Fording The Streams

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Cloud Reflection
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FORDING THE STREAMS

The road to Santa Fe was expeditiously charted to avoid all but some 30 miles of mountainous travel, much of the distance being over even prairie and plains.

One major obstacle, however, was the streams, many of them insignificant little tributaries, but others raging rivers during flood stage. Even in drier times, the channel floors filled with silt and shifting sand and provided less than desirable fords.

One of the costliest factors en route to Santa Fe was time. Time was money, and an inordinate amount of time could be consumed at a water crossing for several reasons.

First, a crossing could be a bottleneck where wagons would be backed up for days waiting for an opportunity to cross, and floodwaters could make streams impassable for weeks. Such was the case in 1844 when William Bent's caravan was stranded at Pawnee Fork for a full month. After finally fording that river on May 21, Bent pushed eastward to Walnut Creek where he waited another month for the water to subside.

Also, the effort involved in crossing a swollen stream was arduous. James Josiah Webb reported in 1844: "The crossing of the Arkansas was looked forward to with much solicitude, as at best it was attended with a good deal of risk and labor. The stream is about a third to half a mile wide, with a rapid current and quicksand bottom — the channel shifting from day to day, forming holes and bars, making necessary much crooking and turning in the stream to avoid miring down so the water would not reach the bottoms of the wagons and wet the goods. I have two or three times, had to raise the load by placing timbers on the bolsters as high as we dare and avoid the risk of the shaking

off or turning over the loads. Uncle Nick, who had made many trips before this, said that on one or two occasions he found the water so high that they could find no place to ford and, having selected a wagon body best fitted for the purpose, caulked it as well as they could, and (stretching raw buffalo skins on the outside) made a boat or scow to ferry over. This is no small job to ferry across such a stream seventy-five to one hundred tons of freight, delaying a train sometimes a week or ten days, and under an expense of eighty dollars to one hundred dollars a day."

Following a difficult crossing, the oxen were so exhausted that on the following day, the animals would have to be rested before the expedition could continue. Additional time was also required to lubricate the axles and repair damage done to the wagons.

Where a quagmire was the culprit rather than high water, a huge amount of effort was expended in preparing the stream bed for crossing. The banks were cut away to allow the wagons a safer entrance to and egress from the stream bed. Brush and grass were hauled in voluminous amounts to pack the mud and sand-filled river channels, and men would enter the water to lend their muscle to that of the animals. Josiah Gregg described such crossings at the Little Arkansas in 1831: "Early the next day we reached the Little Arkansas, which, although endowed with an imposing name, is only a small creek with a current but five or six yards wide. But, though small, its steep banks and miry bed annoyed us exceedingly in crossing. It is the practice upon the prairies on all such occasions for several men to go in advance with axes, spades and mattocks and, by digging the banks and erecting temporary bridges, to have all in readiness by the time the wagons arrive. A bridge over a quagmire is made in a few minutes by cross-laying it with brush (willows are best, but even long grass is often employed as a substitute) and covering it with earth, across which a hundred wagons will often pass in safety."

The most difficult streams were located in that portion of Indian Territory which is now Kansas, where white settlement was prohibited by the Indian Intercourse and Trade Act of 1834. Consequently, only one toll bridge was in operation on the Santa Fe Trail prior to the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which opened the territory to white settlement. Near present Burlingame, John Switzler built a bridge on a stream that became known by 1846 as Switzler's Creek. Switzler was able to circumvent the prohibition of white settlement by marrying an Indian woman and thus becoming a member of her tribe, not an uncommon practice in those days.

With the 1854 opening of Kansas Territory for settlement, six other toll bridges were established in Kansas along the Santa Fe Trail. Geographically, east to west, the first of these bridges was built in 1854 at 110 Mile Creek west of present Overbrook by Fry P. McGee. While the Kansas-Nebraska Act was signed into law on May 30, 1854, the territory was not opened for settlement until months later. Regardless, McGee promptly opened a store to sell provisions to travelers on the Santa Fe Trail and to other emigrants who, like McGee, were squatting on Kansas land. Other ventures included a toll bridge; McGee charged 25 cents per wagon.

Approximately 28 miles southwest, near the present town of Allen, Charles Withington arrived with his family at 142 Mile Creek in June of 1854 and illegally settled in the territory before it was opened to white habitation. He operated a store, saloon, mail station, blacksmith shop and toll bridge. Withington reported heavy traffic on the bridge from May 21 to November 25, 1865: 4,472 wagons, 5,197 men, 1,267 horses, 6,452 mules, 32,281 oxen, 112 carriages and 13,056 tons of freight.

Twenty miles farther southwest, Council Grove had illegally developed into a fair-sized community within the boundaries of the Kaw Reserve. The crossing of the Neosho had a firm rock bottom, but by 1860, a toll bridge was erected of sturdy oak timbers cut from the groves of hardwood that populated the Neosho River valley. Westward traffic on the bridge for the period of April 24 to October 1, 1860, was reported as men, 3,519; wagons 2,667; horses, 478; mules, 5,819; working cattle, 22,738; carriages 550; and tons of freight, 13,422.

Southwest of Council Grove, no stream was bridged until the trail reached the Little Arkansas River, 91 miles distant in present Rice County. In February 1858, the Kansas Territorial Legislature granted a charter to build a bridge across the Little Arkansas River and set the tolls at wagon or vehicle, 50 cents; each large animal, 10 cents; each small animal and person, 5 cents; man and horse, 10 cents.

Excerpts from David Clapsaddle, "Toll Bridges on the Santa Fe Trail," Wagon Tracks, February 1999, reprinted with permission from the Santa Fe Trail Association.