

# A Life-Giving Trail: Documenting the Environmental History of Alamito Creek

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*There is a legend about Alamito Creek, passed down by Casa Piedra old-timers who were cowboys for Presidio County's first cattle king, Milton Faver. In the mid-1800s, these men claimed there was no creek, only a little trail. But Faver's massive herd of longhorns used the trail so frequently that their hooves trampled it into a creek (Vasquez 2010). The legend is a fitting metaphor for Alamito Creek's history. As a precious water source in arid Presidio and Jeff Davis counties, the Alamito has long attracted people across its drainage. Its many watering holes debuted in written records as a trail followed by Spanish missionaries and explorers. These men were following in the footsteps of indigenous peoples, to whom the creek was a fertile agricultural valley and a path between the Pecos River, Rio Grande, and Río Conchos. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the creek continued to be defined primarily as a well-watered trail—by travelers and freighters on the Chihuahua Trail, military expeditions, cattlemen, farmers and the railroad. But at some point in recent history, the Alamito appears to have returned to its legendary roots. Its waters diverted and diminished, the creek has disappeared in many places, leaving only a trail. This paper traces Alamito Creek through historical accounts in an effort to understand the creek's past condition and the plant and animal life it supported.*

## The Creek Setting

The Alamito Creek watershed drains about 2,600 square kilometers (1,004 square miles) in Jeff Davis and Presidio counties in the Chihuahuan Desert region of West Texas (Leithead 1959:83). The creek is approximately 128 km (78 mi) in length, beginning in the southern Davis Mountains between Marfa and Fort Davis, and joining the Rio Grande about 15 km (9 mi) downstream from Presidio (Leithead 1959:83; Vasquez 2010). The creek's elevation ranges from 2,200 feet at its mouth, to about 5,500 feet at its headwaters (Leithead 1959:83). It cuts southward across the Marfa Plateau grasslands and descends the rimrock into the Alamito Creek–Terneros Creek Lowland, lined along the way by gently to moderately rolling hills (Leithead 1959:83; Whorton 2007:224).

## Salt and Spaniards

The first Europeans to set foot on Alamito Creek in the A.D. 1500s were following a well-worn path. Indigenous peoples had long farmed along the creek's floodplain, relying on regular floods to overflow the creek channel and irrigate their fields (Applegate 1992:57). Between A.D. 1200 and A.D. 1400, Applegate believes there was a major increase in this indigenous population in the La Junta de los Rios region, with farms extending 65 km (40 mi) up Alamito Creek from the Rio Grande. This period of ample moisture was followed by a drier one, resulting in the abandonment of many farms along the Rio Grande after A.D. 1400. In prehistoric times, the Alamito Valley also served as a major north–south trade route, linking the larger thoroughfares of the Pecos River, Río Conchos, and Rio Grande (Whorton 2007:226). La Junta's indigenous peoples traveled along the creek to hunt buffalo in the plains and ferry salt from a saline pond in present-day Crane County (Swift and Corning 1988:10; Thompson 1985a:42).

Antonio de Espejo is thought to have been the first European to follow this Old Salt Trail.<sup>1</sup> When he arrived in La Junta in A.D. 1582, the wealthy Mexican citizen found a series of pueblos inhabited by what he estimated to be 10,000 people (Applegate 1992:47). His expedition had been sent to rescue two Franciscan friars stranded in New Mexico, but upon arriving there he found the priests had been killed (Swift and Corning 1988:6–7). Though their mission

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1. Cabeza de Vaca may have preceded him, but his route across Texas is still the subject of lively debate (Swift and Corning 1988:7).

was a failure in this regard, Espejo's party provided some of the earliest documentation of Spanish exploration of the Big Bend region.

On their return trip to Mexico, Espejo and his party encountered a group of Jumano Indians who agreed to lead Espejo back to La Junta de los Rios. Many scholars believe these Jumanos guided the Espejo party from the Pecos Valley through Toyah Valley, to the sprawling San Solomon Springs (present-day Balmorhea State Park), across, or around the Davis Mountains, and finally through the Alamito Creek Valley to La Junta<sup>2</sup> (Swift and Corning 1988:7; Castañada 1936:179).

Unfortunately, Espejo's record of this portion of his trip is brief and lacks any mention of landmarks (Bolton 1952:188–190). But another member of Espejo's party, Diego Pérez de Luxán, kept a more detailed diary (Hammond and Rey 1929:119). In August 1583, he described Alamito Creek from the Marfa area to the Rio Grande:

We left this place on the thirteenth and marched eight leagues, most of the way through a glen with holm-oak groves, wild grape vines, and many Mexican cherry trees with ripe fruit. A stream of water flowed all along this dale. We stopped at a glen with holm-oak groves where there was a pool of rainwater. We left this place on the fourteenth of the month and marched eight leagues over plains. We stopped at a very large valley where there were some pools of rainwater (Hammond and Rey 1929:125).

About a century later, Espejo's route to La Junta is thought to have been retraced by another Spanish explorer.<sup>3</sup> Captain Juan Dominguez de Mendoza was sent to Texas in early 1684 to substantiate rumors of pearls in the land of the Tejas (Swift and Corning 1988:9). He did not find Tejas Indians, but he did find a few mussel-shell pearls, set up wooden crosses anywhere it was possible, and also christened each locale. More importantly from today's standpoint, Mendoza's account of the expedition provides a seventeenth century glimpse of Alamito Creek.

