

Dominguez and Escalante Trails.

The BSA has established three segments of trail in the Cedar Breaks district that commemorate the passage of a famous Spanish expedition through the area in 1776. The next section describes the history behind these hikes and is followed by pictures and description of the actual hikes.

There are many locations on the Colorado Plateau bearing the name "Escalante" -- the Escalante Ruins of western Colorado, the town of Escalante, Utah, the Escalante River which runs through the town and the newly created Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

All are named after Father Silvestre Velez de Escalante, a Spanish Franciscan missionary-explorer, who in 1776-77 along with his superior Francisco Dominguez, set out on an expedition seeking a northern route to Monterey in California from Santa Fe (now in New Mexico). Father Escalante chronicled this first European exploration across the Great Basin desert.

At the time, the New World Empire of Spain stretched from Panama, north through Mexico, and across the American Southwest to the California coast. But little was known about the immense country -- much of it deserts -between California and Santa Fe, primarily because the treacherous Colorado River northwest of the Capital. The government of New Mexico, as well as the church, sought to establish overland routes through the deserts to the California coast. These routes would tie the north and western parts of Spain*s Empire frontiers together, and bring hostile Indians under control.

In 1775, Juan Bautista de Anza led an expedition from northern Mexico across the Sonoran Desert, and eventually discovered a southern overland route to Monterey on the California coast. That same year, New Mexico*s Spanish Governor Mendinueta asked Father Escalante to furnish a report on a possible northern route to Monterey, across the Great Basin Desert. Escalante*s plan, which Governor Mendinueta approved, called for an expedition of 14 men to travel north until they were above the Grand Canyon, unfriendly Indians and the deadly deserts they knew to lie due west, then in as straight a course as possible to head west for California. On July 29, 1776, this expedition left Santa Fe to great fanfare and fervent prayers by Escalante. The 14 men knew little of the country they were entering. Traveling northwest, they made their way into what is now western Colorado. On August 13 the party reached and named the winding Dolores River, where they camped and explored the nearby area.

Above their camp, Fathers Escalante and Dominguez found the ancient ruins of a small Indian village, which Escalante noted in his journal -- the first written record of a prehistoric Anasazi site in Colorado. This site is now called Escalante Ruin, and a second site discovered nearby in modern times is called Dominguez Ruin.

The party moved north through western Colorado, until they became lost and would have perished from thirst had they not met a Ute Indian, who guided them to the Uncompahgre River, where his band was camped. Here Dominguez and Escalante acquired the services of two northern Utes who took them still further north to where Rangely, Colorado, now stands. Here the expedition turned west toward "Utah Lake."

After having traveled across eastern Utah, the explorers found a sign of hope when they encountered a lone bison. They rested a full day while jerking the meat. With a fresh supply of meat, they faced the difficult ford of the Green River. Here, at the northernmost extent of their journey they were in constant fear of raiding Shoshone Indians. Days later when the 14 men entered "Utah Valley" near the present city of Provo, Utah, they saw dozens of friendly Ute villages dotting the shore of a huge lake. They turned south along what is now roughly Interstate

15, meeting several groups of Ute Indians, but these shy people fled from the Spaniards and gave them no help finding a route to California.

Finally, just north of Cedar City, Utah, the expedition determined that moving straight west would bring them directly to Monterey. But now snowstorms and freezing temperatures began to dampen the spirits of the explorers to the point of despair. So far, the hardships of exploring a strange land had been overwhelming. They nearly died of thirst in blistering heat and lived under the constant threat of attack by unknown Indians. When the cattle they'd brought had all been consumed, they were forced to eat their mules.

So on October 4, 1776, when they stopped near Cedar City and were staggered by a blizzard, Escalante and Dominguez, concerned with a lack of supplies and the approach of Winter, decided to turn back to Santa Fe. Dissension over this decision led the Fathers to put the matter in the hands of the Almighty and cast lots, which confirmed their decision.

