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The Santa Fe Trail (Sandy Carlson, editor)

Charles Parker, Freighter And Town Builder

Charles Parker

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Sumac in Shadow #4
Diana Werts

CHARLES PARKER, FREIGHTER AND TOWN BUILDER

For nearly 20 years, from 1849 to 1869, wagon master Charles G. Parker skillfully and fearlessly guided freighters from Kansas to Santa Fe.

He eventually retired from his distinguished days on the trail and settled outside Council Grove, where he founded his namesake town of Parkerville and earned further respect as a farmer, stockman, businessman and noted Morris County citizen.

Parker was born around 1820 (reports about his birthdate vary) in Connecticut. His parents died when he was 10, leaving him and his nine siblings behind. Little is known about Parker's early life, but he eventually made his way west where he became an important figure on the Santa Fe Trail and in Morris County, Kansas.

In 1849, Parker made his first trip, presumably from the port of Kansas on the Missouri side of the Missouri River, to Santa Fe, carrying freight for a military wagon train. For almost 20 years, he traveled southwest, sometimes with his own wagon train and other times in the employment of other freighters. In 1860, the Council Grove Press took note of Parker, returning from Santa Fe, as he brought his train into town: "C.G. Parker's train consisting of 21 wagons, 225 mules, and 30 men passed through town on Wednesday last for Kansas City. Mr. Parker's wagons were loaded with government stores. He also brought 18 passengers from New Mexico to the States."

Freighters faced constant dangers and risks on the trail. In 1857, for instance, before reaching the Arkansas River near abandoned Fort Atkinson outside present-day Dodge City, a large band of 200 Kiowa Indians ordered Parker's train to

stop. In a sworn statement, given August 28, 1857, Parker stated, "With arrows drawn, they requested blankets and coats and whatever else was in the wagons. The men on the train drew their guns and demanded the train be able to move on. The Indians followed for six or eight miles until their chief, Peshamo, rode up and asked for provisions. Peshamo promised the train would be left alone if we gave him flour, crackers, sugar, coffee, rice, smoking tobacco and butcher knives. We gave them the provisions. After the chief left with the provisions, several miles later two more Indians of the same band rode up to us, fired arrows into two mules, killing them, and rode off."

The next year, 50 of Parker's mules were lost in an Indian raid when his train traveled into Mexico. Parker searched for weeks but never found them.

Indians and cholera were the two chief hazards in the trail's Cimarron Crossing area during the summer of 1867. At the Cimarron Crossing of the Arkansas River on June 16, 1867, a band of 70 Kiowa Indians attacked the stage station at the crossing and at the same time attacked the Charles Parker train, which was crossing the river from the south. Eight wagons were on the north side of the river and three were on the south side. Due to the high-water level, a herd of mules was left on the south side of the river to graze. Of the four men guarding the mules, two were killed

and scalped by the Indians. The other two survived by swimming across the river.

In a newspaper interview late in his life, in 1906, Parker recalled, "That Old Santa Fe Trail. Well, I once knew it so well that I could travel it day or night without going astray. I knew every little creek that crossed it for 1,500 miles*, and every crook and turn along its tedious winding way across the plains. In those early days we had to travel in (wagon) trains in order to guard against the Indians. Sometimes we got separated, and frequently they stole our teams. We would give chase, and occasionally they would hide from us, and show fight. I have had arrows sent after me many a time but was never very badly injured by them. While my days are about over, still the very thought of those early times on the old trail seems to bring back the spark of youth."

Charles Parker eventually retired from freighting in 1869 and settled in the Council Grove area where he had purchased land 18 miles northwest of town. There he built a house and began developing the town of Parkerville, which was incorporated in 1871 as a third-class city. The town began to grow when the Missouri, Kansas & Texas Railroad was

*The length of the Santa Fe Trail was around 800 miles (National Park Service) depending on which route was traveled. Parker traveled approximately 600 miles further to Chihuahua, Mexico, several times.



Blue Moon Over Dragoon Creek
Cally Krallman

built along the Neosho River valley. By 1871, 35 businesses had been established at Parkerville. The town built a two-story stone school and even vied to be the Morris County seat, eventually losing out to Council Grove. As of 2021, around 60 people still reside in Parkerville.

Besides his notoriety as the town founder, Parker was also involved in local and state politics, serving as a member of the Kansas House of Representatives in 1870, and he established and operated Neosho Mills. In 1878, The Morris County Enterprise wrote, "Neosho Mills (steam-driven) owned by Mr. C.G. Parker is one of the best mills on the Neosho River, and has a splendid patronage. Mr. Parker is a clever gentleman and is founder of Parkerville."

Parker enjoyed good health for many years and continued to prove he was capable of handling the rugged life and

its difficulties. When he was 86 years old, he rode all night on a freight train, accompanying a carload of his cattle to the Kansas City stockyards.

It has been 172 years since Charles G. Parker first traveled through Council Grove on the way to Santa Fe. After his days on the Santa Fe Trail, he decided to settle in the Flint Hills of northwest Morris County, Kansas. He spent the last 40 years of his life at Parkerville, the community he helped create, and died in his home at Parkerville on September 7, 1909, at 89 years of age.

Excerpts from "Charles G. Parker: Wagonmaster on the Trail to Santa Fe," Charles R. Strom, edited by Larry Patton. Patton, whose family has been in the Flint Hills for five generations, is dean emeritus of humanities and fine arts at Butler Community College.