



Footsteps and Fragments

El Camino Real Historic Site is both a fixed point and a meditation on the journey.

BY FREDERICK TURNER PHOTOGRAPHS BY JACK PARSONS

“THEY’RE ALL OVER HERE,” Chris Hanson was saying, waving a hand at a stretch of cleared landscape surrounded by mesquite and with the last of summer’s desert marigolds shivering in a stiff November wind. “Here” was the site of the ancient Piro pueblo, Teypana, near present-day Socorro. In 1598 on this dot in the unknown American interior the Juan de Oñate expedition made prolonged contact with the Native peoples, and for this reason Teypana remains a major point on what became El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, the Royal Road of the Interior Lands. The road ran from Tenochtitlán (Mexico City) in Mexico, north to San Juan de Los Caballeros in what would become New Mexico, 1,600 miles along pathways laid down by the Natives who were probably following the tracks first made by the wild creatures they had learned to hunt.

Hanson is the site manager at El Camino Real Historic Trail Site, which lies about forty miles south of Socorro, and the “they” he was referring to with the wave of his hand were Piro potsherds, one of which I now held in my outstretched palm. Indeed, they were all around here, and though Teypana has been extensively excavated and many of its artifacts removed and safely stored, still the place positively glittered with fragments of ancient industry. The piece I held was about two inches long, an inch wide,



and several shades deeper in color than the light brown earth from which it had most likely been fashioned centuries earlier. Oddly, as if in an oblique symbolic reference to the tragic history of conquest, it now looked like an arrowhead, with a black portion of its original design still visible along its ragged base. Held thus, its accidental point gestured northward, onward, beyond the reach of the primitive Spanish maps.

Already, however, Oñate had formally taken possession for the Crown of everything in his path, “from the leaves of the trees in the forests to the stones and sands of the river,” which meant the Rio Grande. No doubt the Piros didn’t understand this when they gave the Spaniards some desperately needed help, but they surely had heard news of the strangers from neighbors to the south and perhaps had caught a glimpse of the white men and their horses, for Coronado and subsequent expeditions had penetrated parts of the Piros’ territory. The news wasn’t good. Still, the Piros gave help, however reluctantly, making Teypana one of the more significant archaeological sites in North America, ranking up there with the Lost Colony at Roanoke (1585) and Plymouth Rock (1620). The Piros did not linger long after the advent of these Europeans. After a decade or so of forced religious conversion, forced labor, forced concubinage, and other brutally enforced demands, the Piros abandoned their

Opposite: Greg Reiche’s *Camino de Sueños* confronts visitors as they approach El Camino Real Historic Site. **Above:** Southeast of the building, the Fray Cristobál mountain range looms. These mountains marked the end of the Jornada del Muerto, the most dangerous and arid leg of El Camino Real.

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village and moved north to the pueblo of Pilabo, where they remained until the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. Quite recently, however, Hanson said, a small group of descendants returned here from exile in Texas, California, and elsewhere to perform profoundly important ceremonies of repatriation and purification. However barren and empty Teypana might have looked to the casual eye, this, still, was home.

November 21, 2015, marked the tenth anniversary of El Camino Real Historic Trail Site. On Interstate 25 the sign to it reads, EL CAMINO INTERNATIONAL HERITAGE CENTER, but the site's true marker is no title or sign but instead a striking sculpture by Greg E. Reiche. At first glimpse, silhouetted and from afar, *Camino de Sueños* ("Road of Dreams") looks like a geological

anomaly, arising stark and blue out of a rolling green sea of greasewood. Nearer, it looks like vertiginous red cliffs sliced by a translucent waterfall. Nearer still, it reminded me of those slot canyons found in Utah where the walls shoot straight up to a narrow bit of blue sky. Standing before it, the dominant impression it made was of a massive gate, the last standing artifact of a vanished empire in the sandy wastes of the ancient Near East. When I talked with Greg Reiche one Santa Fe morning over coffee, he chuckled a bit over my changeful takes on *Camino de Sueños*. But then he said this work in progress had kept changing on him, too.

"When I was ready to go to work on it, I looked at all the sketches that had gone into my proposal," he told me, "and not one of them got at what I really had in mind. It couldn't

be pointed to a specific group—Pueblo, Spanish, American. It couldn't just be about blazing a trail. I wanted it to be about The Journey: the journey humans made along there, from the Neolithic hunters to the present moment. But there was something more I wanted to get into it as well: the journey we all have to make in life." I took this to mean our inward journey that keeps the outer one company, sometimes so apparently loosely it seems the two aren't really connected at all—like El Camino Real and the Rio Grande, which in places is visually present only in a distant line of cottonwoods.

Reiche's own outward journey had its own meanders. It began not far from where his monumental work now stands. In Socorro he and his siblings grew up close to the land and its natural and human history. Both parents not only read about the local past but were on good terms with geologists and archaeologists whose frame of reference is immense and far more expansive than books can ever be. There was a lot of camping, hiking, hunting, and fishing in the Reiche kids' lives, and this formed the bedrock that has kept Greg Reiche company on his own outward odyssey: college as an art major at the University of New Mexico, hard work in the oil fields of Wyoming and Montana, back to UNM for a degree in business and finance, some trying years as a CPA, more years as the owner of an art gallery where he framed and sold the art of others.

"From boyhood, I'd always been interested in making things with my hands," he said, creating shadowy gestures on the sunny surface of our café table. "And then there just came a time when I said to myself, 'I can do this—I can make a living making things with my hands.'"

