This would have transferred the northern portion of the province of Chihuahua to the United States. The Mexicans were quick to note this *small* discrepancy. Needless to say, this demanded a reactivation of the Boundary Commission.

The second Mexico-United States Boundary Commission was led by John Bartlett, and his Mexican counterpart Pedro Garcia-Conde, *joined by interpreter John Cremony*, to settle the dispute. They made Dona Ana their headquarters – which at this time was the disputed border town between the United States and Mexico. Mexico claimed Mesilla and the Mesilla Valley was part of Mexico. The Board Commission spent the second half of 1850 surveying the new border. Bartlett was careful to ensure the Santa Rita copper mines remained in the United States – doing so by giving Mexico the Mesilla Valley and everything south of Dona Ana.

Cremony spent much of his time at the Santa Rita copper mines and became fascinated by the nearby Mimbres Apache Indians. In short order, he began to learn their language, culture and customs. In later years, Cremony was the first to compose an Apache-English dictionary that is still used. Cremony authored reports and a book which remains to this day one of the few inside looks of the Apache people during this era, and other events in territorial New Mexico considered to be very valuable to historians.

As the winter of 1850 approached, the boundary commission, and the 100 dragoon soldiers assigned to them, left the cold Santa Rita mines and returned to warmer Dona Ana. Running low on food and supplies, John Cremony volunteered to travel to Socorro to purchase sheep to sustain the men over the winter. It is not known precisely when Cremony made his trek to Socorro except very early in 1851.

Cremony described his journey as follows: “At that time Fort Craig had no existence, and the space between Dona Ana and Socorro, a distance of one hundred and twenty-five miles, is a large desert, well supplied with fine grama grass



Sketch by Paul Harden

The Dragoons were the U.S. Troops that first occupied New Mexico. Dragoons were stationed in Socorro and Mesilla in the 1850s until Forts Conrad, Craig and Fillmore were later built.

in some portions, but absolutely destitute of water or shade for ninety-six miles. This intervening strip of territory is known by the unattractive appellation of the Jornada del Muerto, or the Dead Man's Journey. Why it ever received this title I never distinctly learned, but suppose it was on account of the very numerous massacres committed on it by the Apache Indians.

“On the east the road is fringed for about sixty miles by the Sierra Blanca, a noted strong hold of that people; and from its heights they are enabled distinctly to perceive any party of travelers coming-over the wide and unsheltered expanse of the Jornada del Muerto. As the plain affords no opportunity for ambush, they come sweeping upon the unsuspecting immigrant in more than usual numbers, and if successful in their attack, invariably destroy all of the party; for there is no possible chance of escape, and the Apaches never take any prisoners but women and young children, and they become captives for life.”

In spite of this dismal, though accurate, description of the Jornada del Muerto, Cremony embarked on the journey alone with his trusted horse. He departed Dona Ana about 3:00 a.m. and spent 13 hours in the saddle, stopping about four in the afternoon to make camp. With him and his horse fairly well rested, they took to the trail again about midnight, taking advantage of the light of the moon and the cool evening hours to maintain a steady pace. Cremony arrived in Socorro about 11:00 a.m., writing, “At Socorro was a small American garrison, consisting of about half a company of the Second Dragoons, commanded by Lieut. Reuben

Campbell, an officer whose acquaintance I had made during the Mexican war, and for whom I entertained a sincere regard.”

Cremony spent two days in Socorro visiting with Lt. Campbell, reminiscing about the Mexican-American War, and made arrangements with a local rancher to have a small herd of sheep sent to Dona Ana. On the third day, Cremony prepared for his journey back to Dona Ana, hoping it would be as uneventful as his trip to Socorro. Such was not to be the case.

Cremony's Ride

Cremony departed Socorro about three o'clock in the morning. This was common for those traveling the Camino Real through the Jornada del Muerto. Even in January or February, one wanted to avoid the heat of the day as much as possible. Cremony recorded “I saved my noble beast all I could, frequently dismounting and leading him by the bridle, so as to retain his strength and speed in case of necessity.”

By 3:00 p.m., Cremony had traveled about 50 miles with 75 miles yet to go. This would place him on the Camino Real on the east side of the Fray Cristobal Mountains about 20 miles north of present day Engle. Spotting a stand of grass, he departed the trail to rest himself and his horse. As he turned his horse towards the grass, he noticed a column of dust in the direction of the Sierra Blanca quickly bolting across the desert in his direction. Every traveler along the Jornada del Muerto knew what this meant: attacking Apaches.

Instinctively, Cremony tightened his horses' girths and properly positioned and tightened the saddle for a possible wild ride. Ensuring his four six-shooters were properly loaded, he placed two of his pistols in their holsters and tucked the other two in his belt for the ready. For protection against arrows, he folded his serape in two and wrapped it around his back, tying it under his chin.

