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## The End Of The Trail: Forging A Nation Across The Prairie

Frances Levine

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**Solitude**  
Lisa Grossman

## THE END OF THE TRAIL FORGING A NATION ACROSS THE PRAIRIE

“I remember so clearly the beauty of the earth, and how, as we bore westward, the deer and the antelope bounded away from us. There were miles and miles of buffalo grass, blue lagoons and blood-red sunsets, and once in a while, a little sod house on the lonely prairie...

It was strange about the prairies at dawn, they were all sepia and silver; at noon they were like molten metal, and in the evening they flared into unbelievable beauty—long streamers of red and gold were flung out across them. The sky had an unearthly radiance. Sunset on the prairie! It was haunting, unearthly and lovely.”

Marian Sloan Russell, “Land of Enchantment: Memoirs of Marian Russell Along the Santa Fe Trail.”

It may seem farfetched to say that the social isolation of this pandemic year has given me a better understanding of how some travelers on the Santa Fe Trail might have felt. They were on a journey that for many would take them to unfamiliar places, would test the limits of their strength and endurance, and would expose them to new sights. This pandemic has certainly been a time that I have felt uncertain about what lies ahead, and yet awed by the world around me in so many ways.

I have had the good fortune to live at both ends of the trail. In Santa Fe, the trail meets with the Camino Real and descends the Río Grande deep into Mexico. St. Louis is not often thought of as part of the trail, but surely it began here at the docks, warehouses and wagonmakers’ sheds on the banks of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers.

Walking different sections of the trail, I imagined the thousands of footsteps of those who walked here before me. The first were Indigenous American hunters and their

families, followed by French and Anglo-American trappers and traders, then soldiers and settlers, Mormon refugees fleeing intolerance in the Midwest, and merchants and Civil War troops of many backgrounds moving west to the drumbeat of Manifest Destiny. Those who came from the Southwest journeying east were Mexican and New Mexican merchants and their caravan hands.

Some left accounts of their personal journeys of healing or hardship; others passed by on missions that forged this nation. More often travelers left no written record of their own, having journeyed west or east. Some of the participants in Santa Fe Trail expeditions were transformed by their journeys, and, in some cases, their reputations and place in history were made by their crossings of the expanding United States.

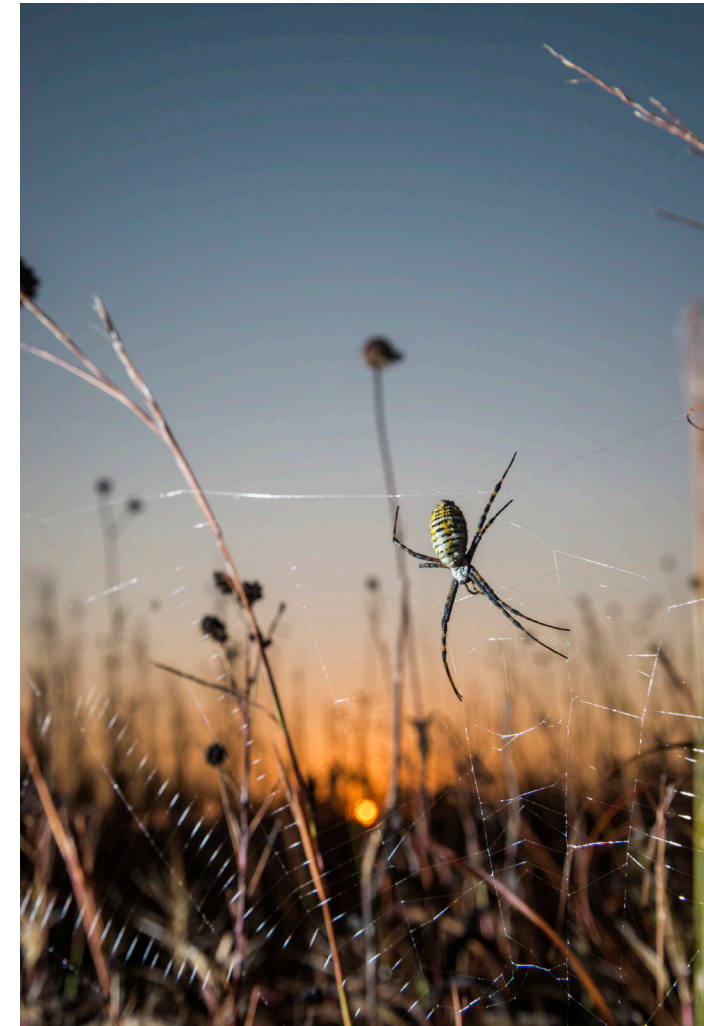
What interests me most about the Santa Fe Trail are the cross-cultural exchanges that took place along the trail. People of diverse heritages perceived each other's cultures differently, sometimes opportunistically, as they united both ends of the trail to link the territories and then states that would form our nation.

