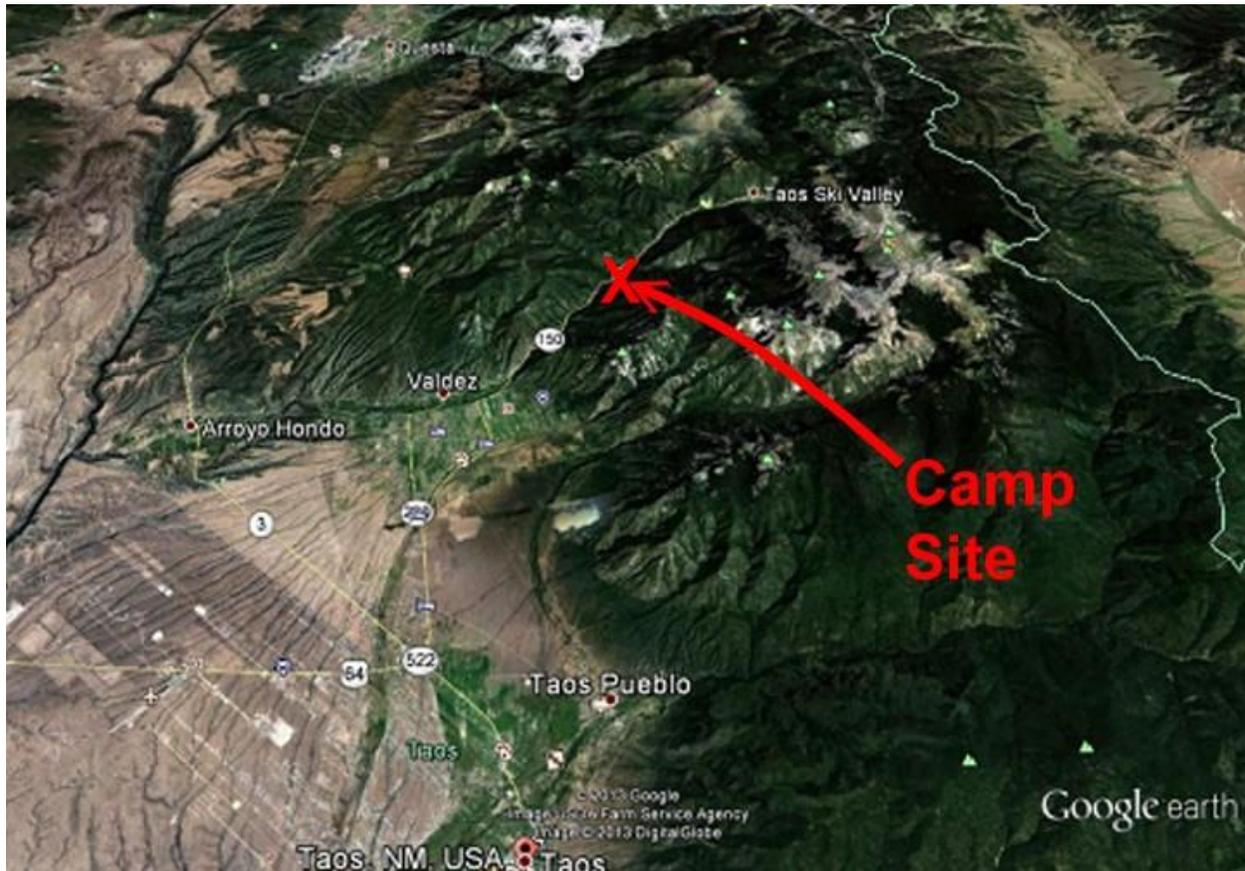


Wagon Whoa!

The glow of the white of the snow was so bright that colors were visible to the naked eye. My hot breath sent steam bellowing from my mouth fogging my sight somewhat. The trees and stream stood in stark contrasts of light and dark in the full moonlit morning. The whinny of a horse and mumbling of a mule gave presence to the fact that the critters were hungry. So, there was work to be done.



