

TEXAS HERITAGE

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HISTORIC ROAD TRIP

A red pickup truck is driving away from the viewer on a two-lane asphalt road that curves to the right. The road has double yellow lines in the center and white lines on the edges. To the left of the road is a white post-and-rail fence that follows the curve of the road. The background is a lush green landscape with trees and a clear sky.

TRAMMEL'S TRACE

THE FARM-TO-MARKET
ROAD SYSTEM

VINTAGE GAS
STATION DESIGNS

Historical Volunteerism

“For sooner or later, a mood is going to commit you to something more or less lasting.”

John Graves, *Hardscrabble, Observations on a Patch of Land*

By Bruce Elsom

While Graves' point was made within the context of land acquisition following a nomadic phase of life, the same is true of almost all of us, though what stirs us may not be something tangible. As with Sir John (I hold him in highest esteem among Texas authors), ownership may be the sort of thing that first comes to mind for many. Belonging is the answer for others. Acclaim and notoriety make the list, too. Yet, for commitment to be truly lasting, that “something” has to be beyond one's mortal self.

As you reflect on the object of your own commitment, might I suggest for your consideration historical volunteerism. If you've never heard the term, don't fret—Google hasn't either. Nonetheless, the concept is obvious, and there are as many avenues in which to participate as the imagination will allow. Docents, reenactors, researchers, diggers, and detectors are all needed. Administrators and authors play important roles as well. And if you think any contribution you could make would be too small, repetitive, unoriginal, or insignificant, I offer the example of Gary Pinkerton, whose article on Trammel's Trace appears in this issue.

From a story about some ruts in a family pasture, Pinkerton has been the driving force in resurrecting the history of a road that was arguably as important to Texas as El Camino Real de los Tejas. His article will tell the tale, but what should not be overlooked is that through research, countless presentations to local historical organizations, and one-on-one education of land owners, he has reconnected Trammel's Trace and brought the historic pathway back into the current consciousness.



Another example of passionate commitment is Gregg J. Dimmick. A pediatrician by profession, the Wharton physician is a self-described avocational archeologist. Do you think the Texas Revolution was completely decided at San Jacinto? Read his book, *Sea of Mud: The Retreat of the Mexican Army after San Jacinto, An Archeological Investigation*, for a more complete picture.

These are but two among countless individuals who have made a difference through their passion for Texas history. Pinkerton refers to this act as “paying it forward,” but I cannot think of a better example of “committing to something more or less lasting.”

On another subject, it is my privilege to tell you that Texas HERITAGE editor-in-chief and Texas Historical Foundation Executive Director Gene Krane was honored by the Texas Historical Commission with the Ruth Lester Lifetime Achievement Award in January. The Foundation board feels extremely fortunate to work with Krane, as she is an invaluable asset to the organization. Her networking, consultation, and support have strengthened the bonds between state and private institutions, and Texas is better off because of her efforts. Well done one and all—and thank you.

Bruce Elsom is a sixth generation Texan who traces his roots back to the Texas Revolution. He has enjoyed living in several areas of the state and currently resides in Houston. Send comments regarding this column to: THF, P. O. Box 50314, Austin, Texas 78763 or via email to admin@texashistoricalfoundation.org.

A Historic Road Trip

Paying History Forward:
Trammel's Trace and the Family Land

By Gary L. Pinkerton

About 12 years ago, my late father and I were riding the backroads around Mount Enterprise (Rusk County in Northeast Texas), where he had grown up and where we still have family-owned land. He mentioned Trammel's Trace, a name I had not heard before or perhaps did not remember. I asked, "What is Trammel's Trace?" His reply surprised me—and changed my life.



Above, left to right: Ben Hudson, James Hudson, and Clay Hudson represent three generations of landowners who have remnants of Trammel's Trace on family land. All photographs are courtesy of the author. Originals in color.



Trammel's Trace was the first road leading from American states and territories to the northern part of Spanish Texas.

My father said, "Trammel's Trace is that rut in front of the farm house, across the pasture where you used to play when you were little."

