

The Rio Conchos Drainage: History, Archaeology, Significance

J. Charles Kelley

Introduction

The Rio Conchos drainage is the major river system of Chihuahua. Its major tributaries originate in the Sierra Madre Occidental; one of them (the Rio Florido) in the state of Durango. The Rio Conchos joins the Rio Grande (Rio Bravo) at La Junta de los Rios, near Ojinaga, Chihuahua, and Presidio, Texas. At the river junction the Rio Conchos is the master stream; reportedly, the Rio Grande above La Junta formerly went dry on occasion, and, relatively, the average annual runoff was very low. In the period of 1900-1913, prior to the establishment of Elephant Butte Reservoir on the Rio Grande above El Paso and several reservoirs on the Rio Conchos, the gauging station on the Rio Grande just above La Junta recorded an average run-off of 645,246 acre feet. In the same period the station just below the mouth of the Rio Conchos recorded an average annual run-off of 2,045,769 acre feet, over three times the run-off above the junction! (Follansbe and Dean, 1915).

History

In the early historic period the Rio Conchos served as a major trail route for the early Spanish *entradas* designed to explore New Mexico; from La Junta these early expeditions followed the Rio Grande northward. By 1567 continuing Spanish exploration, following ancient Indian trails northward from Durango through Guatimape, Zape, and Inde, had reached the Parral area and settlements (and rich mines) were established at Santa Barbara (Santa Barbola) in the San Bartolome (Allende) valley on one of the

J. Charles Kelley is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. He lives near Fort Davis, Texas, and is an Adjunct Professor of Archeology, Sul Ross State University.

tributaries of the Rio Florido. Santa Barbara became the staging ground for the expeditions that followed the Rio Conchos to La Junta and beyond. (Hammond and Rey, 1966, pp. 4-6; Rocha, 1938, pp. 67-71). Shortly thereafter, slave-raiding parties followed the Rio Florido to the Rio Conchos and down-stream at least as far as Cuchillo Parado. The classic *entradas* that followed were the Rodriguez-Chamuscado expedition of 1581-1582, and the Espejo expedition of 1582-1583 (Hammond and Rey, 1966, pp. 67-120; 153-231). Subsequently, the Spaniards heading for New Mexico discovered a shorter route leading through what is now Chihuahua City to Paso del Norte. However, Spanish expeditions continued to follow the Rio Conchos to La Junta, which became a Spanish anchor point complete with Catholic missions and eventually a presidio (Kelley, 1952, 1953). (Figure 1.) During the full historic period a drift of peoples--at first Indians, then Spaniards and subsequently *mestizos*--and culture continued down the Rio Conchos to La Junta, much of it originating in the Julimes area. (Kelley, 1952, pp. 257-295; 1953a, pp. 21-51). Anglo-American occupation of the La Junta region did not begin until the middle nineteenth century; discussion of the Mexican and Anglo-American occupations is beyond the scope of this paper.

Ethnology

Most of the upper Rio Conchos drainage from Santa Barbara to the general region above Cuchillo Parado was inhabited in the Spanish contact period by Conchos Indians, a largely non-agricultural group, hypothetically Uto-Aztecan in speech (Sauer, 1934 pp. 59-64, 81). Although it is believed that Concho territory extended down the Rio Conchos only to the area of Falomir, where the railroad crosses the river, various sources indicate that some if not all of the La Junta village groups were Concho in speech and may have on occasion been under Concho political control. Tarahumara occupation almost certainly extended into the upper tributaries of the Conchos on the northwest.

Beginning near Cuchillo Parado and continuing to La Junta and adjacent sections of the Rio Grande, the river valleys lying between mountain barriers were occupied by essentially sedentary groups whom the Spaniards nicknamed "Patarabueyes," who also may have been Uto-Aztecan in speech. These groups occupied individual village areas; they repeat in microcosm the same type of situation represented by the northern Rio Grande Pueblos--essentially independent villages united by a more or less common culture but differing in dialect or language. (Riley, 1987, pp. 285-310). Some of the La Junta villages were occupied in the winter months, at least,

