

# OVERLAND | JOURNAL



GEORGIA BADLANDS | HIKING SOCKS | DESERTS OF MANGYSTAU | SOUTH KOREA

A large, layered red rock formation, likely a mesa or butte, dominates the background. The rock is a deep reddish-brown color and shows distinct horizontal strata. A dirt path winds through the middle of the formation, leading from the foreground towards the top. Several green trees and shrubs are scattered across the slope, particularly in the middle ground. The sky is blue with some white clouds. The overall scene is a rugged, desert landscape.

# Head of the Red

Retracing Captain Randolph Barnes Marcy's  
steps in the Texas Panhandle.

By Susan Dragoo



Blackbird

800-176



I paused to take a breath and contemplate my dilemma. Entangled in impenetrable brush on the side of the mountain, I might never escape. I would eat my Clif bar and drink all my water, and no one would hear me screaming for help. I would starve and die here, hidden from sight in a chute of bottomless brambles surrounded by ankle-breaking boulder fields. As ruminations go, it was pretty dramatic.

Looking for a silver lining, I reminded myself that it was, at least, winter. The resident rattlesnakes were dormant, a comforting thought since my left leg was at that moment dangling into a dark hole of uncertain depth and even more uncertain occupation.

Thankfully, I was not alone, although my companions were having their own struggles a few yards away. Releasing the flawed concept that any path down is a good path, I finally extricated my limbs from the hard tangle of vegetation, clawed my way back up and out of the devil's chute, and rejoined Chris and Laura Moxley in the boulder field. "We're going to have to go back up and around that ridge," I said, pointing to a protruding pile of rocks we had been trying to avoid. But first, we took a break during which I realized I actually had two Clif bars and, satisfied that I was probably not going to die

that day, shared one with a hungry Chris. We trudged back up the mountainside, over the ridge, and quickly found the "trail," really only a vague hint of a slightly less difficult way down.

Soon we had descended enough that we could see the truck, and there was my husband, Bill, looking up at us, having chosen the proper trail in the first place. Laura led the way down, calling out from below, "Watch out for this slippery rock." Careless in my eagerness to be off the mountain, I lost my footing on the slimy slab despite her warning, scraping my forearm badly. It was, however, the least of my worries, and soon we were all off Oklahoma's Tepee Mountain and digging into the first aid kit.

#### CAPTAIN MARCY'S QUEST

On the granite summit of this same mountain, June 1, 1852, a young engineer with the US Army and the gentlemen of his party chiseled their names. They were 94 miles and two weeks northwest of dragging their heavy ox-drawn wagons through the quicksands of the Red River in a driving rain, under a command led by Captain Randolph Barnes Marcy. As they marched through the western reaches of the Wichita Mountains, they had seen a "prominent and

symmetrical mountain” for 20 miles. Approaching its base, Brevet Captain George B. McClellan, serving as topographical engineer and charged with taking barometrical observations, took a group of soldiers to the crest of the peak and made the inscriptions. McClellan measured the peak at 780 feet above its base and named it Mount Webster, for then-Secretary of State Daniel Webster. Over the years, it became known as Tepee Mountain.

The quest to find those inscriptions at the summit of Tepee was what got me into that pickle on the side of the mountain. More than 170 years of weathering at the windy crest made it unlikely the carvings were still visible, if extant at all. But there we were, and we had to give it a try as we ventured out onto the Southern Plains to retrace Marcy’s 1852 expedition to locate the headwaters of the Red River.

I startled a bull elk when I first stepped atop Tepee’s summit, and down the opposite side he sprang. The view was stunning, a panorama of peaks emerging abruptly from the otherwise flat land, where the highest summit rises just under 2,500 feet. Marcy described the mountains rising in the midst of a “vast naked prairie,” presenting a “striking and anomalous feature in the scenery of that otherwise monotonous landscape.”