A quick glance at the approaching thunder verified the Apaches were only a few hundred yards away. A quick slap of the reins and Cremony's horse bolted down the trail, spoiling their attempt to overtake him on the trail.

Cremony knew his horse was fresh, while the Apache's horses were tiring from several minutes of a heavy run, hopefully giving him an advantage. Once he was easily able to maintain a fifty yard lead, he drew in his rein to save his horse all he could. With this slight advantage, he surveyed his pursuers, counting about 40 Apache, none with fire-arms, but supplied with bows, arrows and lances.

It didn't take long before he could hear arrows whistling past his head. Then, he felt an arrow strike him in the back on his serape blanket, but the double folds kept it from penetrating his skin. Turning half way around on his saddle, he drew a pistol from one of his holsters and fired off a couple of shots. This caused the Apaches to fall back, allowing Cremony to demand the most from his horse, doubling his speed for



Photo by Paul Harden

The flat, barren, waterless expanse of the Jornada del Muerto, where John Cremony had his wild ride, as seen today from El Camino Real International Heritage Center south of Socorro. It wasn't this green when Cremony made his winter ride.

about a mile. Once gaining about 600 yards on his pursuers, he again drew rein to save his horse.

It took many miles down the trail for the Apache to close the gap. As they closed in, again arrows and a lance or two whizzed past him. Again Cremony responded with his pistol, and when his attackers retreated, commanded his trusty horse to bolt into another full run, leaving the Apaches far behind on the trail.

After several repeats of this tactic, Cremony found himself with several arrows stuck into his blanket and arrow grazes on his right arm and left thigh – but otherwise uninjured. He then wondered why his horse had escaped the Apaches' deadly arrows.

Cremony explained this mystery in his own words. “I then became convinced that my horse was the main object of their pursuit. His value and unequalled qualities were well known to the Apaches, and they resolved to have him, if possible. Of course, my life would have been sacrificed, if they could only manage that little affair. I had bought the horse of Capt. A. Buford, First United States Dragoons, who assured me that his equal did not exist in the Territory.”

The race across the desert continued for many hours. By 8:00 p.m., with a clear sky and bright moon, Cremony began to enter the area around the Point of Rocks, a region with rugged small hills and deep ravines. After several miles through these hills, not a sign of his pursuers could be seen. Had they finally given up the chase?

Cremony then realized they had taken a shorter route to cut him off farther up the trail. Upon realizing this, Cremony “struck my rowels into the reeking flanks of my poor steed, and most gallantly did he respond to this last call. He fairly flew over the road. Hill after hill was passed with wonderful

rapidity until nearly a quarter of an hour had elapsed, when I again heard my Apache friends, about eighty yards in my rear.”

The chase through the hills continued until 11:00 at night. Cremony's horse somehow managed to sustain his pace to maintain a healthy lead ahead of the Apaches. Cremony knew their horses were blown, and so was his. As soon as the flicker of a few lanterns in Dona Ana came into view, he fired his pistols blindly into the dark until the Apaches had retreated far out of reach.

