

200 YEARS ALONG THE SANTA FE TRAIL

By Ollie Reed Jr.

William Becknell, a Missouri trader in his early 30s, and five companions watched with worried eyes as a few hundred soldiers approached. It was November 1821 at a creek just south of present-day Las Vegas, New Mexico.

In September, Becknell's party had set out from Franklin, Missouri, crossed the Missouri River at Arrow Rock and pushed West to trade for horses and mules and catch whatever wild animals might prove valuable.

Their journey through Kansas, southwest into Colorado and then into New Mexico through the rugged Raton Pass had been an ordeal. They were bone-weary from battling through snow and other natural barriers, hungry because game was scarce and mounted on horses that were near played out.

And now these soldiers. Might be things were about to get a lot worse.

The American traders were in country that had long been under the flag of Spain, and Spanish authorities did not take kindly to visitors from the United States. In 1812, most of the members of a Missouri trading mission to Santa Fe were put in prison and some confined for nine years.

You can imagine the relief Becknell and his men must have felt when the military detachment greeted them affably.

"Although the difference of our language would not admit of conversation, yet the circumstances attending their reception of us, fully convinced us of their friendly feelings," Becknell later wrote.

It turns out these were not Spanish troops but soldiers of Mexico, which

had proclaimed its independence from Spain in late September. And unlike Spain, the Mexican government welcomed trade with Americans.

Three days later, on November 16, 1821, Becknell's band rode into Santa Fe, where they were welcomed with feverish excitement and swiftly sold out their trade stock at high profits.

"Santa Fe's people were like kids in a candy store, children waiting for Christmas," said James A. Crutchfield, author of *On the Santa Fe Trail* (TwoDot, 2019). "The Spanish had taken very little interest in what happened as far north as Santa Fe, so supplies there were very scarce."

That day, nearly 200 years ago, signaled the start of the Santa Fe trade between the United States and Mexico. And it marked the opening of the Santa Fe Trail, which from 1821 until the coming of the railroad in 1880 was a crucial and successful commercial route.

Connecting cultures

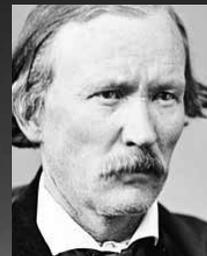
"You can't underestimate the value of the Santa Fe Trail," said Paul Andrew Hutton, distinguished professor of history at the University of New Mexico and a six-time winner of

WWA's Spur Award. "The Trail ties the far West back to the East, Missouri, and makes so many Americans aware of the potential of the West. It is also important to the burgeoning fur trade."

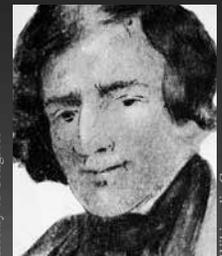
Crutchfield, a recipient of WWA's Owen Wister Award, said the Trail was a major factor in Manifest Destiny, the 19th Century idea that Americans were meant to expand across North America.

"The Santa Fe Trail was first and foremost a path of commerce," he said. "The West could not have been settled if you had only immigrants. You needed commerce, you needed trade."

Besides establishing a back-and-forth trade with Mexico and supporting the Westward movement of American settlers, the Santa Fe Trail accelerated America's conquest of Mexico, disrupted the cultures of the American Indian tribes through whose lands it passed, contributed to the devastation of the buffalo and played a bloody role in free-state/slave-state hostilities and the Civil War.



Kit Carson



Jedediah Smith

And just about every legend of the 19th Century Southwest choked down its dust. Frontiersman Kit Carson went west on the Trail, and trapper-explorer Jedediah Smith was killed on it.



Johnny D. Boggs



Johnny D. Boggs



California Historical Society Collection, University of Southern California

From left, Fort Larned and Pawnee Rock, both in Kansas, and The Old Santa Fe Trail by Frederic Remington.

“The Santa Fe Trail is different from the Oregon Trail, which is all about we are going here to settle,” said Deb Goodrich, publicity chair of the Santa Fe Trail Association directing the association’s commemoration of the Trail’s 200th anniversary. “The Santa Fe Trail is much more complex.

