

FOLLOWING THE WARPATH: Carrizo Canyon

There are conflicting opinions as to exactly where the “Carrizo Canyon” fight, sometimes referred to as “The Battle of Ciénega Ranch” occurred. A 1980 archeological survey reportedly identified the battleground at the west end of the Salado Box, a narrow canyon 18 miles west of Sabinal.¹ But Roland places the site “somewhere slightly to the northwest” of Santa Rita, which is now the ghost town of Riley on the north bank of the Salado.² There is a *ciénega*³ in that direction, but no Carrizo Canyon. However, there is a *Carrizozo* Canyon 28 miles WSW of Sabinal and about 7 miles west of Riley.

“*Cañon de los Negros*” immediately to the east of Carrizozo Canyon may preserve a folk memory of the buffalo soldiers who fought and died nearby. There’s a “Monument Hill” just to the east of where the road to Riley crosses the broad lower reaches of the canyon, about three miles north of Carrizozo Spring. I didn’t climb the hill, and saw no monument visible through binoculars, but the name may also commemorate Parker’s fight with Nana. Other than these slim clues and the similarity of names, I have no evidence that Carrizozo Canyon was the site of the battle.



The unpaved county road to Riley crosses the Rio Puerco on an antique iron truss bridge and circles Ladrone Peak to the north and west before dropping down to the Rio Salado. It’s badly washboarded in some spots and soft sand in others; the last few miles are narrow, winding and steep as you thread the Salado breaks.

¹ Lekson, p. 43.

² Roland, p. 294.

³ *Carrizo* and its variant *carrizozo* mean “reed” in Spanish, while a *ciénega* is a marsh; both names are commonly associated with wet meadowland.



Along most of its length the Rio Salado meanders along a broad floodplain bounded by high cutbanks, deep sand in the dry season and mud and quicksand in the rainy season.

Although it's rarely more than a foot deep and 20' wide, there are only three places I know of where the Salado can be forded even with a high clearance 4WD vehicle. Put it in low gear, follow the ruts made by the last guy across, and maintain momentum – once you stop, you're done, and there's nothing to do but get out ax and shovel and hope you can dig yourself out before the next rain.

My maps disagreed on the exact public land boundaries, but it was clear the mouth of Carrizozo Canyon was on posted land, and there is no public road or trail that leads into the canyon from the north. I determined that the only way to get there was to hike cross-country from the west.



Cottonwood Spring has been closely fenced to keep it from being trampled and polluted by range cattle and so still retains some of the original flavor of what these canyon waterholes looked like more than a century ago.



I've about given up trying to capture a Western sunset. The way the light changes and the colors shift from one moment to the next would be the despair of an en plein air painter.



The next morning I first tried hiking east from Cottonwood Spring, hoping to follow a game trail that would lead me over the saddle into the next canyon, and then over the next ridge to come down into the upper end of Carrizozo Canyon at Barrel Spring. Unfortunately, the trail petered out after about ½ mile, the slope became much steeper, and the ground underfoot rocky and loose. Rather than risk a fall so far from help, I turned back and tried again from farther up the road.



The cross-country hike from the road into Carrizozo Canyon is about 5 miles round trip.



Although it's been tapped to feed a couple of small stock tanks farther down the canyon, there's still enough water at Carrizozo Spring to attract range cattle and wildlife. It may have looked very much like this when Capt. Parker and his troopers arrived, hot on Nana's trail.



As Carrizozo Canyon doglegs sharply to the right (Barrel Spring is beyond the notch in right center of this photo), the knee-high *chamisa* in the canyon bottom offers a little concealment but no effective cover from bullets. While the heights to the left (east) are almost sheer cliffs with rocks offering excellent positions for riflemen, the slope on the right (west) is much more gradual and almost entirely bare all the way to the crest. The height to the left and the equally steep but lower hill directly ahead offer a classic “L”-shaped ambush position.

[Maps](#)

[Carrizozo Canyon](#)

[The Raid](#)

[The Warpath](#)

[Home](#)