The spring time in the Rockies can be as much like winter as winter itself, especially up at 9,000ft plus. We had spent the three days prior at the small roadside park up the Taos Ski Valley and it was looking like it was time to head back down into the town and out of the snow. That's the cool thing about living on the edge of a mountain range. You can go from snow to no snow in a matter of feet.

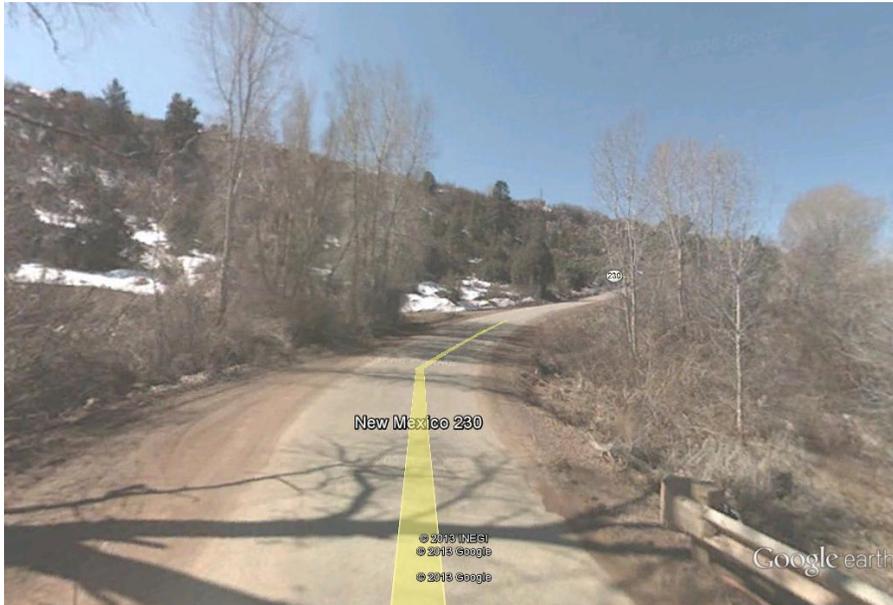


Having had a couple of nice days off, the critters were well rested and ready for the 9-10 mile trip back to the outskirts of Taos where, a few days prior, I had picked a place to set up the wagon to sell some wares and make some money for some badly needed provisions. I hadn't actually got on the ground and checked it out, but it looked like a likely spot. First, we had to get there!

The downhill run was basically that – a run! It was all I could do to hold the mules back and brake the wagon as we made our way down into the little village of Valdez. We had followed the downstream run of Arroyo Hondo and would have to climb up 150' in less than ½ a mile out of the Rio Hondo river bed to get back to the plateau of Taos. If I had taken the high road there wouldn't have been a hill to climb, however I figured the mules needed a little work to get the spunk wore down.

The village was deserted for the most part as we clippity clopped through. Then we crossed the Rio Hondo and faced a steep climb that I could stand and see the top at about a 6 degree incline. At that angle the mules were pullin' the full 2,000lb wagon, and they only weighed about 1600lbs! It was darn sho' gonna be a hard pull for the mules I figured. We sat in a pull off the pavement for a spell as I