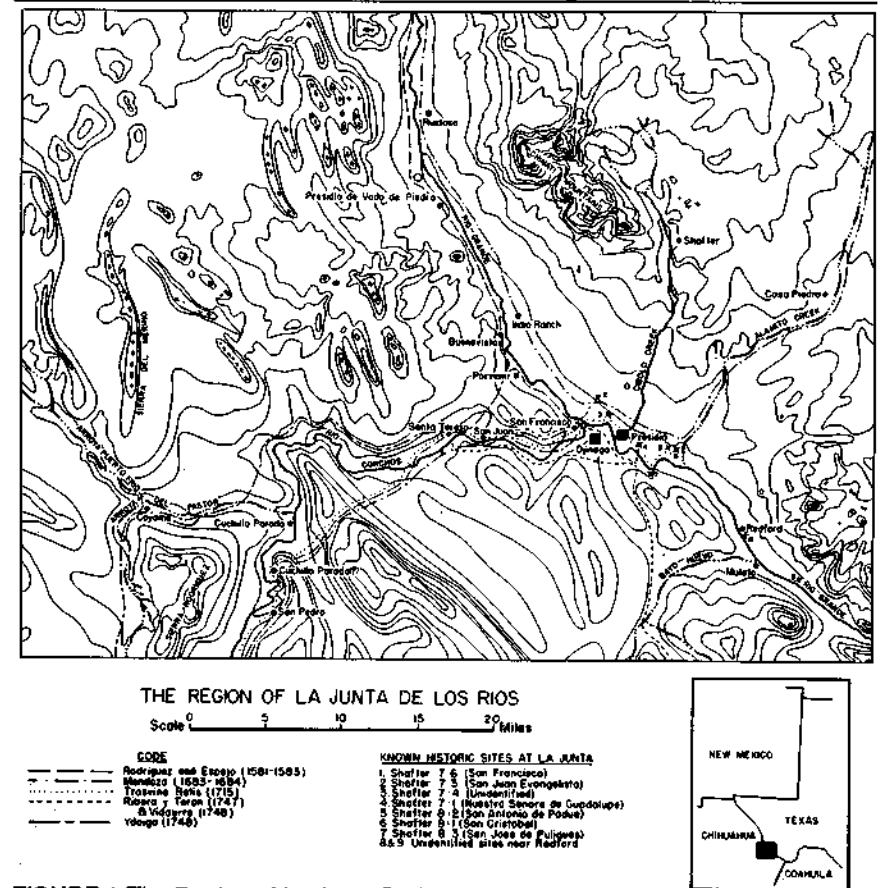


FIGURE 1. The Region of La Junta De Los Rios.

by the nomadic Jumanos ("Jumanos y Cibolos") who hunted buffalo and engaged in trade over much of aboriginal Texas. (Kelley, 1986). The Jumano may represent the first Apachean groups to enter the area, or they may have been an earlier intrusive Plains group who later were absorbed by the Apache. The mountain areas surrounding and partitioning the Rio Conchos valley were occupied by various mobile groups, principally hunter-gatherers, identified by a bewildering variety of names, and whose culture and language are virtually unknown.

Archaeological Research in the Rio Conchos Drainage and La Junta

To the best of my knowledge, archaeological reconnaissance and excavation in the Rio Conchos drainage and at La Junta de los Rios began in the 1930 decade with minor reconnaissance by Victor J.



FIGURE 2. Millington Site, Structure 2, La Junta Phase, 1938



FIGURE 4. Millington Site, La Junta Phase, 1938



FIGURE 3. Millington Site, Structure 3, Concepcion Phase, note relation to Structure 2, 1938

