The Old Spanish Trail was used from 1829 to 1848, as an official trade route between Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Los Angeles, California. Woolen textiles, woven in Northern New Mexico, were traded for strong Californian mules and horses.

The Old Spanish National Historic Trail has three branches. In 1829-1830, Antonio Armijo led the first successful commercial round-trip trade caravan from Abiquiú, New Mexico, to Los Angeles, California. His caravan of 100 pack animals opened a direct but difficult route across northern Arizona. The Main Route, first blazed by William Wolfskill and George C. Yount in 1831, veered northwest from Abiquiú through southwestern to northwestern Colorado and into central Utah. It joined the Armijo route near the Colorado River and not far from Las Vegas, Nevada. (The North Branch forks are discussed below – Trails and Roads of the San Luis Valley.)

Textiles transported over the Old Spanish Trail were made from the wool of Churro sheep. The wool was desirable because of its water resistance warmth, and multiple colors. Churro wool allowed weavers to create beautiful blankets, shawls, and rugs with mixtures of black, white, grey, tan, cinnamon, and brown.

Mules were not only a trade item but were also the primary mode of transportation used during the Old Spanish Trail period. Carrying up to 400 pounds of merchandise, mules traveled the approximately 2,400-mile trail (round trip), in caravans of 50 to 4,600 animals. Traveling 12 to 15 miles per day, a round trip would take from 180 to 225 days, assuming that nothing went wrong along the way.
West Fork Trail. "Remote Beyond Compare," the description by Spanish Governor Don Diego de Vargas of the desolate land he traveled during his 1694 entrada into the Southwest. (Photo courtesy of Ken Frye).

The journey along the trail was difficult. Travelers had to deal with water issues, both the lack of it for drinking and the over-abundance of it at river crossings. Food for the journey had to be dried or gathered along the way. While jerky, piñon nuts, berries, and posole are enjoyable treats for many people today, eating these foods day after day for months would certainly be monotonous. Another concern for the travelers was encountering hostile people. Understandably, many Native Americans were not willing to have these travelers passing through tribal domains. The journey along the Old Spanish Trail was long, dangerous, tiring, and very challenging.

In 1848, with the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hildago, the end of the U.S.-Mexican War forever changed the geopolitical landscape and the primary trade period of the Old Spanish Trail. The southwest became part of the United States, and the Mexican territories of Alta, California (San Diego area), and Santa Fe de Nuevo Mexico, were ceded to the United States. There was no longer any need to link Santa Fe with Los Angeles by this difficult mule trail. Wagon-friendly routes were opened, railroad lines, and eventually, automobiles followed along some of same trail corridors in more recent times.

** Trails and Roads of the San Luis Valley: The North Branches of the Old Spanish Trail**

“Old trails and wagon roads are pulsating landmarks, travel dramas that speak of men and their most daring dreams, their schemes, their driving purposes for good or evil. They carry stories of exploration, trade, war, escapes, rescue, and, during the last 150 years [now180 years], the flow of men, women, children, sheep, goats, and cows as they came to make the first permanent homes in what had been a valley of Nomads. Trails and wagon roads of the Valley are the foothills, mountain passes, and rivers...When they are walked, in a wondrous way they become Then and Now, sunshine and cloud, shadow flowing, and a tremendous cast of characters coming alive.” (Mt. Lookout, Where You Can See for Two Days, by Ruth Marie Colville.)

Two ancient routes ran the length of the San Luis Valley. One, designated today as the East Fork of the National Historic Old Spanish Trail’s North Branch, coursed the open sage country along the base of the Sangre de Cristo mountain range. The other, the West Fork, traversed the San Luis Valley along the base of the San Juan Mountains. For thousands of years these trails were well used by ancestral natives, and later by Spanish colonists, fur trappers, explorers, herdsman, prospectors, invaders, military (expeditions), slave traders, and settlers. In following river courses and the lay of the land, the trails say with courteous proof, “this was the way, the ancient way.” Early photos show traces of the trail, and early survey maps show the commonly used wagon roads prior to their becoming official roads.
An early map, based on the Hayden survey, shows the trail—not a road—from the Sand Dunes National Park & Preserve northward.

Finding present day traces from the Old Spanish Trail period today is difficult. Mule caravans did not follow the narrow type of trail we are familiar with today. Instead, they wandered all about, looking for the best way that day. Modern highways often follow or parallel the trail routes, a testament to the skills of early scouts and explorers. The West Fork Trail brochure (La Vereda del Norte, The Trail of the North, published by the La Vereda del Norte Chapter of the Old Spanish Trail Association), includes a trail map, historical information, and a Time Event Chart from 10,000 BP to 1876, the year Colorado became a state.

