

# THE GREAT GOLDEN WAY

OKLAHOMA IS LACED WITH TRAILS LOST TO YEARS AND PROGRESS; PAVEMENT AND PLOWING; INUNDATION AND EROSION; OIL FIELD AND WIND FARM. THE CALIFORNIA ROAD, WHICH CARRIED PIONEERS HOPING TO STRIKE IT RICH TO THE WEST COAST, IS ONE OF THESE FORGOTTEN TRAILS. SUSAN DRAGOO FOLLOWS ITS PATH ACROSS THE SOONER STATE.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY  
BY SUSAN DRAGOO

**W**ERE ON the edge of being blown away by the most violent thunderstorm I've ever experienced from inside a tent.

"Help me close these flaps!" my husband Bill shouts, and I plunge into the wet, howling wind and struggle to grab a corner. Eventually, we batten down the hatches, but not before we—and our mattress—are soaked. Over a long night camped on the prairie of northwestern Oklahoma, we hope the storm doesn't spawn tornadoes while we try to find a dry spot to sleep. Morning breaks beneath heavy clouds, and we press on to the Antelope Hills, our last stop as we follow the California Road. We're tracing its path from Arkansas to Texas, our pickup truck providing a level of comfort and ease unavailable to drivers of the mule- and ox-drawn wagons that created this trail.

The California Road is obscure in the annals of history but important for its role in the United States' expansion. James W. Marshall discovered gold in Coloma, California, in 1848, bringing fortune-seekers from all over the world. The ten-year Gold Rush swelled California's population and accelerated the nation's westward advancement. Some set sail for the west

coast that autumn, but overland migrants had to wait until spring. Most of these Forty-Niners used well-traveled roads like the Santa Fe Trail, but the sheer numbers of those making the journey demanded alternate routes. Because of its place on the Arkansas River, Fort Smith became the gateway for a southern path to California.

Captain Randolph B. Marcy, a Massachusetts native who later became known as an intrepid explorer of the Southwest and who named more of Oklahoma's physical features than any other individual, was assigned as a military escort for 500 gold seekers leaving Fort Smith. The more than 800-mile journey would take them to Santa Fe, where they would prepare for the difficult trek through the desert. Marcy's trail along the Canadian River through Indian Territory and across the Texas Panhandle became known as the California Road.

This trail was followed by as many as a hundred thousand seeking their fortunes in California. Unlike the storied Santa Fe Trail, the California Road now is little known and sparsely marked, and not much of it is on public property. Finding its trace is a challenge, but Bill and I are determined to locate and follow it.



Spanning more than four hundred miles across Oklahoma, the state's portion of the California Road ends near the Antelope Hills in Roger Mills County.



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**M**ARCY'S CARAVAN of nearly a hundred wagons left Fort Smith in April 1849, crossing the Poteau River on a ferry. Bill and I follow suit on a spring morning, crossing on a bridge. Today, we drive over rivers and think little about it, but crossing streams was a significant undertaking for Marcy's party. There sometimes were ferries near large settlements, but at most crossings, creeks were forded, and the banks often had to be excavated to bring wagons across.

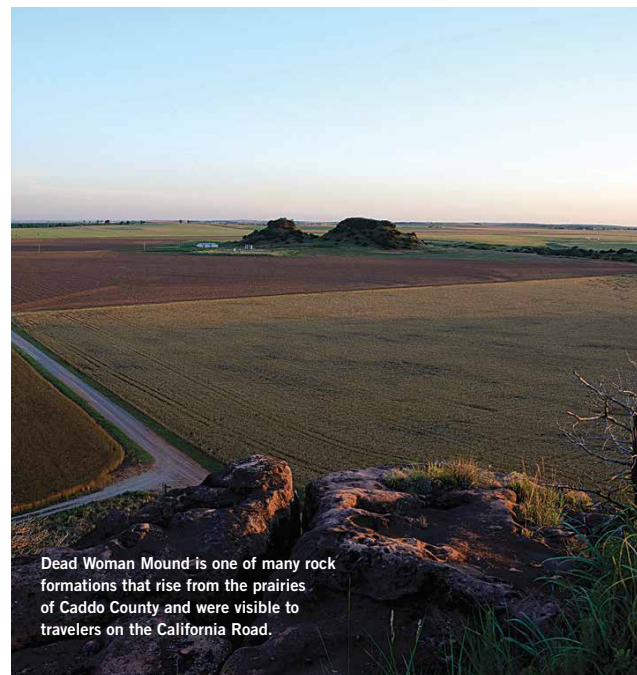
Fourteen miles out of Fort Smith, we stop at Skullyville, where stately trees stand watch over the cemetery. The town was the site of the expedition's first camp and the capital of the Choctaw Nation at the time. West of Spiro, we leave U.S. Highway 59 for back roads. The emigrants weren't stymied by impediments like fences and private property, which prevent automotive travelers from following the California Road's exact route today. We zigzag around the trail, cutting a path through a dark green canopy on the grid of county roads. Wild roses brighten the way with splashes of pink, and we cross creeks on low-water bridges, scaring up a bobcat and a couple of deer.