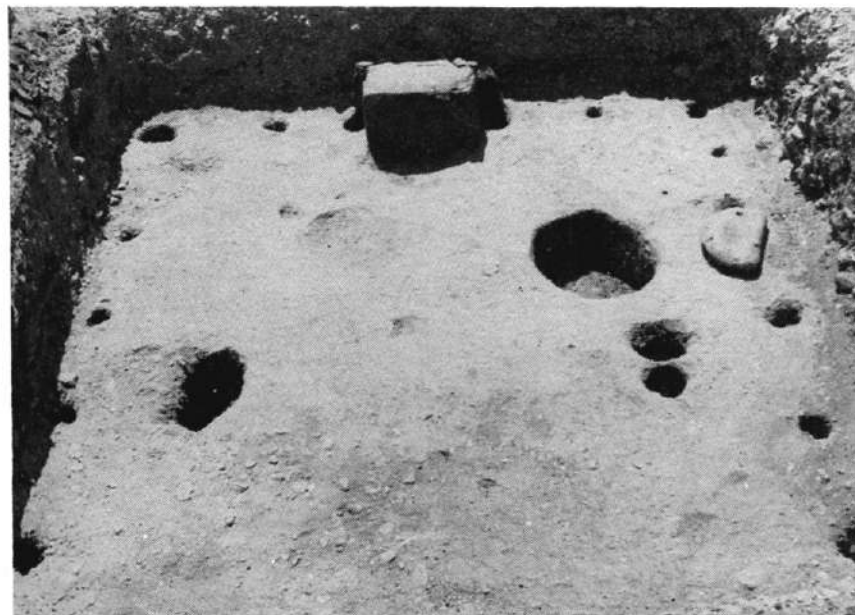


FIGURE 5. Millington Site, La Junta Phase, 1938

Smith and E. B. Sayles (Sayles, 1935) in the latter area. I carried out minor reconnaissance along both the Mexican and United States sides of the Rio Grande in the La Junta area in 1936, and in 1938. Also, in 1936 I excavated a pithouse (Kelley, 1939) on the Texas side of the Rio Grande (less than three miles below La Junta itself) at the Millington site (the historic Indian pueblo of San Cristobal [Kelley, 1953a, pp. 45-48]) located on the river bank in the eastern part of Presidio, Texas. With Donald J. Lehmer, I carried out intensive excavations at this same site in 1938-1939 (Kelley, 1986, pp. 71-85) (Figures 2, 3, 4, 5) and in 1939 I also excavated at the Loma Alta Site (the historic Indian pueblo of San Juan Evangelista [Kelley, 1953, pp. 25-29; Kelley, 1986, pp. 72-84]) located on the Texas side of the Rio Grande five miles up-river from Presidio, Texas. Excavations at these sites produced much valuable archaeological data, including identification of architectural types and development of a tentative sequence and chronology applicable to all of the La Junta sites then known.

Excavation of these La Junta sites was supported by Sul Ross State Teacher's College (now Sul Ross State University) and by small grants from the School of American Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico; labor was furnished by the Works Progress Administration.

In 1948, I carried out an archaeological reconnaissance of the United States' side of the Rio Grande from below Redford, Texas to the vicinity of La Esperanza on the Rio Grande near old Fort Quitman. In the course of this reconnaissance, which was supported by the Latin American Institute and the Department of Anthropology of The University of Texas (Austin), I excavated two pithouses located at the La Junta Indian site of Tapalcolmes (Kelley, 1953a, pp. 40-42; Kelley, 1949) located in Redford (Polvo), Texas. The following year I supervised an archaeological field school for The University of Texas (Austin) at Redford, during which other pithouses were excavated (Shackelford, 1955). Later the same summer, I carried out an archaeological reconnaissance of the Rio Conchos drainage between La Junta and the vicinity of Jimenez, located on the Rio Florido tributary of the Rio Conchos, exploring areas that could be accessed only by using a four wheel drive vehicle. During this reconnaissance I excavated a pithouse at the site of Loma Seca, located on a minor eastern tributary of the Rio Conchos about eight kilometers above Ojinaga, Chihuahua. In 1951, I surveyed otherwise inaccessible mountainous sections of the Rio Conchos between Julimes and Falomir, Chihuahua, on burro back, with financial support from the University Museum of the Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. In recent years numerous surveys have been carried out along the Rio Grande above and below La Junta, largely supported by archaeologists of the Texas State Historical Commission, including two seasons of excavations directed

by State Archaeologist Robert Mallof at the Cielo Bravo site, located down the Rio Grande from Redford, Texas; results of these recent researches, largely unpublished, are noted only incidentally in this paper.