At the crest, I searched for inscriptions in the rust-colored granite, rough-surfaced and covered with lichen of light-blue green and fluorescent lime. One stone revealed a faded carving: “Dale John . . .” Johnson, perhaps? At the mountain’s highest point, the rock bears a geological survey marker near a cedar, its branches spreading. Could the McClellan inscriptions lie beneath them? They could, but over the past century, this has been a popular place and even the graffiti of latter-day rock carvers, like Dale, is now badly worn.

Failing to find carvings we could date to 1852, we started down. Bill’s path off the summit to the bench below looked a little harder than the one Chris and Laura chose, so I followed them. My mistake. Eventually, bloody but satisfied we had done our best, we continued on Marcy’s trail.

#### MAP MAKER PRE-EMINENT

Author of what was perhaps the first American overlanders’ handbook, Randolph Barnes Marcy, born in 1812 and a West Point graduate, was by 1848 commanding Fort Towson in the Choctaw Nation. With the discovery of gold in California, Captain Marcy was ordered to escort a company of argonauts departing Fort Smith, Arkansas, in April 1849. He traveled west with the goldseekers through Indian Territory as far as Santa Fe, New Mexico. After this, he spent most of his time exploring the country surrounding the Red River, making five expeditions in all before 1852. In the process, Marcy named many of the physical features in the region, gaining a reputation as “map-maker preeminent” of the Southwest. His vivid reports of the region and its people provide a valuable record and, in their day, compared “in novelty and interest to reports of explorers of remote parts of the world.” Marcy’s *Exploration of the Red River of Louisiana: In the Year 1852*, became a “classic of Western Americana,” and in 1859, he wrote *The Prairie Traveler*, a guidebook for emigrants moving westward. The book is still in print and contains a treasure trove of advice on purifying water, fording rivers, treating rattlesnake bites, and other essentials for Western travelers in the 19th century.

Marcy’s own curiosity prompted the orders to send him to find the source of the Red. As late as the 1850s, the Red River’s origins were a mystery, and the surrounding area *terra incognita* to Americans. “Up to this point,” he wrote, “there is no record of any traveler having reached the sources of the Red River, and . . . the country upon the headwaters of that stream has heretofore been unexplored.”

In the truest sense, however, Marcy was a latecomer. Aside from the obvious, which is that Indigenous people of the Southern Plains had occupied the area for centuries, the first Europeans to view the Red River were members of the expedition that Spaniard Francisco Vásquez de Coronado led into present-day West Texas in 1541. Over the next couple of centuries, Spain and France vied for control of the area and influence with the natives. The Red River was a major artery for travel into the heart of the region. By the early 1700s, the waterway—Rivière Rouge to the French, Río Colorado or Río Rojo to the Spanish because of its muddy rust color—defined the boundary between the two empires. The Red remained an international boundary through the independence of Mexico from Spain and the independence of Texas from Mexico, until in 1845 it came to define the southern limit of Indian Territory and today the Texas/Oklahoma border.

Marcy had previously explored the Red River country as high as Cache Creek, about 200 miles above the last European settlements on Red River, where steamboats had reached by 1852. In May of 1852, he arrived on the Red River at the mouth of Cache Creek with a company of men from Fort Belknap, Texas, to explore new territory and report on “everything useful or interesting in relation to (the country’s) general resources, soil, climate, natural history, and geography.” After high water delays and difficult crossings, the company found a good road over smooth, high prairie on the north side of the Red River and commenced.

They first took a northwesterly course through what is now southwestern Oklahoma, then turned west into the Texas Panhandle and south to the canyons of the Llano Estacado. It is today a landscape greatly changed on the surface—with wind farms, oil wells, and cultivated fields—but much the same in its depths. The generations since Marcy’s day are but a tick on the timepiece of erosive forces, and along the rivers and within the great gorges,

The generations since Marcy’s day are but a tick on the timepiece of erosive forces, and along the rivers and within the great gorges, the red sandstone and white gypsum still display the scenes Marcy extolled.



