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The Santa Fe Trail (Sandy Carlson, editor)

What Women Wrote About The Trail

Joanne VanCoevern

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Recommended Citation

VanCoevern, Joanne (2021). "What Women Wrote About The Trail," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*. <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2021/highway/7>

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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Anything But Forever, Mead's Milkweed (detail)

Casey Whittier

WHAT WOMEN WROTE ABOUT THE TRAIL

For some women, traveling the Santa Fe Trail was a liberating adventure.

“I breathe free without that oppression and uneasiness felt in the gossiping circles of a settled home,” proclaimed trailblazer Susan Shelby Magoffin. For others, it was an arduous, taxing trek. “At first I could not walk over three or four miles without feeling quite weary, but by persevering and walking as far as I could every day, my capacity increased gradually, and in the course of a few weeks I could walk ten miles in the most sultry weather without being exhausted,” commented Julia Archibald Holmes about her experience walking with the wagon caravan.

Through journal entries jotted along the way, early female trail-goers described their journey and its uncharted adventures. In 1846, Magoffin, who kept one of the most detailed journals, told about preparing to set out: “Now the Prairie life begins! ... The animals made an extensive show indeed. Mules and oxen scattered in all directions. The teamsters were just ‘catching up,’ and the cracking of whips, lowing of cattle, braying of mules, whooping and hallowing of the men was a novel sight.”

In 1852, another young bride, Rebecca Cohen Mayer, wrote about heading across the prairie: “I just wonder if you or anyone reading this can imagine what it means to have as many as five hundred mules – some that had never been in harness before, wild and untamed – all crowded into a small space and the men trying to lasso the mules. The noise and confusion was terrible. ... In a few hours we left the last traces of civilization [behind] and the weather being fine, the plains looked lovely.”

As the 30 wagons stretched out across the prairie, Mayer added, "A long line of wagons with their very white tops ... all of the same size and shape was a strange sight to me."

Onward toward Santa Fe, Magoffin portrayed the beauty and fascinations she encountered on the prairie: "The grass is fine every place, it is so tall in some places as to conceal a man's waist. ... I took a little walk this evening ... and picked some little pebbles. ... [Wildflowers were abundant and] I fixed some this evening in my journal. We find some beautiful roses ... wild onions, and a kind of wild bean ... at my tent door there are two [rose] bushes. ... It is the life of a wandering princess, mine ... for nearly two hours I have been wandering ... picking raspberries and gooseberries. ... We fixed a line and tried to fish a little."

Using a variety of modes of travel, females described riding in fine carriages, in ambulances, in wagons and on horseback, or walking. They learned to dress for the occasion, too. When Julia Archibald Holmes traveled with her husband to the gold fields of Colorado in 1858, she wrote, "I wore a calico dress, reaching a little below the knee, pants of the same [fabric], Indian moccasins for my feet, and on my head a hat. However much it lacked in taste I found it to be beyond value in comfort and convenience as it gave me freedom to roam at pleasure

in search of flowers and other curiosities." She was not the only female to document the wearing of an unconventional costume. Rebecca Cohen Mayer commented, "I am wearing trousers and a work shirt when I ride, in place of my long-skirted riding habit."

After long, tiring days on the trail, camp life was welcomed. Mayer explained they traveled with an ambulance that provided space for their bed. Magoffin said, "We ... stretched our tent. It is a grand affair indeed. We have a carpet made of sail duck."

Once in camp, food preparation became a priority. Mayer noted that they "... carried a stock of preserved fruits, vegetables, and in addition to the usual stock of flour, bacon, dried beans, coffee, sugar ..." and supplemented with fresh game procured as they traveled. Magoffin's first supper consisted of "fried ham and eggs, biscuit and a cup of shrub" (a common beverage served on the trail).

Traveling the trail in 1863, Ernestine Franke Huning wrote, "The beans and ham taste very good out in the open, the air giving us all a good appetite. Yesterday we had goose breast and truffles. ... We have china dishes, camp chairs, and a table, so we dine quite well. ... Once in buffalo country, all enjoyed the tongue, the liver and the marrow bones, prepared by roasting and when done, the bones are split open with a hatchet and the marrow



Half of Living is Mourning
Casey Whittier

is eaten spread on bread or crackers with the addition of only salt."

The time was occupied in camp by "eating, sleeping, smoking tobacco, manufacturing pipes ... and finger rings; playing cards ... the chief games being eucre and cribbage," according to Julia Archibald Holmes.

Susan Shelby Magoffin best sums up the experiences of those women like her, who found great adventure and beauty on the Santa Fe Trail: "Noon out on the wide Prairie. The Sun it seems is exerting himself; not a breath of air is stirring, and everything is scorching with heat. ... Oh,

this is a life I would not exchange for a good deal! There is such independence, so much free uncontaminated air, which impregnates the mind, the feelings, nay every thought, with purity."

Joanne VanCoevern graduated with a B.S.E from Emporia State University and is a former teacher and office manager. She is the current manager for the Santa Fe Trail Association. She was born and raised along the Santa Fe Trail east of Dodge City, Kansas, and currently lives in the area where the Smoky Hills meet the Flint Hills north of Salina, Kansas.