On the upper Rio Conchos, as early as 1931, Robert M. Zingg excavated in caves located in the uppermost headwaters of the Rio Fuerte (in Tarahumara country) just across the Continental Divide from the upper headwaters of the Rio Conchos. His discoveries in this work (Zingg, 1940) are probably applicable to the archaeology of the upper tributaries of the Rio Conchos as well. As previously noted, in the early 1930s E. B. Sayles carried out an archaeological survey of Chihuahua for the Gila Pueblo of Globe, Arizona (Sayles 1936); apparently his survey included at least the upper Rio Conchos drainage, although he does not specify the areas actually covered in his published report. In 1952, while directing an archaeological field school in Durango, Mexico, I surveyed areas of the upper Rio Florido in the Durango/Chihuahua boundary area (Kelley, 1953b, pp. 172-176). Following the end of the 1952 field session, William J. Shackelford and his wife surveyed, on horseback, the Rio Conchos drainage located above Camargo, Chihuahua, continuing through the valleys of Zaragosa and San Felipe de Jesus to the mouth of the Rio San Juan tributary. (Kelley, 1953b, p. 175).

About 1955-56 Richard H. Brooks and his wife (Sheilagh) made an intensive archaeological survey of the eastern foothills of the Sierra Madre Occidental in Chihuahua and northern Durango (Brooks, 1971). In 1984 I made a "tourist" type limited survey of the valleys of Zaragosa and San Felipe de Jesus on the upper Rio Conchos. Other more limited surveys of the Rio Conchos drainage may have been made but, if so, I have no notes regarding them. I know of no other excavations made in the entire area. Much of the Rio Conchos drainage remains archaeologically unknown.

Archaeology

On the upper Rio Florido branch of the Rio Conchos a few kilometers above Villa Ocampo on the Durango-Chihuahua boundary, I found in 1952 the type site of the Loma (or Cerro) San Gabriel culture, situated on a high ridge through which the Florido flows in a steep walled canyon. The Loma San Gabriel Culture is a sub-Mesoamerican semi-sedentary culture which extended along the upper eastern foothills and upland valleys of the Sierra Madre Occidental at least as far south as southern Durango and northern Jalisco (Kelley, 1953b, pp. 172-176; Kelley 1956, pp. 132-133, in Willey, 1956; Foster, 1978; Foster, 1985, pp. 327-351, in Foster and Weigand, 1985). This culture may have extended as far north as

the valley of San Felipe de Jesus on the main Rio Conchos. In Durango the Loma San Gabriel Culture was intimately associated with various phases of the Mesoamerican Chalchihuites Culture, and may have preceded the latter. It survived the disappearance of the Chalchihuites Culture at about A.D. 14-1500, and may represent the ancestral culture of the Tepehuan Indians and perhaps also of other groups of the high sierra. Its essentially lineal distribution in northern Durango delineates the route followed by early Indian traders and colonial "camino reales." In northern Durango this trade route was intersected by another major trade route connecting coastal Sinaloa with the highlands of Durango through the Topia gap in the Sierra Madre Occidental; this trade route was used by the bearers of the late Postclassic Aztatlan culture, which dominated the last phases of the Chalchihuites Culture and may have extended into and influenced the great archaeological site of Casas Grandes, located in northwestern Chihuahua, and the American Southwest as well. (Kelley, 1986, pp. 81-104, in Mathien and McGuire, 1986).

In 1952, on the upper Rio Florido just below the Loma San Gabriel site, I found a small site on the low river terrace represented by a lithic scatter, disintegrating hearths, and rare plain brown ware potsherds. Among the lithic artifacts recovered were end-notched flat pebbles, a characteristic lithic artifact found all along the Rio Conchos to La Junta de los Rios and adjacent sections of the Rio Grande, where it represents one of the most common lithic artifacts. The settlement pattern of this Rio Conchos culture, possibly the late prehistoric manifestation of the Conchos Indian occupation, is one of small sites distributed at intervals along the river and on its lower terraces. The preferred location was an eroding low terrace remnant where a tributary stream or dry arroyo enters the river. In the mountainous middle reaches of the Rio Conchos steep walled canyons alternate with small valleys. Sites of this occupation characteristically are to be found in the valley near the boca where the river emerges from the canyon above. One of the largest of these sites is located on the northern side of the Rio Conchos below Julimes in the alluvial "delta" where the Rio Chuviscar joins the Conchos. These sites consistently are found eroding from the near surficial alluvium of the river terraces; below them, buried deeply in alluvium, there are hearths and occasional lithic artifacts and debitage exposed in the river banks. These probably represent an Archaic occupation of the area, which also occurs in open sites in adjacent mountain areas.