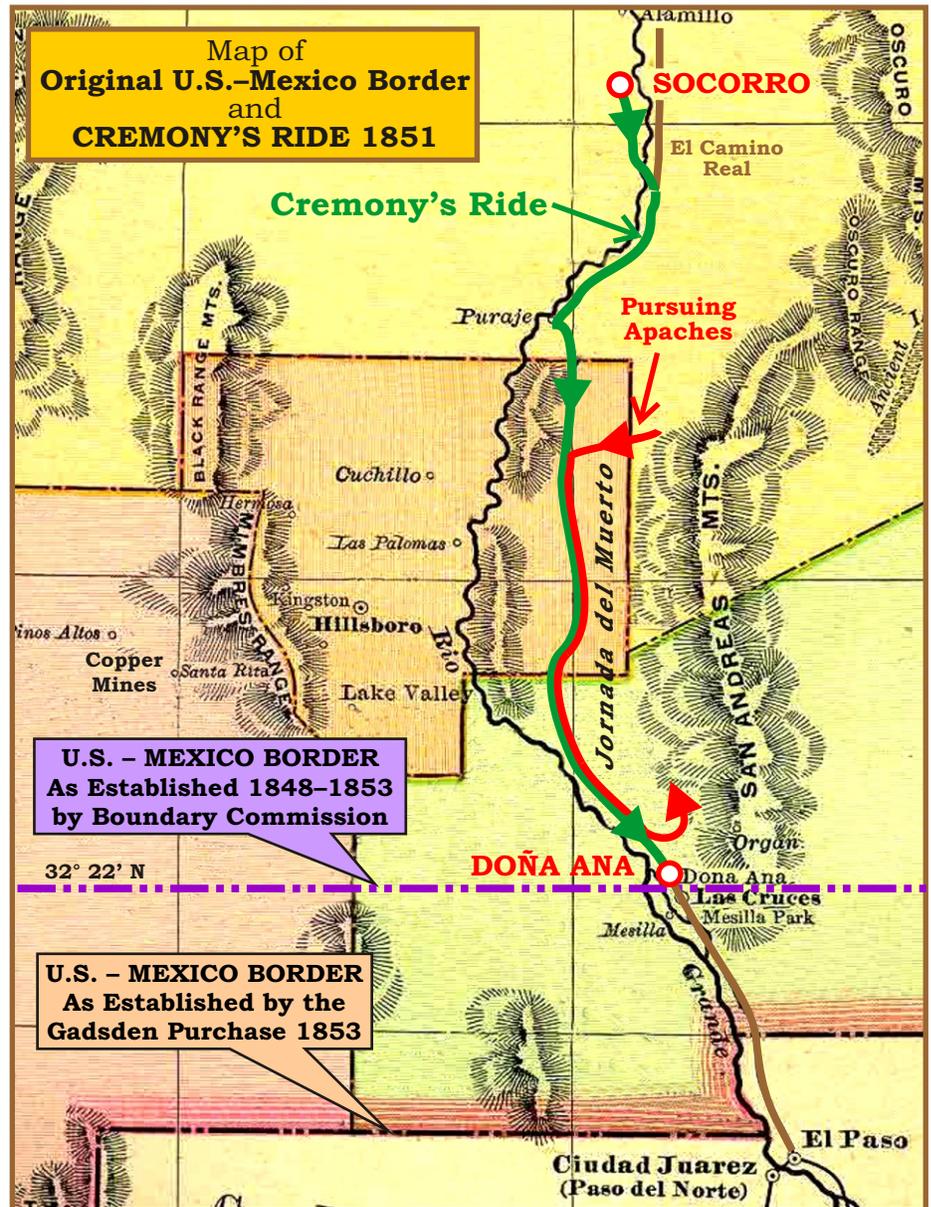
Cremony describes the conclusion. “The remainder of my journey was made without company, and I reached Dona Ana about twelve o'clock midnight, having made the distance of one hundred and twenty-five miles, on one horse, in the space of twenty-one hours, the last seventy miles being performed at a run.” As any horse owner will tell you, this is an astonishing feat.

However, the journey wasn't completely over. Without immediate and proper attention, the loyal steed that saved his life would soon die from exhaustion. Cremony obtain the services of a young Mexican horse handler named Jose and began working the horse. So impressed with the skill of Jose, Cremony documented the procedure.

“Jose ... rubbed my horse down dry with good, soft straw. This operation required about two hours. I then washed him all over with strong whiskey and water, and again rubbed him dry. This was followed by taking off his shoes, and giving him about two quarts of whiskey and water as a draught. His whole body and limbs were then swathed in blankets, a mess of cut hay, sprinkled with water and mixed with a couple of pounds of raw steak, cut into small pieces, was given him to eat, and a deep bed of clean dry straw prepared for him to sink into. These duties kept me up until five o'clock A. M.”

Cremony then admits he indulged in a little of the left-over whiskey himself, allowing him to sleep the rest of that day and into the next. When he finally awoke, he found his horse had fully recovered and in excellent health.

Cremony's ride became somewhat of a local legend. He always gave full credit to his horse, though his name was never recorded for us. It was not the last time the Apaches, or others, tried to steal his now famous horse.



Map by Paul Harden
A map showing Cremony's famous ride along El Camino Real through the Jornada del Muerto, and the 1853 U.S.-Mexico border realignments.

Back to the Border

Following his wild ride, the boundary survey continued. Finally, it was fully agreed upon. On April 24, 1851, John Bartlett and Pedro Garcia-Conde signed the agreement and erected a small monument to establish the official border between New Mexico and Mexico. The border was placed at 32 degrees 22 minutes north latitude, or several miles *north* of present day Interstate 10. This left Dona Ana in the United States and Mesilla (present day Las Cruces) and the Mesilla valley to Mexico.

The Bartlett-Conde survey point immediately caused controversy, particularly among the railroad capitalists planning on building the southern route. The land earmarked for a nearly non-mountainous, all-weather railroad line to California now belonged to Mexico. Bartlett defended the survey by claiming the land lost to Mexico was only “a

desert, with scarcely a tree – and little other vegetation than the chaparral or thorny bushes,” but pointed out his survey had kept the lucrative Santa Rita copper mines. Few were impressed with his logic.

This land squabble was settled in 1853 when President Franklin Pierce send railroad man James Gadsden to purchase the disputed land from Mexico for \$10 million. This is the Gadsden Purchase, which moved the boundary to 31 degrees 47 minutes north latitude, adding 45,000 acres to New Mexico and more or less the boundaries with Mexico we have today.