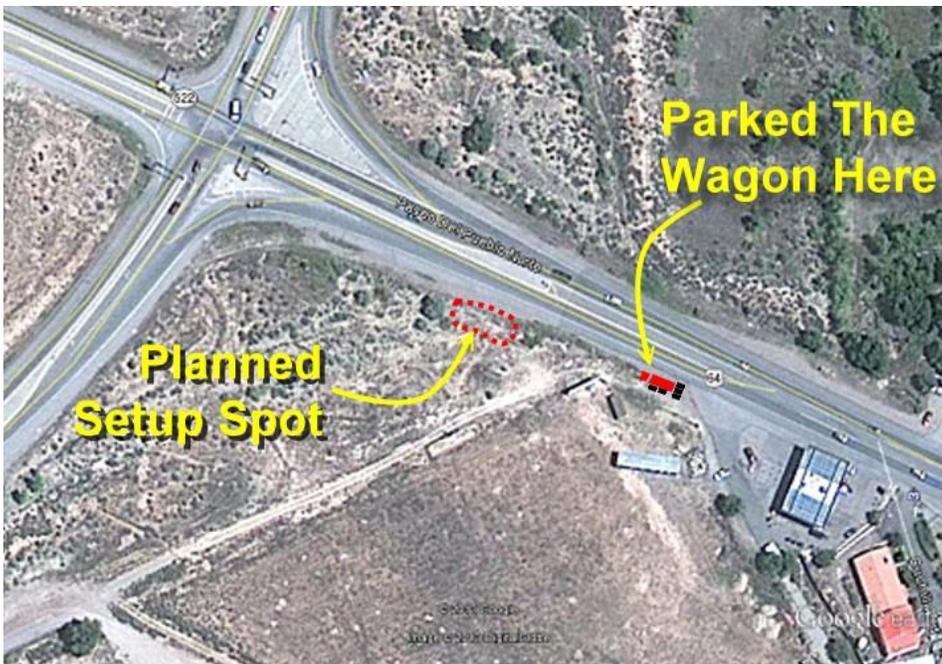
contemplated the plan. I decided to get down and drive the team from the ground to relieve the extra weight the mules would have to pull. This was a mistake!



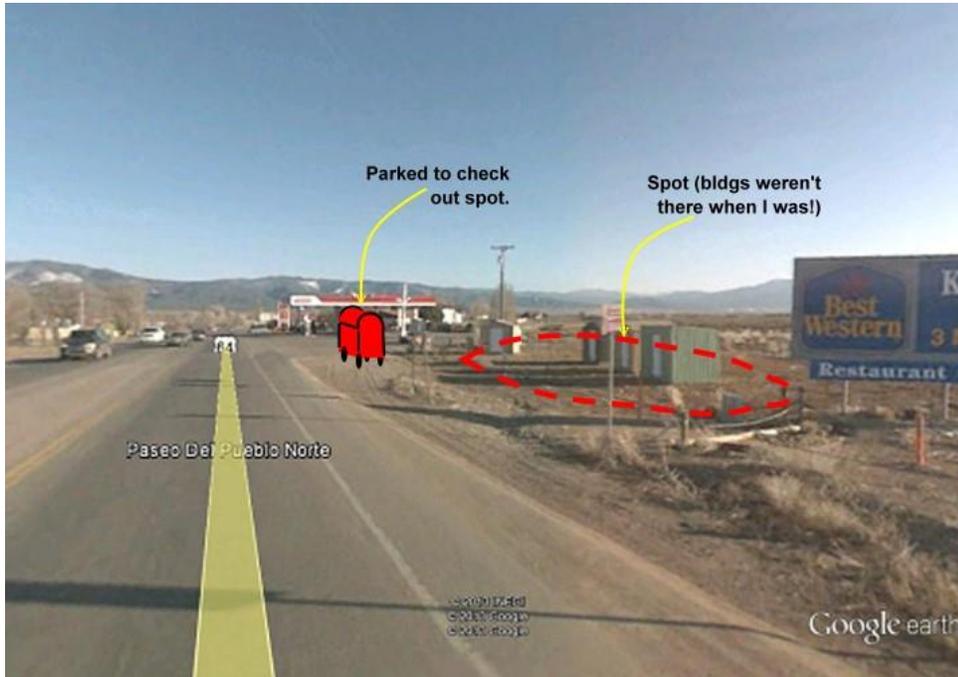
I climbed out wearin' my snow boots and kissed the mules up to get'em goin'. They hit the collar runnin' and it was all I could do to keep from getting' pulled up the grade by the drivin' lines in my hand! With a few loud whoas and a forceful pull on the lines I got them stopped finally, and I jumped back in the cab. "OK" I said "Ya wanna be that way? Then let's do it!" and we were off at a tuggin' pace that

would make a Clidesdale blush with envy.