Plain red and brown pottery in simple forms and sparse sherds of a similar ware with red-line decoration is characteristic of these Rio Concho sites, as is a quite simple stone complex made up principally of chert or rhyolite chopping tools, knives, small arrow points, scrapers, and such pecked stone artifacts as hammer stones,

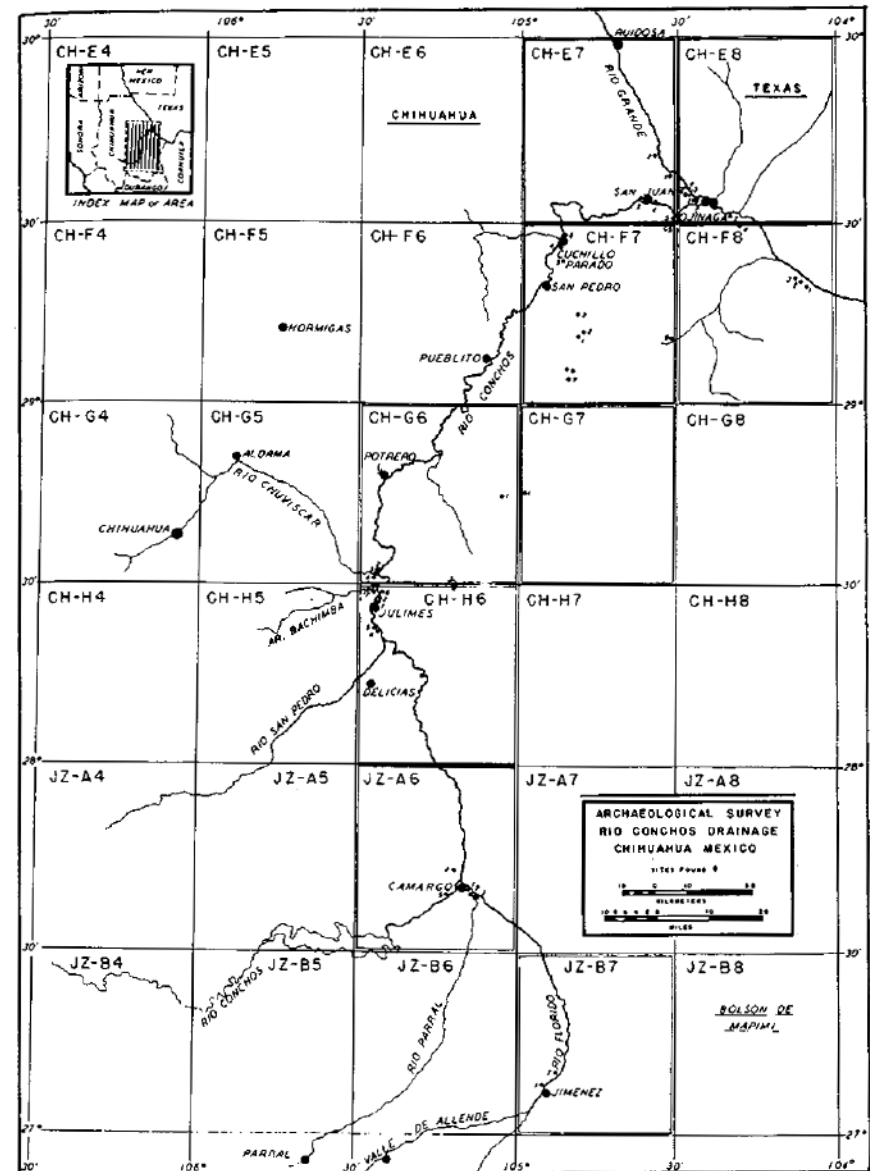


FIGURE 6. The Rio Conchos Drainage

milling stones, and end-notched pebbles. Nothing is known of the dwellings of this Conchoan culture. (Kelley, 1956, pp. 132-133, in Willey, 1956).