In creating *Camino de Sueños*, bedrock background, training, and talent joined with research of a special sort. He read spare Spanish accounts of exploration, walked portions of the old Camino, camped out on the site's lands. He was searching for the shapes and colors of the place, its textures and sounds. "It was an immersion process," he smiled. "I can smell the greasewood right now."

With the crowd at the tenth-anniversary celebration drifting about El Camino's museum grounds, Chris Hanson was telling me that Greg Reiche's sculpture was so arresting

Opposite: The amphitheater evokes the sail of the ship-inspired building.

Right: The site's museum includes a display of tools, goods, and wares that Spanish colonists transported on El Camino Real.





Left: You might notice the sensation of walking on a gangplank as you enter El Camino Real Historic Site's award-winning building.

that many people who came down to the site never got any farther than *Camino de Sueños*, which is some two miles short of the museum.

"They see it, they get out of their cars and walk around it; they take photos; and then they get back in their cars and out on the road again. They figure, 'Well, that's it—that's the site.'" He smiled, a bit ruefully, I thought, for after all, such visitors would miss the handsome museum building with its informative exhibits. The structure itself resembles a modernistic reference to a desert caravan long ago abandoned in mid-passage, though there was about it as well just the faintest shadow of a ship. William Sabatini of Dekker/Perich/Sabatini, the Albuquerque firm that designed it, told me that what he had in mind was an "artifact as simple and pristine" as the landscape it would eventually become a part of. At the same time, Sabatini said, he wanted the building to feel like a resting place where the weary, parched traveler might pause and look southeast across the valley to the river and beyond that to the Fray Cristóbal Mountains. To me, this nicely picked up the theme of Greg Reiche's sculpture—the journey or passage—while also seeming to say that the journey remains uncompleted, as in a way it is, for the dreams of empire that had brought the Spaniards to this place were literally fantastic.

On this day, however, it was clear that many of the visitors had completed their own journeys and had come past *Camino de Sueños* to the museum and its grounds. The weather was wonderfully cooperative. The sky was that depthless, high-desert blue, and by midday it had warmed enough so that many had shed their jackets. Hanson said that if it got much warmer, it might possibly bring out the rattlers, which are found in numbers in this country. On a previous visit to the site I had encountered one and now had no trouble recalling the angry buzzing it made when Hanson and I interrupted its sunbath behind the museum. But, so far, so good, and Hanson appeared reasonably satisfied by the turnout, the visitors happily sampling a generous array of attractions: Native American and Spanish cooking, displays and demonstrations of Native arts and crafts, roaming men costumed as conquistadors, Civil War-era soldiers, and vaqueros. There was a folk music band, a huddle of Churro sheep, and a traveling blacksmith with his smithy. Jim Boswell, dressed as a nineteenth-century trapper, said the crowd really should have been even larger given the site's historical significance.

"You mention to somebody the Bosque del Apache," he said, swiveling the butt of his .50-caliber rifle into the hardpan, "and they'll say, 'Yeah, we know about that.' You mention the Camino Real site, and they'll say, 'The *what?* Never heard of it.'" He was about to add something further when he was cut short by the heavy report of a brass cannon touched off by one of the Civil War soldiers. When the puff of smoke had drifted away, the soldiers moved aside to let a photographer compose a group shot of the conquistadors in their armor and brandishing their weaponry. "Bringing Christian civilization to the Stone Age," one soldier called to the conquistadors, and then they all shared a laugh across the simulated ages.

I wandered away from the museum with its smell of wood smoke from the *hornos*, the occasional gunshots and cannon fire, drawn obscurely back towards "Road of Dreams." Wary of rattlers, I kept to the paved road, but the longer I walked, the more such cautious behavior seemed out of keeping with what I had come to feel was the existential essence of the site: any road, after all, represents risk, continuously taking us from the known into the unknown, and I wanted to have a bit of that

...a massive gate, the last standing artifact of a vanished empire...

feeling here, however brief and contrived. And so I veered off into the sea of greasewood, towards the sculpture that bulked, blackly now, against the traveling sun, watching where I set my feet in the arid soil with its spidery shadows of the greasewood branches and the sun-blasted surfaces of the rocks. Gradually, the sounds from the celebration faded, and I became aware of the wind that in these wide spaces must always have been constant. Out here there could have been heard no shouted orders from Oñate's soldiers, no screaming of the *carretas*' wooden axles, no snaps of bullwhips or the bawls and baas of the dusty herds. Maybe only a leathery outrider might then have heard the wind and on it the incredible vastness of the land stretching ever onward. "Oh, God! What a lonely land!" exclaimed Don Diego de Vargas when he was reclaiming for the Crown the territory lost during the Pueblo Revolt of 1680.

Greg Reiche had never felt that way about this place. To him it wasn't lonely at all, but intensely alive. But he well knew there were many who had felt as desperate as the don in the long centuries before this. He told me he wanted *Camino de Sueños* to make modern-day visitors feel like that once again, to imaginatively share the ancient, inherent hazards of these high, arid stretches. In summer, he said, the temperature of the towering metallic surfaces of his sculpture could reach 280 degrees. "If you were to stand right next to them," he went on, "you could get a sense of what it might have been like to make this journey."

On this late November afternoon it was too cool for that particular experience. But standing directly underneath the sculpture's arch, I told myself that I ought to come back to this spot some August, just to feel the punishing heat all the old sojourners had felt, with no shade in sight except maybe the faraway blue overhang of a cliff at just the right time of day. And sometime I might do so. But for now, what I had was only the wind, the sound of Time itself, wearing away at everything. ■

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Spanish Colonial reenactor Tony Campisi at El Camino Real Historic Site's 10th anniversary celebration.