So the Expedition continued southward instead of heading west. Before they crossed the Virgin River near present-

day Toquerville, Utah, they discovered fields of corn and signs of irrigation, but no farmers. These Paiutes were the only Indians noted by the explorers who had progressed beyond seed gathering and small game hunting. Obstacles on the return trip were, if anything, worse than those encountered earlier. Freezing in alternating snow and cold rain, the expedition made its way south and east; twice they were stopped by cold so frightful they could only huddle around fires to survive.

Their provisions ran out 6 days after the casting of the lots. If the lot had said "Monterey" they would have starved to

death in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas. Here, at least, they were able to escape the snow and get some nuts and berries from the Paiutes. However, this was not enough, so, as Escalante recorded, "the horses began to be deprived of their lives so we would not have to forfeit ours".

Finally, after a week's journey in northern Arizona, crossing the north end of the Kaibab Plateau, descending into House Rock Valley, and following the base of the Vermillion Cliffs, they arrived at the Paria River. They traveled another 11 days before coming upon the Colorado River and crossed it at a place near Marble Canyon now known as The Crossing of the Fathers. On November 26, 1776, the Expedition reached civilization at the Zuni Pueblo, south of Gallup, New Mexico, where the padres compiled their journals. Finally, after stopping on their way east at what is now El Malpais National Monument, the Dominguez- Escalante Expedition returned to Santa Fe on January 2, 1777 and reported to Governor Mendinueta.

The expedition had traveled for nearly six and a half months, undergoing privations and suffering they would remember forever. At no time were they even close to their goal in California, making instead a huge, rambling 2,000-mile circle through the Great Basin Desert and mountains of the West.

Yet the Expedition could not be called a failure. While no direct link was established between Monterey and Santa Fe, the interior West had at last been penetrated, explored and chronicled. Father Escalante's journals and Captain Miera's maps would become invaluable to those who would follow, opening what would be called the Old Spanish Trail 40 years later, between Santa Fe and California.

The Lot casting segment starts about 15 miles west of Minersville, Utah and continues to the South past Blue

Knoll. The actual lot casting site is east of the Blue Knoll and a BLM sign commemorates the

site. The full length of the hike is about 23 miles and it follows the road labeled as -Schoppman Road on the map. The Southern end of the hike is where Schoppman Road crosses the highway (dirt at that point) between Cedar City

This marker marks the lot casting site. There is another marker like this at the Thermo-Hot Springs.

Along this hike and the other Dominguez Escalante Trail hikes there are white concrete markers with a small pyramid at the top of the post. These were installed many years ago and cattle have destroyed many of them by rubbing against them. Where still present, the markers make the trail very easy to follow.

The next segment is the Black Ridge segment. This begins south of New Harmony on the road that runs by Ash Springs reservoir near where the power lines cross the road. Follow the power line over the hill until it is possible to cross under 1-15 to the east side. Follow the Snowfield frontage road to the south. Near the access to the freeway, you will find the marker above. The trail continues south (look for the trail) after about 1/2 mile on this trail, you will find the Pintura frontage road. Follow this south to the Browse exit. A dirt road veers off to the east just before you reach the Browse Exit. Follow this road over into the valley where Anderson Junction is (By the La Verkin Exit). On the south east side of the valley, you can see a road up the hill past and old mine works. Follow this road up and over the hill. The road continues until it meets a Lava strewn canyon that goes down to Highway 17 where the hike ends just North of LaVerkin.

The Sand Mountain segment of the hike begins west of the Sky Harbor subdivision. A combination of roads from the south end of the subdivision just past the cattle guard go north and west. Follow back to the north and west to a ridge that is almost due west of a galvanized water tank. On the ridge turn to the north, a faint dirt road leads to the start of the trail marker about 1/4 to 1/2 mile to the north. From the trail head - look across to the sand mountain to the west and south. There will appear to be a pink notch (actually a road showing far away). Hike to the landmark. There are white concrete markers along the way as well as metal fence posts reinstalled where cattle have knocked over the concrete markers. When you hike to the marker at the ledges, look up on the hill to the south east. The trail continues and drops off to a large sand dune and down to the dinosaur tracks at the bottom. This hike can be expanded to continue to Fort Pierce along the road, ended at the tracks, or continued to San Donulo in Arizona