RETRACE TREK. Tom Alexander, left, and Ted Warner examine maps while tracing the Dominguez-Escalante Expedition Trail. The expedition camped on the Arroyo de San Andres Sept. 26, 1776, and the two BYU historians believe the camp was in or near present-day Payson City Park on Peteetneet Creek.

BYU professors retrace historic trail

If Dominguez and Escalante had returned to Utah to establish settlements after their famous exploration expedition in 1776, the state probably wouldn't have a Provo or Spanish Fork or Kanarraville today.

Instead, these respective localities might be called San Antonio de Padua, Dulcisimo Nombre de Jesus, and Nuestra Senora del Pilar, according to two Brigham Young University historians who recently retraced a portion of the Dominguez-Escalante trail from Provo south to the Utah-Arizona border.

In fact, the whole area from Duchesne to Provo and down to Hurricane near St. George probably would have been identified by a series of Spanish names that the explorers used for their camps, explained Dr. Ted J. Warner, chairman of the BYU History Department, and Dr. Thomas G. Alexander, associate director of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies.

The two professors form one of six teams which are retracing the entire 2,000 mile trail through New Mexico, Colorado, Utah and Arizona under direction of the Dominguez-Escalante State Federal Bicentennial Committee. Melvin T. Smith, director of the Utah State Historical Society, is chairman.

Results of the project will be compiled by Dr. David Miller at the University of Utah who is chairman of the trail exploration portion of the bicentennial project. A report will be published during the nation's bicentennial celebration.

"Our assignment was to find, as closely as possible, the actual trail and campsites of the expedition," Dr. Warner said.

The two BYU professors have retraced on foot and in a four-wheel drive vehicle some 300 miles of the trail. As references they have used several different translations of the original Spanish journal kept by Fray Silvestre Velez de Escalante on the five-month, 2,000 mile expedition.

The historians also had access to two handwritten copies of the journal produced in 1792 and 1797 and to an 1854 Spanish publication of the journal.

Using a new translation by Fray Angelico Chavez of Santa Fe, N.M., the two professors were able to pinpoint more accurately than previously possible the location of some 20 campsites between Provo and the Utah-Arizona border.

"What we now hope to find is an unnamed hill or other prominent Utah landmark which could be named after Dominguez," Dr. Warner said.

He noted that Fray Francisco Atanasio Dominguez and not Escalante was the real leader of the 10-man expedition, but because Escalante wrote the expedition journal, he has received most of the credit for the trek. Several Utah landmarks including a mountain range, forest, desert, river and town have been named after him but nothing has been named after Dominguez.

The explorers originally set out from Santa Fe in July 1776 to find a new route to Monterey, California, but never got any farther west than Utah. However, they were highly impressed with some of Utah's rivers and valleys and wanted to establish settlements in these areas.

But when they returned to Santa Fe in January 1777, manpower and funds were short and their hopes never materialized, Dr. Warner explained. So Utah remained unsettled until the Mormon pioneers arrived some 70 years later and applied their own names to the state's communities, mountains and rivers.

If the Spanish explorers had returned, their names would probably be in use today and it would be hard to tell Utah from California or New Mexico. Payson would have been San Andres, Scipio would have been Ojo de Cisneros, and Levan would have been San Bernardino.

Other campsite names which might have endured are San Pablo, Santa Ysabel, Las Vegas del Puerto, Senor San Jose, San Donulo and San Juan Capistrano.

And who knows what Utah might have been? Maybe Tierra de Los Yutas or Timpanogos or Nueve Espana.