

## **FOLLOWING THE WARPATH: Mining Camps & Mountain Roads**



**Caballo Lake SP, on the Rio Grande south of Elephant Butte, makes a pleasant jumping off point for an excursion into the Gila back country.**

NM52, running west from I-25 north of Truth or Consequences, is paved all the way to its junction with NM59, which is paved from there to Beaverhead, on the other side of the Black Range. Along the way you first pass through the old village of Cuchillo to Winston, with a short detour over the hill to Chloride.



**The old junk cars and ruined buildings on the ridge above might give the impression that Cuchillo itself is abandoned, but in fact the houses and little farms strung along the arroyo are still occupied. Unfortunately, the country bar that was once the town's chief attraction was closed and in disrepair the last time I passed through.**





**There are a few of the old buildings still standing in Winston, in varying stages of decay, but the town is far from abandoned. There's an excellent general store (with the last gas pump you'll see for many a mile; you may want to top off your tank before driving on).**



**Neither is Chloride a ghost town. It's neat and well-tended by the few remaining residents, and boasts some lovingly preserved old buildings, including a 'time capsule museum' – an old general store closed up fully stocked in 1923 and not reopened until the 1970's.**



**What Chloride lacks (ironic for a town that once supported nine saloons) is a bar, convenience store, or any other commercial enterprise,**

In 1879 Harry Pye was a down-on-his-luck prospector working for a grubstake as a mule skinner when he picked up some promising fragments of rock in a canyon leading up into the Black Range. The samples assayed as a high grade of silver chloride, and the canyon became known as Chloride Gulch. Pye himself was killed by the Apaches when his revolver jammed at an inopportune moment shortly thereafter, and the first group of adventurous prospectors was forced to retreat to the Rio Grande. But despite the Indian threat prospects were too rich to resist, and by the summer of 1881 several rough log buildings – including the inevitable saloon – had been erected, a tent city filled the canyon and hundreds of men were working dozens of claims in the newly established Apache Mining District. Some of the new mines, including the U.S. Treasury, the Wall Street and the Nana, proved rich, but the boom was short-lived, When the country went to the gold standard in 1896 and the price of silver dropped, Chloride swiftly dwindled away to its current size.



**A mile or so past the turnoff from NM52 onto NM59 there's a sign marking the former site of the Ojo Caliente agency. This was part of the reservation, but the agency itself was east of here, close to the spring from which it took its name.**



**Dispersed camping (outside an established campground) is allowed in Gila National Forest, and jeep trails branching off NM 59 on the way to Beaverhead allow access to a number of pleasant sites.**



