

Cibolo Rock

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The name on the logo sign in front of the four-legged limestone boulder found in Presidio County along Highway 67, near the headwaters of Cibolo Creek at the entrance to the legendary Cibolo Ranch built among the ruins of an early-1700s Spanish mission dedicated to the Cibolo Indians, is not that of the uniquely American mammal the Spanish called cibolo (bison or buffalo). Instead, it is Elephant Rock. The incongruity of its name, while imperceptible to most passersby, distracts from its remarkable setting. Given no other information, the passing motorists are left to conclude that what is most salient about that place is an isolated rock shaped by random natural forces. Meanwhile, the highway runs by that distinctive rock in the first place because of a rich local legacy. A place name that reconciles with the local historical and natural, as well as with the shape of the rock, would do better justice to both. Elephant is a credible interpretation of the form presented in the rock, but the shape is far from a perfect depiction of an elephant. It has no discernable trunk, big ears, stringy tail, or even any hint of tusks. It allows for a wide spectrum of equally credible totems, African and American, including a grazing rhinoceros, dinosaur (triceratops), bear, bison, and even the once-native giant sloth. Passing motorists see an elephant primarily because that is what the sign suggests, but they could just as easily see a cibolo if the sign indicated that, and there are many other reasons than its appearance to call it cibolo.

Placenames matter. They convey the significance of the place they demarcate¹. They may relate why it is important to the humans who came in contact with it. They may also indicate the place's importance to the surrounding non-human environment, like a spring or the epicenter of an ancient meteorite strike. Of course, they can also provide levity. That is the case of the logo sign a few miles south of Elephant Rock, where motorists can read "Profile of Lincoln" as the interpretation of the outline of the Burro Mountains visible in the far distance west of the highway. In that wide-open space, twenty miles away from the town of Presidio, the imaginative suggestion of the profile of any historical personality is a welcomed and safe distraction. As a prop for entertainment, it fits perfectly in that long straight stretch of highway. The apparent purpose of the logo sign in front of Elephant Rock is also to entertain. In this case, however, the whimsy of an elephant instead of a bison or buffalo in a place that once harbored Cibolo Indians, an expansive ranch named Cibolo, and cibolo herds—never elephants, is an imperfect choice. At best, it is a lost opportunity to share meaningful information with passing motorists, as well as entertain them. At worst, it contradicts reality, as it suggests to motorists that nothing outstanding ever occurred or currently occurs there.

¹ Basso, Keith H, "*Wisdom Sits in Places*" (University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 7

Ranchería de los Cíbolos

The moniker for the area surrounding the rock, if not also the rock itself, is more than three hundred years old. The earliest it appears in the record is 1715. That year while reconnoitering the pueblos of La Junta, Spanish Sergeant Major Antonio Trasviña y Retis noted the existence of a *rancheria* (community) of “Sibolo ” Indians at the springs feeding what today is Cibolo Creek.² The settlement was large enough that Trasviña y Retis left behind a friar who had been traveling with him, Friar Gregorio Osoria, to minister to the people in the Mission Santa María la Redonda de los Cíbolos, located approximately twenty miles north of present day Presidio³.

The Spanish referred to the Indians they thought came from the Great Plains as Cibolos. This convention evolved from reports by Francisco Coronado about his exploration of the Southern Great Plains in the mid-1500s, where the Spanish made their first contact with the American plains bison. He was lured there by the myth of the gold laden Seven Cities of Cibola. These stories had been brought back to Mexico by Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and his fellow survivors of a Spanish shipwreck in 1527 who wandered through Texas and crossed the Rio Grande at La Junta in the mid-1530s near present-day Presidio.⁴ Coronado set out on his expedition to the until-then unexplored north in 1540. Upon interrogating the people at every Indian settlement he encountered, he was told that the land of Cibola was located further north. He kept going as far as present-day Missouri, encountering the vast herds of bison along the way. Having encountered no gold, he returned to Mexico in 1552 empty-handed but rich in stories of his experience, including that of the countless *vacas* (cows) roaming a great plain. The plains cows and the Indians who lived off them eventually came to be known as cibolos and the plains they roamed the *Llano de los Cibola*.⁵

La Junta was a waystation on an ancient migratory route from the plains to northern Mexico. When Trasviña y Retis first went there, it had become a significant trade center, where cibolo meat and hides were traded for farm products harvested by the Pueblo people living there. His visit came soon after the reconquest of New Mexico by the Spanish, more than a decade after their expulsion in the 1680 Pueblo Revolt, which was aided by the plains Apache, who had been living in the vicinity of next the plains-facing Pecos Pueblo for centuries. One of the key strategies of the Spanish when they returned to New Mexico was to separate the Pueblos from their Apache allies. This then led to a growing presence of people from the plains in La Junta.