“But it starts out as an international road, a connection between two very different cultures – American and Mexican. Mexican traders started going east on the Trail in 1825, bringing goods to America. The trade was exhilarating. Mexicans and Americans are getting all this cool stuff from another culture.”

Two routes

Becknell rested in Santa Fe until early December 1821 and then started back to Franklin, arriving in the Missouri River town in late January 1822. He got right at organizing another Santa Fe expedition, one that would include wagons. You could pack 200 to 300 pounds on the backs of horses or mules but load 5,000 to 6,000 pounds in wagons. Do the math and see how that comes out on the bottom line.

But wagons could not go everywhere horses and mules could. The stark challenge of just getting wagons over the Trail inspired Albuquerque, New Mexico, sculptor Reynaldo “Sonny” Rivera in the creation of two dramatic larger-than-life installations that pay tribute to the Santa Fe Trail and the people who traveled it.

Journey’s End, dedicated in 2003 on Museum Hill in Santa Fe, depicts a wagon drawn by six mules working to get up a steep grade. *Westward Journey*, dedicated in 2019 at St. Louis University’s Lay Center for Education and the Arts in Pike County, Missouri, portrays a mule-drawn wagon attempting a water crossing as a woman and children

and several mounted men watch.

“What [the installations] represent are all the ups and downs facing travelers from Missouri to Santa Fe,” Rivera said. “In *Westward Journey*, the wagon’s right front wheel went into a gutter, a depression, shifting the wagon’s load so the mules are struggling to get the wagon going again.”

Such difficulties would have been on Becknell’s mind. When he departed Franklin in May 1822 with 21 men and three wagons, he was already pondering a route that would avoid steep and rock-strewn Raton Pass, which could chew up wagon wheels and axles, not to mention the human spirit, and spit them to the side.

When his band reached the vicinity of what is now Dodge City, Kansas, he turned southwest. Instead of continuing into Colorado along his 1821 path, which would become known as the Mountain Route, Becknell set a course between the Arkansas and Cimarron rivers. This route, dubbed the Cimarron Cutoff, skirted all but a sliver of Colorado and sliced through a corner of what is now Oklahoma into New Mexico.

The Cutoff was roughly a hundred miles shorter than the Mountain Route, 775 miles versus 870, depending on the starting point in Missouri. But this more direct passage into Santa Fe was perilously dry.

“The primary hardship of the Santa Fe Trail was drought, lack of water, lack of forage for the animals and just the heat,” Crutchfield said.

Famed mountain man Jedediah Smith, part of an 1831 Santa Fe trade caravan, was on a desperate search for water along the Cimarron Cutoff in southwestern Kansas when he was reportedly killed by Comanches.

And Becknell’s 1822 company nearly

died of thirst. Josiah Gregg, who himself made eight trading trips on the Trail, describes that group’s dire situation in his 1844 book *Commerce of the Prairies*.

“The forlorn band were at last reduced to the cruel necessity of killing their dogs, and cutting off the ears of their mules, in the vain hope of assuaging their burning thirst with hot blood. This only served to irritate the parched palates and madden the senses of the sufferers.”

It probably didn’t do much for the mules’ disposition either.

But just when hope seemed thinnest, Becknell, his men and surviving livestock finally got to water and into Santa Fe not many days later.

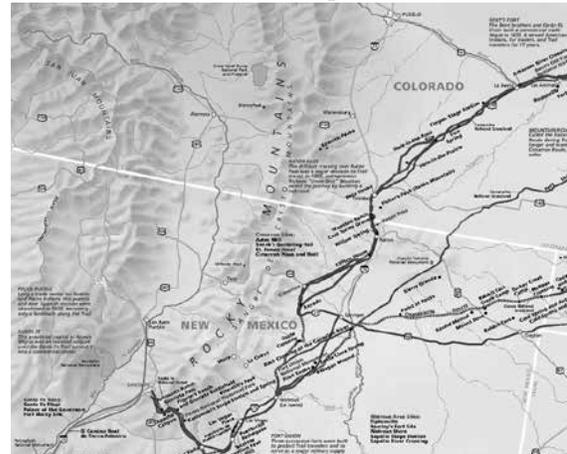
Grand entrance

In *Commerce of the Prairies*, Gregg recounts what it was like when American trade wagons rolled into Santa Fe.

