



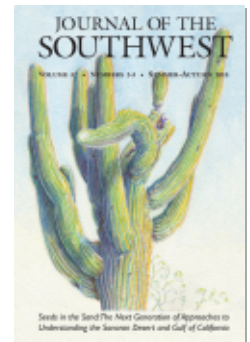
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The Trooqui Treen: A Seri Truck

CATHY MOSER MARLETT

In the early twentieth century the shores and desert surrounding the northeastern Gulf of California were isolated from and largely unknown to Euro-Americans, whose image of the area as treacherous and populated by “savages” was fueled by popular articles and pulp fiction. Overland access to the gulf was difficult because of the remote desert expanses, and any roads were just simple tracks made by the horse- or mule-drawn carts of a few small inland cattle ranches. Then, in the 1920s, commercial fishing expanded into the area and reached the shores of what is now Bahía de Kino, in Sonora, Mexico, long a place of traditional winter camps of the Seri (Comcaac) people. It was at this time that this small group, numbering in the low hundreds, began to emerge from an isolated existence into a world of significant change.

In 2006 I was sent a link to digital images posted online by the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology in Berkeley, California, made from photographs taken by anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber while on a short visit to Sonora in March 1930. The photographs were taken on Tiburon Island and at Estero Santa Rosa, a “negative estuary”¹ on the mainland opposite the island. A number of them are of Seri individuals. In two of the photographs, some Seris and several non-Seri Mexicans are grouped around a flatbed truck with a conspicuous chimney-like tank behind its cab and a wooden crate structure at its rear (see figure 1).² My interest was piqued, as I was unaware of a road, or most certainly a truck, in that area at such an early date.

I spent much of my childhood as well as time during recent years in the Seri village of Desemboque, and speak the language. While doing research for my book *Shells on a Desert Shore* (Marlett 2014), I found that seemingly mundane information sometimes leads to a fascinating trail in oral history. So, high on my list of questions for my next visit to Seri country were some about the truck. When I showed the photographs to several older Seri friends I got a response of immediate recognition—“That’s the *Trooqui Treen!*” Since I had never heard of the truck, the fact that it existed and was even remembered by a name intrigued me.



Figure 1. The Trooqui Treen at Estero Santa Rosa, 1930. Seris identify the man in the white shirt at the far right as Chico Romero, and the man seated in the cab as probably either (the non-Seri) Roberto Thomson Encinas or his brother Luis. Photograph by Alfred L. Kroeber, courtesy of the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology and the Regents of the University of California, catalog no. 15-8743.

Here was a road to follow; here might be a bit of history, as indeed there turned out to be. I found a few people who recalled details that they had been told about the truck, such as what it looked like, where it was used, what it transported, and who drove it; there was even a woman who rode on the truck as a child, and told me her story. And, finally, having someone recall and sing a short song about the truck, composed by an early player in the story, certainly provided the crowning detail. Later I found a few brief notes mentioning the truck, made in the mid twentieth century by both my mother, Mary Beck Moser, and by anthropologist William Neil Smith, based on Seri recollections.³

THE STORY

Traditionally a hunter-gatherer people, the Seris have long inhabited a remote area of the Sonoran Desert along the eastern shore of the Gulf of California. Relations between the people and the encroaching agricultural and cattle-raising world were often turbulent, and friendly

contact was rare.⁴ However, with the advance of commercial fishing into the area, interaction between the Seris and outsiders sharply increased.⁵

Several Seri individuals became better known as they related to outsiders, and in 1925 one of these, Chico Romero, was given a more official role as “governor” by the Mexican government in hopes that he would be a reliable contact and help maintain peaceful relations between the Seris and the outside world.⁶

During these years, besides commercial fish buyers and Mexican fishermen who came into the area for work, English-speaking visitors were attracted to the area by the establishment of the Kino Bay Club, a hunting and fishing club begun by an American, Yates L. Holmes, in 1926 (Smith 1954). Before this, according to Seri oral accounts, the people had a long history of trading salt, deerskins, and other commodities to non-Seri settlers on ranches in the area, and even as far away as Hermosillo, the state capital, about a six-day trek by foot from the coast. This new settlement in Bahía de Kino provided opportunities for trade in closer proximity, and the people took advantage of more consistent interaction with outsiders, especially American tourists (Spicer 1962: 115). They traded or sold not only their crafts, but fish and shellfish as well (Marlett 2014: 45–48).