² Trasviña y Retes, AGN, México, University of Arizona Institutional Repository, (The University of Arizona, July 17, 1715)

³ University of Texas at San Antonio, “Spanish Missions and Presidios in Texas”, Center for Archaeological Research, Accessed January 20, 2024, <https://colfa.utsa.edu/car/missions/> .

⁴ Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *The Journey of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza De Vaca*, (Rio Grande Press, 1905).

⁵ Hamburg, “Cibolo”, (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 1947), Accessed February 6, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cibolero>.

Friar Osorio's mission among the Cibolos did not last long. Thirty years after his arrival, Commander Joseph Ydoiaga led an expedition to La Junta. Escorted by Cibolos in December of 1747 he encountered in Púliques, Ydoiaga forded the Rio Grande at present-day El Polvo, near Redford, and trekked up Cibolo Creek to the old Cibolo settlement. There he found the ruins of the old mission and a dilapidated irrigation system fed by the springs at headwaters of the creek.⁶ From then on, the Cíbolos appear on the record as one of the many Indian groups of La Junta the Spanish would document.

The old settlement at Cibolo Creek springs re-appears on the record in 1832, when local Mexican authorities granted the surrounding land to Colonel José Ygnacio Ronquillo.⁷ The grant required that Ronquillo ranch and mine and live on the land, but he was called away by military duties fighting the Apache. Before he could meet the terms of the land grant, however, he was killed in a skirmish with the Apache.

The arrival of Americans soon after the Mexican-American War brought a US cavalry fort to the area, Fort Davis. This development lured an enterprising wagon hauler operating out of La Junta by the name of Milton Faver, who saw an opportunity in raising cattle and farm products to sell to the fort. It soon proved a good idea. In 1852, Faver bought the old Cibolo mission site, which he named Fortín del Cíbolo (Stronghold of the Cibolo).⁸ Profits from his operations at Cibolo allowed Faver to buy adjoining land and expand his ranch to the point that it became the largest ranching operation in Presidio County⁹. Eventually, his operation grew to the point that it involved driving large cattle herds to market in New Orleans and Kansas¹⁰.

Faver's ranch won enough notoriety throughout Texas over time that in the 1960s, it came to be used as the setting for the popular cowboy television series, "Rawhide," starting a young Clint Eastwood. Cattle trails out of Texas and expansive hot vistas was the general theme of the show. Notably, the name of the trail boss in the show was Gil Favor.

Immediately upon the establishment of the fort, the US Cavalry began reconnoitering and mapping the region. In 1878, Major William Livermore, a surveyor at Fort Davis for whom Mount Livermore is named, plotted the salient landmarks of the region and labeled the

⁶ Madrid, Enrique, Expedition to La Junta de los Ríos 1747-1758: Captain Commander Joseph Ydoiaga Report to the Viceroy of Spain, Office of the State Archaeology Special Report 33, Texas Historical Commission, 1992.

⁷ Morgenthaler, Jefferson, "The Promised Land", in the Promised Land (University of Texas at Austin, 2004).

⁸ Texas Historical Commission, "Cibolo Creek Ranch", last modified August 27, 2023, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/cibolo-creek-ranch>

⁹ Texas Historical Marker Database, *Milton Faver Ranches*, last modified September 7th, 2017, <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=60848> .

¹⁰ Cibolo Creek Ranch, *The Cibolo Creek Ranch*, (Southwestern Holdings, 1994)

weathered boulder near the entrance to the Fortín del Cíbolo as “Cíbolo.”¹¹ Faver owned the ranch until he sold it as an old man in the 1880s. It was then parceled out to different landowners, including to John Spenser who restarted silver shaft mining operations in partnership with former officers from Fort Davis. The center of operations of the mine came to be known as Shafter.

Why an elephant instead of a cibolo?