“The arrival produced a great deal of bustle and excitement among the natives. ‘Los Americanos!’ – ‘Los carros!’ – ‘La entrada de la caravana!’ were to be heard in every direction; and crowds of women and boys crowded around to see the newcomers.”

Traders made the best of being the focus of the town’s attention. Gregg writes that besides washing their faces, combing their hair and breaking out

Santa Fe National Historic Trail map. National Park Service



Timeline

November 16, 1821: Missouri trader William Becknell and party take trade goods into Santa Fe, establishing commerce between the new nation of Mexico and the United States and opening the Santa Fe Trail.

May 1822: Becknell sets out from Arrow Rock, Missouri, on his second Santa Fe expedition and along the way establishes the Trail's Cimarron Cutoff, a shorter but dangerously arid route to Santa Fe.

July 17, 1825: George Chaplin Sibley leaves Fort Osage, near present-day Kansas City, Missouri, with a survey crew tasked with charting the trail.

1827: Independence, Missouri, is founded and soon replaces Fort Osage as the major jumping off place for the Trail.

1829: Council Grove, Kansas, 55 miles southwest of present-day Topeka, develops as a gathering place at which traders formed larger caravans for traveling the Trail.

1838-39: Santa Fe sets a \$500 import fee per American trade wagon, prompting traders to use bigger wagons.

August 18, 1846: After a march along the Trail, Stephen Watts Kearny and his Army of the West occupy Santa Fe without a fight at the outset of the Mexican War.

1851: To protect travelers on the Trail from Indian attack, Fort Union is

constructed 30 miles north of Las Vegas, New Mexico, near the junction of the Trail's Mountain and Cimarron Cutoff routes.

1865: Former mountain man Dick Wootton builds a toll road through rugged Raton Pass to make Trail travel between Colorado and New Mexico less difficult. Toll was \$1.50 per wagon, 25 cents for horsemen, five cents per head of stock. Indians traveled for free.

February 16, 1880: The first train rolls into the Santa Fe area. A headline in the *Santa Fe New Mexican* reads "The Old Santa Fe Trail Passes into Oblivion."

Source: *The Santa Fe Trail, Yesterday and Today* by William E. Hill, 1992

their best duds, "Each wagoner must tie a brand new 'cracker' to the lash of his whip; for, on driving through the streets and the plaza publica, every one strives to outvie his comrades in the dexterity with which he flourishes this favorite badge of authority."

Traffic on the Trail increased each year. In his book about the Trail, Crutchfield writes that between 1826 and 1835, more than 1,500 men and 775 wagons transported more than \$1,365,000 in merchandise along the Trail.

And the trade was lucrative. According to Crutchfield, in 1824 an American hauled \$30,000 in goods into Santa Fe and left with \$150,000 in Mexican wares.

Becknell did just fine on that nearly disastrous 1822 expedition, making an estimated 2000 percent profit. But realizing how close he came to being scattered and bleached bones, the father of the Santa Fe Trail decided to get out of the trade business. Crutchfield notes that when Becknell next re-

turned to New Mexico, in the summer of 1824, he was a fur trapper.

Dangerous journey

"Travel on the Santa Fe Trail was so dangerous," Hutton said. "Every caravan was a target for native tribes, white outlaws, prairie fires and a couple of million buffalo that might happen by."

Hutton's work in progress, a book titled *The Undiscovered Country*, includes two chapters linked to the Santa Fe Trail. One tells about Kit Carson's migration West along the Trail from Missouri when he was 16. The other relates Carson's efforts, as scout for a troop of Dragoons, to find and rescue Ann White. Mrs. White, her child and servant had been traveling with White's husband and several other men along the Santa Fe Trail in northeastern New Mexico in October 1849 when they were attacked by Jicarilla Apaches. All the men were killed and Mrs. White, the little girl and servant abducted.