A special friend was Roberto Thomson Encinas, a man whose family had long ranched in the area. A brief childhood encounter on his family’s ranch seeing a group of captive Seris that were cruelly bound and being led into exile had left a vivid and lasting impression and gave him a special interest in helping this people (Ryerson 2005: 127–129). Besides being an acknowledged peacemaker and intermediary between the Seris and the Mexican authorities, Thomson helped establish a federal school in Bahía de Kino, and provided other aid as well, in 1928 procuring a twelve-ton boat and a truck to help the Seris transport goods, natural resources, and people (Smith 1954).⁷

One can only imagine what a wonderful piece of fortune was the truck for the nomadic Seris, and what a ride through the desert must have meant, as these long and thirsty journeys had always been made on foot. Certainly, the large, noisy, and smoking truck was quite a spectacle; a Seri woman, Raquel Moreno, recalled her father recounting how the people fled into the mesquite thickets near Bahía de Kino when they first heard the truck coming through the desert.

The truck was described as having tires that “were without air” and made from rubber, “instead of metal,” perhaps for clarification, as metal

wheels might be implied by the name *treen* (an adaptation of Spanish *tren*, ‘train’).⁸ Its long flat bed that could accommodate a crowd and its large metal “chimney” that “when the engine started, lots of white smoke billowed out of” were distinguishing features that prompted the truck’s name—*Trooqui Treen*, ‘Train Truck’.⁹

A dirt road already existed through the desert from Rancho Costa Rica, a long-established ranch west of Hermosillo, to the coast at Bahía de Kino. However, as described by María Luisa Astorga (whose family figures in the account presented below), there were no roads into the mountainous coast beyond, and most outsiders were afraid to go there because of its inhabitants. The provision of a truck created a way for the Seris themselves to participate in opening up access to the area by making a road, clearing the way and laying down wood or brush for the truck to drive over in the more sandy areas.¹⁰

The road left the coast and headed northward through the flats bordering Bahía de Kino, skirting the small mountain called *Hast If* and crossing the sandy expanse south of the large, usually dry lake bed of Playa San Bartolo. From there it climbed westward into the mountains through the pristine rugged desert landscape, to the traditional mountain camp of *Hast Hax* (at the site now known to outsiders as Pozo Peña). From that point the road meandered through the mountains and then down into the low coastal desert (see figures 2 and 5), finally reaching the shores bordering Estero Santa Rosa and the camp called *Pnaacoj quih Iicot Cöiictim*. The estero was a place thick with protective mangroves and, most important, provided the nearest access to the shores of Tiburon Island.

The *Trooqui Treen* transported fish and shellfish to Bahía de Kino, bringing fresh water and supplies back to the Seris. One person recalled hearing that it carried lumber and nails for boat building, cloth, and an occasional cowhide for making sandals. The truck also ferried the people to Rancho Costa Rica, where they were paid to help harvest produce such as melons, beans, corn, and wheat—and, as a bonus, the truck gave them a new and convenient means of travel between their own desert camps as well.

A few Seri men were taught to drive the truck. Those named are Santo Blanco (a man who also spoke Spanish and was accustomed to interacting with outsiders), Chico Romero, and Manuel Encinas (the grandfather of Victoria Astorga, whose account appears below). The Seris are quick to give nicknames based on a person’s appearance, speech, or actions: Another driver of the truck was a young man named Luis Güicho, whose



Figure 2. The Trooqui Treen road heading west from Hast Hax and toward the coast, 2015. Photograph by the author.

skill at using the gearshift earned him the playful nickname *Eenm Hapoj an Ihimoz iti Coha*, ‘Gearshift Lever’. And Chico Romero’s young son, Fernando Romero, was humorously dubbed *Trooqui Treen*; as suggested to me, the name was given because both the truck and the boy “belonged” to Chico Romero, the appointed leader.

