

*Observations on Early Days in New Mexico*  
*Memories of Benjamin D. Wilson*  
(1811-1841)

*Commentary*  
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***Abstract:***

*An American frontiersman's experiences through four years employed in southwestern New Mexican securing a copper mine, Santa Rita del Cobre, against Chiricahua Apache, at the same time bartering with them. Then, self-employed as a successful merchant in the pueblo of Santa Fe the next four years.*

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## PROLOGUE

In the last half of the nineteenth century Hubert Howe Bancroft assembled a remarkable collection of material recording the history of California and the Southwest. What Bancroft was not able to obtain in the original, he sent staff to copy. Thomas Savage secured copies of manuscripts, as well as dictation from pioneers including Benjamin D Wilson. Early in 1900s Bancroft sold this collection to the University of California, Berkeley including Savage's transcript of ***Observations on Early Days in California and New Mexico*** completed late in 1877.

Don Benito Wilson chronicled his New Mexican experiences after thirty-seven remarkable years in Southern California where he achieved elite status. Life in Tennessee, Mississippi and New Mexico tested the young man through arduous, treacherous, hardscrabble encounters, including charity from relatives. Four years as merchant in Santa Fe gave promise for a better life.

When dictating the eight year New Mexican adventure, Wilson concentrated on expeditions, assassinations, treks and near-death escapes. Unfortunately, the account reveals little how he worked, lived and earned his keep; he is narrating events early in his life. Never intended as biography nor memoir, *Observations* recalls experiences in New Mexico that occasioned courage, audacity, nimble heroism to survive and ultimately succeed.

After achieving recognition, wealth and fame in California, Don Benito did not disclose problematic details of actions, shortcuts necessary in earlier years. Sherwood <sup>1</sup> underscores this lack of transparency,

*... when it came to his own personal background; Wilson was no more communicative than a mountain Indian, and just as adept at covering his tracks. So far as he was concerned, his life began when he crossed the Mississippi River.*

*Commentary* by the author clarifies Wilson's principal activities and occupation, includes historical perspective for the Mexican period, addresses omissions and inaccuracies in the narrative.

Whether Benjamin Wilson kept a diary is not clear but unlikely, more probable he relied on records and memories. Picture him in 1877 at his estate, now *The Huntington Library, Art Museum* and *Botanical Gardens* within the city of San Marino, California, overlooking a private lake, occasionally gazing up at the mountains, the highest now *Mount Wilson*, reminiscing on his interaction forty years earlier with Indigenous Americans, New Mexicans and Americans in the wilderness of Apacheria and the pueblo of Santa Fe.

Let's begin the narrative,

BANCROFT LIBRARY

Observations  
on  
Early Days in California  
and  
New Mexico

H. H. Bancroft Collection  
Bancroft Library

By  
Benjamin Davis Wilson

A native of Nashville, Tenn. = Who came  
to New Mexico in 1833 = to California in  
1841 = Since prominent as a citi-  
zen, ranchero, merchant, In-  
dian Agent, first Mayor of  
Los Angeles, State Sen-  
ator etc etc. —

Written at Lake Vineyard, Dec. 1877 from  
the authors dictation by Thomas Savage  
for the

Bancroft Library

A native of Nashville, Tenn. = who came to New Mexico in 1833 = to California in 1841 = Since prominent as a citizen, ranchero, merchant, Indian Agent, first Mayor of Los Angeles, State Senator etc etc.

Written at Lake Vineyard, Dec. 1877 from the authors dictation by Thomas Savage  
for the Bancroft Library

### **TENNESSEE PERIOD 1811 - 1826 AGE to 15**

I, Benjamin Davis Wilson of Nashville, Tennessee born in 1811, Dec 1<sup>st</sup>. My father was born in a fort in the territory of Tennessee in 1772 in what is now Wilson County. He died when I was 8 yrs old having lost by bad speculation his fortune, which left his family poor. We, however, were assisted to some education by our grandfather.

*Four sentences recap the Tennessee period. Wilson kept it simple describing his origin by the nearest big city. Born fifty miles southwest of Nashville on his father's farm ten miles north of Centerville on the Piney River in Hickmann County, Tennessee.<sup>2</sup> His father's birthplace description is incorrect. John Wilson was probably born at his father's residence in or around Washington County, North Carolina.*

### **MISSISSIPPI PERIOD 1827 - 1832 AGE 15 - 21**

When I was abt 15 yrs of age, I went into business for myself at Yazoo city on the Yazoo river above Vicksburg where I kept a little trading house to do business with the Choctaw & Chickasaw Indians. My health entirely broke down, and I was told by physicians I could not live in that country, must either leave or die.

*Wilson summarizes six-years in Mississippi in two sentences. Neither Tennessee nor Mississippi is mentioned in the title. For a comprehensive account of Wilson's first twenty-one years see ... Benjamin Davis Wilson, A Unique 19<sup>th</sup> Century Tennessean.<sup>3</sup>*

### **NEW MEXICO PERIOD 1833 - 1841 AGE 22 - 29**

*On achieving Independence from Spain in 1821, Mexico inherited savage guerilla warfare by marauding Indians on the frontier states of Sonora and Chihuahua and Provinces of New Mexico and Arizona. Mexico relaxed a Spanish ban on immigrants and imports to increase quantity and value of goods available to the frontier. In addition to merchandise, American merchants brought muskets, powder, shot and whiskey. These traders and trappers established clandestine relations with native Americans in homelands of high deserts and forested mountains remote from government surveillance. Indigenous groups furnished contraband mules in exchange for American merchandise, weaponry, alcohol. Benjamin Wilson arrived twelve years after Mexican independence.*

Went then up the Arkansas River to Fort Smith, an outer post then of the country, the company I was to join did not go for the reason that the river did not rise in time. From there went to Missouri, joined the Rocky Mtn Company & crossed the plains with them. Nothing worthy of mention occurred till we reached Santa Fe in the fall of 1833.

*Wilson crossed into New Mexico months after the annual Santa Fe Trail caravan had departed the Missouri settlements. Joining the Rocky Mountain Company, owned by Milton Sublette and partners, meant crossing the Trail with a group, a seven hundred and fifty mile trek.*

*FIRST EXPEDITION INTO APACHERIA EMPLOYED BY SANTA RITA del COBRE MINE FALL 1833 – SPRING 1835*

Being without money joined a trapping party, to go & trap in the Gila & Apache country for beaver. The first year there was no event worthy of record, except that we were quite successful. Explored the Gila River and returned to Santa Fe in the spring of 1835.

