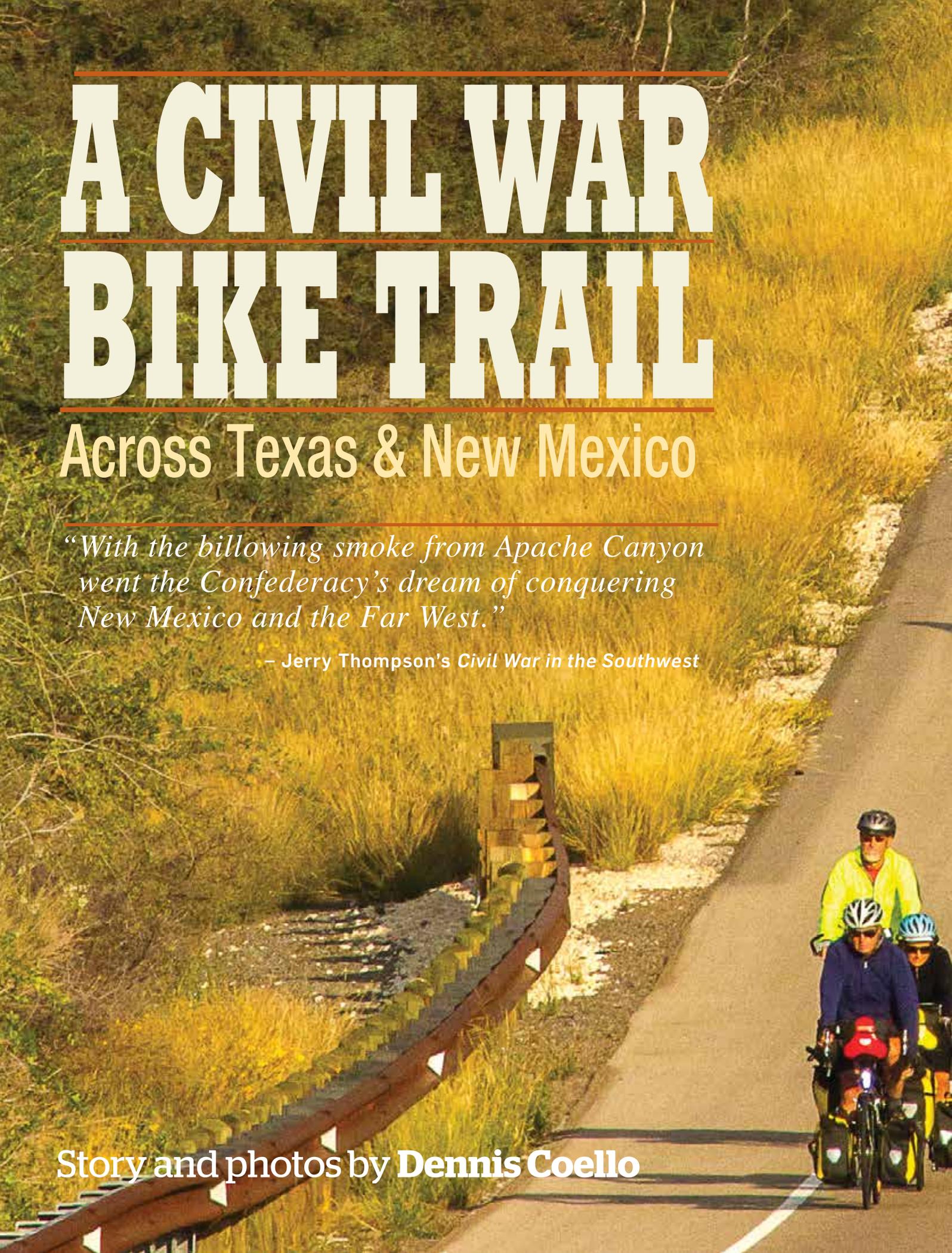

A CIVIL WAR BIKE TRAIL

Across Texas & New Mexico

“With the billowing smoke from Apache Canyon went the Confederacy’s dream of conquering New Mexico and the Far West.”