A few other adjustments were made in later years, the reason why the southern boundary of New Mexico is noticeably irregular and forms the famous “boot heel” in the southwest corner.

The shifting of the Rio Grande was another source of tensions between the United States and Mexico. It was not until after Elephant Butte dam and reservoir was built that the two countries finally agreed to ignore future changes in the Rio Grande. Of course, since then, the course of the river that defines the border has changed little.

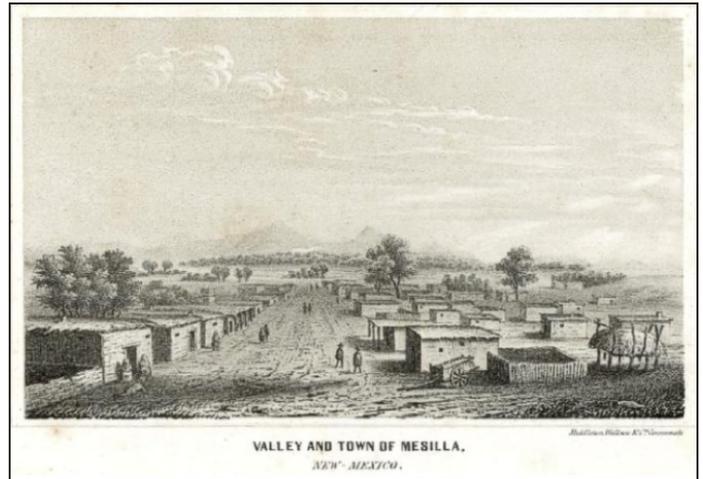
Following the Bartlett-Conde survey, John Cremony was released from the Boundary Commission. Rather than returning to Boston, he ventured on to San Francisco, where once again he found employment as a newspaper reporter and later as editor. He married Ella Hunt in 1857.

Civil War Service

However, it seemed Cremony could not refuse another call for adventure. When the Civil War broke out, he joined the California Volunteers, eventually receiving the rank of major. He commanded Company B of artillery under Maj. Gen. James Henry Carleton's famous march of the “California Column” through southern Arizona and New Mexico.

It was along this march, in 1862, that the army and Chiricahua Apache clashed at the battle of Apache Pass. This was the first time the Apache experienced the deadly effects of mountain howitzers. It was Cremony's canons that fired these famous shots. Upon arriving in New Mexico, Cremony's company reclaimed many forts once occupied by the Confederates in New Mexico and Texas after their retreat back to San Antonio, Texas.

Afterwards, the California Column got involved in restoring order in New Mexico, including subduing the Navajo and Apache Indians. Cremony's command of the Apache language became invaluable to Gen. Carleton in negotiating with the Apache. Though he always did his job, he became outspoken with his opposition on how the army treated both the Apache and Navajo. Because he could speak their language, he was well respected by the Apache. Likewise, Cremony developed a deep respect for them and admired their characteristics in many ways, though admitted, he never let down his guard with them.



New Mexico State University Collections
The village of Mesilla as it appeared to the Boundary Commission in the 1850s. Mesilla bounced between the United States and Mexico several times during border realignments and changes in the Rio Grande.

Towards the end of his enlistment with the California Column, he was negotiating with a band of the Mescalero Apache. A couple of Mescaleros seemed to take special interest in Cremony, finally revealing they had taken part in the chase along the Jornada del Muerto many years before. Once convinced Cremony harbored no vindictive feelings over the matter, a warrior led him to an old squaw and her adult children. It was explained that these were the wife and children of the man who led the chase against Cremony 13 years before. Cremony received them kindly and they both agreed it turned out for the better that no one was killed in the chase.

Cremony's Last Days

Major John Cremony was discharged from the army in March 1866 and immediately returned to his family in San Francisco, working again as a newspaper man and contributing articles to other journals. In 1868, he wrote his book, “Life Among the Apaches” that chronicled years of his experiences with the Boundary Commission, service in the army, and his extensive dealings with the Apache. His pages of descriptions of the Apache culture, marriage practices, and other aspects of their society remains one of the few inside looks to the Apache culture ever written.

John Cremony was also one of the founders of the Bohemian Club in San Francisco, an elite men's club that remains to this day. He died in San Francisco on August 24, 1879 of tuberculosis at age 64. Being a journalist, and sitting on the front row of history, his writings have given us a unique look into this era of New Mexico history – including the famous El Camino Real.

Some of the references used in this article:

“Life among the Apaches” by John C. Cremony, 1868; “Roadside Guide to Historic Markers” by David Pike; “A Review of the Causes and Consequences of the Mexican War” by William Jay (1849); and “Turmoil in New Mexico” by William Keleher.