*He begins as one of eighteen American frontiersmen on an expedition to Apacheria fall 1833 to spring 1835 employed by James Kirker. Kirker oversaw security operations for the Santa Rita Copper Mine operating in southwestern New Mexico within the homelands of the Chiricahua of the Apache Nation. This open pit copper mine is owned and operated today by Freeport-McMoRan Inc. fifteen miles from Silver City.<sup>4</sup>*

*Wilson suggests the entire tour spent exploring and trapping beaver along the Gila and tributaries. An unrealistic explanation of a year and a half presence in the wilderness of Apacheria. In the 1830s, trapping in New Mexico occurred through deep winter in higher altitude streams.<sup>56</sup> Comandante General of Chihuahua, Jose Joaquin Calvo, stated James Kirker's trapping was only a front for his trade in armaments with Indians.<sup>7</sup>*

*These mercenaries were employed to ensure Santa Rita continued producing copper ore and ingots for shipment south to mints in the Republic of Mexico. By 1833, Apache's, Comanches and others raided the frontier, slaying, carrying off captives while rustling livestock. Skill with a musket, not the trap, earned a silver peso a day for these Americans in the wilderness.<sup>8</sup>*

Refitted & returned at the head of a small company formed by myself. One of this party was Enoch Barnes of Missouri who was murdered in Los Angeles county some six years ago by Cyrus Sanford.

The first party to which I belonged was commanded by James Kirker an Irishman who died in California about 1852 or 1853 altho I never saw him in California, but I did get a note from him, he probably left a family, for he was married to a Mexican lady in El Paso, Chihuahua. She was handsome & a fine woman whom I saw many times.

*For his second eighteen month tour in Apacheria, the entrepreneurial twenty-four-year old Wilson strikes out on his own, returns fall 1835 leading five fellow Americans. Wilson, no doubt, contracted with Robert McKnight, Santa Rita mine lessor to furnish extra security. During this tour he made three hundred mile treks spring 1836 and 37 across New Mexico from the Gila river region to rendezvous Santa Fe Trail caravans east of Santa Fe.*

I wish to revert to my second Gila expedition, winters of 1836 & 37.

*[Wilson remembered this trek later in the original dictation of **Observations**. We place it here in the correct chronological setting.]*

*Wilson recalls this first trek across New Mexico herding mules spring 1836 from the Santa Rita del Cobre mine to rendezvous a trade caravan embarked on the Santa Fe Trail for Missouri. Close to death following five days without water, he depicts the search and source of life-saving water. An abandoned settlement in a*

*desolate site. Wilson closes by describing the place so others may determine its history.*

Myself & my expedition, 6 men all told, once found ourselves absolutely without anything to eat, the only result to us from it was great weakness. On the evening of the 6<sup>th</sup> day in getting off from our mules, we felt so weak that we became very much alarmed about our condition. So I had no other recourse but to shoot dead my faithful mule that I had ridden on over 1000 miles, it being the only animal that showed any flesh. I feel sorry abt that mule yet, the killing of which occurred some 42 years ago.

*As a New Mexican beast of burden, mules were the clear favorite. Superior to the mustang in endurance, agility, intelligence with twice the load carrying ability, these animals were also an Indian's preferred source of protein.<sup>9 10</sup> In the wilds of the Borderlands, mules brought thirty dollars, eight hundred dollars today, the mustang around ten.<sup>11</sup>*

*The contribution of Mexican mules and breeding donkeys to Missouri merchant prosperity has been underreported. In his 1832 caravan Captain Charles Bent returned about thirteen hundred mules, fifty two jacks and jennies to Missouri.<sup>12</sup> The livestock assortment alone earned Bent, St. Vrain & Co., the largest trading company in the southwest, close to seventy-five thousand dollars. Today more than two million.<sup>13</sup>*

On our return as before mentioned to intercept the Mission caravan, after crossing the Del Norte [the Rio Grande] at the head of Jornada, going eastward to the river Pecos, we had the misfortune to find no water till the 5<sup>th</sup> day at night. On the 4<sup>th</sup> day crossing an arid sandy plain leading N to S between two parallel mtns, we saw to the north of us in the midst of this plain a large building, which encouraged us to believe that our water trouble was at an end. We went to the building and found it to be quite a large church. On the northern side of the building saw evidences that there had been on that site a very large town. The church itself was built of stone & stood almost in a perfect state of preservation, whilst all the other buildings had decayed.



*Mission Church [today] – San Buenaventura – Gran Quivira - NM*

*Laying a track across New Mexico from Santa Rita del Cobre to forty miles east of Santa Fe crosses within miles of Gran Quivira. Wilson may have been lost but he was on track for his destination.*

We spent the whole day in looking for water without any success. Just at night I discovered on the eastern side what satisfied me were the remnants of an aqueduct. Camped there that night, next morning endeavored to trace the aqueduct which led easterly to a mtn range. Spent the whole day in tracing it to ascertain which was the gorge it entered, believing we should find water there. Our hopes were gratified and our terrific suffering ended.

I had already had the experience of six days without food, and five without water and can state that the suffering caused by the former bears no comparison with that of the latter. No living man, unless he has had the opportunity of feeling it, or seeing it with his own eyes, could realize how much flesh a man may lose in five days without water. Every joint in our bodies ached, our eyes sunk back in our heads as if we had been dead a week and the bones seemed to be pushing through the skin. After my return to Santa Fe narrated our discovery of that building, and some enthusiastic men went in search of it, they called it the Grand Quivira.

*The expedition re-discovered Gran Quivira, site of an ancestral Puebloan Indian community later joined by a Franciscan Mission in the 1620s. See photo above. One of eight Puebloan villages east of the Rio Grande and over one hundred miles south of Santa Fe, migrating Anasazi Indians settled this and another seventy Pueblos in New Mexico centuries earlier.<sup>14</sup>*

*Hillside catch basins, called jagueyes by the Spanish, formed by building low retaining dams across ravines on the slopes of the mesa. Retaining walls trapped the soil being washed from the top of the mesa, the soil trapped the moisture. The Pueblos dry-farmed in and around these small pockets of moist earth. Nine of these have been located. Most are about 30 to 50 feet across and almost flat, while the two largest are each 120 feet across and several feet deep.<sup>15</sup>*

Those men dug for treasure and reported that they had discovered some 5 miles from the buildings a place where extensive mining operations had been carried on by some civilized people. Yet the best informed of the Mexicans could give no information on the matter. The whole thing was involved in mystery.