Seri songs are the poetry of the people as they relate to their world. There are lullabies, haunting laments relating to tragic events, songs of power and the supernatural, of victory over enemies, and a great many about familiar creatures of the desert and sea. Often a song’s composer is referenced with its performance, and certain individuals are recalled as prolific composers. Antonio Herrera was the first Seri constable—and called *Cmaacoj Policio [sic]*, ‘Old Man Policeman’, by the people—and was perhaps best known as a storyteller, dancer, and singer. It was he who composed a short song with Spanish words to celebrate the *Trooqui Treen*, sung to me by the late Cleotilde Morales¹¹:

*E canzone de la tren,
 E canzone de la tren,
 Ay va bonito la tren!
 E canzone de la tren,
 E canzone de la tren,
 ¡Ay va bonito, la tren, tren, tren, tren!*

The song of the train,
 The song of the train,
 There goes the beautiful train!
 The song of the train,
 The song of the train,
 There goes the beautiful train, train, train, train!

When I began inquiring about the truck, it was obvious that at this late date the information was secondhand—until one day I learned that the *Trooqui Treen* once carried a young girl on a short journey from a mountain camp to Bahía de Kino, and who turned out to be one of my own research consultants. In 2007 Victoria Astorga (see figure 3), then around the age of eighty-five, described for me her ride on the *Trooqui Treen*.

Central to Victoria's account is *Hast Hax*, the mountain camp mentioned above, strategically located at a pass that gave entrance to the coastal Seri territory. The nearby cave-riddled hills provided a clear view of the plains stretching eastward toward Hermosillo; visible westward was the narrow strait (the Infiernillo Channel) across which lay Tiburon Island, an ancient Seri homeland and refuge. *Hast Hax* was an important summer camp where the people harvested cactus fruit and processed mesquite pods collected in the extensive groves near Playa San Bartolo. Thirteen deep bedrock mortars are still there, reminders of times past when the toasted pods were pounded into tasty flour (see figure 4).

As background, Victoria described her childhood games, and how her brother playfully gave her the name *Lieble* (from a babytalk pronunciation of *liebre*, Spanish for jackrabbit). She then briefly referred to a serious incident involving outsiders that induced her family to flee into desert areas beyond the more often frequented Seri territory. *Xazojaapa Yaayam* was a camp far to the north of what is now Puerto Libertad, and where nearby mountains held natural water tanks; here Victoria's family lived for several years.

When she was about eight years old, Victoria's family began a long journey southward to rejoin other Seris (see figure 5). Their small group consisted of Victoria, her parents Guadalupe Astorga and Carmelita



Figure 3. Victoria Astorga, Punta Chueca, 2008. Photograph by the author.

Encinas, her brother José Astorga, aunt Catalina Mata, and cousins Manuela and María Luz Díaz (daughters of Porfirio Díaz, mentioned later in the account). Victoria described *Hastiscl*, the rocky hill at the tip of Punta Sargento, as being one of the places at which she recalled stopping.



Figure 4. Rosa Amelia Barnett, the daughter of Victoria Astorga, beside the bedrock mortars at Hast Hax, 2007. Photograph by the author.

From *Hastiscl* they continued south to *Xaasj Xepe iti Coyai Iteems*, a beach camp named for a long-spined cardón cactus (*Pachycereus pringlei*) growing there that evoked the whiskered appearance of pirates. It was in the heat of summer, and they were out of water. For a reason that Victoria didn't explain, they were in a great hurry, and didn't even make the effort to obtain the liquid that could be extracted from scraped barrel cactus flesh, and drunk when water was not available. When the group arrived at the camp, the biting gnats were so fierce that they had to "flee" from them. Victoria said that, to sleep at all, they slipped into the shallow water and laid their heads on the tumbled shore rocks. "That's how the Comcaac did it. Someone asked me later why I wasn't afraid of sharks!"