In 1849, a wet spring made the path boggy and sometimes impassable for heavily loaded wagons, which became mired and often stood for days before their drivers could gather the strength to attempt further progress or the roads dried out. Our spring has been a wet one too, but our four-wheel-drive truck helps us negotiate sticky mud and deep water. Returning to pavement at State Highway 31 near McCurtain, we follow the trail through a valley flanked by wooded hills.

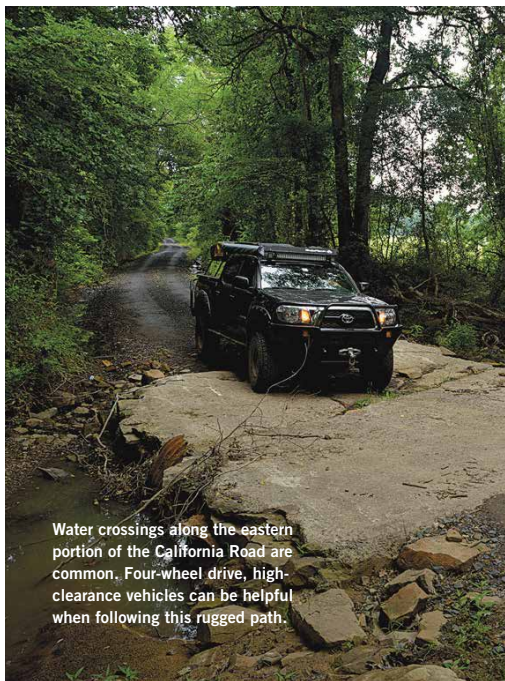
A detour east of Kinta reveals a possible remnant of the California Road, a wide recess in the earth packed down from years of use and bordered by long rows of mature trees. Ripe dewberries grow by the trail. Standing in the rain, knee-deep in lush grasses, I pick berry after berry and pop them in my mouth. They taste like sweet, cool water, and I wonder if the Forty Niners picked dewberries along the way.



Several markers north of Leedey, like this one, denote the location of the California Road.



Dead Woman Mound is one of many rock formations that rise from the prairies of Caddo County and were visible to travelers on the California Road.