I forgot to mention while speaking of my first expedition to the Gila country under Kirker, a very remarkable place some 12 miles from where the Little Red River (Colorado Chiquita), leaves the mtns. There was a village built in a sugar loaf mound, near the bank of the river, which left on the mind the impression that the mound was made by human hands, as it was entirely alone in a perfectly plain country, within the bounds of what had been an extensively cultivated field.

The zanja madre or main ditch, some 12 or 15 miles in length, was plainly visible covering a plot of ground of some 1000 acres, as near as I could judge the *regaderos* or cross ditches were also clearly seen.

In the mound several feet above the base was a row of buildings, or rather rooms, in a perfect state of preservation and the cone of the mound many feet above the rooms seemed to serve as the roofing.



In the rooms we found great quantities of dried corn cobs. About two miles easterly some spurs of the Sierra Madre project and are pretty much covered with junipers or cedars the soil of a very red sticky clay. At the foot of these hills our mule herders found a quantity of stone like bullets of about the average musket ball size. They brought them to us saying that there were very large quantities of the same kind. Our curiosity led us to go & examine them for ourselves. We thought that there must be waggon loads of such bullets, so great was the quantity strewn about. We were thoroughly convinced that those bullets were the work of men, as many bore the appearance of having been moulded with the neck still on.

My impression is that they were moulded from red clay and age had petrified them. I leave a wiser men to explain.

*Wilson now launches a lengthy review of the assassination of Apache chief Juan Jose Compa, additional chiefs, fifteen women and children late spring 1837, the end of his second and final expedition into Apacheria.*

*When describing this assassination, he emphasizes a close working relationship between Apache and American traders. Barter trade ensured a secure existence in Apacheria for Yankee frontiersmen supplying vital merchandise in exchange for stolen Mexican goods.*

*Dr. David Weber suggests a link between Indian friendship and deadly trade goods,*

*““Wilson later recalled that until 1836 the Apache had befriended the Americans, even though these Indians were at war with the Mexicans. That the Americans deadly trade goods promoted this friendship, Wilson does not say. The friendship of the Apache, according to Wilson, was profitable to the Americans, for the Mexican government “would not give permission to the Americans to trade or trap in their territory, we were there as interlopers, and smugglers.” Thus, Americans operated in the Gila area almost under the protection of Apache until the season of 1836-37, a time which represents a turning point in American Apache relations.””<sup>16</sup>*

#### **SECOND EXPEDITION INTO APACHERIA – FUNDED BY B D WILSON FALL 1835 – SPRING 1837**

I will now relate events connected with this expedition, and its results.

The Apache up to this time had been extremely kind and friendly to the Americans, but owing to bad treatment of their Chief Juan Jose by the Mexicans, there was a deadly hostility existing between the Apache and Mexicans which lasted to the present day.

Juan Jose was educated originally for the Church, could read and write, keep accounts etc. and was really quite an educated man. The Mexicans murdered his father, which prompted him to leave the whites and place himself at the head of his people, and wage war against the Mexicans. But his relations with American traders and hunters were of the most friendly character, and he never lost an opportunity to show them his friendship. Whenever by any mistake any animals belonging to American parties were stolen by Apache, Juan Jose would have them returned to the owners.

There was an American by name James Johnson, living and married to a native woman in Oposura, who had during several years been trading between that country & New Mexico and had thus secured himself quite a competency. He had been invariably an object of friendly regard from the Apache, and occasionally that some of his stock had been by mistake captured, the same had been returned to him. Indeed, Juan Jose desired to maintain the best friendly as well as uninterrupted trading relations with American hunters & traders.

The Mexican Governor of Sonora was exceedingly anxious to secure the capture and destruction of Juan Jose who had become a terror to the Mexicans. He would send out his men & intercept dispatches, and thus keep himself well posted abt the movements of his enemies. During the two years that I was in that country, Juan Jose was frequently in our camp, and had mails brought to him to read, which had been captured by his men. We thus became informed of the military movements contemplated by the Mexican government. That government would not give Americans permission to trade or trap in their territory. We were there as interlopers and smugglers, and would have fared badly had we fallen into the hands of their forces. Juan Jose's friendship was in every way valuable to us.

Returning to my story, the Government of Sonora made an arrangement or promise with James Johnson to kill Juan Jose whenever the opportunity occurred to do so, as it was frequent for Juan Jose & his men to visit Johnson's camp. It was well known to the Government that the Apache were friendly to Johnson & all Americans. Of course it was left to Johnson to effect Juan Jose's destruction in his own way.

*Wilson tells us James Johnson has been "trading between Sonora and New Mexico during several years and has secured quite a competency." James Johnson, Benjamin Wilson, Kirker, seventeen other frontiersmen employed at Santa Rita mines all bartered American merchandise to Chiricahua Apache throughout the Gila river territory. The Chiricahua, three other Apache tribes, Navahos, Utes and Pueblos were friendly to all trading partners and valued their services providing essential American merchandise.<sup>17</sup>*

*Apache sought revenge for the assassination of chief Juan Jose Compa and fifteen of his family by ambushing and murdering thirty-four innocent Americans travelling the Gila to reach California. The American who fired the small cannon, James Johnson, returned to Sonora and eventually died in bed in California. Apache also spared the lives of Benjamin Wilson and two colleagues.*

*Wilson's statement, 'Apache were friendly to Johnson and all Americans,' should be amended ... 'who provided merchandise.'*

Juan Jose was generally hovering on the frontier with a small force of reliable young warriors of about 20 or 30. Juan Jose was known not to be a fighting man, his people deemed him too valuable to allow him to expose his person in battle.

*Juan Jose was born and raised at the Janos presidio, see below, where he did not experience a traditional adolescent training regimen for young Apache warriors.*

All those Gila Apache had been mission Indians during the Spanish occupation. After the Mexican independence the country became disorganized & the frontier Mexicans treated those

Indians so badly without any effort being made by the Government for their protection, that they rebelled and from that time kept up a warfare against everything that bore the name of Mexican. They were a civilized people, and indeed, many of them could not speak Apache and felt a strong contempt for the wild tribes of Apache, known under the names of Coyoteros, Mezcaleros, & Jicarillas. The necessities of the way have since made them more friendly & to intermarry with the others.