Captain Randolph Barnes Marcy, explorer of the Southwest, wrote the first American overlanding guide, *The Prairie Traveler: A Handbook for Overland Expeditions*, 1859. Photo courtesy Library of Congress. | **Opposite:** Looking north from the summit of Tepee Mountain, the view illustrates Marcy’s description of these mountains rising “in the midst of a vast naked prairie.” | **Opening spread:** Palo Duro Canyon’s spectacular depths are plumbed by miles of challenging trails at Merus Adventure Park. Here, the Moxleys negotiate a sketchy land bridge in their Jeep.

the red sandstone and white gypsum still display the scenes Marcy extolled: “The stupendous escarpments of solid rock, rising precipitously from the bed of the river . . . worn away, by the lapse of time and the action of the water and the weather, into the most fantastic forms . . . required but little effort of the imagination to convert into works of art.”

#### THE MOUTH OF **CACHE CREEK**

We picked up Marcy’s path where he crossed the Red River from Texas into Indian Territory, but in a classic case of “You can’t get there from here,” we were stymied in our attempt to reach the mouth of Cache Creek: the stream is sequestered behind a barbed wire fence. This would often prove true, as most of the land in Texas and Oklahoma is privately owned, requiring some ingenuity to reach or at least visualize many historical sites. We embarked upon our own expedition in early February 2024, leaving home in central Oklahoma with our friends Chris and Laura in their Jeep, “Blackbird,” with Bill and me in our unnamed Toyota 4Runner. Heading south toward the Red River, it was only a matter of minutes before we found ourselves out on the plains, immersed in the geography of Marcy’s story. US Highway 81, our road to the river, took us

We hit the road early enough to catch glimpses of mist lying in shallow dales as the sun rose toward the horizon. Wisps of pale pink clouds accentuated the blue-white sky until that deep orange orb slipped above the edge of the Earth over our shoulders.

through Rush Springs, near the Wichita village where Marcy paused for news on his 1852 return. We hit the road early enough to catch glimpses of mist lying in shallow dales as the sun rose toward the horizon. Wisps of pale pink clouds accentuated the blue-white sky until that deep orange orb slipped above the edge of the Earth over our shoulders. On a dirt road west of Waurika, we ended up one locked gate and a mile of pasture from the mouth of the Cache. After taking

a look at the confluence with Chris’ drone, we jumped on US Highway 70, whose west/northwest course was our best approximation of Marcy’s route.

#### **WICHITA MOUNTAINS AND THE BIG PASTURE**

As we rolled up the road west of Cache Creek, I spied the hazy silhouette of the Wichita Mountains from nearly the same vantage point as Marcy, who on his first day in Indian Territory, guessed the mountains to be 25 or 30 miles to the north. The range is about 35 miles away, so Marcy’s estimate was not too far off. These mountains, named for the Wichita people who inhabited them, are home to one of the nation’s earliest wildlife refuges, set aside as a forest reserve in 1901 by President William McKinley and redesignated a game preserve by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1905. The Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge now occupies 59,020 acres, protecting, most notably, bison, which were reintroduced there in 1907. The herd now numbers about 650.

Marcy’s command camped their second night near present-day Grandfield, Oklahoma, on a branch of Cache Creek. Following along, we found ourselves in Grandfield’s now-derelict downtown. Along the highway sits a tall, pink granite historical monument, anomalous in its majesty against the drab and dusty setting. It commemorates the Big Pasture, nearly half a million acres of grasslands

bounded on the south by the Red River, named for its use as grazing land by Texas cattlemen. In 1905, the Big Pasture was the setting for President Theodore Roosevelt’s wolf hunt with John R. “Catch ’Em Alive Jack” Abernathy of nearby Frederick, renowned for his ability to catch wolves with his bare hands. In 1906, the tract, which had previously been set aside for the Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache, was opened to settlement through sealed-bid sales and became part of the Oklahoma Territory.