– Jerry Thompson’s *Civil War in the Southwest*

Story and photos by **Dennis Coello**





The Alamo. El Paso. Albuquerque and Santa Fe. Not exactly the names that spring to mind when you think about the American Civil War, are they?

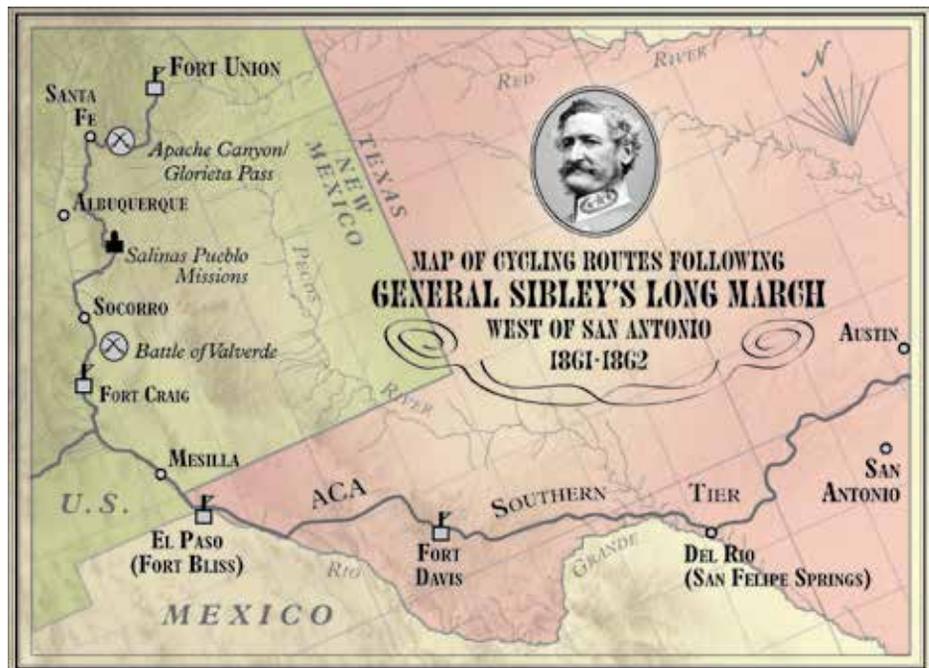
And if a friend asked you to ride a 1,100-mile route that has mountains in view for most of that distance, crosses deserts once occupied by the Apaches and Comanches, puts you in an old Western frontier fort made famous during the Indian Wars by Buffalo Soldiers cavalry, and passes the wonderfully preserved and unbelievably scenic sun-baked adobe ruins of Pueblo Indians and later Spanish missions (one of them visited by Francisco Coronado's expedition from Mexico in 1540!), would you think you were being invited to pedal the path of a 3,000-man Confederate army intent on Colorado goldfields and giving the South a port on the Pacific?

Of course you wouldn't. We're trained by history teachers and Hollywood to think of our bloody, body-mangling Civil War against a backdrop of leafy-green eastern woodlands and Fort Sumner on the blue Atlantic. When we are forced to look farther west, we might think of Union gunboats on the Mississippi shelling and starving Vicksburg into submission, as the armies of Grant and Sherman attacked that lovely bluff-top town from the east 150 years ago this very summer.

But battles in and beyond the southern Rockies?

And yet within blocks of the Alamo, in late October of the first year of the war (1861), Confederate General Henry Sibley's Army of New Mexico troops began their long dry march due west out of San Antonio through sage and tumbleweeds to San Felipe Springs, today surrounded by the small Texas border city of Del Rio on the Rio Grande.