*Wilson refers to Indians who re-located near Spanish presidios under their patronage late in the eighteenth century. Approximately two thousand Apache, from a variety of tribes that Spaniards called Mescaleros, Faraones, Mimbrefios, Chiricaguis, Gilefios, and Tontos, settled in eight Establecimientos de paz, peace establishments, situated near seven presidios in Nueva Vizcaya and Sonora.<sup>18</sup> It was at one of these establecimientos, Janos Presidio, that chief Juan Jose Compa was born and raised.*

*After emigrating from now northwest Canada and Alaska centuries earlier,<sup>19</sup> the Apache Tribes settled in four locations surrounding now Santa Fe and Taos. The Eastern or White Mountain Apache, Wilson refers to Coyoteros, in western New Mexico and eastern Arizona; the smaller Jicarilla opted for northeast New Mexico; the Mescalero chose east of the Rio Grande in mountainous country. The Chiricahua homelands now Gila and Apache National Forests in southwestern New Mexico spilling into Arizona and the Sierra Madre, the extension of the Rocky Mountains into the border states of Mexico.<sup>20</sup> Wilson's expeditions into Apacheria occurred within Chiricahua territory, Wilson calls them Gila Apache.*

*At this time in the wilderness Wilson may not have been aware to the extent other Apache roamed and marauded the Mexican frontier. Shortage of revenue and chaos in Mexico City forced the government to stop funding peace establecimientos begun in the Spanish era, they collapsed two years before Wilson's arrival. The Apache Nation reformed, increasing terror and savagery on the citizens.*

*Ignacio Zuniga, commander of northern Presidios, reported five thousand citizens slain, nearly as many homes abandoned and a hundred settlements deserted along the northern frontier between 1820 and 1835.<sup>21</sup>*

There was a party under Eames from Missouri that had gone to Sonora to buy mules; taking with them William Knight (the same man who gave names to "Knight's Ferry," and "Knight's Landing") on the Sacramento, to act as their guide and interpreter. The party consisted of 10 or 12 men. They were unsuccessful in their expedition, could find no mules, as the Apache had stripped the whole country.

*By spring 1837 Apache raids on Mexican ranchos in frontier states devastated the countryside. After distribution of government rations to the establecimientos ceased six years earlier Apache reprisals swept the Borderlands.<sup>22</sup>*

They were returning to New Mexico, and took the route suggested to them by James Johnson, as the nearest one through the Apache country assuring them that there was not the least danger from those Indians.

Johnson concocted the plan of murdering Juan Jose with a man by the name of Gleason or Glisson, who also resided at that time in Oposura. Johnson availed himself of Eames' party, who were entirely unconscious of the plot, to carry out Johnson's plans. All started together, Johnson being the guide. Some days out from Oposura near the Gila River they met Juan Jose who had heard of their coming, and also of the arrangement between the Governor & Johnson, which he had obtained through some intercepted dispatches but gave no credence to the report, as he could not believe that Johnson, whose friend he had ever been, could possibly entertain any project against his life. In the camp he told Johnson what he had learned, and the latter of course assured him there was no foundation for the report. Juan Jose then said to him "Don Santiago, you have never deceived me, and if you give me your word of honor that the report is false, come to my camp with your men and pass the night with us." Johnson repeated his assurance, and all went to Juan Jose's camp.

After arriving there, Johnson said to the Chief that he had a sack of pinole to give to the women and children. The sack was taken out that same evening, and Juan Jose ordered a man to attend to the distribution of the pinole. But all the men, women, and children collected around the sack. This was a part of Johnson's plan.

Johnson had a blunderbuss secured under a parejo, which had been brought on mule back. The weapon was loaded with balls, chains etc. Whilst the pinole was being distributed Gleason had invited Juan Jose to walk out to where the latter's fine mule was tied, with the pretext that he wanted to buy the mule.

The plan of Johnson and Gleason was that the former would fire the blunderbuss into the crowd, and Gleason was to shoot Juan Jose with a pistol at the same time. This hellish plot was carried out to the letter, the blunderbuss was fired into the crowd killing and maiming many. Gleason shot at Juan Jose but did not kill him, the latter cried out for his "friend" Don Santiago to come to his aid and clenched Gleason and had him down with a knife drawn. When Johnson approaching Juan Jose told him in Spanish. "For God's sake save my life, I could kill your friend but I don't want to do it." Johnson's only reply was to shoot Juan Jose whilst he was over Gleason with his drawn knife. Juan Jose fell dead on Gleason. Thus perished that fine specimen of a man. I knew the man well, and can vouch for the fact that he was a perfect gentleman, as well as a kind hearted one.

After that occurrence, the party had to keep together & fight their way back, for the Indians by smoke & other means, had gotten together a large party, and pursued them. Whilst that villainous act of Johnson & his accomplice was taking place, I and my party were camped some 30 miles from Juan Jose's camp on the Gila River, and about 40 miles from Charles Kemp & his party of trappers, who were below me on the Gila.

*Wilson accounts for assassination impact on Americans' welfare throughout Apacheria. Two parties suffered the misfortune to travel the Gila when Juan Jose Compa was murdered, thirty-four Americans in all executed by revenge seeking Apache warriors.*

After the Indians fought Johnson's party into Oposura, they went to Kemp's camp, and killed every one of the party, 22 in number. I was on my march to return to Santa Fe, entirely ignorant of what had been taking place; my object being to intercept east of the settlements of New Mexico, the Americans bound to Missouri. When we arrived at the trail, discovered that the caravan had passed there two days before. We then started with the view of overtaking them by forced marches but were intercepted by a party of Apache and taken prisoners, everything we had being taken from us.

