

Indianola, Texas and the Chihuahua Road

I. Context

During the period between 1844 and 1887, Indianola grew from a plague-infested immigrant camp to a cosmopolitan port city. At her zenith, before the storm of 1875, she was second only to Galveston in the State and was regarded by that place as an annoying threat to its commercial and maritime supremacy. Wielding vast influence on the development of Western Texas, as the land west of the Colorado River was then called, Indianola left her imprint on that great region.¹

She became the port for the Chihuahua trade, was the eastern terminus of the shortest overland route to California and was the funnel through which tens of thousands of immigrants from Germany, Switzerland and France came to Texas. Contributing to her growth were immigrants and energetic merchants from the Southern and Eastern United States to the new land of the west. Over her wharves moved the necessities and luxuries of life for the inhabitants of Western Texas, as well as the ordnance and other supplies for the chain of forts that shielded “civilized” Texas from the untamed Indian tribes.² They came to take advantage of the only spot on the Texas coast where wagon trains to and from the interior could drive right to the fine shell beach for loading onto and unloading from sailing ships, and later steamers, from as far distant as Western Europe.

II. OVERVIEW

One of the great boosts to Indianola after February 1, 1849, was the opening of the Chihuahua

Road to the Far West and to Chihuahua, Mexico. The isolated silver mines discovered by the Spanish in Chihuahua in northern Mexico precipitated the development of three important trade routes between Mexico and the United States. In the middle of the nineteenth century, these three widely separated wagon roads snaked out of the United States and made their laborious way to Ciudad Chihuahua, capital of the Mexican state bearing that same name.³

What was the talisman? Whence sprang that silver flood which put a thousand wagon trains on the long, dry roads from Independence, Missouri and Indianola, Texas during the mid-1800's? It came from the most prolific array of silver mines that the Western Hemisphere has known. Beneath the hills of Chihuahua lay an incredible lode that was found and tapped by the ancient Indians, rediscovered by the Spanish after they had given up their dream of the Seven Cities of Gold, and even now, after three centuries of exploitation, still yields a constant flow of silver.⁴ Dr. Francisco Almada, venerable historian of Chihuahua, lists more than 200 mines in the state which had been exploited for profit. A few of these were gold mines; a considerable number were for copper, zinc and lead; but the overwhelming majority were silver mines.⁵

In the years when the wagon freight lines were most active between the United States and Chihuahua, the principal silver-producing lodes were distributed in six major areas of the state: Santa Eulalia, a few miles outside the capital city; Cusihuiriache, sixty-odd miles southwest of the city; Corralitos, 180 miles northwest; Batopilas, in the southwestern extremes of the state; La Gavilana, seventy-eight miles south of the capital: and those mines directly under and about the city of Hidalgo del Parral. Of these, the most generous throughout three centuries, and the

most significant in the development of the city of Chihuahua had been Santa Eulalia.⁶ **La Republica Mexicana: Chihuahua**, published in 1909, reported that from 1834 to 1868 the mines produced \$3.5 million in silver and from 1868 to 1884 almost another \$3.5 million was produced. These two citations cover the era of the United States wagon freight trade.⁷

The first of the three roads, mentioned above, was known as the Santa Fe Trail because many of the wagon trains stopped in that old New Mexico town after passing through El Paso del Norte (El Paso). The fact was that Santa Fe represented only the point of exchange for American and European goods freighted down from the States, to meet the wealth of Mexican mines as it found its way by cart trains up from the south.⁸ However, the Santa Fe Trail took a long way around from the markets of the east, through Independence, Missouri, and that state's full width, across all of Kansas and part of Colorado, then south in New Mexico through a wild, mountainous region into Santa Fe. And from there, it was still 500 miles to Chihuahua City.