Over 1,000 miles separate Santa Fe and St. Louis. That distance spans the heart of the North American continent, and the two ends of the trail link vastly different regions. The transition from the lush confluence of the Mississippi and

Missouri river drainages near where the trail begins in Missouri gives way to the vast prairie in Kansas and Oklahoma. Then gradually the land rises to the high desert and Rocky Mountains at the western end of the trail in Santa Fe and Taos respectively. It is the geographic and cultural diversity found along the trail that undergirds its history.

The literature of the Santa Fe Trail is considerable. Trail journals, military reconnaissance reports, and memoirs were written as travelers moved westward from the American frontier in Missouri to meet eastward travelers from the Spanish Southwest. Westbound travelers were immigrants from Anglo-American, French or German-speaking communities of the midcontinent. Some westbound travelers, too, came as African American servants or slaves in trail caravans. In Kansas and Missouri, travelers from the Southwest encountered Americans in their larger cultural milieu, not as interlopers on Mexican soil as they would come to be seen in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War.

Crossing the midcontinent opened travelers to the potential and limitations of environmental resources at each end of the trail. In all of the accounts, the travelers were crossing lands of Indigenous peoples, yet there is precious little recorded in their voice or words.



**Writing Spider**  
Philip Heying





**Santa Fe Trail (entry)**

Tod Seelie

Not all of the intercultural interactions led to conflict. Indeed, the men and women who traveled the Santa Fe Trail and who settled even for a time at opposite ends of the trails created cross-cultural families and friendships. French trappers and traders found partners and wives in Indigenous communities, as well as in the Hispanic settlements at the far ends of the Santa Fe Trail. They produced blended families and succeeding generations of descendants, some of whom identified as French, others as Spanish or Mexican or other European identities. There were those family

members, too, who took their place in Native communities, and still others who claimed their mixed heritage, identifying as métis in French or mestizo in Spanish.

Kansas was the geographic setting for much of the Santa Fe Trail. Many travelers recalled the immense seas of grass, colorful sunsets, and the brilliant stars they saw there. The Santa Fe Trail had two routes that crossed Kansas. The Cimarron Route covered 446 miles in Kansas, or 52% of Cimarron's 865 miles. The Mountain Route traversed 401 miles of its 909-mile course in Kansas, or 44% of its length.

So important is the Santa Fe Trail to the history of Kansas that the state seal, designed in 1861 by committee, has a cluster of symbols that encompass themes in Kansas history and its aspirational message that reads *Ad Astra per Aspera ...* "To the Stars through Difficulties," or "Through Hardship to the Stars." Whatever slight variation one would put on that phrase, it is an apt accompaniment to some of the other symbols of the seal: the steamship as a symbol of commerce, the homesteader plowing fertile soil and the wagon train pulled by oxen. Both the buffalo and the Indigenous American hunter would not share that same future place in Kansas' destiny.

Wagon trains moving west to markets in Taos and Santa Fe and further south into the interior of Mexico carried manufactured goods, such as bolts of cloth, machinery and hardware, household goods and delicacies. Wagons loaded with furs and hides and silver specie and mules moved from the southwest, east across Kansas to the

Heartland. The Santa Fe Trail was, throughout its history, more often a trail of merchants and armies, and only after the mid-19th century did it transport a significant number of settlers to the newly annexed Southwest.

Marian Sloan Russell was awed by the beauty of the prairie, but something deeper was happening there as well. A new nation woven from the threads of different experiences of peoples from different cultures and languages was forged in the colors of sunset on the prairie.

Frances Levine, Ph.D., an ethnohistorian by training, has been president and CEO of the Missouri Historical Society and Missouri History Museum in St. Louis since 2014. Previously she was director of the New Mexico History Museum and Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe. Her fascination with the Santa Fe Trail stems from having lived at both ends of the trail and from her interest in culture contact and culture change dynamics.

#### FOLLOWING SPREAD

**Sunset Looking North From Camp Creek**

Philip Heying