*Wilson's sequence of events is too inconsistent and vague to understand or resolve. He reports ... he and crewmembers encamped on the Gila at time of assassination; next 'on march' toward Santa Fe for Santa Fe Trail rendezvous three hundred miles distant; missed the caravan, set out at forced march to catch up; then captured by Apache, marched to their camp for death by slow roasting over fire; then escaping alone from a wigwam and trekking on foot to Santa Fe one hundred and fifty or two hundred miles distant. Completing a six or seven-day trek on foot. His two colleagues choose to face their fate as Apache prisoners.*

*Wilson planned to meet a Santa Fe Trail caravan forty miles east along the Trail. Implicit proof of prohibited barter activity by the necessity to evade Mexican officials in Santa Fe. Now responsible for all facets of the venture, the twenty-five year old Wilson oversaw the essential task of moving mules from Apacheria to Missouri. In each self-funded excursion ending spring 1836 & 1837, the destination was forty miles east of Santa Fe to link with caravans on the Santa Fe Trail. Wilson avoided the pueblo of Santa Fe where livestock subjected to taxation and confiscation.*

*Chihuahua officials issued a circular early in 1835 restricting trade with Apache and prohibited the sale of arms, ammunition, and alcohol. It specified that "the foreigners who, under the pretext of hunting beaver, enter the lands of the Apache Indians be subject to all of the trading restrictions that affected Mexicans. Foreigners caught trading arms, powder, lead would be executed." <sup>23</sup> Wilson faced the added peril of arrest and execution. Although Wilson avoided Mexican officials and Santa Fe, he was not able, initially, to evade Apache vengeance.*

We were marched to the Apache camp, there we were given to understand that something terrible had happened between Apache and Americans, and that the young warriors were determined to sacrifice us. We expressed our astonishment at the changed conduct of the Apache, from whom we had ever before received so many evidences of friendly feeling. That party did not seem to be fully informed of the causes of the change of feeling. In camp that night the Indians kept up a war dance to the east of the wigwam where the chief Mangas kept us confined. That old chief was opposed to us being sacrificed, as he said that he had received many favors from Americans, and believed it was to the interest of his people to keep up the amicable relations existing till that time. Our party was at this moment reduced to only 3, originally it was only of 6, the rest had managed to steal off & reach the settlements with some of the property, leaving the balance in our hands to be turned over in Missouri to their friends, of course that was before we were captured.

*Wilson confirms three other crew members 'stole off' to Missouri with a share of the 'property.' Property representing payment from Apache family units, rancherias, in barter transactions.*

Mangas had told us that he had been doing his best to dissuade his men from destroying us, but unsuccessfully. Finally, at a late hour of the night Mangas came in greatly excited, and said he had to return to his warriors, and one of us must leave, as it was the only way he could save the others. I asked my men what we should do, one named Maxwell had a sprained ankle and could not walk. The other named Tucker was a kind of invalid, and replied that if he was to die, it would be as well to die there, as he could not possibly get to the settlements distant 150 miles on foot. So it was concluded that I should go & that forthwith, because from the Chief's intimation the warriors were coming in a few minutes to take us out and burn us alive for which they had been already preparing the wood. I caught up a small buffalo robe, threw it over my shoulders (the Indians had stripped us of all clothing) & left.

The camp was situated at the base of a little stony mountain on the prairie. I started up the hill & had not been out but a few moments when I could hear a general turmoil in the camp, and the whole country soon swarmed with horsemen who had started in all directions in pursuit of me. I heard them in my rear, and crept into a rent in some large rocks, where I remained perfectly still until they passed me, and I heard them all going back to their camp. The mtn was abt 20 miles from a deep canon, the only hiding place in all that country. I had therefore to get into the canon before daylight, for in that plain a man could be seen from the hill in the daylight at the distance of 20 miles in all directions. I ran and walked as hard as I could and succeeded in getting into the canon just as day was breaking, got on the ledge & sat down to rest before hiding myself. As I had expected, at daylight the plains were full of horsemen. I slid down into the deep chasm or cut among the vines and brush, and stayed there all day without food, and what was worse, had the prospect before me of over 100 miles to march without nourishment.

The next night was also a perilous one having 30 miles of prairie to cross before I could get into the next hiding place. That night I walked the 30 miles and got into the spur of the Rocky Mountains, traveled until daylight, rested awhile, and went on in a fine broken country. I traveled all that day and kept on, after taking a little rest during the night and when near daylight on that 3<sup>rd</sup> night, I unexpectedly arrived at a sheep ranch that I knew nothing of. I there got some mutton and atole. My shoes were entirely worn out, my feet bleeding. Stayed there the whole day with the herder, who had the kindness to make me a pair of moccasins out of some untanned sheep skins with the wool on them.

Continued my journey until I reached the settlements, at a place called Morro <sup>24</sup> procured a pair of shoes and some food. Finally walked in about three or four days' time the 100 miles or upwards intervening between that place and Santa Fe, where I arrived without money, clothing, or friends not even an acquaintance, and perfectly worn out.

*By late spring 1837 Wilson returned to Santa Fe, toiling three of the previous four years in treacherous New Mexican wilderness losing everything in two speculative, high risk, self-funded treks across New Mexico. A Santa Fe merchant life afforded personal safety and opportunities overseeing lucrative barter trade*

*his remaining years in the Province. From a Santa Fe store, Wilson and colleagues served all southwestern native Americans.<sup>25</sup>*

Two days after news arrived of the disaster to a party of Americans known at that time as the Key Kendall party, abt 150 miles south of Santa Fe on the El Paso road, at a place called Point of Rocks. Someone approached me inquiring who and what I was, and upon giving him the required information, he told me they were seeking for someone to go out to the place of the disaster with a party of men, bury the dead, and do anything that circumstances might call for. I offered my services, provided they would give me a suit of clothes, and an animal to ride. Started same evening, three or four Americans accompanied me. We had letters from the Governor of Santa Fe to the alcaldes on the rio abajo (*the Rio Grande river south of Santa Fe*), to furnish us all the men we might need. Reached the scene of the disaster and found twelve dead bodies in a state of decomposition, dug a large pit and deposited the bodies therein. Found many burnt waggons, but nothing of any value. Returned to Santa Fe and made report.

I had not been back many days when a merchant offered me a clerkship in his store with wages at \$25 per month & edibles which I had to cook myself. Remained with him only 3 or 4 months. Whilst I was there, Dr. Gregg (afterwards the author of a work on the prairies), arrived with a large quantity of merchandise, wishing to pass on with a portion of his goods to Chihuahua, he engaged me to take charge of the rest of his merchandise. I attended to all the business to his satisfaction.