The extreme lower section of the Rio Conchos and adjacent sections of the Rio Grande was a region of somewhat higher aboriginal culture. There, in the zone of La Junta de los Rios, a sedentary culture, formerly known as the Rio Bravo Valley Aspect, first appeared about A.D. 1150/1250 and survived into historic times. The earliest period of this occupation, the La Junta Phase, essentially represents an isolated colony of the El Paso Phase of the Jornada Branch of the Mogollon Culture of New Mexico. Around a small linear El Paso Phase house group excavated at the Millington site, many small rectangular, and some oval or circular pithouses were constructed. Sites bearing Jornada Branch and Casas Grandes ceramics, usually found in association with large areas of hearths and lithic scatters as well as numerous and large "mescal pits" (ringmiddens), are found along the Rio Grande from the Redford valley below La Junta to the El Paso area. The time period represented is ca. A.D. 1220 to 1400/1450 A.D.; charred beams recovered from an eroding La Junta phase pithouse at the Polvo (Tapalcolmes) site in Redford have been radiocarbon dated through the courtesy of State Archaeologist Robert Mallouf and the Texas Historical Commission; the dates are 1265-1405 A. D. (Beta 29991) and A. D. 1240-1350 (Beta 29992), supporting the dates earlier developed through cross-cultural comparisons.

I now believe that all of these La Junta phase sites, including those on the lower Rio Conchos and on the Rio Grande above the river junction, were procurement stations producing surplus local plant foods (especially mescal and mesquite beans); bison skin and dried bison meat obtained from Plains groups trading at La Junta; and were extractive areas for minerals and stones; all supplying the needs of the great redistribution center of Casas Grandes (Paquime) located in northwestern Chihuahua. (DiPeso, 1974). The ceramics found in these La Junta phase components are almost all trade wares, derived either from Casas Grandes or from the Jornada Branch sites of the El Paso area. Potential agricultural land and water for more than *temporal* farming are strictly limited in the Rio Grande areas above La Junta, suggesting some other reason for the occupancy. The putative age of these sites, including the La Junta Phase, parallels that of Casas Grandes (utilizing the new unpublished dates of ca. A.D. 1250/1300 - 1450/1500); with the dissolution of the Casas Grandes interaction sphere and abandonment of Paquime, the "Central Place," these sites were also largely abandoned, even in the hearth area of the Jornada Branch near El Paso and in southeastern New Mexico.

Between about A.D. 1400/1450 and ca. A.D. 1550 the La Junta area along the lower Conchos and the adjacent Rio Grande drainage may have been almost entirely abandoned by pottery making agriculturists, leaving the area occupied only by semi-sedentary hunters and gatherers living in simple structures. Around ca. 1550 cultural influences from the south, following the Rio Conchos, may have combined with others introduced by the arrival of the Jumano (as early Apacheans?) at La Junta to form the protohistoric Concepcion phase. Shortly thereafter, in the early 1580s, the arrival of the Spaniards began the transformation of the La Junta cultures into those of the full mission period Conchos Phase.

This is a new hypothesis; formerly we had believed that there was continuity of basic features of the "Bravo Valley Aspect" from the early Jornada Branch-related La Junta Phase into the historic Conchos Phase. The research of Texas State Archaeologist Robert Mallouf in the Big Bend and La Junta regions has greatly influenced my thinking in this regard as has our massive new data base for Mesoamerican influences on northwest Mexico cultures, especially that of Casas Grandes. This new hypothesis may not survive the recovery of still more archaeological data in the La Junta area but these new data should certainly produce other new explanatory hypotheses. All the new data that accumulate serve to demonstrate the importance of Chihuahua in our understanding of the archaeological history of northwestern Mexico and the American Southwest ("Greater Mesoamerica"). What is now urgently needed is the participation of Mexican archaeologists in exploration of the archaeology of Chihuahua--and renewed attention by Texas archaeologists to archaeological research in the La Junta area.

REFERENCES CITED

- Brooks, Richard H.
1971 *Lithic Traditions in Northwestern Mexico, Paleo-Indian to Chalchihuites*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Colorado, Boulder.
- DiPeso, Charles C.
1974 *Casas Grandes, a Fallen Trading Center of the Gran Chichimeca*. 3 vols.
- Follansbee, Robert and H. S. Dean.
1915 *Water Resources of the Rio Grande Basin 1889-1913*. *United States Geological Survey, Water Supply Paper 358*.
- Foster, Michael S.
1978 *Loma San Gabriel: A Prehistoric Culture of Northwest Mexico*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Colorado, Boulder.