The Old Spanish Trail Landform Sculpture, located between Monte Vista and Del Norte, Colorado (along US 160), holds special significance to the Old Spanish Trail within the San Luis Valley. The sculpture stands near a portion of the West Fork Trail of the North Branch of the trail. As long-used trails evolved into roads, this west-side route became known as the “Old Conejos Road.” Prior to the formation of Rio Grande County in 1874, pioneering settlers used this road because all legal records related to property within the terrain lying south of the Rio Grande, including mining claims, brands, personal and real property ownership, had to be filed at the courthouse in Conejos, a 100-mile round trip. Deep wagon ruts nearby indicate this use.
The Old Spanish Trail Landform Sculpture was conceived as a way to mark an historic trail and highlight the cultures of the San Luis Valley. Sculptor Mettie Swift, of Del Norte, began by creating a proposal and identifying the participants. During the process of the work, the project received funding from the Rio Grande County Tourism Board, the US Forest Service, and the Colorado Council on the Arts.

Mettie salvaged the large stone scraps from the Old Stone Quarry nearby and hired the Gates family to move the stones to the sculpture site. Work began in 1999, and was to take three years. Working during the summer in the cool of the early morning, Mettie was joined by Ross Martin, a young sculptor from La Garita. The theme of the sculpture was inspired by a small santo called La Conquistadora, which came north from Santa Fe in 1859, with the 14 New Mexico families who set out following the Old Spanish Trail to a “beautiful place far north along the Rio del Norte” (Rio Grande). The first settlement, just east of Del Norte, was called La Loma de San Jose. The front sculpture is a wheel, representing both time and travel of those families and others who came after. Other themes include local rock art and a map.

History of the Old Spanish Trail Association
La Vereda del Norte Chapter of the Old Spanish Trail Association

The Old Spanish Trail Association (OSTA) originated in the San Luis Valley as a result of an organizational meeting at the Rio Grande County Museum in Del Norte, in February 1994. Since then the association has expanded into an international organization. OSTA has directors from all six states through which the trail passes (New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Arizona, Nevada, and California). The Old Spanish Trail was designated by Congress to become part of the National Historic Trails system in 2002.

In 2003, San Luis Valley members re-organized their original county chapters into La Vereda del Norte Chapter. The La Vereda del Norte Chapter is dedicated to preserving, marking, and interpreting the Old Spanish Trail through the San Luis Valley and southwestern Colorado. Formed to help locate unknown, long-buried information regarding the trail, the chapter works in partnership with regional Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service staff (Public Lands Center), the San Luis Valley Archaeological Network, the San Luis Valley Heritage Tourism Project, Los Caminos Antiguos, the Sangre de Cristo Heritage Area, the San Luis Valley Museum Trail Association, and a broad base of individuals interested in Valley history. Interesting field trips, lectures, and a publication, Trail Tails, highlight Valley history.

For information about membership of the Old Spanish Trail Association, please visit http://www.oldspanishtrail.org.
Their publication, Spanish Traces, will acquaint you with the national organization. The publication can be picked up at: Rio Grande County Museum in Del Norte; the Great Sand Dunes National Park & Preserve; Ft. Garland Museum; Saguache Museum; San Luis Valley Museum (Alamosa); and the Colorado State Welcome Center – Alamosa. If you follow the Main Branch of the trail through southwestern Colorado to the trail crossing of the Colorado River, just north of Moab, Utah, plan to visit the Southern Ute Cultural Center and Museum in Ignacio, the Animas Museum in Durango, and the Anasazi Heritage Center in Dolores. To learn more about the Old Spanish Trail, and the activities of La Vereda del Norte Chapter, contact Ken Frye @ 719-657-3161 (mailto:kennruth@gojade.org); or Suzanne Colville Off 719-657-2350 (mailto:offislandranch@gmail.com), officers of the La Vereda del Norte Chapter.

Suzanne Colville Off, of La Vereda del Norte Chapter, wrote this information. Her mother, historian Ruth Marie Colville, began researching, tracing, and writing about the Old Spanish Trail in the 1960s. In addition to the writings of Ruth Marie Colville, other contributors include historian Patricia Richmond, past president of La Vereda del Norte Chapter and Ken Frye, retired US Forest Service and current President of the Chapter. Colville, Off, Frye, and Richmond were among the founding members of the Old Spanish Trail Association. Lorrie Crawford, Carson and Rio Grande National Forest, and Dr. Douglas Knudson, past president of OSTA also assisted, along with Stuart Bryan, historian.
Old Spanish Trail in the San Luis Valley