Carson and the Dragoons pursued the Jicarillas and overtook them, but Mrs.

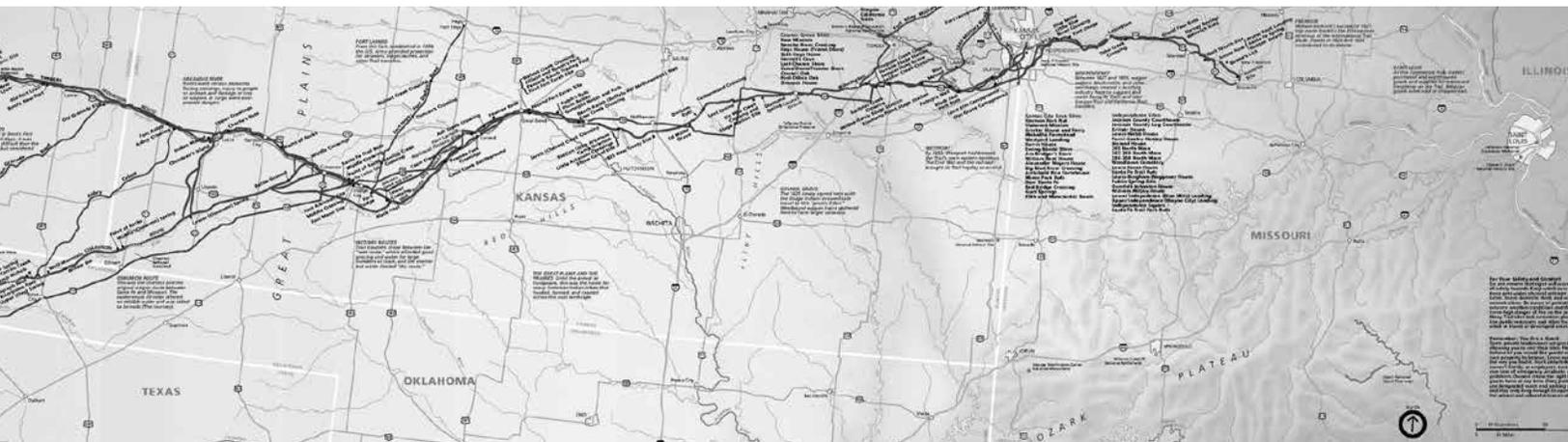


Fort Union ruins in New Mexico. Johnny D. Boggs

White was killed by her captors minutes before she could be saved, and the daughter and servant were never found.

Hutton said the White incident led to the building of Fort Union (1851-1891) about 30 miles north of Las Vegas, New Mexico. Situated near the junction of the Mountain Route and the Cimarron Cutoff, northeast of Santa Fe, the fort was intended to protect travelers on the Trail from Indian attack. Conflict with Indian tribes had been part of the Trail's history from the start, but in 1846 the road took another turn.

"It opens up commerce between Mex-





Trail monuments near Olathe, Kansas; in Raton, New Mexico; in Jackson County, Missouri; at a southbound I-25 rest area in Colfax County, New Mexico; and in Morton County, Kansas, near the Colorado Border.

ico and the U.S., and then it becomes a war trail,” Hutton said.

In a move to add the disputed Republic of Texas and the Mexican possessions of New Mexico and California to its own growing empire, the United States declared war on Mexico in 1846, and the Army of the West, under the command of Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny, was on the march along the Trail to Santa Fe.

“Without the Santa Fe Trail, Kearny could not have reached Santa Fe as fast as he did,” Crutchfield said. “He got down there in a matter of weeks. That was very important.”



Stephen Watts Kearny

There is but one entrance, this is to the East rather.”

That’s Susan Shelby Magoffin writing in her diary about Bent’s Fort in July 1846. Magoffin, the young bride of a Santa Fe trader, was traveling that

Bent’s Fort

“Well the outside exactly fills my idea of an ancient castle. It is built of adobes, unburnt brick, and Mexican style so far. The walls are very high

and very thick with rounding corners.

year with her husband from Independence along the Trail into New Mexico and then south to Chihuahua, Mexico. Bent’s Fort was a civilian endeavor, built in 1833 by Ceran St. Vrain and the brothers William and Charles Bent for the purpose of trading with Southern Cheyennes, Arapahos and white hunters for buffalo robes. Located near present-day La Junta, Colorado, it was also a major stopping point for those traveling the Trail’s Mountain Route.