Mendoza departed La Junta in January 1684, proceeding down the Rio Grande and stopping at "an arroyo which flows from north to south. It has

2. Other historians and archaeologists believe the Jumanos led Espejo's party down Pinto Canyon to reach the Rio Grande. (Swift and Corning 1988:7; Whorton 2007:226).

3. As with Espejo's route, some scholars debate whether Mendoza followed Alamito Creek. (Whorton 2007:227).

a very abundant pasturage, partly green and partly dry” (Bolton 1952:326). Many sources have identified that arroyo as Alamito Creek (Bolton 1952:326; Shipman 1933:32; Swift and Corning 1988:10; Thompson 1985a:21; Raht 1963:39). Mendoza’s party then continued up the creek about 39 km (24 mi), stopping next at a “spring of hot water which flows toward the southeast. Its source is on a height. The water and the pasturage are good. The land is level and has little wood. A cross was not erected for lack of timber.”<sup>4</sup>

From there, Mendoza traveled another 39 km (24 mi) up Alamito, stopping at San Esteban Spring (Shipman 1933:33; Thompson 1985a:21), which he christened San Nicolas:

It is at the extremity of a mesa which extends to the north. It is a watering place consisting of a beautiful reservoir which is supplied by the rains. The passage through the rocks forms two steep crags on the sides; on one of them I had a holy cross placed. There are in the environs of the reservoir some ash trees and other kinds of timber; and in the cavities made by the rocks adjoining the reservoir there is a great quantity of maidenhair fern and most beautiful grape-vines. Toward the west is a beautiful plain, with plentiful pasturage of couch grass<sup>5</sup> (Bolton 1952:326).

En route to his next stop near present-day Paisano Pass, Mendoza left the creek bed and climbed onto the grassy plain to find “some little pools of brackish water,” which Shipman identified as Antelope Springs on the upper margins of the valley (Shipman 1933:33). “All the land is level. In the neighborhood of the little pools there is a great quantity of white and yellow mesquites. In the midst of so much evil there is a little spring of fresh and kindly water, and, as an exquisite thing, I had it noted with particular care” (Bolton 1952:326–327).

## On the Chihuahua Trail

The next significant historical descriptions of Alamito Creek come from the mid-1800s. At that time, increasing commerce sparked a need for a trail that would connect silver and gold mines in Chihuahua to San Antonio, Gulf Coast ports, and points further north and east.

4. Shipman, writing in 1933, noted this spring was probably located on the “Norman and Morgan ranch, now owned by T.M. Wilson . . . Mrs. James Norman says that the water of the spring was warm when they first came to the ranch.” (Shipman 1933:33).

5. Bolton notes that couch grass is *Grama sp.*

In 1839, physician-turned-merchant Henry Connelly is thought to have been one of the first Anglo-American traders to use the Old Salt Trail route from La Junta—by that time known as Presidio del Norte—up Alamito Creek and on to present-day Alpine and beyond (Swift and Corning 1988:36–37; Morgenthauer 2004:37). Colonel Jack Hays also traversed this path in October 1848, during his expedition to find the shortest trading route between San Antonio and Chihuahua. Then, in the early 1850s, while working on the U.S.-Mexico boundary survey, William H. Emory undertook efforts to improve the trail along the creek, which he described as being the shortest path between San Antonio and Chihuahua “where a permanent supply of water could be obtained” (Morgenthauer 2004:86).

And so, over the next few decades, Alamito Creek became a major artery of the Chihuahua Trail. The deep ruts left by *carretas*, stage coaches, wagon trains, and prairie schooners are still worn into bluffs and rocks in many places along the creek (Thompson 1985a:42).

Most Chihuahua Trail travelers, including Connelly, left either no written account of their journey or did not bother to document the scenery along Alamito Creek. That’s not surprising considering how focused these travelers usually were on staving off Apache and Comanche attacks, protecting their mercantile interests from bandits, and finding the next watering hole or meal. For example, freighter August Santleben made several trips along Alamito Creek starting in 1869. But in his autobiography, the most verbiage he devoted to the creek pertained largely to the watering holes along its course:

... we traveled twenty miles to Antelope springs, that is better known as Barando. The next water is at Tinacha San Stevens, thirty miles beyond. Then comes El Alamita at the distance of twenty-five miles, which is forty miles from Presidio del Norte . . . the road is tolerably good excepting the last forty miles, which is hilly and the sand is heavy, but its principal recommendation is an abundance of grass that affords good pasturage (Santleben 1910:102).

Otherwise, he only indirectly mentioned the creek twice: in another description of the pasturage as being waist-high in a place about 19 km (12 mi) west of “El Alamita,” (Santleben 1910:186), and when his wife, while hunting for moss-agates, found two bleached white human skeletons in the high grass about 80 km (48 mi) northeast of Presidio (Santleben 1910:156).

But there were a few Chihuahua Trail travelers who felt compelled to describe the creek in more detail. In 1853, Julius Froebel, a young German man of leisure, joined a wagon train hauling silver pesos from Chihuahua to San Antonio, which passed through La Junta (Morgenthaler 2004:87). As a self-described naturalist and geologist, Froebel's journal of his trip along "Connelly's Trail" included a vivid recollection of Alamito Creek.

