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Evolution Of The Santa Fe Trail

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Santa Fe Trail (sign)
Tod Seelie

EVOLUTION OF THE SANTA FE TRAIL

The Santa Fe Trail, 1821-1880, was a route of commerce and conquest that involved three cultures: Indigenous nations from Missouri to Colorado and New Mexico, Hispano-Americans of Mexico and the American Southwest, and other Euro-Americans from the United States.

Successful trade opened in 1821 with the independence of Mexico from Spain and the admission of Missouri as a state. Efforts to open trade prior to 1821 were thwarted by Spain's mercantilism, which prohibited trade outside the empire.

Independent Mexico and the United States both benefited from economic connections. The Santa Fe Trail was one result, and an era of international commerce was followed by U.S. expansion, leading to a war by which nearly three-fifths of Mexico was added to the U.S. and, later, more than 99% of Indigenous lands were taken.

The Road to Santa Fe, as it was commonly called in the United States, evolved over time, just as an individual, community or institution develops through stages. An understanding of those periods provides perspective to evaluate the history and significance of this important route of commerce, conquest and cultural exchange.

Although successful overland commerce was not possible until 1821, events prior to that time facilitated the birth of the trail when it happened. The era of gestation included commerce and trade routes established by Indigenous nations before the European invasion. Spain, France and the United States sent explorers throughout the region to trade with Indigenous



Santa Fe Trail (stratum and shadows)

Tod Seelie

peoples and attempt to open trade across the Great Plains. When France lost its claims in North America in 1763, Spain extended loose control over much of the continent west of the Mississippi River. The United States began expansion into that region with the Louisiana Purchase, 1803, and the Zebulon Montgomery Pike Southwest Expedition, 1806-1807. Trade with Plains Indians increased. However, efforts to open overland trade between the United States and New Spain were blocked by Spain's refusal to permit colonies to trade outside the empire. That changed in 1821.

The period of international commerce, 1821-1846, profited both nations and saw Mexican merchants and trade caravans actively involved alongside those from the U.S. By 1840, more Mexican merchants were engaged in the business than those from the United States. It was also a time of cultural exchange as trade expanded between Euro-American nations and included Indigenous peoples along the entire route. Relations among the three cultures were mostly peaceful until the U.S.-Mexican War. According to Josiah Gregg, author of the first detailed history of the Santa Fe Trail "Commerce of the

Prairies," the value of the merchandise carried from the United States to Mexico grew from \$12,000 in 1823 to \$450,000 in 1843.

Everything changed with U.S. expansionism of the 1840s, leading to war between the U.S. and Mexico. The Santa Fe Trail was a major route of invasion. General Stephen Watts Kearny's Army of the West and other troops that followed marched from Fort Leavenworth via the trail to Santa Fe and beyond. They occupied much of the land taken from Mexico at the end of the conflict (more than half of Mexico was transferred to the United States by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in February 1848). Then the commercial route was all within the U.S., and trade continued across the border into northern Mexico for decades. Indigenous resistance increased during and after that war in response to the decline in buffalo numbers, the destruction of timber, the invasion of sacred places and various treaties by which Indigenous peoples ceded traditional lands to the United States.

The era between the U.S.-Mexican War and the U.S. Civil War, 1848-1861, saw the militarization of the route with new military posts founded to empower the conquest of Indigenous nations, including forts Mann, Atkinson, Riley and Larned in Kansas; Fort Lyon in Colorado; and forts Union and Marcy in

New Mexico. The freighting of military supplies superseded civilian freight on the trail. Because the Army did not have the resources to provide the transportation of supplies, large freighting firms (such as Russell, Majors & Waddell, which reportedly had 4,000 wagons and 40,000 oxen) dominated the shipment of materials over the trail. The final conquest of American Indians of the region was interrupted by the U.S. Civil War, 1861-1865.

The Civil War saw guerrilla raids along the trail in Kansas as far west as Diamond Spring west of Council Grove. Important battles between U.S. and Confederate troops were fought on the trail, especially the battles at Glorieta Pass in New Mexico, March 26-28, 1862, which was the turning point of the war in the Far West. This stopped Confederate expansion designed to acquire Colorado Territory, New Mexico Territory and the state of California, virtually ensuring Union control of the region and preventing the expansion of the Confederate States of America. During the last years of the war, the subjugation of the Indigenous nations expanded.

The final years of the trail, 1865-1880, saw the wagon route superseded by railroads. As the Union Pacific Railway, Eastern Division, (which became the Kansas Pacific Railway) built westward from Kansas City to Denver, 1864-1870,

the end of track became the eastern terminus of the Santa Fe Trail. Later the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad followed the Mountain Route of the Santa Fe Trail into New Mexico. In 1879 the AT&SF reached Lamy near Santa Fe, and a spur was completed into Santa Fe in 1880, ending six decades of commerce and conquest via the trail. The Indian nations along the route were defeated in a series of wars and placed on reservations during this period. Indigenous struggles to protect their homelands ended with the close of the Red River War (known to the Indians as the War to Save the Buffalo, 1874-1875).

The Santa Fe Trail was an important part of the westward expansion of the United States and the conquest of Indigenous nations and Hispanic Americans in the Southwest. For six decades the Santa Fe Trail served the nation as a major route of commerce and conquest. It contributed to the successful development of the nation and its rise to international power. That view, challenged more and more by historians and some citizens, is slowly being re-evaluated for racism, subjugation of Indigenous peoples and destruction of their cultures, and military conquest of territory occupied and controlled by Indigenous nations and the nation of Mexico.

As the people of the United States continue to reassess national expansion,

including the Santa Fe Trail, a more critical and balanced appraisal will be forthcoming. Although historic events are evaluated in terms of the times in which they occurred, the heritage of conquest affects the descendants of those who were defeated and their culture destroyed. As we commemorate the 200th anniversary of this historic route of commerce and conquest, we must strive to provide a better balance of its history and further evaluate the actions of a nation that played by rules that are not acceptable today. This remains an important task to be fulfilled.

The long life of the Santa Fe Trail has been commemorated in many ways since 1880, mostly in a positive way to celebrate national growth and expansion without any thought to the victims of white nationalism that continues to the present. Beginning in 1906, the Daughters of the American Revolution placed granite markers along the historic route from Missouri to New Mexico, a total of 187 at last count. In 1929, the DAR placed Madonna of the Trail statues along overland trails in 11 states, from Maryland to California. Three of those are on the Santa Fe Trail at Lexington, Missouri; Council Grove, Kansas; and Lamar, Colorado. In 1956, U.S. Highway 56 was designated the Santa Fe Trail Highway. After the Santa Fe Trail Highway 56 Association was founded, it persuaded



Nearing Dusk Along the Trail
Cally Krallman

state highway commissions to mark the road with special signs featuring a covered wagon and “Santa Fe Trail” printed boldly over the wagon. In 1986, the Santa Fe Trail Association was founded, and the Santa Fe National Historic Trail was created by Congress in 1987. The National Park Service continues to mark the historic route. After 200 years, it is time to confront the negative and destructive results, too.

Leo E. Oliva, Ph.D., has been researching and writing about the Santa Fe Trail since 1959, and he has contributed to the positive claims of nationalism and expansion while neglecting the victims of the conquest. Today he strives to overcome the historical perspectives of his professional training and tell a more balanced story. Having been a part of the problem, he now hopes to become part of the solution.