

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands

Witness Statement

Statement of Al Lowman
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President, Texas State Historical Association
to the House Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands
HR 2409, the Camino Real de los Tejas National Historic Trail Act
May 9, 2000

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Al Lowman. I am president of the Texas State Historical Association for 2000-01 and, for thirty-three years, I've been managing partner of Lowman Ranch Limited, which sits astride the Camino Real de los Tejas. The house I've lived in for fifty-five years was built in 1879, and its sidewalk ends at the Camino Real right-of-way. I 'm not only a land- and homeowner along the trail, but also a life-long student of borderlands history.

Last month I coordinated a two-day conference on the Camino Real, which brought together archeologists, anthropologists, historians, cultural geographers, folklorists, natural scientists, and people with hands-on experience in presenting the historical, cultural, scenic and other resources to the touring public. The conference, sponsored by the Texas State Historical Association and co-sponsored by three state agencies, was held on the campus of Southwest Texas State University.

The turn-out was gratifying. Attendees came from all along the trail--Saltillo to Natchitoches. Enthusiasm ran high. I believe time has come for approving legislation to designate the Caminos Reales from the Rio Grande border to Natchitoches, LA as a national historic trail.

While this vital traffic artery had its origins in prehistoric American Indian trade routes, it emerged in the 1740s as a royal road connecting Guerrero in Coahuila and Los Adaes in Louisiana Territory. Over the ages it has taken various twists and turns and assumed different names as human beings adapted it to sundry human needs. It became a favorite of explorers, would-be conquerors, tourists, and renegades, some of whom stayed behind to establish communities.

The Santa Fe Trail functions under similar legislation with outstanding success and with the enthusiastic support of landowners and small town dwellers the entire length of that trail. No doubt its broad-based acceptance is due in some measure to the absence of coercive power on the part of the program promoters. Eminent domain is inapplicable here; landowners' participation is purely voluntary.

Historic trails and associated sites are protected through a certification program that recognizes those individuals and entities who are willing to share their part of this national heritage. Some may allow year-

around access, others may limit access to one day a year on a guided tour basis. And some may choose to avoid participation altogether. When these stipulations are pointed out to affected property owners, hesitation and reservations quickly fade.

This purely voluntary approach has worked so well along the Santa Fe Trail that there are already about sixty certification agreements in place and twenty more pending from petitioning landowners. To date, *all* expiring certifications have been renewed for a second five-year term.

Now it should be noted that if a willing owner wishes to sell an interest in his property to the government, he may do so, PROVIDED the government is willing to buy. But this option has rarely been exercised; voluntary certification--and the prestige attached thereto--has been the means for recognizing and preserving these trail remnants. If an owner wants no part of this program, his property won't be certified. Visitors won't be directed there in *any* trail publications.

In September 1997 I attended the biennial roundup of the Cimarron Cut-off Chapter of the Santa Fe Trail Association. I saw a tremendous outpouring of ordinary folk with hardly a bureaucrat or college professor in sight. The place was crawling with property rights advocates who thought the National Historic Trails program worked just fine for them. Mid-morning refreshments were served by the Ladies Garden Club in Elkhart, KS; the Methodist Church Ladies in Boise City, OK; and the ladies of the Clayton, NM Rotary Club.

For these communities this program has been a unifying force that has brought substantial tourism benefits. To say that "a good time was had by all" would be a gross understatement. I saw the same elements at work at the 1999 conference in Council Grove, KS.

The establishment of El Camino Real de los Tejas as a National Historic Trail, with the support of the National Park Service, would certainly provide like benefits for the people of Texas and Louisiana, especially those gathered in the rural areas and small towns along the way. Moreover it would provide a means of linking the past to the present in a way that allows us to educate people about the rich culture of our borderlands and promoting better understanding and appreciation of our region's Spanish and Mexican influences.

Among other things, it would give us the chance to emulate Kansas City's success in linking public schools along the Santa Fe Trail via the Internet with a data base that promotes localized research pertaining to that Trail. It has proved a wonderful vehicle for getting public school students involved and excited in learning about their own community's history and then relating it to the larger picture.

Establishing El Camino Real de los Tejas as a National Historic Trail is quite simply an opportunity not to be missed.

Thank you.

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