**For a picnic table, fire ring and pit toilet, the FS Wolf Hollow campground is just below Beaverhead.**

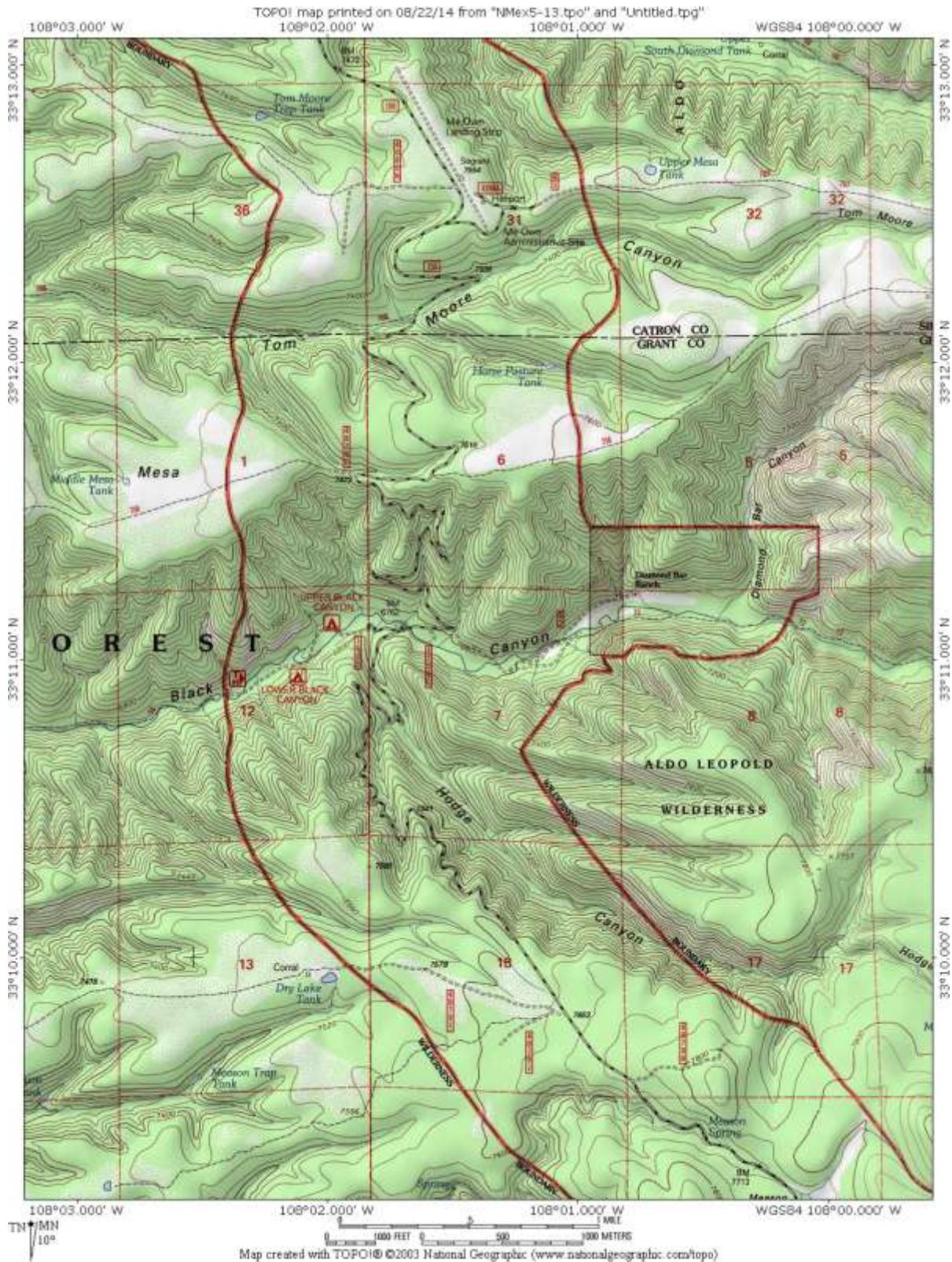


**NM 52 is paved to the turnoff to NM 59, and 59 is paved west to Beaverhead, on the high plateau on the other side of the Black Range.**



**South from Beaverhead, Gila FR 150 is a one-lane dirt road aptly named the “Geronimo Trail.”**

On the Forest Service’s “Pocket Guide” to the Gila, the road appears to be a relatively straightforward run down a canyon that more or less parallels the East Fork of the Gila to the west and ultimately meets the Mimbres River. Instead the road quickly climbs out of the Beaver Creek drainage, drops back down to cross Indian Creek, climbs back up over the mesa only to drop precipitously down into Whitewater Canyon, then back up and over another mesa and down into Diamond Creek Canyon, up and down into North Star Canyon, over the next ridge and down into Black Canyon, up and down again into Rocky Canyon, and then in and out of Terry Canyon before finally following the Continental Divide down to Sapillo Creek and pavement at NM35.



This larger scale topo map of just one short section of the road gives some idea of the seemingly endless succession of shoulder-free hairpin turns, steep climbs and hair-raising descents in this 40-mile rollercoaster.



But the countryside is very pretty wherever the road momentarily straightens out long enough to allow a glimpse of the passing scene. This is near Wall Lake, still marked on some maps as a public campground but now closed on private land.

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