The road from Fort Davis to Fortín del Cíbolo and Cibolo Rock diverged from what is still known as Alamito Creek Road, the traditional route to Presidio from the highway running from San Antonio to El Paso. The railroad to Presidio followed the same general alignment. This old route connected several old settlements that sprung up beginning in the mid-1800s, including the stagecoach and train watering station of Casa Piedra. Even as it grew into a highway when mining operations peaked, the road ended at Shafter until the early-1900s.¹²

The thoroughfare to Presidio did not begin to shift to the alignment that Highway 67 follows today until fifty years later. In the late-1930s, the County of Presidio and the State of Texas began acquiring right-of-way through Cíbolo from Shafter to Presidio, where most of the labor for the mines came from. Paving did not start until 1944. This was made possible by a successful county-wide bond election that allowed the county government to go into debt to meet the State’s \$3.5 million local match for improving the main roads in the county.¹³

The paving of Highway 67 was completed in 1949. This coincided with the boom in paved roads and, with that, automobile use throughout the country. The adoption of wayfinding and logo signs to assist motorists and encourage more motoring also grew. By the 1960s, the driving experience became a major focus in popular culture. Television shows like “Route 66” became major hits. Drive-in movie theaters became quite common. Billboards and giant highway logos came to compete with the natural vistas for the attention of the passing motorists. Inevitably, official road signs followed suit.

By the 1960s, signs pointing out entertaining and imaginative road sights became standard features of state and federal highway department operations.¹⁴ Focused on making the driving experience fun, many of these signs popped up with little or no local consultation. It is about this time that the sign for Elephant Rock went up. Cibolo would have been too foreign-sounding word for the time. But even if the options were buffalo or elephant, the latter would have been the easier choice. Its cache is well proven. There are more movie star elephants,

¹¹ Presidio County Courthouse, “Elephant Rock”, (History Files, 1978), Marfa, Tx, retrieved Dec, 19 2023.

¹² Cibolo Creek Ranch, *The Cibolo Creek Ranch*, (Southwestern Holdings, 1994).

¹³ Minutes of the Presidio County Commissioners Court, November 30, 1929.

¹⁴ Jensen, Bruce, Texas Department of Transportation, Environmental Affairs Division, *Historic Road Infrastructure of Texas 1866-1965, United States Department of Interior* , 2015, 85-86.

like Dumbo, than buffalos. The average driver is hard pressed to immediately think of a fun personality for a cow-like beast that had once almost disappeared from the American landscape like the buffalo. And it is the preferred icon in many other places. Today more than half dozen states and many countries have one, and there are three other Elephant Rocks in Texas, including nearby El Paso County.¹⁵

Why not a Cibolo in 2024?

The term cibolo spans all possible dimensions of Presidio County's identity, grounded at the precise location where that rock rests. It starts with the first historical records associated with the region. It is a rock shaped by nature resembling the bison that once grazed around it. It attaches to the creek that runs through the valley floor within eyesight of it. It attaches to the history of the Indians who lived there, passes on that of the same of the Spanish and Mexicans who came later, and carries on further to that of the Americans who came after them. It attaches to all the ways that humans made a living in the region, farming, ranching and mining. As the backdrop behind the logo sign that stands there today, cibolo towers over Elephant Rock.

It is only through the power of suggestion that the rock resembles an exotic elephant, its trunk buried unnaturally out of sight in the ground and the limestone offering no possibility at all for a tail and elephant-like ears. A more natural suggestion is that of an iconic American bison grazing the plain, alone but well-integrated into the land. Should passersby finally see the cibolo in that rock, they will also appreciate the centuries of human legacy associated with that totem in that place, perhaps also the millennia of generations of cibolos who visited that rock weathered in their image.

If indeed the past six decades of the current placename's existence has made it an irrevocable historical marker, then there should be at least a marker in the widened highway shoulder that tells the story of the three centuries that made cibolo historical. In this way, the whimsy of an elephant in the West Texas landscape will finally meld into the local narrative of the Cibolo.

¹⁵ Casey, Clifford B, "Archives of the Big Bend", (Sul Ross State University, 1981); Wicker, Doug R, Franklin Mountains, 2015, <https://rdougwicker.com/tag/franklin-mountains/>
https://athenaeum.sulross.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/C338C_Clifford-B-Casey-Papers.pdf

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