All he really knew was that the ditch on our family property was once a section of an old road. Trammel's Trace is also mentioned on the historical marker in front of the Old Shiloh Baptist Church Cemetery where my grandparents are buried, but that citation had gone unnoticed by me during earlier visits.

Seeking more information, I turned to the *Handbook of Texas*

Above: Brinda Mandella, left, and Larry Collins discovered that their adjacent properties were once part of Trammel's Trace. Collins owns the piece of land shown here, which is located in Hughes Springs.

Online. I learned that in the early 1800s, Trammel's Trace was the first road leading from American states and territories to the northern part of Spanish Texas. At that time, this pathway and the El Camino Real de los Tejas, from the east, were the only two routes into Nacogdoches, the lone settlement in the entire northeastern quadrant of the state.

In an instant, that rut across my family's pasture land became sacred ground.

Legends like James Bowie, David Crockett, and Sam Houston had traveled the long-ago pathway. Down that historic trail, hundreds of families had migrated into Texas, bringing only what they could carry on horseback or in a wagon. This discovery quickly became an indulgence of curiosity that led me to author a book on Trammel's

Trace and instilled a commitment to help preserve the remains of this historic road.

A UNIQUELY EAST TEXAS TRAIL

The story of Trammel's Trace crosses every period in the state's history. Early on, the route was a series of former American Indian trails used by Nicholas Trammell, whose name the path would later bear, to smuggle horses from the Red River prairies to markets in Natchez and New Orleans.

When Spanish Texas became Mexican Texas in 1821, liberal colonization laws attracted Anglo settlers in growing numbers. People from Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri Territory, and the Carolinas traveled down Trammel's Trace from two separate points of origin along the Red River: one at Fulton, Arkansas, by that tributary's Great

Bend, and a second location near the early settlements of Pecan Point and Jonesborough, farther west along the river.

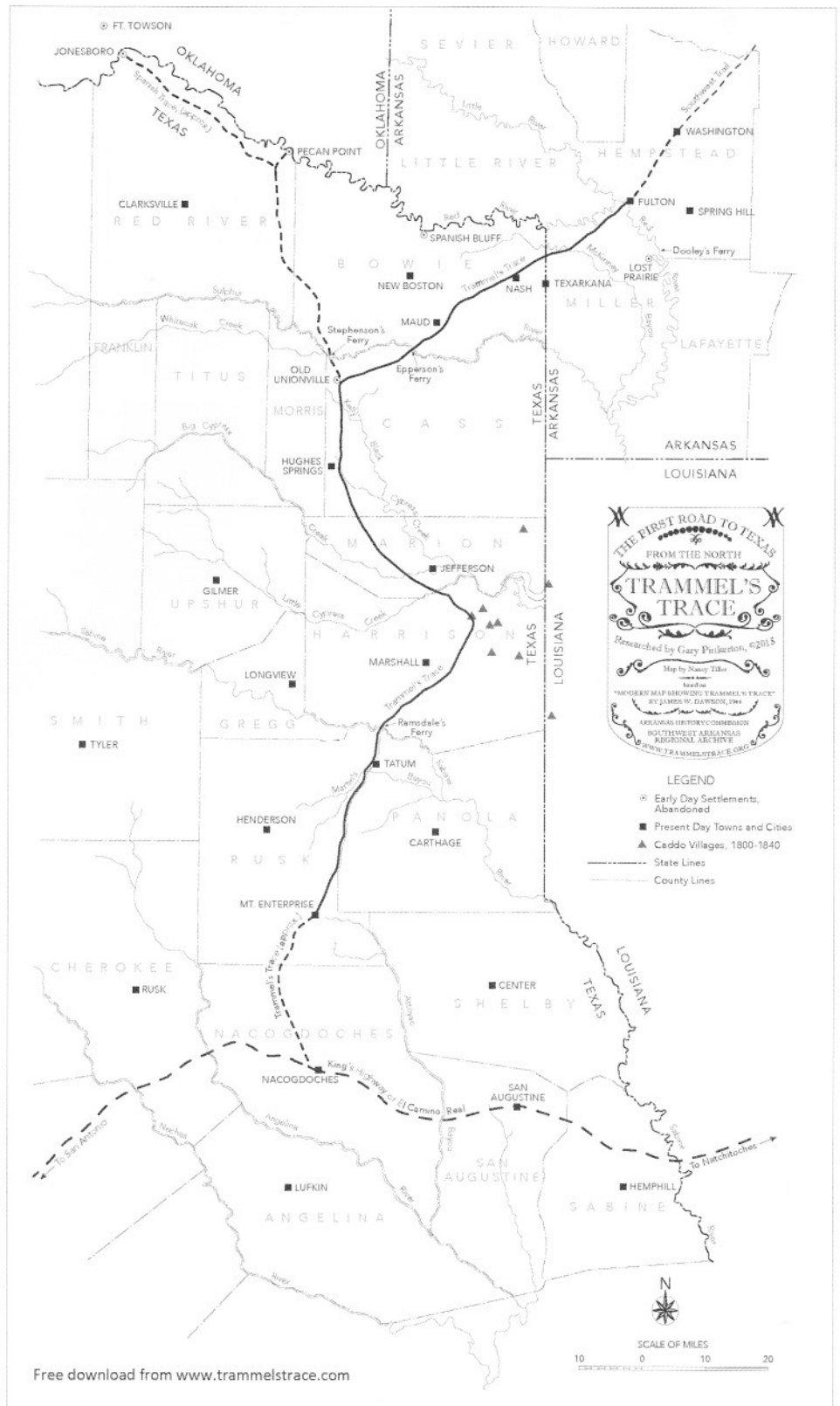
When the Republic of Texas began making land grants in 1838, surveyors' notes called out the crossing of Trammel's Trace on many of the original headright surveys spanning seven counties. The Texas Congress, responsible for laying out new counties, designated the trail as two thirds of the boundary between Rusk and Panola counties in 1843. Newer roads often followed or were near the original path of Trammel's Trace.

