

HOUSTON

Historical preservationists probe King's Highway for clues to centuries-old migration

By **Allan Turner** | March 29, 2015 | Updated: March 29, 2015 11:17pm

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Photo: Gary Coronado, Staff

IMAGE 1 OF 3

San Antonio archaeologist Sergio Iruegas, left, and Julie Vickers, a volunteer and donor, dig Thursday for artifacts along a segment of El Camino Real de los Tejas National Historic Trail in San Augustine.

HEMPHILL - Julie Vickers dreams of being Indiana Jones, the swashbuckling archaeologist of cinema fame. Although the chance of plucking gold or gem-studded crosses from this old Spanish trail is almost nonexistent, she hopes to unearth treasure of another kind: fragments of pottery or metal left by families traveling through these woods more than 200 years ago.

Under the watchful gaze of San Antonio archaeologist Sergio Iruegas, the Woodlands-area communications specialist shakes and bounces loamy forest soil through a fine wire mesh and comes up with ... twigs and leaves.



The volunteer excavator is undaunted.

"I know this isn't glamorous," she says.

"It's digging in the dirt. But I'd take any chance I could get to be a grunt assistant."

Vickers is among supporters and officials of the El Camino Real de los Tejas National Historic Trail Association braving unseasonably cold, wet spring weather to wrap up archaeological field work at a 3.5-acre stretch of the old King's Highway. The work is prelude to a May meeting with National Park Service experts to determine how best to interpret the site to visitors.

Steven Gonzales, executive director of the Austin nonprofit, says his association hopes to open the Sabine County site for tours within two years. The wooded parcel adjoining Texas 21 contains what arguably are the most dramatic remnants - seven deep swales - of the roadway, which runs from northwest Louisiana to southwest Texas.

Historic 'highway'

Ninety-nine percent of Texas' first "super highway" is privately owned and possibly in danger of being lost, Gonzales says.

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"History is so palpable here," says Iruegas. "All the Spanish colonists, all the early Texans - Stephen F. Austin, Davy Crockett, Sam Houston - came up this trail."

In its earliest form, El Camino Real, one of 29 national scenic and historic trails, consisted of Native American footpaths. In the 1680s, Spanish soldiers pioneered the King's Highway as they searched for rival French explorer Rene-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, who had blundered into current-day Texas while in search of the mouth of the Mississippi River.

The roadways - El Camino Real followed several routes - soon linked a series of Spanish missions from the Eagle Pass area through San Antonio and onward through East Texas and northwest Louisiana. By the late 1700s, the Texas capital was established at Los Adaes, near today's Robeline, La. Then, in 1773, Spanish colonial authorities ordered relocation of the capital to San Antonio.

Five hundred settlers journeyed more than 400 miles along the trail through the heat of a Texas summer.

Artifacts recovered from the area, including a fragment of fine Spanish pottery, a nail and pieces of metal, likely date to that massive migration, Iruegas believes.

While the initial round of site investigation has answered some questions - Iruegas believes the migrating colonists camped on nearby high ground, now privately owned property - more remain.

Among intriguing possibilities, Iruegas says, is that a series of stones on the roadbed mark graves of some of the 10 children who perished on the trip. "They could be cairns -

markers designating the route - or they could mark graves," he says. Spanish colonial roadside directional markers have been found in New Mexico, but not in Texas.

Park presentation

Archaeological scrutiny of the site indicates the largest stone had been placed horizontally on small stone pillars. Additional stones then were stacked on top. The nearest natural stone outcropping is several miles from the site, Iruegas says.

Gonzales says further examination of the stone markers will have to wait.

His group's top priority is consolidating information already gleaned from the site for presentation to national park officials. At that meeting, officials will discuss trail development and signage plans for the site. Gonzales says his association hopes to organize group tours led by volunteers from East Texas history organizations. Eventually, the site likely will be turned over to national or state parks agencies, he says.

Funded by volunteer contributions - Vickers and her petroleum engineer husband, David, were among donors - Gonzales' group bought the Sabine County site at a county back-tax auction in late 2013. While Texas 21 roughly traces the King's Highway through East Texas, many portions have been damaged or lost, Gonzales says. At one point, a concrete pad for oil exploration covers the trail. It is named in honor of the historic route.

Oil bidder

One potential bidder for the trail association's site also planned to use the parcel for oil exploration. He dropped out of bidding when he was informed of the property's historic significance.

Months after the purchase, a neighboring property owner clear-cut timber on his land.

Those concerns seem far away, though, as Vickers and Iruegas sift the earth for artifacts.

"When I was little, I always wanted to be an archaeologist," says Vickers. "I've always been interested in history. I love the outdoors."

'This is awesome'

Gonzales and others who have come to see the final excavations crowd around as archaeologist and helper painstakingly scrape the red clay earth with trowels, shake and sift, examine their catch and then start the process anew. First they dig atop the ridges that tower up to 18 feet above the sunken roadways. Then they plan to turn to the soft red clay that lines the roadways' bottoms.

Each time, though, their quarry eludes them.

Vickers, though, finds her joy in the trying.

"This," she says of her outing, "is awesome."

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