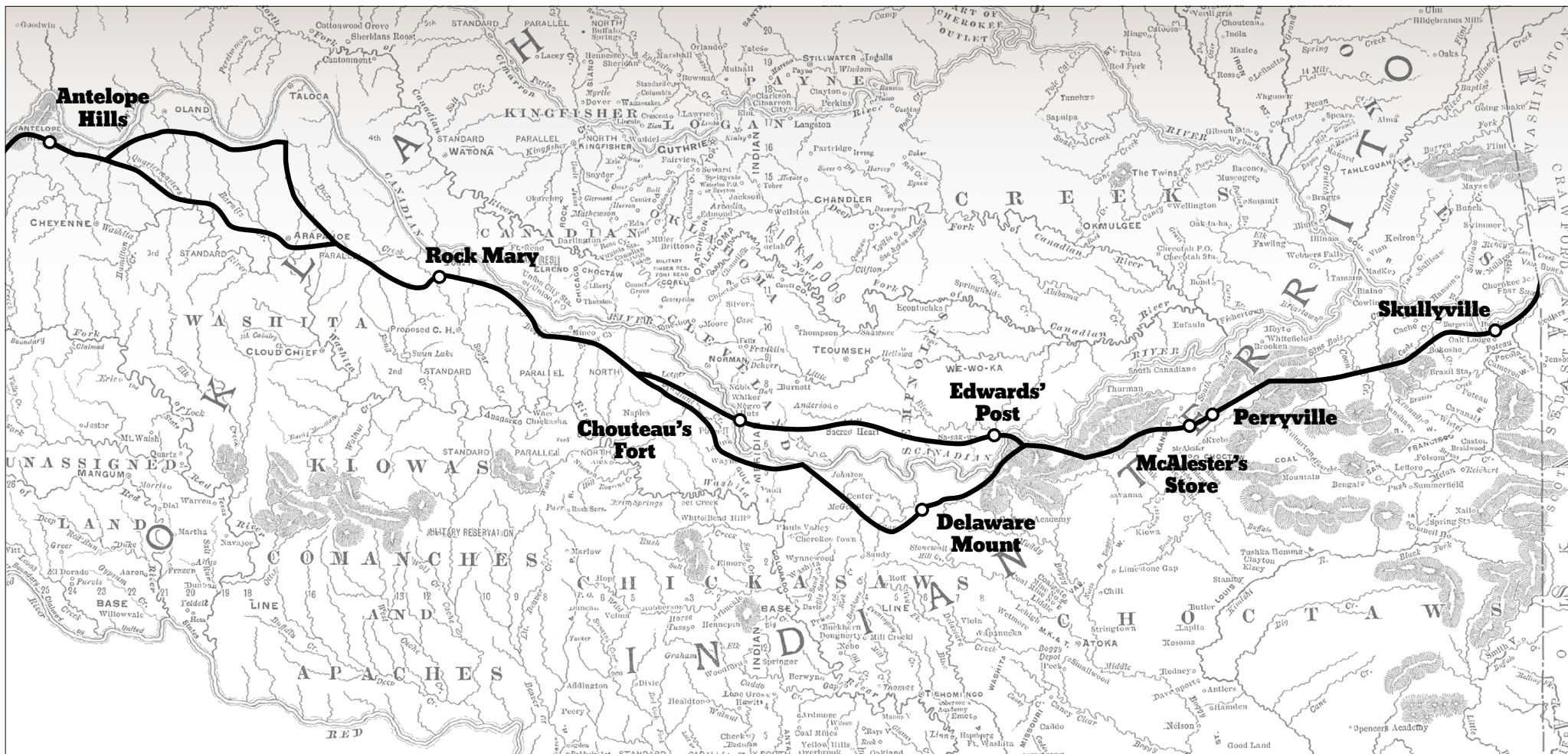


Water crossings along the eastern portion of the California Road are common. Four-wheel drive, high-clearance vehicles can be helpful when following this rugged path.



Hinton Historical Museum curator Art Peters examines wagon ruts in the stone at Red Rock Canyon State Park in Hinton.





**L**AKE EUFAULA covers the route north of McAlester, and we join it again near Stuart, following State Highway 1. Here, near present-day Atwood, was Edwards' Store, a trading post on the Little River. Beyond this, there were no settlements in Indian Territory, making Edwards' the last place travelers could purchase supplies. Marcy stocked up on corn and beef here and engaged the services of Black Beaver, a celebrated Delaware guide who was in constant demand by explorers of the day. Leaving Edwards' on May 1, Marcy traveled southwest to the Delaware Mount in the vicinity of Ada. In his journal, Marcy writes that this ridge impressed observers with a view of "prairies, woods, and mountain hills . . . mingled together in the most rich and sweet profusion."

In Ada, we find a hilltop with a view worthy of such praise, and near Latta School off State Highway 1, a faded historical marker for Delaware Mount. The trail turns northwest at Fitzhugh and passes close to Byars, following State Highway 59 and U.S. Highway 77 to Purcell. Marcy's party camped across the Canadian River near Chouteau's Fort, also known as Old Fort Holmes, a trading post established in 1835 by Colonel Auguste Pierre Chouteau. North of Lexington, the creek on which the fort was situated is named for him. It was near here the expedition witnessed a small tornado.

"This evening there suddenly arose one of the most terrific storms I ever witnessed—it was a perfect tornado," wrote Marcy. "Nothing could resist the violence of the storm."

