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Genovevo Chávez Ortiz

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Moonrise and Adobe
Phil Epp

HISPANOS CRISS-CROSSED THE GREAT PLAINS GRASSLANDS

Even before the countries of Mexico and the United States existed, there was trade over what would become the Santa Fe Trail by Wichita and other Plains tribes.

Taos, New Mexico, was a center of trade where, for centuries, Indigenous peoples met regularly to exchange goods. By the time Francisco Vázquez de Coronado explored what he called Quivira (Kansas) in 1541-1542, Indian trade routes were well established. Coronado's expedition was led by captive Indian guides, who took it over a route that approximated the Cimarron Route of the Santa Fe Trail.

There is evidence in Spanish documents that many other would-be traders preceded William Becknell's expedition of 1821. French Mallet brothers in 1739 traveled from "Illinois country" into the Spanish Kingdom of Nuevo México. Others, including Jean de Alarí, Pierre Satren and Pedro Vial, crisscrossed the grassy plains of Kansas in 1782. Between 1790 and 1821, a New Mexican who knew the trail well was Juan Lucero. He made at least 13 trips in and out of the Kansas plains along the corridor that would become the Santa Fe Trail.

HOW OFFICIAL TRADE STARTED

As a mercantile empire, Spain discouraged trade with the United States for fear of loss of its monopoly with its colonies. But when Mexico gained its independence from Spain on August 24, 1821, and eventually became the Republic of Mexico, it welcomed trade with its neighbor to the north. Bartolomé

Baca, governor of New Mexico, which was Mexico's northernmost territory in 1823-1825, licensed U.S. citizens to trap beaver in its mountain streams. Baca was interested in developing trade with the United States. In the summer of 1824, Baca sent a delegation of 28 men to Council Bluffs to meet with Pawnee Indians. With assistance of U.S. Indian Agent Benjamin O'Fallon, they signed a treaty with the Pawnees to permit Mexican traders to travel the trail without interference. In 1825, a party of Mexican traders accompanied traders from the United States from Santa Fe to Missouri. In 1826, Manuel Escudéro, a member of the Chihuahua provincial assembly, led a caravan from Missouri in early June with "six or seven new and substantial [goods-laden] wagons," believed to be the first Hispanic trader to lead a wagon train along the Santa Fe Trail to Mexico.

In "Los Capitalistas, Hispano Merchants, and the Santa Fe Trade," Susan Calafate Boyle wrote, "The literature about the Santa Fe Trail tends to celebrate Americans (and some western Europeans) and often portrayed them as daring explorers and visionaries who initiated commercial relations between the United States and Mexico. Often overlooked is the equally significant role played by Hispanos."

Hispanos, including Severino Martínez and his family, became active in trading

with the Americans who were bringing trade goods in by the Santa Fe Trail. The Martínez Hacienda in Taos was the northern terminus for the Camino Real, which connected northern New Mexico to Mexico City. The hacienda was also the headquarters for extensive ranching and farming and, later, for wool processing and weaving operations, which supplied military forts along the trail.

Felipe Baca was one of Trinidad, Colorado's founders and a prominent businessman engaged in trade with the United States. Baca lived and worked in a hacienda with his wife, Dolores, and their children. Later he purchased the John Hough residence, which became the Baca House near the Santa Fe Trail in Trinidad. The two-story adobe Baca House evokes the lifestyle of a prominent period, 1860-1890.

INTERNATIONAL TWO-WAY THOROUGHFARE

After the Santa Fe Trail officially opened in 1821, New Mexican entrepreneurs, with their extensive networks of trade in the Hispano world, facilitated the geographical expansion of trade between Mexico and the United States. In 1837, wealthy landowner Juan Esteban Pino made a request to the Mexican government for an exemption from Mexican import duties on behalf of

himself and others whom he called "capitalistas."

By 1843, entrepreneurs from New Mexico and Chihuahua had become dominant traders involved in the traffic of goods over the trail. Some of these traders became U.S. territorial representatives after the war between the United States and Mexico ended in 1848. Many New Mexicans later joined the Union Army during the American Civil War. One example is José Francisco Chaves who used his distinguished military service as a route to political office in the U.S. Congress. A prominent New Mexico militia commander and a Union officer during the Civil War, Chaves became a local power broker working with key politicians in Santa Fe to strengthen trade.

A member of a wealthy New Mexico family, Miguel A. Otero used his political connections to venture into the private sector. Otero attended St. Louis University with a major in English and went on to become the longest-serving delegate from the Territory of New Mexico, spanning three U.S. congressional sessions, 1855-1861. Otero left New Mexico in 1864 to pursue business interests in Kansas City and in Leavenworth. In 1867, Otero, his brother Manuel, and Scottish immigrant John Perry Sellar formed a commission and forwarding firm, named Otero, Sellar

& Co., that operated from the end of the track as the railroads built west and replaced the Santa Fe Trail, first on the Union Pacific Railway, Eastern Division, and later on the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe. They contracted wagon trains to haul commodities from the end of the track to Santa Fe and beyond. Many of the freighters were Hispanos, especially from Las Vegas, New Mexico.

In the 1870s, Otero served as an agent for the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad, lobbying on its behalf before the New Mexico territorial government. In this position he continued to pursue one of his goals in Congress: bringing major railroads through New Mexico to spur economic development. He also served on the board of directors of the New Mexico and Southern Pacific Railroad Company and arranged for its passage through the territory. Through Otero's and other enterprising efforts, the advent of the Santa Fe Railroad replaced the wagon trail and gave greater access to international trade.

Genovevo (Gene) T. Chávez Ortiz, Ed.D., is a Humanities Kansas scholar whose focus is documenting the history of Latino people in the Midwest. Of special interest is the connection of Kansas City with the Hispano world of Mexico and the Spanish Southwest.