#### GYP SUM HILLS AND **BLACK KETTLE**

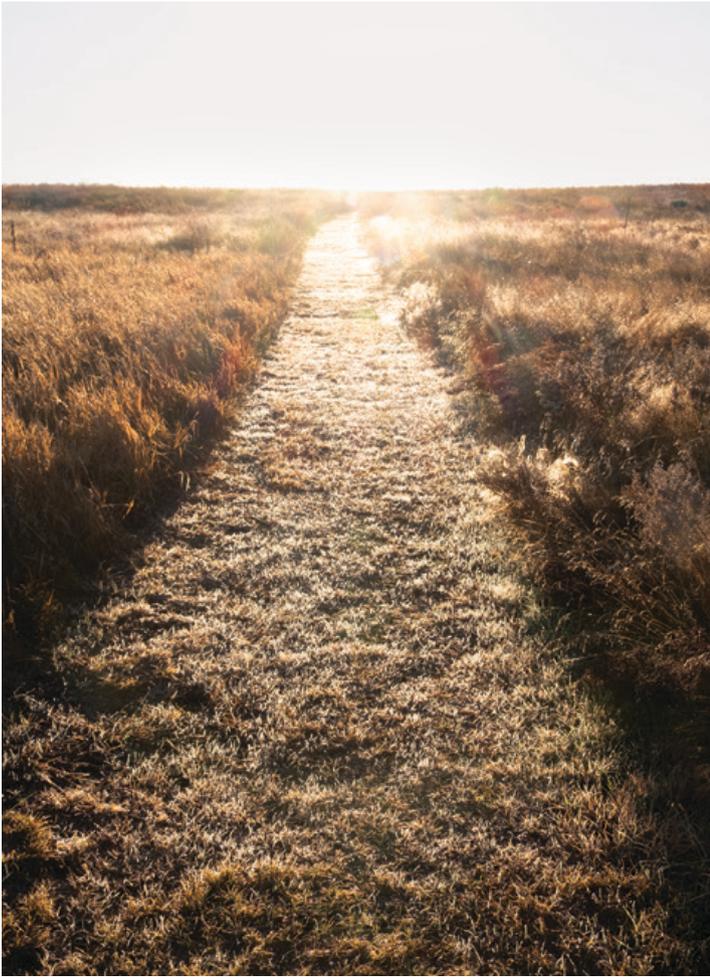
The triad of essentials for expeditions of Marcy’s day was water, wood, and grass: potable water for humans and livestock; wood for cooking and warmth; and grass to feed the horses, mules, oxen, and any cattle they brought along for food. Marcy’s party enjoyed good water as long as they were in the Wichita Mountains, but when they passed into the Gypsum Hills, the water became bitter and unpalatable. As the terrain changed, Marcy noted conical mounds, their eroded sides showing exposed white strata of gypsum between layers of red clay. The company trekked along the North Fork of the Red, passing about 10 miles south of the spot on the Washita River where 16 years later, Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer led an attack on Cheyenne Peace Chief Black Kettle’s camp, an event known as the Battle of the Washita.

After a day of scrambling through remote mud bogs with only a lone oilfield truck around for rescue should we become mired, we veered off Marcy’s path to visit the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site. But first, we stopped at the car wash in nearby Cheyenne to prevent the red mud from turning to brick, then ate dinner at the only place in town open, Nana’s Kitchen. We couldn’t help eavesdropping on the handful of other patrons, hunters extolling the virtues of their bird dogs, as it happened to be quail season. We’d camped years before amid the Black Kettle National Grasslands surrounding the Washita historic site, but on this cold winter evening, we found a warm bed at Croton Creek Guest Ranch after watching the sun set over Skipout Lake.