- 1985 The Loma San Gabriel Occupation of Zacatecas and Durango, Mexico. *The Archaeology of West and Northwest Mesoamerica*: 327-351. Michael S. Foster and Phil C. Weigand, editors. Westview Press, Boulder.
- Gallegos, Hernan
- 1582 Relation and Report of the Expedition Made by Francisco Sanchez Chamuscado and Eight Soldier Companions in the Exploration of New Mexico and New Lands, and Its Outcome: 67-114. *The Rediscovery of New Mexico, 1580-1594*, George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, 1966. Albuquerque.
- Hammond, George P., and Agapito Rey
- 1966 *The Rediscovery of New Mexico, 1580-1594*. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.
- Kelley, J. Charles
- 1939 Archaeological Notes on the Excavation of a Pithouse Near Presidio, Texas. *El Palacio* 46(10): 221-34.
- 1949 Archaeological Notes on Two Excavated House Structures in Western Texas. *Texas Archaeological and Paleontological Society, Bulletin* 20: 89-114.
- 1951 A Bravo Valley Aspect Component of the Lower Rio Conchos Valley, Chihuahua, Mexico. *American Antiquity* 17:2: 114-119.
- 1952 Factors Involved in the Abandonment of Certain Peripheral Southwestern Settlements. *American Anthropologist* 54:3: 356-387.
- 1952- The Historic Indian Pueblos of La Junta de los Rios. *New Mexico Historical Review* 27:4, 1952: 257-295; 28:1, 1953a: 21-51.
- 1953a
- 1953b Reconnaissance and Excavation in Durango and Southern Chihuahua, Mexico. *The American Philosophical Society Year Book* 1953: 172-176.
- 1956 Settlement Patterns in North-Central Mexico. *Prehistoric Settlement Patterns in the New World*. Gordon R. Willey, editor. *Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology* 23: 128-139. New York.
- 1986a Jumano and Patarabueye, Relations at La Junta de los Rios. *Anthropological Papers, Museum of Anthropology*, University of Michigan. (With a foreword by John D. Speth).
- 1986b The Mobile Merchants of Molina. *Ripples in the Chichimec Sea*: 90-104. Frances Joan Mathien and Randall H. McGuire, editors. Carbondale.
- Kelley, J. Charles, T. N. Campbell and Donald J. Lehmer
- 1940 The Association of Archaeological Materials with Geological Deposits in the Big Bend Region of Texas. *West Texas Historical and Scientific Society Publications* 10: 1-173.
- Perez de Luxan, Diego
- 1583 Diego Perez de Luxan's Account of the Antonio de Espejo Expedition into New Mexico, 1582: 153-212. *The Rediscovery of New Mexico, 1580-1594*. George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, editors, 1966, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.

- Riley, Carroll L.
- 1987 *The Frontier People*. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.
- Rocha, Jose G.
- 1938 La Primera Espanola en Territorio Chihuahuense. *Sociedad Chihuahuense de Estudios Historicos, Boletin*, July and September, 1958: 67-71, 152-158.
- Sauer, Carl
- 1934 The Distribution of Aboriginal Tribes and Languages in Northwestern Mexico. *Ibero-Americana*: 5. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Sayles, E. B.
- 1935 An Archaeological Survey of Texas. *Medallion Papers* No. 17, Gila Pueblo, Globe, Arizona.
- 1936 An Archaeological Survey of Chihuahua, Mexico. *Medallion Papers* No. 22, Gila Pueblo, Globe, Arizona.
- Shackelford, William J.
- 1955 Excavations at the Polvo Site in Western Texas. *American Antiquity* 20: 256-262.
- Willey, Gordon R.
- 1956 *Prehistoric Settlement Patterns in the New World*. Gordon R. Willey, editor. *Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology* 23. New York.
- Zingg, Robert M.
- 1940 Report on Archaeology of Southern Chihuahua. *University of Denver, Contributions*: 3. *Center of Latin Studies*: 1.