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The Santa Fe Trail (Sandy Carlson, editor)

Trail Time Tunes

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TRAIL TIME TUNES

“We greeted the new day with loud shouts and with heartfelt songs.”

H.B. Möllhausen, “Over the Santa Fe Trail Through Kansas, 1858.”



Cowboy Silhouettes in Strong City, Kansas

Philip Heying

Traders on the Santa Fe Trail sang songs. There was little entertainment, not much to break the monotony of another day on a hot and dusty – or cold and muddy – trail. While the threat of danger lurked in the shadows, traders typically endured the boredom of just another day. Singing while they worked provided a respite from watching a distant horizon seemingly move further away with each step in its direction.

Travel on the Santa Fe Trail was a business trip, different from pioneer families on the Oregon Trail seeking a new home. As a business trip, singing on the trail was simply a way to deal with daily tedium. Evening singing may have accompanied the consumption of alcohol and perhaps reflected homesickness or loved ones waiting for the traders’ return.

Favored songs on the trail are unknown, but they were likely the trendy songs of the day. Many songs became popular during the mid-1800s, and some are still familiar today. Songs ranged from soul-stirring hymns to bouncy drinking songs, from mournful ballads to lively hoedowns. The mix of cultures, the American derived from Europe and the Mexican derived mostly from Spain, sparked a new genre of music that was gathered by both cultures into their respective song repertoires.

POPULAR SONGS OF THE DAY

“Buffalo Gals,” 1844, is a song of exuberance with the invitation to “dance by the light of the moon.” While the relationship is unclear, the song is associated with building the Erie Canal in 1817-1825, which connected the New York cities of Albany

and Buffalo. This provided a direct water route from New York City to Lake Erie and the Midwest, which transformed New York City into the commercial capital it remains today.

“Oh Susanna,” 1848, and “Camptown Races,” 1850, are other lively and popular songs written by famous composer Stephen Foster.

“Sweet Betsy from Pike,” 1858, is based on an Irish melody that likely crossed to the New World during the potato famine. Although about California gold seekers, it was no doubt sung on the Santa Fe Trail.

The most famous drinking song is “Little Brown Jug,” 1869. Four years after the Civil War, the country needed a happy tune. Other “just for fun” songs we regard as children’s songs include “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” 1830; “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,” 1838; “Polly, Wolly Doodle,” 1843; “Over the River and Through the Woods,” 1844; “Pop Goes the Weasel,” 1852; and “Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” 1852.

“Long, Long Ago,” 1833, is an example of a melancholy ballad, becoming a national favorite by 1844. A century later, 1942, Glen Miller had a hit with the same tune with new lyrics and a bouncier tempo: “Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree – With Anyone Else but Me.”

HYMNS AND CAROLS

Susan Shelby Magoffin, who kept a diary of her trail travels in 1846-1847, observed, “The blustering, swearing teamsters remembering the duty they owe their Maker, have thrown aside their abusive language, and are singing the hymns perhaps that were taught by a good pious Mother.”

Hymns that were popular then, and now, include “How Firm a Foundation,” 1832; “Come Ye Thankful People Come,” 1844; “Abide with Me,” 1847; “Faith of Our Fathers,” 1849; “The Church in the Wildwood,” 1857; and “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” 1868.

Christmas tunes of the time include “O Tannenbaum,” 1824; “O Holy Night,” 1847; “Angels We Have Heard on High,” 1862; and “Jolly Old St Nicholas,” 1865.

INFLUENCE FROM MEXICO

The earliest songs of Mexico included pastorales taught to Indians by Catholic missionaries to add music to dramatizations of religious biblical concepts – for example, the birth, life and resurrection of Christ. They originated with the Baroque style of music and dance which flourished in Europe during the 1700s. In the territories of the Spanish, Portuguese and Iberian empires, the *pastorale* style continued, together with new styles, until the first decade of the 1800s.

By the mid-1800s, the common songs of New Mexico were performed at fiestas which celebrated important religious or civic dates. The Christmas season, December 16 through January 6, was and still is celebrated with musical processions called *las posadas*, as families go from house to house seeking rest in an inn and are turned away until at last, on Christmas Eve, a kind neighbor opens his home, the baby Jesus is put in a manger and a party commences.

Other celebrations included Easter musical processions, birthdays with serenades and a huge celebration with music to commemorate Mexico’s independence from Spain in 1821.

Salones de baile (dance halls) were places where traditional music could be enjoyed in Mexico. The doors of the hall were left open, with benches on one side of the room for men and on the other for the ladies. As in formal dances, a man would walk across to ask a lady to dance. These salones were likely places where American and Mexican cultures mixed as traders who visited Mexico sometimes married Mexican women and sometimes moved their families to Santa Fe.

The genres prevalent during the 1800s included *coplas*, like “Cielito Lindo,” a traditional Mexican song likely brought by Spanish settlers. *Canciones rancheras* is a genre dating to before the years of the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1921. It

later became associated with the mariachi bands that evolved in the Mexican state of Jalisco. The song “El Rancho Grande” is an example of this style.

Corridos were of a Mexican genre similar to ballads of Europe and later the United States. They tell a story, and lyrics can be changed to fit the situation, a love affair or political happening. “La Cucaracha” is likely familiar to most Americans.

SONGS FOR SPIRIT

Songs were used by Santa Fe Trail travelers to raise their spirits and keep them pushing on. Even today these songs are sung and are taught to children. On the trail, a “song in the heart” enabled one to meet the challenges of the day and propelled two young neighbor nations to their destinies.

Jeff Davidson’s music reflects the serenity and solitude of the Flint Hills. Providing music across the state for years, Jeff and his songs focus on historical aspects of Kansas and the history of the West.

Genovevo (Gene) T. Chávez Ortiz, Ed.D., is a Kansas Humanities 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.