*Once again, Wilson's terse summary of a new career as merchant reveals no detail concerning merchandise, customers or how he conducted the business. Dr. Josiah Gregg authored the exceptional journal, *The Commerce of the Prairies*, the most informative of this period. This is the final time in Wilson's life at age twenty six he is employed by others.*

This brings me now to the winter of 1836 & 37. About this time, Mr. Eames & his party arrived from Oposura, and remained in Santa Fe over the winter. Eames lived with me during that time, he related to me all that had passed in connection with Juan Jose's murder.

Johnson met with the retribution that his crime deserved, he got no reward from the Mexican Government. Oposura was besieged by the Apache so effectively that he could do no business whatever, had to sell his property, left his family there & escaped, came to California, lived in great poverty, and died near Gilroy some years later. I never met him in California, nor did I wish to come again in contact with such a wretch.

His act of treachery caused the destruction of a large number of Americans, and the Apache war has continued from that day to this. Eames' arrival in Santa Fe brought us the first full information as to the cause of my own, Kemp's and Key Kendall's disaster.

*Americans in two parties travelling the Gila River perished in Apache vengeance. These frontiersmen lacked trading ties to Apache who, along with Comanche, earned reputation as most feared Indians on the frontier. This ferocious response to an attack on family members was consistent with their creed, all non-family were enemy.<sup>26</sup>*

My two men Maxwell and Tucker were not killed, they got away, but I never saw them again. I learned that Tucker died some years later in Texas. I also learned that Mangas the chief had a row with his people who broke his arm. He frequently visited me in Santa Fe afterwards, and in consideration of his services to me and my companions was a pensioner of mine.

*Both Wilson's colleagues 'got away' to California and Texas while Wilson 'escaped' to Santa Fe. Apache treated trading partners as family as Wilson reveals, they were a protected class. No other explanation is possible for such a difference in Apache conduct.*

*Wilson earlier referred to Mangas as 'the old chief.' Some conclude this was Mangas Coloradas, a legendary Chiricahua leader. We surmise Wilson refers to an elder uncle or father. Mangas Coloradas estimated in his later thirties or early forties during the 1830s would not qualify as an old chief. That the iconic Apache leader would travel to Santa Fe to accept a pension from any white man is unlikely.<sup>27</sup>*

In 1837 there was a great revolution in Santa Fe, the Governor, Alvino Perez and all his officers, and every other respectable man that had in any way been connected with the Govt. were killed.

Armijo, who till that time been merely a successful sheepman, headed the Pueblo Indians and the New Mexican rabble, and made that revolution. After Gov. Perez, the three Obrea brothers & the rest had been murdered, the rebels went through the city with the murdered men's heads stuck on pikes, and crying death to the Americans, death to the gringos. There were besides myself, abt 6 Americans, (the deceased Major Samuel Hensley was one of them). We shut ourselves up and remained so for 6 days till the riot was over. The rioters tried to get into our store, but the old Indian Chief Pedro Leon, who was at the head of the Pueblo Indians and was acquainted with me, saved us by declaring to the others that we were not in the store so they all went away. That time I did really expect that our life was not worth the purchase.

*Once more protected by a native American, Wilson and colleagues shelter for a week in the warehouse cellar. Why might a Pueblo chief, head of all Pueblos according to Wilson, safeguard the lives of six foreigners? Chief Leon was protecting his source of foreign goods stored below in the warehouse.*

*The five Americans probably field agents linking Wilson's trading activities with Southwestern Indians whose homelands fell within and surrounded Santa Fe and Taos.<sup>28</sup> Similar to Wilson's endeavors his first four years in Apacheria. One of at least eight near-death experiences in a lifetime for the twenty-six year old American.*

Armijo, as soon as the rabble dispersed to their homes, and the territory was left entirely disorganized and without a government, issued a call for the leaders to hold a convention in Santa Fe, and on their arrival there from all parts of the territory, he had a squad of his own satellites arrest the leading men, 32 in number, marched them back on the hill behind the public square of Santa Fe, and had them all shot the next morning. After that he declared himself loyal to the Mexican Government, soon his commission as Governor of the territory arrived. He is the



man who in 1841 captured Col. Cook and his company, one of whom was Mr. Geo. Wilkins Kendall, one of the editors of the New Orleans Picayune.

The fellow who betrayed the Cook party received no other compensation from Armijo other than a few hundred dollars and a peremptory order to leave the territory. Armijo had promised to reward him with an office in the Custom House, but afterwards told him that he could not trust a man who had been a traitor to his own people. This I learned afterwards, from a source entirely reliable, Mr. John Rowland, who had obtained the facts from Armijo's own lips. Rowland died here in Southern California a few years ago, at the Puente Ranch, which he owned.

***FINAL FOUR YEARS IN SANTA FE, SUCCESSFUL MERCHANT SUMMER 1837 - FALL 1841***

*Wilson avoids discussing his four years in Santa Fe as a merchant. Never mentions his clients, his product line, his involvement in the Santa Fe Trail now in its sixteenth year of operation. The Trail freighted merchandise to Santa Fe that he bartered for livestock, mainly mules from New Mexican Indians. Livestock had to return safely via the Trail to the Missouri settlements before Wilson could realize revenue.*

*American merchant's trade with New Mexican Indians remains an unreported happening of the Mexican period. Access to American merchandise, armaments and whiskey incentivized Indians to raid Mexican wealthy ranchos and haciendas in Sonora and Chihuahua.<sup>29</sup>*

I remained in charge of Dr. Gregg's business some two years, and then bought out the remainder of the goods and stayed in Santa Fe till the fall of 1841.

Mr. John Rowland, and William Workman, who were old residents of that country, at Taos, and had been in correspondence with prominent parties in Texas, learned that an expedition was being fitted out to come & take New Mexico as part of Texas. They were convinced that the plan might succeed, but in the meantime prominent foreigners in New Mexico would probably be sacrificed to the fury of the Mexicans.

As it was, Armijo had information that the Texans were coming, this was in the summer of 1841, it was even whispered that we were in correspondence with the Texans. One day that Armijo was haranguing his rabble to rise to a man & meet the foreigners who were coming to destroy their customs & religion, an American French creole from near St. Louis, who was a bold gambler named Tiboux, made some insulting remarks in a stentorian voice. This came very near being the destruction of all of us, for the whole wave of the rabble moved towards us, but fortunately, Armijo called them back promising to punish the offender. However, he was not found out & came out to California with us in the fall.