Before sunrise the next morning, we were walking the trail to Black Kettle’s camp on the Washita River, where the battle took place. Mist on the river and sparkling frost on the tall grasses made the somber setting even more haunting on the cold winter morning. Tree branches bore colored ribbons, prayer flags commemorating ancestors killed in what is now considered a massacre. The day before the November 27, 1868, attack, Chief Black Kettle had gone to Fort Cobb to petition for protection for his people, but learned he would have to deal with the army’s field commanders if he wanted peace. Black Kettle’s wife begged him to move their camp closer to larger camps along the river, but he delayed until the next day, and then it was too late. The attack on the sleeping village came at first light and lasted about two hours, leaving 30-60 Cheyenne dead, among them Black Kettle and his wife, along with 20 cavalry lost. It was perhaps the most controversial incident in Custer’s career prior to Little Bighorn.

#### **SWEET WATER**

As Marcy continued northwest, the water remained brackish for several days. But on June 9, the company came upon a stream of water so pure he named it Sweetwater Creek. Continuing west along



**Clockwise from top left:** Low rays of an early sun light a path through native grasses at the Washita Battlefield. | Plants of both the arid Southwest and the Eastern Deciduous Forest mingle in the prairies of Black Kettle, where the evening sun sets aglow a stand of flowering sage at Skipout Lake. | Marcy's expedition followed the North Fork of the Red River through Oklahoma's Quartz Mountains, a western range of the Wichitas. The river is now dammed here to form Lake Altus-Lugert. | Ranch roads run flat, straight, and fast on the Llano Estacado. | Momentum is our friend as we slog through wet clay approaching the Washita River near Cheyenne, Oklahoma.



**Clockwise from top left:** Rolling hills add depth to dirt roads along the periphery of Caprock Canyons. | The 1886 Mobeetie County Jail and nearby historical markers commemorate Marcy's 1852 camp on Sweetwater Creek, near the future site of Fort Elliott. | Prairie dogs in Caprock Canyons are as curious about us as we are about them, but instantly disappear if we even think about approaching them. | Texas Highway 207 descends like a lazy serpent before crossing the Prairie Dog Town Fork of the Red River, the stream's main branch, as Marcy discovered. | Neon signs and vintage iron adorn streets and alleyways in historic Turkey, Texas.

Sweetwater, they paralleled the North Fork into present-day Texas. Soon, the Caprock Escarpment came into view, a line of high bluffs forming the border of the Llano Estacado. The bluffs may have given the great tableland its name, which in Spanish means “staked plain” or “palisaded plain.” In 1849, Marcy described the view atop the Llano as “boundless as the ocean. Not a tree, shrub, or any other object, either animate or inanimate, relieved the dreary monotony of the prospects; it was a vast illimitable expanse of desert prairie . . . a land where no man, either savage or civilized, permanently abides; it spreads into a treeless, desolate waste of uninhabited solitude, which always has been, and must continue, uninhabited forever.”

It is now a land of fences and wind farms, power lines and cattle. I struggle to imagine the plateau before settlement, when its flat surface and tall grasses were disturbed only by mirages in the summer and northers in the winter.

Marcy camped near the future site of Fort Elliott, an Army post from 1875 to 1890. We advanced on the same path, now US Highway 152, which runs along Sweetwater Creek into Texas and through Wheeler, the county seat. There, a stop at Mel’s Diner yields both good West Texas food and the iconic experience of morning coffee with local cattlemen. Beyond Wheeler, we stopped at the site of Mobeetie, where the flagpole from Fort Elliott remains along with other historic structures. The 1886 Old Mobeetie Jail Museum is a two-story structure built of locally quarried stone stuffed with fascinating odds and ends, and just down the road, granite monuments mark the site of old Fort Elliott.

## PRAIRIE DOG TOWN FORK

After tracing the North Fork to its head, Marcy turned south to explore the Red’s southern branches. On June 20, the company encountered a lovely stream which Marcy named for George McClellan. In the late 1940s, McClellan Creek was dammed to form Lake McClellan. The reservoir is now dry, only a puddle even with heavy rains, perhaps the victim of damming upstream. Situated within the McClellan National Grasslands, the dry lake is, oddly, still surrounded by lovely and apparently well-used camping areas shaded by giant cottonwoods.