A HISTORIC JOURNEY DOWN TRAMMEL'S TRACE

Stepping onto the primitive roadway at the Red River meant traversing unsettled lands in, what was until 1845, a foreign country for Americans. Given the pace of a loaded wagon, travel from Fulton, Arkansas, to Nacogdoches took roughly two and a half weeks.

After crossing the Red River at Fulton, those making the journey were then faced with seven miles of cane thickets standing 20 to 30 feet tall, a route a mapmaker later simply would label as "impracticable." At the time, the prairies of what would become Bowie County were lush with equal parts of open grassland and wooded areas dispersed across low, rolling hills, where wild horses roamed in large numbers. Hardwood forests of oak, ash, and cedar, tangled with vines, lined the creeks. Small streams located in close proximity resulted in a continuous, thick undergrowth that complicated travel.

Not all of the journey, though, was as formidable. The Trammel's Trace Sulphur River crossing was one of the most significant natural landmarks in Northeast Texas. A nearby creek had deposited a shoal of silt and debris that created a convenient river ford. The Spanish explorer Luis de Moscoso Alvarado crossed here twice in 1542, and



Free download from www.trammelstrace.com

This map illustrates Trammel's Trace's historic route from Fulton, Arkansas, to Nacogdoches. That journey was thought to have taken about two and a half weeks to complete. A volunteer-led effort currently is underway to locate, verify, and protect the visible remnants of "the first road to Texas."



René-Robert de La Salle's surviving crew made use of the spot in 1687. Epperson's Ferry operated at this crossing after 1837.

Farther south, the route passed near the site of an old Choctaw village, located on the east side of present-day Hughes Springs. It then ran southwest of Jefferson, traversing Big Cypress and Little Cypress bayous. The low-water crossing over the Sabine River was atop an outcropping of dark brown lignite coal that created a natural passageway for hundreds of years. This location later became known as Ramsdale's Ferry. The final two days of travel along Trammel's Trace led travelers through immense pine trees before arriving in Nacogdoches.

RUTS REMAIN, PROTECTION IS NECESSARY

In the trail's 200-year history, much has changed across the landscape. Despite no conscious or concerted effort to preserve or protect any remains of the route, vestiges of the old road still can be found.