Embarking from Presidio del Norte, Froebel's party turned up the creek on May 22, 1853. They traveled mostly at night and rested during the day, which, Froebel lamented, left him unable to make a "connected examination of the country . . ."

. . . I can only say, in general terms, that the road from the valley of the Rio Grande, passes over sand and gravelly hills, through deep watercourses and over steep cliffs in the alluvial region, till it reaches the first terraced side of the valley. Farther from the river, it ascends to hills of conglomerate, sandstone and limestone, respecting the geological character of which I can say nothing. Passing through valleys shut in by these hills, and over elevated plains, around which rise table-mountains composed of strata of sandstone of different colours, and limestone of various quality, we came to the perpendicular cliff of a terrace of porphyry, the surface of which forms a sloping plateau. Rising over this we arrived at the base of the Puerto del Paisano . . . (Froebel 1859:411).

After that overview, Froebel went on to describe each stopping place in greater detail, starting with the first watering hole east of the Rio Grande, which he called Los Alamos:

We reached it in the morning after a night's journey, and found a spring surrounded by poplars, and thickly bordered with reeds, among barren hills covered with scanty grass, cacti, yuccas, lechuguilla agaves, dasylliria, and a poor growth of bushes. The journey through the next night brought us into a well-watered valley of considerable extent and ramifications, opening towards the Rio Grande. It is bounded by hills of conglomerate, a few isolated and curiously formed mountains being only seen upon the horizon to the east. Where the road comes upon this spring, the place is called Punta del

Agua. The road passes through this valley along a brook bordered with high reeds (Froebel 1859:412).

That place, Punta del Agua, is known today as Casa Piedra (Morgenthaler 2004:147). There, Froebel noted that the “cugar, called by the Mexicans leon, abounds,” and he also found several snakes among the reeds, which he suspected were the “very dangerous” moccasin snake (Froebel 1859:412). He continued his description of Punta del Agua:

This valley is broad, and fertile enough to make it a desirable place for future settlements. Willows and other shrubs grow along the stream. The hills are barren, and the grass upon them thin, but—like all mountain grass of this country—of good quality. On the horizon, beyond these hills, isolated mountain groups are seen, many of them singular forms (Froebel 1859:412).

Among those singular forms, he noted an “isolated hill, like a castle rock,” called Cerro de Jacinto, and further along on their trip, “a rocky mass resembling a church with towers and cupolas,” called Picacho de la Cienaga de Valles.<sup>6</sup>

Their next stop was at a place called El Saucillo, or the Willow Bush, which was at the lower end of present-day San Esteban Lake (Morgenthaler 2004:147). There, Froebel wrote, “water and grass were in abundance. . . . The plain is bounded on the one side by steep tabular hills of sedimentary rocks; while on the other the long perpendicular wall of a terrace of porphyry extends” (Froebel 1859:412–413).

They drove through the night over “hard smooth ground,” arriving at the base of that colorful porphyry terrace early the next morning:

The place where the road ascends it<sup>7</sup> is called Cuesta de San Estevan. This porphyry is of a light yellow and greenish colour, full of caves and arched vaults. A rising plain lies eastwards on the sum-

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6. These peaks were probably San Jacinto and Cathedral Mountain, respectively (Morgenthaler 2004:148).

7. According to Morgenthaler, the trace of wagon ruts is more apparent in that passage, up the tuff terrace, than anywhere else on the Chihuahua Trail. It is also where the wagon road intersects the South Orient Railroad, which follows Alamito Creek south to Presidio. (Morgenthaler 2004:147).

mit, upon which, at the edge of the precipice, Tascate bushes grow, a species of juniper, bearing red berries (Froebel 1859:413).

On that terrace, Froebel wrote that they found “Ojo del Berendo, or Antelope Spring . . . a very suitable name, for we saw numerous herds of antelopes all around”<sup>8</sup> (Froebel 1859:413). He then noted that they passed “a plain full of the prairie marmot”<sup>9</sup> as they crossed the plateau towards Puerto del Paisano, where they arrived on May 29. He described the “most interesting scenery” of that mountain pass, covered with abundant grass and scattered oaks, adding that “this year scarcely any rain had fallen to rouse the slumbering vegetation” (Froebel 1859:414).

The latter detail is significant because it suggests 1853 was a dry year. That makes it all the more striking that even in May—before the replenishing rains of summer—Froebel encountered so much spring flow and so many “deep watercourses” along the Alamito.

## **Military Perspective**

Merchants and the occasional traveling naturalist weren’t the only traffic on Alamito Creek in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The United States Army also used the valley as a thoroughfare. Supplies from Presidio were regularly ferried up the creek to Fort Davis, and scouts from the fort routinely patrolled it (Morgenthauer 2004:100). During the Civil War, the creek became a backdoor trade route for Henry Skillman, a stage coach driver and pioneer mail carrier who was running espionage and sneaking supplies from Mexico to Confederate forces in San Antonio (Morgenthauer 2004:111).