As Marcy explored the middle, or Salt Fork, of the Red River, he found prairie dogs occupying nearly the whole river valley. Reaching the head of the Salt Fork, the company again turned south, passing through a continuous prairie dog town, and on June 27, they struck the main branch of the river. Advancing upstream through more prairie dog towns, it became apparent why the Comanches named this branch “Ke-che-a-qui-ho-no” or Prairie Dog Town River. Prairie dogs were once so numerous in the Texas Panhandle that their population was estimated at 400 million. Today, their numbers are reduced to about 16 million, but their population is stable. Dog towns are popular attractions in Texas’ Caprock Canyons State Park and the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge.

## ONLY 104° IN THE SHADE

Marcy’s train reached the base of the Caprock on June 28, finding the terrain so rugged that the only way to proceed upriver was on horseback. The next day, Marcy left camp with a small party for the head of the Prairie Dog Town Fork. He reported 104°F in the shade with not a breath of air. The temperature reached 108°F the next day

and 112°F the next. The water was “acid and nauseating.” As they traveled over the “burning sands of the river bed,” the men suffered, praying to reach the head of the canyon and an end to the ordeal. Several soldiers experienced violent stomach cramps and vomiting from drinking the “repulsive” river water.

Finally, the river channel narrowed, and its bed changed from sand to rock. Marcy described “gigantic escarpments of sandstone, rising to the giddy height of 800 feet on each side.” The walls gradually closed in until they touched overhead, “leaving a long narrow corridor beneath, at the base of which the head spring of the main branch of Red River takes its rise,” wrote Marcy. They quenched their thirst in the fresh water of the spring, then ascended the escarpment, finding themselves atop Llano Estacado. Believing they had achieved their goal, Marcy’s party returned to camp and on July 4 headed home.

## THEIR SUFFERINGS DISORDERED THEIR IMAGINATIONS

Some argue that Marcy never quite made it into Palo Duro Canyon proper. Historian Dan Flores wrote that in the quarter-century after Marcy, folks began to suspect “chicanery” as “Army commanders chasing Indians kept encountering draws atop the Llano Estacado that pointed toward the Red River.” In 1937, Oklahoma historian Grant Foreman wrote that it was impossible to harmonize Marcy’s journal with his map, noting “obvious inconsistencies.”

In 1985, historian T. Lindsay Baker shed more light on the matter when he published the diary of Lt. E.H. Ruffner. Exploring Palo Duro Canyon in 1876, Ruffner located the headwaters of the Red River north of Palo Duro and wrote of riding down a gorge far from those headwaters, identifying it as the place “so vividly described in Marcy and McClellan’s Red River Report . . . as I have traced up and down every cañon which could fit their description and this comes the nearest to doing it. I concluded that their sufferings disordered their imaginations.”

This was Tule Canyon, 125 miles distant from the headwaters of the Red. Flores wrote that Marcy “didn’t even explore the right canyon, abandoning Palo Duro down at its mouth.” The Marcy lithograph of the scene, according to Flores, “is a dead ringer for the wall that towers above the main spring in the Tule Narrows.”

## ALL THE ANGLES

The Tule Narrows are, unfortunately, on private land today, as is most access to the Llano Estacado and the depths of its gorges, especially in a vehicle. But we explored the Llano’s canyons from as many angles as possible, starting with the most obvious: hiking at Palo Duro Canyon State Park. The Prairie Dog Town Fork runs through the park, lined with camping areas and trails for hikers, mountain bikers, and equestrians. The Lighthouse Trail leads to the park’s most iconic formation, a 300-foot spire of red clay and gypsum. It’s an easy three-mile walk to the base of the formation and a short scramble to get up on it. Other trails climb the canyon wall to the plateau for stunning vistas, into gypsum caves and slots, and bootleg trails (now tightly restricted) on the periphery of the park lead to “secret” slot canyons the likes of which you’d expect to see in southern Utah, not the Texas Panhandle.