Happily, Del Rio is also on Adventure Cycling's Southern Tier Route, a far more enjoyable and less-trafficked path paralleling Sibley's journey across the state and through surprisingly high mountains (and tall cottonwoods) to Fort Davis and beyond. The world flattens out as you continue riding west, through desert country toward the northward-curving Rio Grande, past cacti,



MAP BY NATHAN TAYLOR

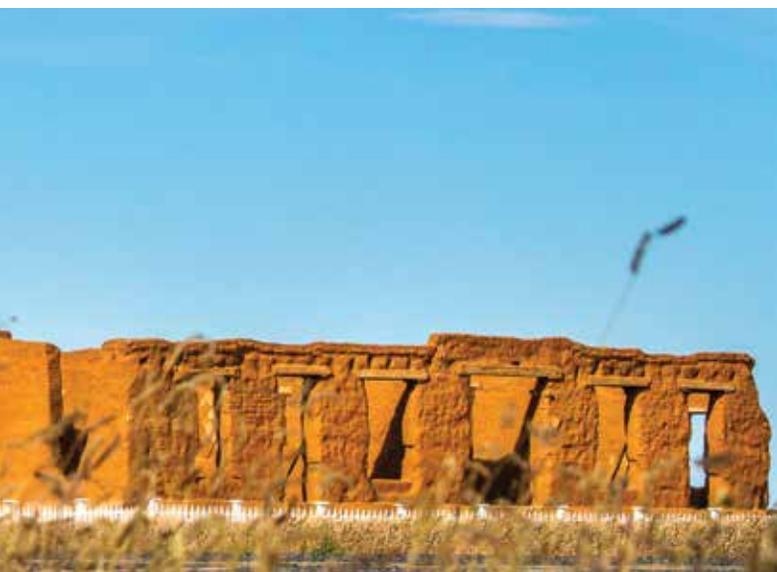
(facing page, above) **ALMOST TOO REAL** Union troops react to Confederate artillery at a reenactment of the Battle of Valverde near Fort Craig and Socorro, New Mexico.

(facing page, below) **LIGHTWEIGHT ACCOMMODATIONS** A Southern Tier rider in camp at Marathon, Texas. Note the screened tent top and lack of fly for stargazing during dry Southwest nights.

(below) **WESTERN STRONGHOLD** Trail's end – the sun-baked adobe walls of Fort Union. In 1862, these buildings held the mountains of food, clothing, and ammunition needed to resupply General Sibley's Confederate troops on their intended invasion of Colorado.

“BLOODY VALVERDE” WAS THE RESULT, AN ALL-DAY VICIOUS FIGHT THAT ENDED WITH THE BATTERED CONFEDERATES HOLDING THE FIELD, BUT CANBY AND HIS TROOPS SAFELY BACK IN THE FORT.





mesquite, and cotton fields into El Paso.

The troops of slow-moving, hard-drinking Sibley (his medical problems forced him to seek relief in the bottle) reached this point in late December, moved on to the town of Mesilla in January (as will you, on the Southern Tier) and in the bitter cold of February, continued north the final 70 miles to Fort Craig. The last few miles to this historic spot are your only required dirt-road riding. It's worth the bumps and dust.

Awaiting Sibley behind the fort's earthen walls and cannon, was a friend, Colonel (later General) Edward Canby, with whom he'd campaigned against the Navajo and Mormons, but who still wore the enemy blue and commanded 3,800 Union soldiers. Only 1,200 of these were well-trained regulars; most of the rest were Spanish-speaking local villagers led by famed frontiersman Colonel Kit Carson. Behind the fort's defenses, they were deemed too strong for a successful attack.

But when the Confederates bypassed Fort Craig and moved north of it and nearby Black Mesa, a huge volcanic escarpment that the Spanish first described in their journals in the 1500s, Canby brought part of his army out to meet them. "Bloody Valverde" was the result, an all-day vicious fight that ended with the battered Confederates holding the field, but Canby and his troops safely back in the fort.

Details from both sides searched the wide battlefield and cannon-blasted, leafless cottonwoods along the Rio Grande for their wounded in the dark, hoping to find them before they froze to death. Union soldiers loaned the Confederates half of their lanterns — it was that kind of war. At least it was in 1862. It grew more grisly as the years went by and the numbers of dead on both sides rose from the hundreds to the hundreds of thousands.