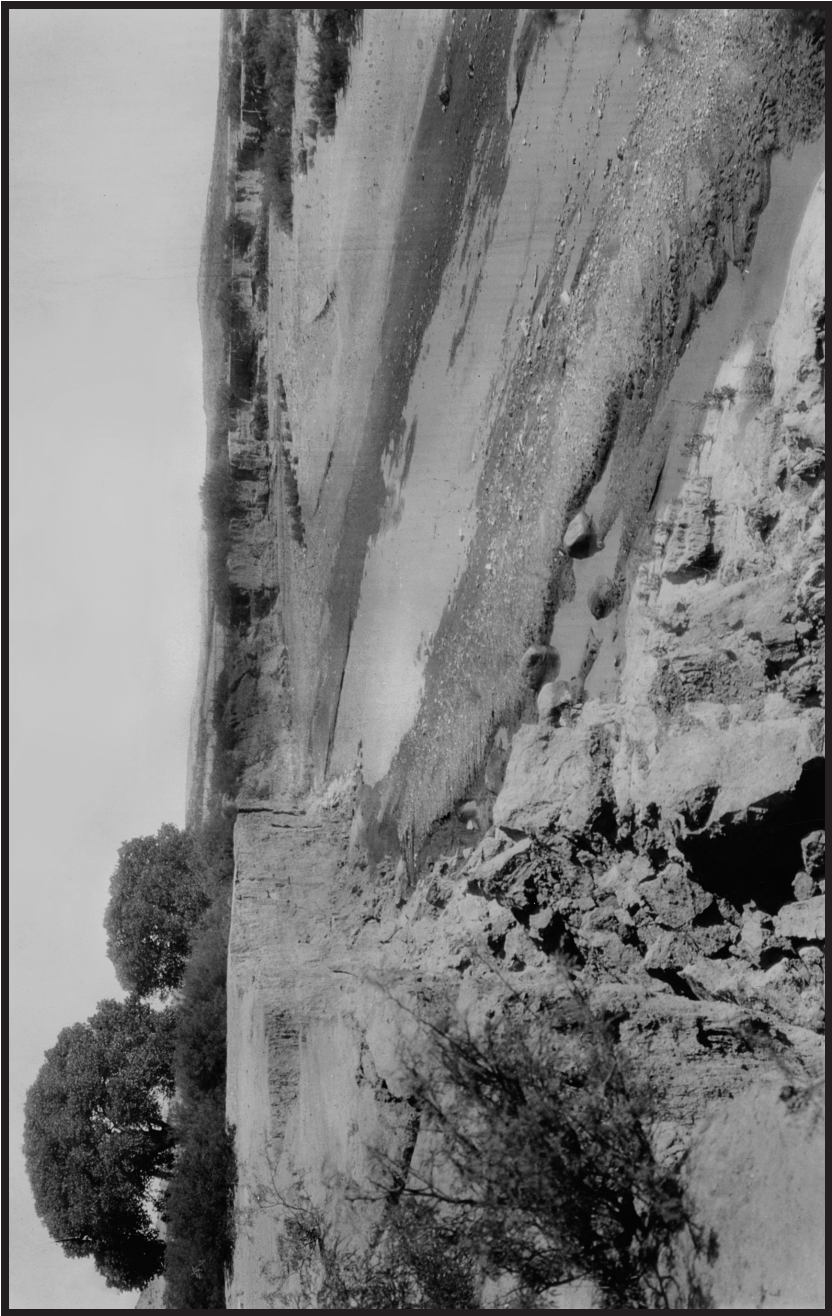
But it was an experimental camel expedition led by Army Lieutenant William H. Echols that left that military era’s most descriptive record of Alamito Creek. In mid-July 1860, Echols and his entourage of twenty camels left Fort Davis for Presidio, by way of the Alamito Valley (Echols 1994:190–191). Their first camp was about 40 km (25 mi) south of Fort Davis, likely in the vicinity of present-day Marfa. From there, they walked another 16 km (10 mi), along

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8. Here Froebel added that a Virginian in their party tried disguising himself with an antelope head, which he had heard was an old Mexican hunting trick. But as the man jumped around trying to blend into the herd, “hundreds of antelopes stood, in a large semicircle, watching the actions of this strange mongrel figure”. . . He didn’t manage to kill any antelope, but the story does give some indication of antelope abundance.

9. Samuel Maverick, a member of the 1848 Hays expedition to Chihuahua, also noted a “dog town plain” somewhere in the same vicinity. His journal of the trip, however, mentions no other features of Alamito Creek, except noting a few mountain landmarks visible from the trail, including San Jacinto Peak (Green 1952).





*Alamito Creek, from the Mrs. O.L. (Alice Jack) Shipman Collection, Archives of the Big Bend, Bryan Wildenthal Memorial Library, Sul Ross State University, Alpine, Texas.*

the way finding what Echols called “Rancherillo spring, made by digging, with splendid water,” in an arroyo bed, and then San Esteban, at which one of Echols’ men reported the water was unfit for drinking (Echols 1994:191).

About 13 km (8 mi) later, they camped at “a fine permanent water called Pealagos,”<sup>10</sup> and felt a slight sprinkle of rain. The name of the following day’s camp—about a 42 km (26 mi) march—was unclear in Echols’ report. But Echols’ journal entry for the day reads:

There were water holes in the bed of an arroyo; perhaps permanent water; found the greatest abundance of fine water along the road to-day in the bed of an arroyo, each place having its name; six miles reached the Penitas; about three miles another water; four and eight another; at eleven the Varras, very fine large hole an hundred feet long, very deep, and running stream; the last hole is called the “Punta del Agua” country mountainous but road fine; camels performing beautifully and heavily laden . . . country very dry; wood, but little grass. A wagon load of watermelons passed us this afternoon for Fort Davis from Presidio del Norte (Echols 1994:191).