A lesser-known but spectacular access point is Caprock Canyons State Park, farther south along the Caprock. The Texas state bison



Sheer drops await modern explorers searching for the headwaters of the Red River amid an anything-but-flat Texas Panhandle. | **Opposite:** This “slot cave” is one of the pearls awaiting explorers at Merus Adventure Park. | Trails within the 5,500-acre Merus Adventure Park suit every level of challenge.

herd resides here, along with a substantial prairie dog town. Hiking and camping are the attractions, with the option to stay in nearby Turkey, Texas, home of Western swing bandleader Bob Wills. We spent a night in the historic Hotel Turkey, in business since 1927 and now a jumping spot with good food and live music, along with comfortable rooms which retain their vintage vibe. The breakfast conversation at Hotel Turkey was lively with speculation about how many feral hogs the hunters staying there had shot the night before. Ah, Texas.

The public access point for Tule Canyon is Lake Mackenzie, where Tule Creek has been dammed. Not unlike Lake McClellan, its waters were very low, and the area was a ghost town during our winter visit. All around the Llano, you can drive dirt roads through ranchland and 75 mph two-lane paved roads bisecting playa lakes. But finding a place to get off-pavement and into the canyon with a vehicle has been well-nigh impossible. Merus Adventure Park has changed that.

## PURE ADVENTURE

On the north side of Palo Duro Canyon near Claude, Merus Adventure Park welcomes four-wheeled overlanders and off-roaders, hikers, mountain bikers, and campers into the canyon's depths. From a Greek word meaning "pure," the park's name translates to "pure adventure." Here, the average overlander can purchase a day pass or an annual membership and venture into the recesses of Palo Duro on miles of trails built with an eye toward both access and sustainability. We spent the day there with owner Dirk Van Reenen, who opened the 5,500-acre park in 2021. Access is limited to 4WD vehicles, hiking, and mountain bikes: no four-wheelers, side-by-sides, or dirt bikes. Following Dirk, we enjoyed spectacular rim views and thrilling trails down to the canyon floor, where we drove along Salt Fork Creek to the Meadows, a camping area deep in the heart of the gorge. Thinking of the renegade slot canyons on the edges of Palo Duro State Park, I asked Dirk if any exist at Merus. Obliging, he took us to a "slot cave," essentially a slot canyon whose roof at the ground level had not yet collapsed. The cave offered an exciting underground experience, which slaked my slot canyon thirst for the moment. Merus also offers ample camping on the rim and below, as well as cabins, both on- and off-grid, for a full-immersion experience in Palo Duro Canyon not available elsewhere.

We traveled home by way of a low-water crossing of the Salt Fork of the Red. Bill and I made the sandy crossing many years before on motorcycles, under much drier conditions. This time, we approached it along a slick red road of mud after heavy rains and found it a torrent—impassable. We turned around and headed back to the pavement, a luxury Marcy did not have. He would have waited several days for the water to subside or plunged in with oxen and wagons. And while it seems likely that Marcy turned around not in Palo Duro but in the Tule Narrows, motivated perhaps by survival, the record he left nonetheless illuminates the world of the Southwest of the 1850s, and inspires us to continue exploring the mystery and beauty of its depths. 🌐

## RESOURCES

Merus Adventure Park [merusadventure.com/](https://merusadventure.com/)

Washita National Battlefield [nps.gov/waba/index.htm](https://nps.gov/waba/index.htm)

Palo Duro State Park [tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/palo-duro-canyon](https://tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/palo-duro-canyon)

Caprock Canyons State Park [tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/caprock-canyons](https://tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/caprock-canyons)

## RECOMMENDED READING

*Adventure in Red River: Report on the Exploration of the Headwaters of the Red River*, by Captain Randolph Marcy and Captain McClellan, edited by Grant Foreman

*The Prairie Traveler*, by Randolph Barnes Marcy

*Caprock Canyonlands: Journeys into the Heart of the Southern Plains*, by Dan Flores

*Texas Red River Country: The Official Surveys of the Headwaters, 1876*, by T. Lindsay Baker