The following day the group walked inland, arriving at a mountain named *Hast Moosni*, and rested there. Manuela fainted from thirst, and Guadalupe carried her on his back when they resumed their journey, finally arriving at the mountain named *Hastoosxöl*, near *Hast Hax*. José Astorga, who would have been around thirteen years old, took cans and ran ahead to *Hast Hax* where other Seris were. As Victoria related this to me, her words reflected her astonishment that he could have done this, and, as she added, then come back so quickly, bringing water. She

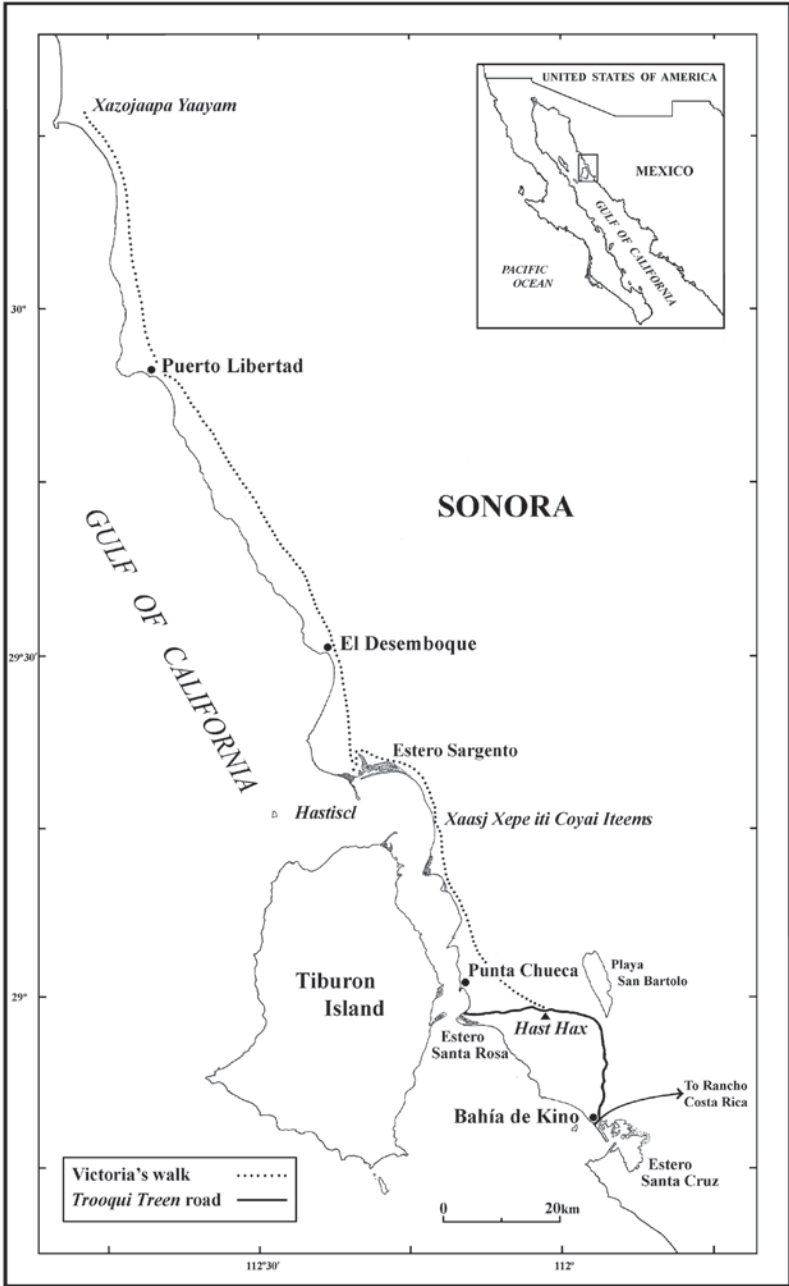


Figure 5. The eastern central Gulf of California coast showing the Trooqui Treen road and the approximate route traveled on foot by Victoria Astorga and her family.

continued her story, saying that Porfirio Díaz arrived soon after, with a carrying yoke bearing two clay vessels of water and cooked food, along with a bundle of *hatín*, dried meat.

