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El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro North America's Oldest and Longest Road

El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro (Royal Road of the Interior Land) was born thousands of years ago when Native Americans followed routes used by buffalo and other animals, realizing that these creatures knew the best paths to take. The trail is North America's oldest and longest road, connecting pueblos north of Santa Fe with Mexico City. In October 2000, the 404-mile stretch of the trail between San Elizario, Texas, and the San Juan Pueblo north of Santa Fe, New Mexico, was designated as a United States National Historic Trail.

The entire 1,600-mile trail led from the center of New Spain, Mexico City, past the provincial capital of New Mexico on the edge of the empire's northern frontier. The Royal Road served as a lifeline for the colonial system from its founding in 1598 until the last days of Spanish rule in the 1810s, bringing supplies to the missions along its route. Throughout the Mexican and American Territorial periods, the Camino Real expanded, becoming part of a larger continental and international transportation system and, until the trail was replaced by railroads in the late nineteenth century, functioned as the main pathway for conquest, migration, settlement, commerce, and culture in today's American Southwest.

For much of its U.S. range, the trail follows a natural highway formed by the Rio Grande; it deviates from the river's course where narrow gorges prevent trails and roads along its banks. In close proximity to its path, we find 19 current Pueblos and countless archeological sites.

This presentation will explore early sites along the trail, its importance to the colonial Spanish period as well as the more recent migration in the Southwest. Included are maps, historical vignettes and photos, commentary and narrative accounts collected from a variety of sources.

Wolf Koch has previously developed and given presentations commemorating the end of World War I, World War II, the 500-year anniversary of the Reformation, and covered various local historic as well as photography topics. He and his wife Linnea travel extensively; their interest in history has taken them to many historical sites in European countries, covering the period between the Stone Age and medieval times. Locally, they have been studying accounts of the Hopewell civilization, have traveled to many mound builder sites in Ohio, Iowa and Illinois and given many talks on the Hopewell civilization in the Rock River Valley. During the past winters they have traveled to New Mexico to photograph Sandhill Cranes and visit many sites along the El Camino Real between the San Juan Pueblo and El Paso, Texas. Dr. Koch, a Sterling resident, is a consultant to the oil and petrochemical industry and has been a professor of chemical engineering. Linnea Koch, a graphic designer specializing in exhibit design and interpretive signage is an accomplished photographer.