The following day, upon leaving camp, Echols reported that he crossed a steep range of mountains, over a rolling and uneven surface. Then about 6 km (4 mi) from camp, his party arrived at “Alamo Spring,” which he noted had “fine running water in abundance in a cluster of a half dozen large alamos.” They found water a few miles further on in a cave, “scarcely accessible by man.” From there, Echols wrote that the “tolerably good” road to Fort Leaton traversed a “very curiously broken” surface, and passed “ravines in *cañons* and on table lands; hills in the bottom of *cañons*, isolated and dotted about” (Echols 1994:191).

Obviously Echols, in his military journal, was concerned mainly with documenting locations of watering holes for soldiers and camels. But his account does give some indication of how much water was in the creek, in particular how deeply and abundantly the stream and springs flowed near Casa Piedra (Punta del Agua).

## **The Birth of Presidio County**

The Chihuahua Trail and military enterprises of the mid-1800s brought some of the founding fathers of Presidio County’s cattle industry to the region, in-

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10. Perhaps this was Pelagras Springs.

cluding a few families that settled along Alamito Creek. In the wake of the Civil War, the creek valley's population surged as several villages sprang up along the "Old Presidio Road."

This settlement of the creek valley was spurred by two main factors, according to geographer Paul Wright: "the assured water supply from a source that in the mid-nineteenth century was large enough to merit the name "river," and the market and protection from Indians afforded by the large and well-armed caravans following the Chihuahua Trail . . ." (Wright 1995:186). By 1900, these valley settlements were densely populated with farms and ranches that supplied food to the mining town of Shafter (Wright 1996:146).

"Uncle John" G. Davis established one of these first settlements<sup>11</sup> at a Chihuahua Trail crossing on Alamito Creek, near the present-day abandoned railroad depot at Plata<sup>12</sup> (Wright 1997:89; Whorton 2007:227). By 1870, his fort-like *rancho*, called Alamito, covered about two sections of the creek valley and was home to between 15 and 20 Mexican farming families, a herd of horses and cattle, and a peach orchard from which Davis made peach brandy that many Chihuahua Trail travelers imbibed (Thompson 1985a:121; Whorton 2007:227; Gregg 1933:56).

Davis was joined about a decade later by a cattle-ranching family that settled about 8 km (5 mi) upstream. Colonel J. R. Ellison shipped 2,500 to 3,000 head of cattle from Central Texas to present-day Alpine, and from there drove the herd to their range on Alamito Creek, below San Esteban about 24 km (15 mi) south of Marfa. Ellison's son, Robert Reed Ellison, was a teenager at the time but recalled in his unpublished memoirs the journey out of Paisano Pass to their new home:

We drifted our cattle down the Valley where no cattle ever before had niped [sic] grass except oxen that the freighters used . . . When we bedded our cattle down that night we saw no more of them until the next morning as the grass was so high and soap weed so thick they were hidden from view . . . (Thompson 1985a:194).

That morning Ellison found a spring with "antelope by the hundreds," which then came to be called Antelope Springs. Ellison also remembered that springs and creeks of running water were plentiful and every canyon seemed to

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11. Census data indicate Larkin Landrum's ranch was established prior to Davis's ranch (Wright 1995:186).

12. Wright notes that a post office here once bore the name Dysart Village (Wright 1996:146).

have water, but he later discovered these were “wet weather springs” (Thompson 1985a:194–195).

Another ranch established along the creek around that time belonged to William Woodworth Bogel and his family, who had a herd of 10,000 sheep about 64 km (39 mi) south of Marfa. A few years later the Bogels moved upstream to San Esteban where they switched to cattle (Thompson 1985a:209).

The 1880s also saw many families settle in present-day Casa Piedra. In 1884, Dionicio Mata and his wife homesteaded 160 acres at Punta del Agua, which they later sold to Presidio County’s second sheriff, William Russell. In the 1890s, Mata homesteaded another 160 acres, where he built the rock house that gave the area its current name, Casa Piedra (Thompson 1985a:214). By 1900, Casa Piedra was home to more than 50 families who were farming cotton, corn, beans and hay on a large scale (Thompson 1985a:347).

In 1933, Verna Humphreys Popken started teaching at the Canagrias School about 13 km (8 mi) south of Casa Piedra on Alamito Creek. According to her unpublished oral history, she lived in the adobe school building and went to the creek for drinking water, which she hauled back to boil and store in a drum (Dillard and Green 2002:109). She also recalled bathing in the creek every evening, thereby unwittingly providing entertainment for many villagers (Dillard and Green 2002:106).

The Vasquez family was among Casa Piedra’s earliest settlers, and, in 1912, Conrado Vasquez started a store and post office there, making the village’s name official. Vasquez’s son, Armando, recalled that for a long time, all the families around Casa Piedra relied on the creek for drinking water and irrigating cotton, corn, milo and other crops. “They had depended on the rainwater in Alamito Creek to rise so they could start planting their crops and irrigating them,” Vasquez said. He went on to say the creek flowed most during the summer rainy season, and could be dry at other times of year. But even when “you couldn’t see the surface water,” he added, “if you was to dig a hole, you could reach water, almost any place” (Vasquez 2010).