The party was soaked, and after rebuilding their camp, they took an extra day to dry out before continuing along Walnut Creek near the present-day towns of Washington and Blanchard to the vicinity of Tuttle.

**I**T'S here we pick up a guide. Art Peters, curator of the Hinton Historical Museum, has spent the last decade mapping the California Road across western Oklahoma. We meet him to walk a remnant of the trail. Wagon ruts often are visible, and artifacts like buttons, bullets, and blacksmithing tools lie where the land never has been plowed.

"It's like finding a well-preserved ghost town waiting to have its story told," Peters says of the road's archaeological treasures.

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## “PEOPLE who came through here on the wagon road saw a different Oklahoma than we do.”

The divide between the Canadian and Washita rivers offered Marcy a smooth path west, and State Highway 37 follows it to Red Rock Canyon State Park, where visitors can view a clearly defined California Road wagon rut. The narrow wheel tracks are visible because expeditioners locked the rear wheels to ease their wagons into the canyon, the years of dragging creating indentations in the rock. The road leaves the canyon near the Hinton Historical Museum, which houses California Road artifacts and a collection of twenty-six horse-drawn carriages.

Rock Mary, a sixty-foot sandstone outcrop on private property west of Hinton, is perhaps the trail's most famous landmark. When the Marcy party passed here on May 23, 1849, Lieutenant J.H. Simpson, the expedition's topographical engineer, named the butte after seventeen-year-old Mary Conway, who was traveling with her family. Conway later became engaged to another officer on the expedition, Lieutenant M.P. Harrison, who died on the return from Santa Fe. The pair never married.

The road continues along the divide to Putnam and makes a left, following the Canadian River. Peters takes us west on State Highway 47, turning north at Rhea Cemetery. The road veers west, running close to the trail and offering a vast prairie view. In the distance, a strip of green marks the water's course.

“People who came through here on the wagon road saw a different Oklahoma than we do,” says Peters.

At first, it seems he is stating the obvious, but I have come to understand there are differences more subtle than cities and highways. The river, for instance, is harder to distinguish since the Eastern red cedar has invaded the prairie, making the land more timbered than it was in 1849. Peters points to a high spot on the horizon where he hopes we can camp tonight. It's the northernmost spot on the trail. North of Leedey, we pull into a pasture and drive along a narrow ridge.

“Here, the wagons had to be single-file,” says Peters. “It's the exact divide between the Canadian and Washita rivers.”

In camp, Bill chops a dead cedar for firewood, and coyotes begin their evening serenade. After dinner, we stay up late

watching a storm approach. The view is panoramic, but the skies I expected to be dark are trimmed by strings of light along the horizon in all directions: the bright white lights of the oil field and flashing red beacons of wind farms.

The next morning, after weathering the storm from inside our tent, we continue to the Antelope Hills, near the site of Marcy's last camp in Indian Territory. We've done in three days what took the Forty-Niners nearly fifty: We've traversed the California Road's 434 miles across Oklahoma.

**A**FTER THE Civil War, the wagon road through Indian Territory was used perhaps as late as 1918, when the last stagecoaches were retired. Four years after Marcy's expedition, the road's path was surveyed as part of a possible route for a transcontinental railroad. In 1858, Lieutenant E.F. Beale surveyed it again for the creation of the first federally funded road to the west coast, and Route 66 eventually mirrored Beale's path across New Mexico and northern Arizona.

Turning east toward home, we think of the emigrants who made this journey. Many died along the way; others turned back. Fever and cholera took some, but death was a greater threat in the western desert, where scarcity of water, food, and pasture for livestock created great hardships.

We have experienced only a fraction of their struggles, but we've seen our state through the accounts of explorers who described its violence and what Marcy called its “unrivalled beauty.” We've traveled the undulating country of the east and smooth, firm roads across the western prairie. Much has changed, but much remains—the cool waters of a creek, the warm stone of a butte, a prairie of native grass never plowed, and the traces of a road long forgotten. 🌵

The Hinton Historical Museum is open Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. 801 South Broadway Avenue, (405) 542-3181. Red Rock Canyon State Park, 116 Red Rock Canyon Road in Hinton, (405) 542-6344 or [TravelOK.com/parks](http://TravelOK.com/parks).

Art Peters and Bill Drago walk alongside the remains of the California Road near Roll in Roger Mills County.