The pull didn't wear them mules down one bit! At the top of the grade I stopped for a minute to let them take a breath, but hey seemed to not wanna stand still so I pushed on, and they got up into a trot and then into a lope, and they held that pace for the next 4 miles getting' us to the intersection of 64/230 a lot faster than I would have believed. The mules weren't as tired as I was when we pulled up to park just shy of the gas station.



There was nuthin' to tie the team to so I just set the brake, stepped down and walked over to the proposed setup spot. I knew that before pullin' off the road durin' that time of year (spring) could be tricky 'cause the spring thaw brings on the mud, and it can be deep. The surface may look solid but just under the crust the slime can be feet thick. So, I wanted to avoid any possible stickin' in the mud.

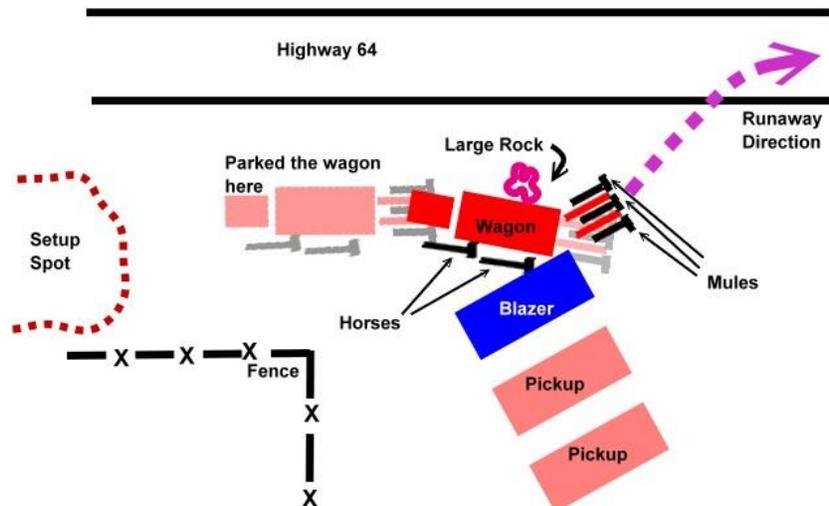


I was walkin' around the spot testin' the soil when I heard the dog (Chelsea) barkin'. It was bark I had heard before when she was getting' after the mules or horses. I turned around just in time to see the wagon move forward and jam the right single tree up into the wheel well of a red Blazer parked near by.

I ran as fast as I could back to the wagon, and when I got there I shut the dog up and surveyed the damage. Fortunately there was none, except that I was gonna have to unstick the wagon from the Blazer. I could barely reach through the door to get ahold of the lines, and there was no way I could get in myself. I took the horses that were tied to the side and asked a couple of fellers sittin' on a tailgate in the parkin' lot to hold them for me while I got the wagon out of the predicament it was in. Reluctantly the two agreed and I went to work.

The right side of the wagon was next to the Blazer and on the left side was a large boulder, so I was literally caught between a rock and a hard place! The thing was...I wasn't laughin' at the time. The mules didn't really have much of a reverse, but I could turn them hard to the left to clear the Blazer, which I did. Then the trouble began.

Chelsea decided that I needed help with the mules and began to bark like crazy causin' the mules to jump ahead with a jerk and the cab door flew open. Out came Chelsea at a run snappin' at the heels of the mules. I yelled at Chelsea, only makin' matters worse causin' the mules to pull even harder.



The forward momentum was the only thing that kept me from fallin' on my face as I tried to keep up with the pace. The snow boots I was wearin' didn't help any either. The drivin' lines slowly slipped from my hands as I slowed and the wagon went faster until they were gone completely. By this time I was standin' in the middle of a busy highway watchin' all my worldly possessions go merrily down the road without me.