His family was eventually freed from their dependence on the creek when they built a few artesian wells. His father used the artesian well water to fill a dirt tank. “Gosh, it converted into the best swimming pool we ever had known,” Vasquez recalled. “So anyway, we found there were turtles in there but they never did bother us . . . I don’t know the name of the turtle. We just called them mud turtles” (Vasquez 2010).

Vasquez reported that tank eventually filled with cattails and is now dry. The artesian wells still flow, though he thought they flowed a little bit less than when they were originally built. Casa Piedra, he said, lost most of its population during World War II, when drought made it especially hard to farm there and workers were needed elsewhere for the war effort. “Most of them found better jobs, and they never went back. And everything folded up,” he said.

In the 1940s, Kerr Mitchell grew up near Alamito Creek on the Antelope Springs Ranch south of Marfa. He recalled that the creek hasn’t changed much over the past 70 years and was never deep or flowing consistently enough to support fish or many other aquatic animals. “It wasn’t a flowing creek, but it’s like it is when you get further south,” he said. “During the rainy season, it would perk back up again. It’s usually wet down there in spots, and it’s not uncommon to have little areas where the springs are actually running a little bit. But Alamito never was a big one” (Mitchell 2010).

An earlier perspective on the creek north of Marfa comes from the journal of botanist Mary Sophie Young. In August 1914, Young and a student assistant trekked from Marfa into the Davis Mountains. Somewhere between what was then the Mimms Ranch and Claud Smith’s ranch, Young stopped for water at “a stream with water in it,” which was later identified by area ranchers as Alamito Creek (Tharp and Kielman 1961).

A vague sense of Alamito Creek’s more recent past can be gleaned from such accounts and the few records left by early Alamito Creek residents. But the settlement of Marfa and the Alamito Valley during this era certainly set the stage for changes along the creek during the twentieth century.

## **Railroad Views**

Plans for a railroad following the Chihuahua Trail from Paisano Pass through Presidio were first announced in 1900, but economic forces conspired against the line’s construction. It wasn’t until 1928 that the discovery of oil in West Texas resurrected the idea, and the Santa Fe system purchased the right-of-way to the Kansas City, Mexico, and Orient Railroad. The long-anticipated “South Orient” segment along Alamito Creek was finally completed between 1929 and 1930 (Whorton 2007:232).

One of the contractors working on the railroad, J.L. Allhands, wrote an extensive account of the project in 1930, including many references to Alamito Creek and the surrounding environment. He described the tracks hugging the rocky bluffs along the creek, which were “headquarters for the wild bee, and some of them yielded our camps their first taste of delicious, cactus flower

honey. In places large colonies of bats occupy those caves and hollows as their roost. At another place, towering high above one's head, the bluff is peppered with caves, which some fancy are ruins of cliff dwellers' homes—their occupants having vanished long ago" (Allhands 1936:70–71).

He went on to mention the "trading post at Casa Piedra, with the remnant of what was once a community ditch, a few small patches still being watered. The one store of adobe, with its pole and mud roof, was operated by Conrado Vasquez." He and his crew were mystified by how a goat herder living near Casa Piedra managed to sustain his flock, because "the last thirty miles of that country, except for the Rio Grande Valley, is devoid of even a single blade of grass" (Allhands 1936:71).

The geology of the valley made a big impression on Allhands. Carving through the creek's rocky bluffs was a colossal job, and Allhands reported that people in Marfa and Alpine could hear the blasts of dynamite and black powder. Some strata of rock, he wrote, took a jackhammer two hours to make a hole three feet deep. At one point, 3,500 cubic yards of rock were blasted from a mountain slope, including a 1,500-cubic-yard boulder that rolled into the creek channel (Allhands 1936:72).

Aside from these rock-bashing heroics, Allhands devoted about half of his account to plants, animals, and the creek itself. He wrote of the "barren, semi-desert country" below the Marfa Plateau:

Grassless, that dreary waste is covered with dwarfed cat-claw, huisache, sotol (from which the Mexicans make a distilled liquor resembling mescal), chaparral, the guayule or rubber shrub, and the yucca, tipped with a plume of waxy blossoms, [which] stands out like the ghosts of long vanquished Indians (Allhands 1936:74).

Among the other plants he noted were the "ever present smell of the greasewood bush" and "cactus of all varieties and shapes, from the long spined prickly pear of various shades, the blind pear, the devil's pin cushion, the rattlesnake, rainbow and melon cactus down to the devil's walking stick, all bristling with thorns and each with its distinctive blossom of fruit" (Allhands 1936:74). But there was not a tree for miles and miles, he wrote, except for an occasional cluster of cottonwoods along the creek.

The bobcat and "snarling, fighting ring-tail cat" were spotted frequently, and one day, a crewman found a mother ring-tail with her babies hiding behind a cactus. Allhands wrote that the men took the kittens back to camp, "and there





*Alamito Creek shown after a rain shower sometime between 1910 and 1920. Photo courtesy of the Whelan Collection, Cushing Memorial Library and Archives, Texas A&M University.*

they became playful and peaceful pets as their city bred relatives” (Allhands 1936:74). Of other animals encountered, he wrote:

In this country of big game, bears were to be shot in the hills, and many partook of their first never-to-be-forgotten deer hunt . . . You could see bands of those elusive, wary and fleet footed antelope ranging with the cattle, for the long closed season and its severe penalty has made them rather plentiful . . . The stealthy panther is not as common as in former years, yet some of the camps heard his weird cry, on his nightly hunts. There was that wonderful bird, the blue quail, and the chaparral cock or road runner (Allhands 1936:74).