Evidence exists in the form of ruts that are overgrown and scattered through forests or across pasture land that has been cultivated for decades.

Most of the old trail is on private property and inaccessible. However, noticeable remains of Trammel's Trace can be found today on Highway 77 at Dalton in Cass County. Near the Missionary Baptist Church, a historical marker stands where several still-visible ruts angle across an open pasture.¹ Those swales are significant because a fork in the route, the point at which a trail from Pecan Point joined the main track from Fulton, Arkansas, and continued southward, was situated close by.

Since I began researching and

writing about Trammel's Trace, I have coordinated a parallel effort to identify and pinpoint trail remains. Using original headright surveys, mapping software, and online GIS (geographic information system) tools, I have worked with fellow volunteer "rut nuts" to uncover known points along the 180-mile historic route. Once a potential trail location is identified, information found in surveyor's notes main-

Top: The Epperson's Ferry crossing on the Sulphur River, at the boundary of Bowie and Cass counties, was a significant landmark for many years. Below: Ruts from Trammel's Trace are still evident on the land of Paul and Casey Betts in Cass County.

tained by the Texas General Land Office serves as the starting point. Those observations often describe specific, measurable positions on the ground where Trammel's Trace was documented during the early days of the Republic of Texas.

Unlike El Camino Real de los Tejas, a designated National Historic Trail and part of the National Park Service, with Trammel's Trace, there is only a loosely organized effort to protect and preserve the road. Volunteers reach out to landowners and, when access is granted, perform field work to confirm existing segments of the primitive path. By networking within each county, committed trail preservationists have been able to contact property owners and walk their land together, photographing and documenting the road. Just as significantly, these interactions are an opportunity to tell the story of Trammel's Trace and convey the importance of preserving the physical remains of that history.

FAMILY LAND, SHARED HISTORY

What has been clear throughout this effort is that when landowners learn more about Trammel's Trace, they universally embrace the concept of protecting and preserving their piece of the old trail. One committed family includes brothers Paul and Casey Betts, who share Cass County roots. Casey lives with his wife Melinda and their teenage son Michael on land that has been in his family since 1850.

After initial conversations with the owners, I was able to explore the property with several other volunteers. Even though the head-right survey did not call out Trammel's Trace specifically, by using satellite images, mapping tools,

and *ground-truthing*, information collected on site, the group determined that an ordinary-looking rut across a long-used pasture was a portion of the original trail. Paul Betts now has a photograph of those historic swales on the wall of his Austin office, and he enthusiastically shares the story behind that image with others.

Another interested landowner, Larry Collins learned about Trammel's Trace from a neighbor, Brinda Mandella. With his interest piqued, Collins led me to an old roadway near his grandmother's house. Much like assembling a jigsaw puzzle, with known points of Trammel's Trace both north and south of that site, we were able to follow the terrain and verify the authenticity of the location.

The evolution of Trammel's Trace is of particular importance to James N. Hudson of Austin, son Clay, and grandson Ben. A section of the trail on their property, located near my family's land north of Mount Enterprise, also was part of the first (unofficial) farm-to-market route in 1937, which ran from Old Shiloh Baptist Church, just off Highway 315, to Mount Enterprise, following along the old trace. The two historic roads occupied the same corridor, and ruts remain on both sides of the long ago right-of-way that runs through Hudson-owned land. The family is committed to preserving their special piece of the state's transportation history.

When I began this research more than a decade ago, there were a few people, like my father, who knew a little about Trammel's Trace. However, hardly anyone fully understood or appreciated the path's significance. Now that the road's role in Texas and American settlement

is better understood, landowners have begun to recognize that the ditch across their property may be a remnant of a roadway that was an essential part of early Texas travel and immigration. By choosing to protect the existing remains of Trammel's Trace, these families are paying Lone Star history forward for the next generation. ★

Gary L. Pinkerton, of Houston, is the author of Trammel's Trace: The First Road to Texas from the North, published by Texas A&M University Press. Order the book online at www.trammelstrace.com.

¹ These remaining vestiges of Trammel's Trace are visible in Google Maps™ satellite images. Go to: <http://tinyurl.com/daltonruts>.



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