To complete their journey, the group walked to *Hast Hax*, José carrying Manuela, who was “like a dead thing.” Victoria recalled that after arriving she was urged to play with the other children, but that she just sat there and couldn’t move, she was so tired. She described her mouth and lips as being so swollen and sore that she couldn’t eat, her skin sunburned “like it was fire-blackened,” and her feet very sore, adding that she wore bright blue pants and black shoes, now in tatters.

There were men gambling in the caves high above the camp. They began yelling and calling out, “*Trooqui Treen quih tii mxoa! Trooqui Treen quih tii mxoa!*” (*Trooqui Treen* is coming! *Trooqui Treen* is coming!). The truck was coming up through the desert from Bahía de Kino. Someone called, “*Lieble, Lieble*, come see the *Trooqui Treen!*” but Victoria recalled being too tired to move. She described the insides of her shoes as being moist from her burst blisters, and said that she didn’t even stand up because she didn’t want the others to see her feet and tattered shoes, keeping them hidden beneath her.

The truck arrived, driven by a non-Seri driver named Pancho, the son of Alberto Durazo “El Dólar,” who made the first road to a fishing camp on the southern shore of Punta Tepopa. On the truck were five gallon-sized glass jugs containing Mexican liquor. Victoria described the people drinking the liquor and getting very drunk, clarifying that it was not their own homemade cactus fruit wine, but was much stronger. Everyone was dancing, especially Porfirio’s wife, Juana. They all climbed aboard the truck—it was full of people, still drinking, and Juana still dancing—and rode down to Bahía de Kino. In finishing her story, Victoria recalled being very frightened on the trip, adding that she had never been to Bahía de Kino, or so far south.

We don’t know where in the truck’s story Victoria’s account fits, or how long afterward this memorable vehicle remained in use. Certainly, the maintenance of the *Trooqui Treen* was not easy. One can only imagine how difficult it was for people who knew nothing about machinery to maintain and repair the truck. It is said that the truck came equipped with a box of tools—tools that steadily dwindled in number as they were sometimes left where last used (Moser n.d.).

After a short time of use—two or three years, according to one source—the era of the *Trooqui Treen* came to an abrupt end. A few

narratives exist as explanations, the most plausible and detailed related by a contemporary of the Seris involved. Following an incident in which stored food and some wooden slat structures were stolen from the unoccupied Thomson ranch, the *Trooqui Treen* was discovered parked near Playa San Bartolo. In retaliation for the theft, Luis Thomson disabled the truck by removing critical parts, ending the truck's use by the Seris. Another account confirms that location, and adds that the truck was left there and then disappeared.

Today, all that remains of the *Trooqui Treen* is a bit of lore, a song, some nicknames, and a road—and, just perhaps, somewhere a rusted tool, long unused and unnoticed under a desert bush.

The journey on foot made by Victoria's family represents the end of an era since, as I have been told, it is the last one of such length walked by a group of Seris. The wooden boats that the people began constructing provided a new means of transportation, and a fishing cooperative set up in the following decade required its participants to settle in one place (Smith 1954). And no doubt playing an important role in their transition to a sedentary lifestyle was the increase of easily available commercial food and supplies, which made living off the land less attractive.

Almost a century after Victoria's ride on the *Trooqui Treen*, a drive on the coastal road is easily made in any vehicle. In 2013 the government completed paving of the road from Bahía de Kino to Punta Chueca (the southernmost of the two Seri villages), linking the village by a short half hour's drive to a world of brisk commerce and vacation homes. Only a few miles south of Punta Chueca, the track of the *Trooqui Treen*, its origin mostly forgotten, merges briefly with the new highway before veering off and continuing its slow path down to the shore and Estero Santa Rosa.