Some animals he described less charitably: swarming flies that filled his car whenever it stopped, and packs of coyotes that pilfered his camp’s garbage dump and serenaded his crew nightly. He also reported a crewman finding a “strange kind of fish of special interest” while excavating a pier for the second bridge crossing the creek: “Those fish with red eyes that could not see, wore some sort of horny helmet atop their heads, which must have served in plowing through the oozy mud ten and twenty feet below the creek’s surface” (Allhands 1936:75).

He described the creek itself as an “ever twisting stream” that “continues to eat its way deep into the adobe soil and sprawls out over a wide area. With heavy rains in the mountains it quickly reaches flood tide and a wall of water several feet in thickness may pour down its channel unannounced,” which at one point washed an engineer’s car downstream (Allhands 1936:74).

He went on to note that “during its normal state the Alamito will shrink to a mere thread of crystal clearness. In places it may cease to dawdle along and disappear under its own bed, leaving a trail of sand and gravel bars, and perhaps re-appear a mile or two below” (Allhands 1936:74).

For the most part, the creek seemed to behave quite well during the construction of five bridges spanning its banks. Allhands wrote:

The weather, of delightful sunny days, was superb most of the time, with the various camps working every day except for two or three days when in the grip of dust storms that enveloped everything, and a day’s snow. And was it dry? Well, last August a seven-inch gully washer fell on the upper portion of the line and not a drop since until the latter part of April, when the north half was again



softened up . . . it was lucky for the contractors that a drought was stalking this Big Bend Country, as the supply trucks had to travel a road of bridgeless creeks. Therefore, when it poured, with but little vegetation to restrain the water, there was a quick run off and those streams soon reached flood tide (Allhands 1936:74–75).

On the whole, the contractor seemed to greatly admire the creek. “Never was a job in a semi-desert country so well watered. Every time camp was moved it went right on down with the water, made possible by this unfailing, life giving Alamito” (Allhands 1936:74–75).

### **Changes Along the Creek**

By 1885, more than 60,000 head of cattle and large numbers of sheep had been brought to Presidio County (Thompson 1985a:241). Unfortunately, the surge in the county’s bovine population came during a period of above-average rainfall, which was followed by a major drought from 1885 to 1886, with dry years lingering into the 1890s (Thompson 1985a:214–215; Whorton 2007:227). Cattle desperate for water wandered along Alamito and other county creeks to the Rio Grande,<sup>13</sup> and as many as 25 to 40 percent died (Thompson 1985a:241, 244).

The drought appears to have prompted the first major attempts to reshape Alamito Creek. Ranchers began building ground tanks and digging shallow wells to water their thirsty cattle. “Every draw that ran any water soon had a tank,” wrote John Gregg (1933:109). Apparently, during soil conservation work in the 1930s, many “spreader dams” were also built to divert water to pastures and tanks (Thompson 1985b:433).

Regarding dams along the creek, Vasquez reported that:

[The creek has] changed a lot. It does not flow in the amount that it used to, and let me tell you why. Because the ranchers have built over the years a lot of diversion dams, to stop the water and make grass grow. And that way they have stopped a lot of the drain-

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13. Thompson cites the reminiscences of Alice Schwartz, whose father, J.W. Merrill, recalled an effort to round up these drifting thirsty cattle. Schwartz’s recollection included a list of ranches Alamito Creek passed through on its way to the Rio Grande: “. . . the Alamito which has its source in the mountains of the J.W. Friend country, runs through the Merrill Ranch, crosses the highway west of the Merrill home, turns south through the Smiths and Mimms ranches, through Marfa, thence to San Esteban, eventually by Casa Piedra and on to the Rio Grande” (Thompson 1985a:244).

age. Which is good, because it kind of shuts down the erosion. A lot of that farmland was being washed away. It was very hard on the land, the Alamito Creek (Vasquez 2010).

These diversion dams, he said, can be seen from an airplane all along the creek, but particularly in the Marfa highlands.

Another change brought about by the cattle industry, which may have had an impact on Alamito Creek, was a deterioration in the condition of range-land. In 1951, Leithead reported that almost 50 percent of range in the Alamito Creek watershed was in "fair" condition and 33 percent was in "poor condition," with the remaining range in "excellent" or "good" condition. Range in poor condition increases runoff and decreases the soil's ability to absorb moisture (Leithead 1959:87), altering the way water flows through a watershed.

Cattle ranching was not the only cause of change to Alamito Creek. By the 1890s, the creek's floods were becoming a problem for the burgeoning population of Marfa and Presidio County, and various flood control projects were built over the next several decades to tame its waters.

At some point early in Marfa's history, flooding almost washed away part of the courthouse and jail fence, so, in 1894, a ditch was dug north of Marfa to divert flood waters (Thompson 1985a:323). Robert Ellison's daughter, Evelyn, who was born in 1898 and raised at Alamito, recalled that the fertile fields along the creek there flooded intermittently (Thompson 1985a:337). During one of those floods, the creek must have jumped its channel near Alamito, because Evelyn Ellison also remembered the house of Carlos Herrera being washed away when the creek changed course (Thompson 1985a:338). A 1904 flood destroyed at least one home and store on the east bank of the creek in Marfa, prompting its owner, Maximiano Cortez, to move to the west side of the creek (Thompson 1985a:341). Gregg, writing in 1933, noted that Alamito and other Presidio County creeks became "raging torrents when heavy rains fall on the mountain ranges."