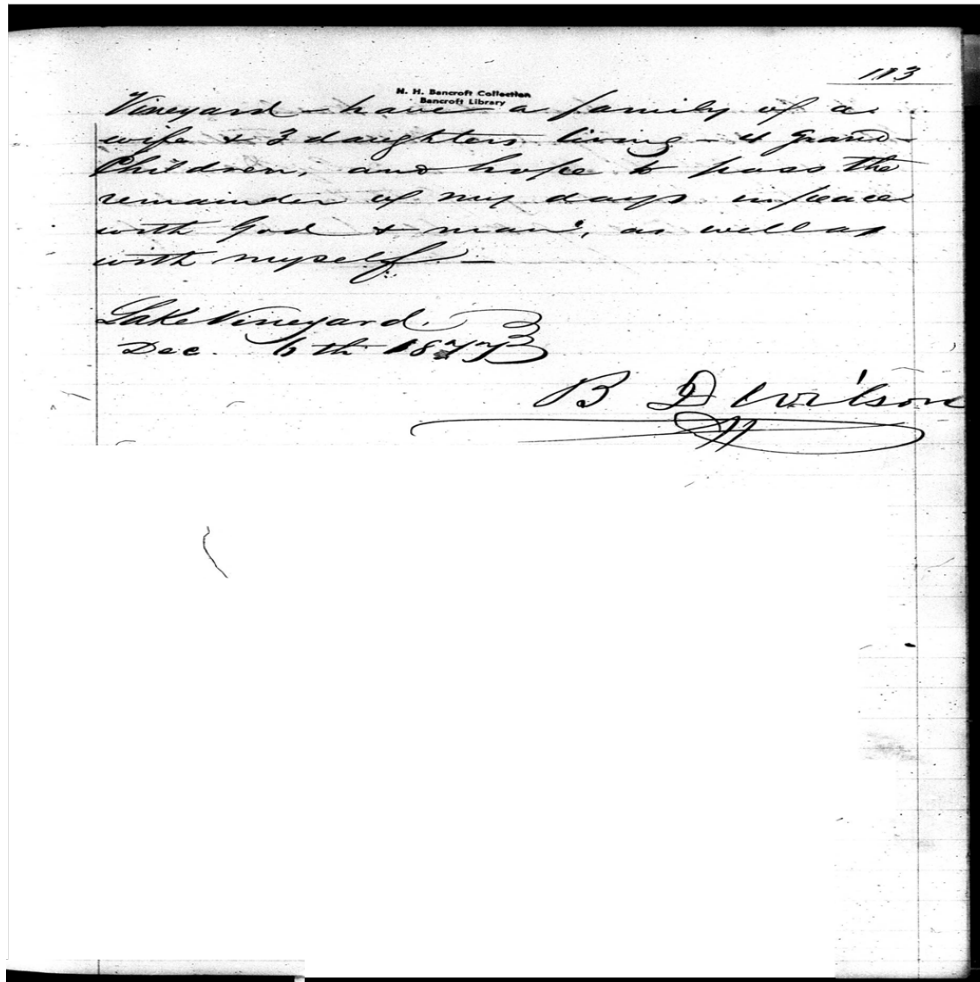
Under the circumstances, Rowland, Workman and myself, together with abt 20 other Americans including William Gordon & William Knight, concluded it was not safe for us to remain any longer in New Mexico. We formed a party, and were joined by a large number of New Mexicans. In the first week of September 1841 we started from our rendezvous in the most western part of New Mexico, a place called "Abiqui" for California. Met with no accidents on the journey,

drove sheep with us which served us as food, arrived at Los Angeles early in November of the same year.

*The serial entrepreneur, Wilson transported twenty trunks of serapes, probably Navaho sourced, along the journey to California. These woven garments most valued throughout the west as high as fifty dollars. He probably realized a sizeable profit on these four hundred ponchos.<sup>30</sup>*

*Mexican silver pesos along with trade goods would predominate as cargo on this journey.*

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Vineyard .. have a family .. of a wife & 3 daughters living .. & grandchildren .. and hope to pass the remainder of my days in peace with God & man, as well as with myself.

Lake Vineyard

Dec 6<sup>th</sup> 1877

B D Wilson

Benjamin Wilson passed away just three months later.

## *EPILOGUE*

There were unintended consequences when H. H. Bancroft encouraged Wilson to record his story. Wilson dictated events in New Mexico where courage, resourcefulness and resolve were displayed and death evaded. However, he dodged citing barter trade activities that increased raids and plundering of Mexicans in the Borderlands.<sup>31</sup> The sixty-six year old don Benito focused **Observations** on experiences in New Mexico that could not jeopardize a reputation earned following thirty six years of achievement in southern California.

Wilson survived the first four years trading among Chiricahua Apache interacting with the most dangerous of indigenous Americans. Life in the southwestern wilderness of New Mexico brought survival skills as well as barter trade techniques transferred with him to Santa Fe. In the 1837 riot in Santa Fe against the incumbent governor, Wilson and colleagues were protected by a Pueblo chief. Another example of close working relationships between merchants and native Americans safeguarding American traders operating in New Mexico.

He entered the Santa Fe merchant ranks after his final trek across New Mexico ended in another near-death and loss of mules to Apache. Once established in a trading business, formerly owned by Dr. Josiah Gregg, his opportunities prospered. Wilson accumulated Mexican silver sufficient to erect a homestead and cattle ranch on Rancho Jurupa as well as careers and investments in southern California.

In contrast to New Mexico, Wilson's portrayal of activities in California for **Observations** is forthcoming and comprehensive, no dodging or dissembling. He reveals ... battles with a grizzly devouring milk cows; three expeditions on behalf of Governor Pio Pico capturing renegade Indians; joining Southern California neighbors in combat deposing a California governor; duty as combatant and POW, then liaison as brevet captain with American military commanders in the southern California campaign of the Mexican American war. Wilson was proud to provide details of his civic activities that included more near-death experiences for these volunteer services. A consistent trait throughout his lifetime.

Before Don Benito launched his entrepreneurial career in the pueblo of Los Angeles, he sold off two thousand cattle driving them up the San Joaquin valley to Sacramento from his sixty-five hundred acre Jurupa Rancho in now Riverside. In the pueblo he combined city, county and state government service with an impressive portfolio of real estate transactions. Eight years later a final move to his beloved estate, Lake Vineyard, in the now San Gabriel valley of the Los Angeles basin. Here his grandson was born, Five star General of the Army George S. Patton, Jr.