This short account of a few people making a long overland trek to a horizon where a novel transport carried them down into a modern settlement is perhaps a picture of the significant transformation of a mobile and isolated hunting, fishing, and gathering society into a very different kind of community settled in two seaside villages today. ❖

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Diane Boyer for first making me aware of the online digital images of Alfred Kroeber's Seri photographs, and the Phoebe A. Hearst

Museum for permission to use the photograph of the truck. The Prescott College Field Station in Bahía de Kino generously gave me access to detailed maps of the area. I am grateful to Scott Ryerson, who made available to me notes and transcripts of his 1969 interview with Roberto Thomson Encinas (in which, unfortunately, Roberto did not mention the truck).

I especially appreciate the comments of the anonymous reviewers and others who read the manuscript or helped in other ways: Steve Marlett, Nemer Narchi, Carolyn O'Meara, Richard White, and Ben Wilder.

Listening to Seri individuals recount their history is always a highlight of a visit with them. Clearly, this piece of that history would not have taken shape were it not for the input of the following people who shared details of the *Trooqui Treen* story with me: Amalia Astorga, María Luisa Astorga, Lorenzo Herrera, Cleotilde Morales, Raquel Moreno, Chavela Torres, and, most certainly, Victoria Astorga, whose childhood memories gave life to the truck's history.

NOTES

1. Felger and Broyles (2007: 617) describe such *esteros* as being a hypersaline wetland lacking a regular freshwater inflow—hence, a “negative estuary.”

2. Photographs of the truck may be viewed at <http://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf309nb6dt/dsc/#c000698>. The collection includes photographs of some of the Seris mentioned in the account: Santo Blanco (15-8726), Porfirio Díaz (15-8727), Chico Romero (15-8728 and 15-8729), Antonio Herrera (15-8730), and Luis Güicho (15-8738).

3. Any information given here that is not attributed to a specific source is from interviews I had with various Seri individuals (sometimes named specifically) between 2007 and 2015.

4. See Spicer (1962), Sheridan (1999), and Bowen (2000) for details of the history following Spanish contact.

5. This was a time of social crisis for the Seris, as noted by Smith (1954), when a series of measles and influenza epidemics in 1925 and 1926 took many lives, reducing the group from “perhaps 350 to about 160 population.”

6. A handwritten copy of an official document naming Chico Romero as “Gobernador de la Tribu Seri” is in the Arizona Historical Society archives (MS 0247, Norman W. Elton Papers, 1921–[19]73).

7. According to Smith, who spent time with the Seris from 1945 to 1967, the truck was provided to transport fish to market in Bahía de Kino and even Hermosillo. M. Moser (n.d.) notes: “General Fausto Topete gave the Seri a truck. They called it Troque Tren [*sic*] because of its being long and [having]

several wheels. It had 6 or 8 wheels [Kroeber's photographs show the truck having four—CMM].” General Fausto Topete was the governor of Sonora from 1927 to 1929.

8. Although most Seris were probably not familiar with trains, those who had visited Hermosillo might have seen them there.

9. The truck is an enigma. How it was powered remains unclear, although the Seris say that it burned wood rather than gasoline and that the crate at its rear held wood for the truck's use. The “chimney” perhaps suggests a wood-gasifier truck, and the lack of easily accessed gasoline in the remote desert would support the use of such a vehicle.

10. Later, in the 1930s, other coastal areas were reached by fish buyers who made roads through the desert to more easily access fish caught by the Seris. Seasonal fishing camps like Campo Víboras, Campo Álmon, and Campo Dólar had their inception during these years.

11. The song is obviously in non-standard Spanish. *Cancione* (instead of *canción*) may be a meter-driven adaptation, typical of Seri songs. The use of *E* instead of a standard article, *la tren* instead of *el tren*, and *Ay* instead of *Allí* or *Abí* suggests a limited knowledge of Spanish in those years of early, less consistent contact with the language. Seris who hear the song today find it quaint and humorous.

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