The most striking records of the creek's old habits are photographs taken during a flood in the early 1930s which inundated the streets of Marfa. In one image, a group of people stand ankle-deep in flood water outside a downtown candy store. Another image shows the creek swollen above its banks outside town, and another depicts a house half-submerged in rushing flood water (Thompson 1985b:371–373). Soon after that flood, a flood control dam was built on the Alamito just north of town (Thompson, personal communication, 2010). While Marfa's streets have not been inundated since that time, torren-

tial rainfall in 1941 led to a flood that washed out the Alamito bridge near the creek's mouth east of Presidio (Thompson 1985b:478).

The biggest dam built on Alamito Creek was not a flood-control project though. In August 1910, W.W. Bogel sold 16,000 acres of his San Esteban Ranch, including San Esteban Springs, to a Kansas City company, in which at least one Marfan owned stock (Thompson 1985b:71). The company spent \$75,000 on an "Ambursen" dam on Alamito Creek and \$25,000 on a 700-foot irrigation tunnel through the creek's rock walls. The company planned to sell ten-, twenty- and forty-acre tracts of the land for \$2 to \$10 per acre. They advertised the project as:

St. Stephan Land & Irrigation Company, Marfa, Texas, to sell irrigated land in St. Stephan Valley, where an abundance of water is behind a dam, which will irrigate, by natural flow, every acre of land we are offering . . . Area limited and climate perfect (Thompson 1985b:72).

The company claimed the dam would be about 16 km (10 mi) southwest of Marfa, and the lake would be 2.4 km (1.5 mi) wide by 6.4 km (4 mi) long (Thompson 1985b:72). However, those dimensions had changed by 1911. At that time the company promised the reinforced-concrete dam would be 104 feet above bedrock, nearly 1,000 feet in length, and the lake would be 4 km (2.5 mi) long, 3.2 km (2 m) wide, and 12.8 km (8 mi) around, covering 1,120 acres that would irrigate 9,000 acres of San Esteban Valley (Thompson 1985b:84). The new townsite by the lake was to be called Truman, after a company sales manager. It wasn't until 1912 that the dam was completed (Thompson 1985b:91).

Unfortunately, that same year construction stopped on the South Orient Railroad, which the St. Stephan company had expected to pass through their development and was central to their plans (Thompson 1985b:92). By June 1928, San Esteban Lake suffered from other problems. The lake, which was supposed to cover 640 acres at a depth of 30 feet, only covered 20 acres and had a maximum depth of 4 feet. St. Stephan Valley land buyers had abandoned their farms, and the county judge leased the land, estimating that the lake would be completely filled with silt within a few years (Thompson 1985b:309).

Despite these problems, San Esteban Lake was a popular destination for Marfans for many years. Kerr Mitchell, who grew up near Alamito Creek on the Antelope Springs Ranch, said boating and fishing for catfish and bass were



*View of the Marfa Lake from the Hubbard Ranch. Photo taken in 2000, courtesy of Robert J. Mallouf.*



*View looking to the southwest across the Alamito Creek basin from a bluff above the San Esteban rockshelter. Photo taken in 2000, courtesy of Robert J. Mallouf.*

common activities there (Mitchell 2010). In 1936, the Lake Esteban Club even felt compelled to restrict fishing to club members, after large parties of fishermen flocked to the lake to catch black bass (Thompson 1985b:410). The first motorboat was launched on the lake in 1934, and a boat club was soon organized. A few years later, three young Marfans drowned in the lake when their boat overturned (Thompson 1985b:418). And in September of 1940, the lake club hosted a Highland Regatta, for which they built a dock that extended 78 feet into the water. Sixty-eight boats entered the event, which also included surfboarding as an activity (Thompson 1985b:465).

Vasquez and Mitchell reported that the lake, presently on the MacGuire Ranch, is now dry but does occasionally fill with water. “John McGuire used to keep it pretty well full, but at his expense. He had some very large pumps he used to fill it up with,” Mitchell said. “For some reason or another over the years it’s dried up. It used to catch water, and a good deal of water” (Mitchell 2010).

## Conclusion

Only a faint sketch of Alamito Creek’s past can be obtained from the sources presented here. But it is apparent more water once coursed through the valley than can be found there today, and the creek’s floods used to be fierce and predictable enough to support prehistoric agricultural settlements and menace the streets of Marfa.

Today though, sections of Alamito Creek—particularly north of and around Marfa—are dry most months of the year, except during late-summer’s rainy season. That change was acknowledged by Paul Wright in his article on the region’s population in 1900, in which he wrote that Alamito was “*then* perennially flowing” (Wright 1996). And over the last several decades, it appears Marfa’s flood control projects have tamed the creek’s seasonally “raging torrents.”

Yet exactly how and when these changes took place is only hinted at in the sources we examined here: deteriorating rangeland in the watershed, flood-control projects north of Marfa, diversion dams on ranches, and perhaps even climatic and precipitation changes. And many questions remain unanswered: did the creek ever flow year-round along its entire length? If so, when did it stop doing so and why?

Whatever the answers, it is clear the “unfailing, life-giving Alamito” shaped Presidio County, perhaps more than any person or herd of longhorns shaped the creek.

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