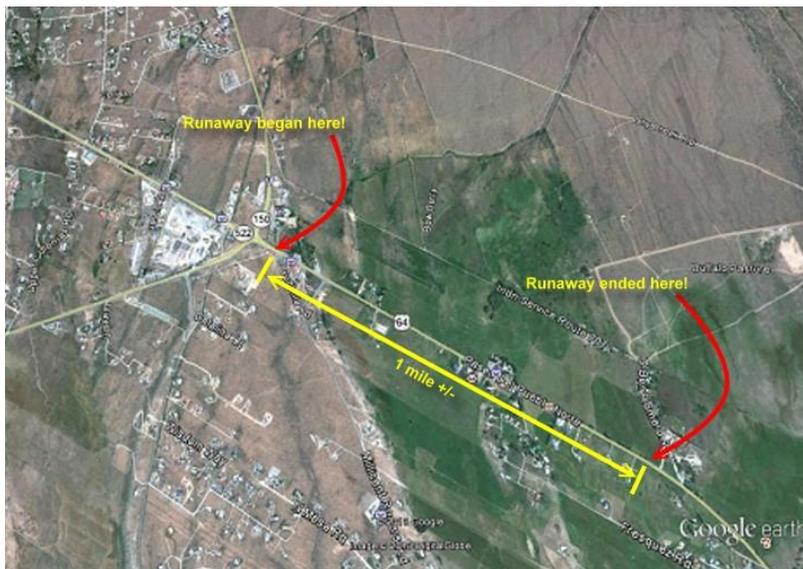
Out of despair and frustration I tore off my hat and threw it as hard as I could onto the pavement utterin' a few words of which I wouldn't speak otherwise. Then I realized I was standin' in the middle of the road!

The first vehicle to avoid hittin' me was a van with one of those high dollar paint jobs on it, and then a woman in a station wagon. Neither of them really slowed down. They swerved around me and kept on goin'. A white van came up next and stopped and the driver asked what the problem was and I told him to "Follow that wagon!" The look on his face was odd, but this was an odd situation. He hit the gas and we were in pursuit of the runaway.

We caught up with the mules about a mile down the road and my heart was a racin'! I just knew the mules had run into the side of that fancy painted van that had passed me earlier and was now parked in front of the wagon, or maybe the station wagon parked on the side in the middle of the road. None of my worst fears happened! The two good Samaritans had managed to box the mules in with the van in front, the station wagon along the traffic side, and a guardrail on the ditch side.

With the look of astonishment I ran to the guy who was lightly holdin' the bridles of two of the mules and sighed a relief that all looked well - except for the mules which were panting pretty hard. The guy (Never did get his, or the lady drivin' the station wagon's name?) asked me if I had lost something - with a smile on his face.

Pleasantries were exchanged for a brief moment, and then the two who pulled off the miracle took off with a final "Good Luck!" to me. I didn't waste any time gettin' ahold of the lines and turnin' the wagon



around to go back to retrieve the horses I had left in the care of the two now flabbergasted fellers. Neither of the two seemed to be horsemen, and I was sure that the horses were not happy about their wagon takin' off without them. They were shor' happy for me to take the lead ropes from them, and then they left quickly 'cause they were late for work.

I sat there for a spell letting the blood pressure go down and thought about the events of the

previous 20 minutes! (If that long!) I was so mad at Chelsea for startin' the whole mess. I made her get in the back of the wagon and lay down, then I kissed the mules up and headed them to a spot where I had camped just before goin' up into the ski valley. I just wanted to park the wagon, stake the mules and horses out, then go get me a good stiff drink. I settled for coffee inside the cold wagon 'cause I didn't have the money to spend on alcohol. I was bushed, and after the feedin' I went to bed! Just another day on the trail!