The second road resulted when Dr. Henry Connelley an American trader, long situated at Chihuahua, became dissatisfied with the inefficiencies of the Santa Fe Trail. He seized on the idea of a more direct route which would go down the Conchos River in Mexico to Chihuahua City to the present location of Presidio on the Rio Grande, then strike out across the uncharted wilderness of northern Texas, to gain access to eastern markets at Fort Towson, beyond the Red River. Dr. Connelley did establish the feasibility of this second road, but for some reason it did not catch fire, and the route was eventually abandoned.⁹

By the end of the Mexican War in 1848, the elements were falling into place for the inevitable opening of the third road, the most direct route from the Eastern Seaboard and Europe: through the Gulf of Mexico, across Texas, and into the treasure troves of northern Mexico. Along this great artery, known properly as the Chihuahua Road, moved traffic and commerce from the 1850's through 1877, as well as a tide of immigration that opened up the Southwest.¹⁰ This third road wound across the Southwest from the port town on Matagorda Bay- Indianola; through San Antonio and out along the great springs of the Balcones Fault to the Rio Grande at San Felipe Springs in Del Rio; then turned northward, crossing the imposing canyons of the Devils and Pecos rivers, passing through Alpine and Marfa until it finally turned south down Alamito Creek to the Rio Grande at Presidio del Norte, then into Mexico and up the Conchos River to Chihuahua City. This bald itinerary suggests little of the wide variety of terrain which this route traversed: the lush, flowered prairies of the Coastal Plain, the magnificent pecan and cypress-shaded springs along the Balcones Fault, the desolate reaches of the Trans-Pecos and the Chihuahua Desert. The Chihuahua Road's several parts were known variously as the Indianola Road or Goliad Cart Road, the Old Spanish Trail, the Government or Military Road, and in Mexico, El Camino del Rio Conchos.¹¹

By the end of April 1850, train sizes had so increased that a single giant procession of 150 wagons and 250 Mexican carretas was on the road. Early summer saw 550 to 600 wagons at a time being outfitted at Indianola for the Trail. The flood gates of commerce had been opened.

Each wagon was drawn by six mules or six to eight oxen. The huge Mexican carts were pulled by four to six oxen. The wagoners endured a life of privation and danger on the trail, but they prized their independence. There was little variety in their diet. There was seldom an opportunity to bathe. Beards were the order of the day, by necessity.

The tough little towns along the way; the lumbering trains of great freight wagons and the boot-tough men who drove them; the innumerable desert campfires tended by weary freighters, taut with vigilance against the perpetual threat of Indian or bandit attacks – these elements developed as the story of the Chihuahua Road unfolds.¹²

III. HISTORICAL/CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Chihuahua Road continued until 1877 when a hurricane destroyed Indianola and the railroads replaced ox/mule carts for carrying freight in the Southwest. During more than 30 years, the Chihuahua Road held a dominant role in moving items of commerce, travelers, military supplies and personnel through this part of Southwestern North America. By the time of the Road's demise, a solid foundation of civilization had been built in the Southwest. The end of the Chihuahua Road came upon the completion of the Southern Pacific Railroad from New Orleans to California January 12, 1883. The beginning of the transcontinental railroad service also drove a nail in Indianola's coffin, which was slammed shut by the hurricane of August 20, 1886.

During the period from 1844 and 1886 scores of towns in Western Texas along the Chihuahua

Road were born as a result of the trade between Indianola, Texas and Chihuahua, Mexico. The route of the Chihuahua Road, is generally known. Surveys have been conducted to determine with more accuracy the exact route. On-ground (walking) surveying has uncovered evidence such as rusty wagon parts, mule and oxen shoes, rusty container cans, rusty wagon tools, spent cartridges, campsites and occasional wagon ruts to help delineate the route. In addition, railroad and land surveyor reports from this period have helped to locate the exact route. These reports have, on occasion, mentioned crossing the Chihuahua Road.

A historic subject marker will signify the importance of the Indianola Chihuahua Road terminus and explain its effect on the development of western Texas.

IV. DOCUMENTATION

¹ Brownson Malsch, *Indianola-the Mother of Western Texas* (Shoal Creek Publishers, Austin, Texas, 1977), page 1.

² Malsch, pages 1 and 2.

³ Roy L. Swift & Leavitt Corning, Jr., *Three Roads to Chihuahua* (Eakin Press, Austin, Texas, 1988), frontspiece.

⁴ Swift & Corning, Introduction, page x.

⁵ Swift & Corning, Introduction, page xi.

⁶ Swift & Corning, Introduction, page xi.

⁷ Swift & Corning, Introduction page xiii.

⁸ Swift & Corning, Chapter 2, page 17.

⁹ Swift & Corning, frontspiece.

¹⁰ Swift & Corning, frontspiece.

¹¹ Swift & Corning, Introduction, page x.

¹² Swift & Corning, Introduction, page x.