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End of the Trail (After Remington)

Matthew Regier

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SANTA FE TRAIL, 1821-1880

The first international commercial road in the United States officially began in 1821.

The Santa Fe Trail lasted for six decades until the arrival of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad in Santa Fe on February 9, 1880. This marked the end of a trail that had provided profits from merchandise traveling east and west; helped to bring an end to the Panic of 1819; and contributed to an exchange of cultures, the establishment of military posts throughout the Southwest and the expansion of the United States.

Previously in 1803, President Thomas Jefferson had paid \$15,000,000 for the Louisiana Purchase. Soon, many settlers, primarily from Kentucky, Virginia and Tennessee, moved into the new territory along the Missouri River. Towns sprang up from St. Louis, Missouri, west along the Missouri River to Indian Territory. In 1805, two sons of frontiersman Daniel Boone started a salt business approximately 150 miles west of St. Louis in an area called Booneslick. They shipped the salt they produced to St. Louis by keelboat, a long, narrow boat propelled by sails, oars, poles or ropes. The business was quite successful for a time.

The War of 1812 disrupted life in Missouri as the British instigated skirmishes between the Indians and settlers. William Becknell joined the fighting and met the Boone brothers. After the war, Becknell followed the Boones to Franklin and soon bought part interest in the Booneslick salt business. He also borrowed money for several other business ventures, including a ferry at Arrow Rock and lots in the growing village of Franklin.

With the purchase of the Louisiana Territory, expansion and land speculation was happening across the United States. People

became heavily dependent on loans from banks. However, in 1819 the boom came to an end as the Bank of the United States demanded repayment of the loans in only silver and gold. The Panic of 1819 led to a major depression, and those who could not pay their debts were jailed. Becknell was about to be one of those.

History would change in 1821, with three important events. The first occurred August 10, 1821, when Missouri was admitted as the 24th state, the first state entirely west of the Mississippi River. It was admitted as a “slave state.”

For 300 years the Spanish had strictly controlled the Kingdom of New Spain from the Canadian border south and west of the Mississippi River, allowing trade with the northern colonies only if it benefited the mother country. The scarce supplies the colonists had received came on pack animals and carts from the coast of Veracruz once every three years. The people of Mexico rebelled and, after nearly 10 years of fighting with the large, heavily armed Spanish Army, a treaty was signed on August 24, 1821 ending Spanish control.

The third event began September 1, 1821, when Becknell and five men on horseback crossed the Missouri River at Arrow Rock, Missouri, and headed westward with pack horses carrying trade goods. On June 25, Becknell had placed an ad in the Franklin newspaper

Missouri Intelligencer, announcing a company of men would be organized to go westward “for the purpose of trading Horses and Mules and catching Wild Animals of every description.” It is unclear if Becknell knew that Mexico was free of Spanish control and if he was even serious about capturing horses. The trip to Santa Fe was successful, with Becknell returning in January 1822 with leather bags loaded with silver coins.

Becknell had managed to change the future of both the United States and Mexico. The profits made by his first trading trip brought much-needed gold bullion and silver coins, along with mules, into central Missouri, where the Panic of 1819 had devastated the economy. With no banking system, paper money was considered worthless in Missouri, so only silver coins and gold bullion were accepted as payment of debts. No markets even existed for farmers to sell their products or for merchants to peddle their wares. The influx of Mexican coins, which became legal tender in the United States until 1857, significantly helped Missouri’s economy. Now Mexicans were able to purchase manufactured goods from the United States.

Because of the success of this trip, Becknell was encouraged and quickly advertised for 70 men to go westward on a second trading trip to Santa Fe.



March of the Caravan
Copied from Josiah Gregg, “Commerce of the Prairies”
Kansas Historical Society

Becknell, 30 men and \$3,000-\$5,000 in goods left Missouri in May 1822. This time he had wagons, and Becknell decided to try to find a route that would avoid the mountainous areas he passed through on his first trip. As he left the wooded areas of Missouri, the trees grew fewer. When the men reached the area known today as Council Grove, they found a good stand of trees which would provide material for wagons that needed repairs, abundant grass for the animals and plentiful water.

The tallgrass prairies soon changed to short grass grazed by buffalo herds. Turning south at about the 100th Meridian, they ran into barren land with little available water. After crossing the Arkansas River (boundary of the United States and Mexico), they traveled

through the parched Cimarron Desert, where both people and animals suffered from severe thirst. After 48 days on the long trail, the caravan reached the adobe buildings of Santa Fe. The men sold their wares, including the wagons they had used to make the trip. They returned to Missouri with a profit of nearly \$91,000 and numerous mules. The profitable, and at times romantic, Santa Fe Trail had begun.

Marcia Fox is an educator who has spent half her life involved with the Santa Fe Trail. A charter member of the Santa Fe Trail Association SFTA, she is one of the founders of a Santa Fe Trail camping trip for fifth and sixth grade students. She is currently a SFTA officer.