Thirty-six years in multiple careers with incredible accomplishments in southern California, the intrepid don Benito became one of the five richest pioneers there.

## ENDNOTES

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1 (Sherwood 1982) Volume I

2 (J. T. Bueche 2015) Available on [benjamindaviswilson.com](http://benjamindaviswilson.com)

3 (J. T. Bueche 2015)

4 (McGaw 1972) Chapter X, pg. 103, notes

"James Kirker swore in a deposition he paid 18 men the sum of one peso a day [or one dollar a day, the peso and dollar of equal value] for a total of \$5,022. Today, \$150,000."

Correct calculation results in \$9,720 not \$5,022. \$9,720 in 1835 worth \$302,000 in 2021. These funds provided from the Santa Rita Mine for security of external activities. Kirker could not personally afford such expenditures, he was an employee of Santa Rita mine lessor, Robert McKnight.

5 (D. Weber 1970) pg. 225

David Weber notes "as beaver fell from favor in the early 1830s, the woolly hide of the American bison quickly eclipsed it. The activities of Wilson, Kirker and the others who trapped and traded on the Gila during the mid-1830s seem to have been sporadic and of little economic consequence".

6 (Cleland 1952)

Robert Cleland points out, "the fur of the desert river beaver though somewhat lighter in color and practically worthless from early spring to late fall, is only slightly inferior to that of the northern beaver the remainder of the year".

7 (D. Weber 1970) pgs. 221-25

8 (McGaw 1972) Chapter X,

Mexican Peso and American silver dollar each contained very similar grains of silver. See Endnote 4. See also (Gregg 1954) pg. 298 notes.

9 (Ewing n.d.)

10 (Gregg 1954) pg. 202

11 (Stephens 1916) pg. 305

"Mules brought from twenty to thirty dollars a head when the overland trade (the Santa Fe Trail) began (early 1820s) and though imported in large numbers (into Missouri) the price steadily advanced thereafter." Other source(s) advise mules traded for thirty dollars in New Mexico. In Missouri mules were more expensive. Breeding donkeys sold for five hundred dollars in the South. [Editor]

12 (Captain Bent & Co. have just returned from Santa Fe. 1832) Missouri Intelligencer 11-10-1832

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13 MLA citation: "\$75,000 in 1835 → 2021 | Inflation Calculator." *Official Inflation Data, Alioth Finance*, 2 Apr. 2021, <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1835?amount=75000>.

14 (Lekson 2021) *Archaeology Magazine*, pgs. 57-64

"Between 1250 and 1290 thousands of people left the Mesa Verde region, perhaps fleeing political unrest and widespread violence to resettle in villages where Pueblo people still live today."

15 (National Park Service, *Architectural History of the Salinas Missions* 2001) - Brochures & online.

16 (D. Weber 1970) pg. 223

17 (James 1916) *Chapter IV*

*In Santa Fe the later part of February 1822, General James was approached by Ute, Navaho and Comanche urging him to establish trading relationships with their nations.*

18 (Babcock n.d.) pg. 366

Babcock notes "Some of these bands would remain at peace well into the Mexican national period, until presidial troops stopped issuing rations in 1831." [Peace Establishments]

19 (Powell 2014) *Archaeology Magazine*, January/February, 11

20 (McGaw 1972) pg. 94

*One of several references depicting locations of Apache homelands surrounding Taos & Santa Fe.*

21 (Worcester 1985) *Apache and Comanche Plunder Trails*.

22 (Smith 1962) pgs. 20-42 *Apache Plunder Trails Southward, 1831-1840*

23 (D. Weber 1970) pg. 222

24 *El Moro National Monument, 180 miles west-south-west of Santa Fe, N M.*

25 (D. J. Weber n.d.) *The Borderlands on the Eve of War*, See Endnote 28.

26 (Hutton 2016) *The Apache Wars*

27 (Sweeney 1988) *Mangas Coloradas*

28 (D. J. Weber n.d.) *The Borderlands on the Eve of War*.

"New Mexicans thought of themselves as surrounded by hostile Indians, and indeed they were, Navajos to the west, Utes to the northwest, Comanches to the northeast, Apaches to the south. One could go on and break these groups down into still smaller entities as the New Mexicans did, who understood Apaches, for example, by many different names — Gileños, Mimbrenos, Lipanes. These totaled 20 or more different groups of hostile Indians that surrounded New Mexico."

29 (Gregg 1954), See Note 31 below.

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30 (Jenkins 1964) Senior Archivist, State Records Center & Archives of New Mexico

Myra Ellen Jenkins, Senior Archivist of the State Records Center and Archives of New Mexico, wrote to Bill McGaw on July 15, 1964...

We have Mexican Archive #6389 before us, and have made a translation:

"Señor Administrator General of Rents of this Department of New Mexico

You will be pleased to order that a Guia of 400 sarapes of the country which are in twenty trunks of forty each, be conducted for its outlay in the Californias, obtained for the same, and they are those which are here stated:

Trunks 20 # Twenty trunks of sarapes with 400: (four hundred) At 40 each .100.00

Santa Fe, July 10, 1841 (signed) Benito Wilson"

31 (Gregg 1954) Ten years of travel in Mexico and interaction allowed Josiah Gregg to observe Apache culture and customs,

"Like most of the savage tribes of North Americas, the Apaches are passionately fond of spirituous liquors, and may frequently be seen, in times of peace, lounging about the Mexican villages, in a state of helpless inebriety. ...

... Chihuahua, however, has been the mournful theatre of their most constant depredations. Every nook and corner of this once flourishing state has been subjected to their inroads. ... **This arrangement supplies them with an ever-ready market, for the disposal of their booty and the purchase of munitions wherewith to prosecute their work of destruction. In 1840, I witnessed the departure from Santa Fe of a large trading party freighted with engines of war and a great quantity of whisky, intended for the Apaches in exchange for mules and other articles of plunder, which they had stolen from the people of the south. ...**

The depredations of the Apaches have been of such long duration that, beyond the immediate purlieus of the towns, the whole country from New Mexico to the borders of Durango is almost entirely depopulated. The haciendas and ranchos have been mostly abandoned, and the people chiefly confined to towns and cities."

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