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Trammel's Trace: The First Road to Texas from the North. By Gary L. Pinkerton.
(College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2016. Pp. 304. Photographs, maps, bibliography, index.)

A self-proclaimed “rut nut” prone to ground-truth his research, Gary L. Pinkerton brings considerable historical and geoarchaeological skills to bear in his in-depth analysis of an often-overlooked early route to Texas. This is, at one level, a detailed biography of a road, but in focusing on a line through the Texas prairies and woodlands that predated formal Anglo-American colonization of the area, the author also makes significant, defining connections that give the reader much more to consider. There are myriad regional factors at play along what the author terms the “undeveloped, backwoods cousin of the Natchez Trace” (76), and he weaves them together to show broader influences that led to the initial establishment and later sustained viability. This represents the first significant effort to interpret the complex history of Trammel’s Trace beyond what is generally considered a route of immigration and commerce. Borne of the lucrative trade of horse smugglers and other freebooters, including its namesake, Kentuckian Nicholas Trammell (the trace’s name reflecting a different spelling of his surname that came later), it initially

served elements of the ragged edge of frontier society. With time and continued use through ever-changing historical eras—from colonial times to statehood—it garnered a much wider utility and acceptance.

Through a tight and well-researched chronological approach to the topic, readers will confront outlying, but related, stories associated with international trade, filibustering expeditions, short-lived rebellions, and boundary disputes. They will also encounter a wide range of interesting characters associated with the road. They include those that might be anticipated, such as Louis Juchereau de St. Denis, Sam Houston, and David Crockett, but also the unexpected, like Jean Lafitte and Peter Ellis Bean. No characters in this study are more compelling, though, than the extended family of Nicholas Trammell, a group never far from legal entanglements or rumors of high crimes and misdemeanors. The family seems to have earned its questionable reputation, one reason Stephen F. Austin chose not to allow Trammell to join his colony.

One of the unique strengths of the book is the second chapter, entitled “Through the Wilds,” that highlights the value of Pinkerton’s site-specific lead-in by combining historical accounts of the trace with his own first-hand experiences. As a result, the overview of the journey from Arkansas, across the Red River, and on down to Nacogdoches, includes layers of the story often overlooked, like treacherous stream crossings, vast claustrophobic canebrakes, mid-trail stumps, and persistent mosquitoes, hornets, and yellow jackets. The depiction enhances the author’s assertion that a trace, at least in its formative stage, “does not qualify as a trail” (5). It is, instead, a path that results from extended use over time. It is dynamic and ever-changing, and in the end, often obsolete. There are still vestiges of the trace to be found, but most of those are now on private land and thus inaccessible to the traveling public. Thankfully, rut nuts like Pinkerton seek them out and match them up with historical records to keep the route in the mainstream of regional history more than two centuries after a horse trader named Nicholas Trammell started moving south to Texas.