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Recommended Citation

Hoy, Jim (2021). "American Indians And The Santa Fe Trail," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2021/indigenouamericans/2>

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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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AMERICAN INDIANS AND THE SANTA FE TRAIL

On May 22, 1822, William Becknell began his second journey to Santa Fe, New Mexico. His aim was to trade three wagon loads of American goods for Mexican silver.

He was in charge of 21 men who were, themselves, in charge of the 24 oxen that were pulling the wagons. Onlookers called his assemblage the “Caravan of Death,” for how could these men with slow-moving oxen rather than fast horses escape attacks from the various Indigenous American peoples who lived along their route? The party carried firearms, but Becknell had also included gift items to help pave his way through this potentially dangerous territory.

Over 100 miles after leaving Fort Osage, Missouri, Becknell’s wagons encountered Indians near what is today Burlingame, Kansas. There he had his first and only significant encounter with Indians on this trip, a band of Osage. Ready to fight if necessary, Becknell and an interpreter approached the leader of the Osage and offered various gifts as tokens of peace. Their offer was accepted, and the traders went on their way unmolested.

In what would become Marion and McPherson counties, small bands of Kansa Indians followed but did not make contact with the wagons. The same thing occurred with Comanches from present-day Dodge City into New Mexico, small groups occasionally appearing but never coming close. Becknell’s Caravan of Death followed a route that angled southwest from a spot east of present-day Great Bend past present-day Tucumcari before arriving in Santa Fe, where he sold not only his trade



Viviparous Quadrupeds of the Anthropocene (Hare)

Kirsten Furlong

goods but his wagons as well. On his return home, he traveled a different way, establishing a trade route that would become one of the most famous trails in American history. To be totally accurate, he was not the first to trod this trail, a path Indigenous peoples had used parts of for centuries.

Although Becknell in 1822 encountered only three tribes, some dozen different tribes lived and hunted along the 800-plus miles of the Santa Fe Trail. Besides the Osage, Kansa, and Comanche, others included the Pawnee, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, Kiowa (or Plains) Apache, Ute, Jicarilla Apache, and Pecos Pueblo. In addition to these tribes, the trail also cut through the Shawnee allotment near Kansas City.

The standard view is that Indians along the Santa Fe Trail were usually hostile, prone to attack, steal, plunder, and kill teamsters. That's an exaggerated notion. Attacks and fights did occur, but more often, especially in the earlier years, the Plains tribes were more interested in trade or in asking for food. When that trade involved alcohol, trouble was more likely to occur. The Pawnee, who lived in towns along the Republican River in Nebraska and Kansas, would go on extended buffalo hunts during the summer, often along the big bend of the Arkansas River. In the 29 years from 1822 to 1851, there

were only 18 fights between Santa Fe traders and the Pawnee in that area.

The Osage and Kansa, like the Pawnee, lived in villages, farmed and traveled onto the Plains for extended buffalo hunts. Farther to the southwest, Pecos Pueblo Indians had lived near the banks of the river of that name since around 1300, residing in a 700-room pueblo and living by farming, trading and hunting. When Becknell opened trade with Santa Fe in 1821, their population had greatly decreased from its peak, and only 17 members had survived by 1838 when they moved west and merged with the Jemez Pueblo. The Plains tribes were all essentially nomadic hunter-gatherers. All dozen tribes also traded among themselves and with Euro-Americans. Each tribe had its own religious practices, but all had in common a religious belief in the sacredness of the earth and its plants and animals, on which their lifestyles depended.

These Indigenous peoples generally perceived Euro-American incursions into their respective territories as trespassing and users of the Santa Fe Trail as trespassers. Active opposition to this violation of their territory began early, and in 1829 the United States responded to the threat of violence by sending troops to protect wagon trains. Attempts by Indigenous peoples, particularly by the Plains tribes of the Cheyenne, Arapaho,



1925 Centennial Reenactment of the Signing of the Compact between the Osage and the U.S. Government in Council Grove
Kansas Historical Society

Comanche, Kiowa, and Plains Apache, to resist and repel Euro-American invaders increased markedly during the years when the United States was determined to take their lands and force them onto reservations. During this period, and a few years before, the United States had established a number of forts to protect the invading settlers and traders – forts Leavenworth, Mann, Atkinson, Zarah, Larned, Dodge, Lyon, Union and, Aubrey along the Santa Fe Trail, and also Harker, Riley, and Wallace to the north of the trail.

A major obstacle to peace, not only along the Santa Fe Trail but throughout the American continents, was the concept of land ownership. To the Europeans who settled in (invaded?) the New World, ownership required an official title registered with the proper authorities, an almost incomprehensible idea to the original inhabitants. How, they wondered, can one own or sell or fence off one's mother? Mother Earth was sacred and nearly literal to their way of thinking. But to Europeans, prior occupancy counted for naught when met with legal title.

Europeans claimed New World lands through what was termed the "Doctrine of Discovery," a legal premise established by a Supreme Court decision in 1823 that allowed them to claim ownership no matter who was already living there

or how long they had been living there. Moreover, "Manifest Destiny" also allowed Americans to believe that they had an inalienable right to rule the land from "sea to shining sea."

From the perspective of Euro-American history, the Santa Fe Trail was a great achievement, opening up trade and friendly relations with the Mexican government that had, in turn, replaced a Spanish government hostile to trade with the United States. But from the Indigenous people perspective, particularly that of the Plains tribes, this new international commercial highway was an intrusion, a trespassing on land where they had traditionally lived and hunted.

Where Euro-Americans saw innate Indian savagery as the cause of conflict along the Santa Fe Trail, Indigenous peoples considered Euro-American expansionism as something to be resisted in order to maintain their traditional way of life.

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Pawnee Smoke Along the Republican River

Phil Epp