The Southern army captured the nearby village of Socorro, created a makeshift hospital for their many wounded, and continued north toward Albuquerque. Don't miss the Manzanares Street Coffeehouse before you pedal off in the same direction. While the java could be stronger, the outside bike murals are cool and col-



(top) **MAIN STREET RIDE** Southern Tier cyclists pedaling east out of Alpine, Texas, after dropping out of the mountains from Fort Davis on — you guessed it — Jefferson Davis Highway (TX 118).

(above) **HUNGRY CYCLISTS** A second hearty breakfast of the day for Southern Tier riders at Judy's Bread & Breakfast Bakery Café in Alpine, Texas. Look at the size of the hotcakes!

**UNION SOLDIERS
LOANED THE
CONFEDERATES HALF
OF THEIR LANTERNS —
IT WAS THAT KIND OF
WAR. AT LEAST IT WAS IN
1862.**



iron DONKEY™

BICYCLE TOURING

WWW.IRONDONKEY.COM
 WWW.IRONDONKEY.COM
 WWW.IRONDONKEY.COM
 WWW.IRONDONKEY.COM
 WWW.IRONDONKEY.COM
 WWW.IRONDONKEY.COM
 WWW.IRONDONKEY.COM

Your Personal Factory

Design the bicycle to satisfy all your needs, and have it custom built in the USA to fit your body.

Adventure Cycling Members always earn a 5% discount at Bike Friday

PROMO CODE: 2051



*A Dream becomes
 a Memory,
 One pedal stroke
 at a time.*



BIKE FRIDAY

Custom folding and travel bicycles
 hand-crafted in Oregon SINCE 1992

800-777-0258 // BikeFriday.com

(below) **RED ROAD RIDING** A loaded mountain biker traversing NM 107 west of Socorro, between the San Mateo and Magdalena Mountains. Sibley's Confederates, on their long retreat to San Antonio, left the Rio Grande Valley and took this tough route to avoid Union forces at Fort Craig.

BEGIN THE FINAL 100 MILES OF YOUR RIDE FROM THE HISTORIC DOWNTOWN PLAZA IN THE HEART OF THIS CITY.



orful, and the historic town square and huge Catholic church are only a scone's throw away.

Speaking of food, Sibley had expected to feed his men on the tons of provisions stashed at Fort Craig and, just south of the Colorado border, the even larger Fort Union. Ever hungrier, with horses and mules (those which hadn't been killed at Valverde) weakened by the poor forage and barely able to carry their riders and pull their small cannon and supply wagons, they headed on through Albuquerque to Santa Fe.

You can ride their route, or near it, but it's a mind-numbing (and ear-deafening) jumble of urban streets and no-shoulder, busy four-lane roads paralleling the interstate that today connects these cities. Better to head east for a long ride up into and through the mountains, to enjoy the centuries-old Indian and Spanish mission ruins, and a windy, hilly, challenging (but beautiful!) trek along the Turquoise Trail into Santa Fe — the remarkable 7,000-foot-high "City Different" that was founded a decade before the Pilgrims came ashore.

Begin the final 100 miles of your ride from the historic downtown plaza in the heart of this city. Pedal Old Santa Fe Trail Road to 2 Trails Road and continue on Old Las Vegas Highway out of town and into the narrow, steep-walled Apache Canyon and Glorieta Pass. Here you'll ride the very places where the battles began, as the Confederates clashed with Colorado volunteers racing south from Denver, and other units from Fort Union.

Who won? Well, as at Valverde the South claimed victory. You'll learn the details a few miles up the road at Pecos National Historical Park, where trailside markers explain the ridge-top parts of this horrific and history-changing battle. Till then, see the captions for why the Confederates soon began the long, cold, hungry retreat to Texas. **AG**

Dennis Coello is an avid cyclist and photographer, as well as an American Civil War buff. You can learn more about him at denniscoello.com.