“Bent’s Fort was about halfway along that Mountain Route,” said Rex Rideout, Old West re-enactor, musician and student of 19th Century music

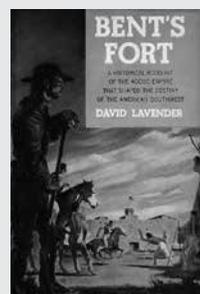
Trail Books

Nonfiction

***On the Santa Fe Trail* by James A. Crutchfield (2019):** Concise primer about the Santa Fe Trail’s history and personalities.

***Wah-to-yah & the Taos Trail* by Lewis H. Garrard (1850):** Garrard went West on the Trail at age 17 and kept a journal that led to this stirring account of Santa Fe traders, mountain men, Indians and the Taos Rebellion.

***Commerce of the Prairies* by Josiah**



Gregg (1844): Vivid and colorful depiction of the Santa Fe trade by a man who made eight trips on the Trail.

***Bent’s Fort* by David Lavender (1954):** Enthralling, Spur-

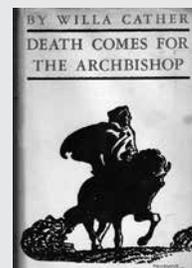
winning history of the Colorado trading post and Trail stopover established in 1833 by Ceran St. Vrain and brothers William and Charles Bent.

***Down the Santa Fe Trail and Into Mexico* by Susan Shelby Magoffin (1926):** Derived from the diary Magoffin, wife of Santa Fe trader Samuel Magoffin, kept on her 1846-47 honeymoon trip along the Trail and then south to Chihuahua, Mexico. She turned 19 during a stopover at Bent’s Fort.

Fiction

***Santa Fe Passage* by Jon R. Bauman (2004):** In 1822, young Matthew Collins leaves Illinois for the Santa Fe trade, prospers, marries a Mexican woman, becomes a Mexican citizen and is forced to decide his loyalties as war between America and Mexico approaches.

***Death Comes for the Archbishop* by Willa Cather (1927):** Cather’s story of a Catholic clergyman’s challenges and



triumphs in New Mexico during the second half of the 19th Century paints a memorable picture of Santa Fe during the Trail’s busy and waning years.

***Wolf Song* by Harvey Fergusson (1927):** Fergusson, whose maternal grandfather came to New Mexico as a Santa Fe Trail bullwhacker, tells the vigorous, feral story of mountain man Sam Lash and his adventures in Taos, Bent’s Fort and other frontier locales.

***Fighting Caravans* by Zane Grey (1929):** The rousing tale of Santa Fe caravan leader Clint Belmet, who battles Comanches and treacherous white men but finds time to fall in love with the lovely May Bell.

– Ollie Reed Jr.



On the Trail

To help you experience the Santa Fe Trail up close during its 200th anniversary year, go to SantaFeTrail200.org. This site, created by the Santa Fe Trail Association, features an extensive calendar of events associated with the Trail, national parks along the Trail and suggested sites to see in each of the five states along the Trail.

Another excellent source of information is the website of the Santa Fe National Historic Trail. Go to NPS.gov and look for Santa Fe National Historic Trail on the list of National Parks.

During the coronavirus pandemic, events are subject to postponement or cancellation, and sites or venues may be closed or open with restrictions. Double check by phone or online before attending events or visiting sites and venues.

— Ollie Reed Jr.

and frontier history. “The fort had complete blacksmith and wood shops with skilled craftsmen. One could stop for repairs and get needed supplies. So Bent’s Fort enjoyed commerce with the wagon trains passing through but their primary role was the buffalo trade. Serving those passing along the Trail was a lesser function.”

Susan Magoffin turned 19 at Bent’s Fort and was there while the Army of the West marshaled its forces at the fort for the push into New Mexico.

“The Fort is crowded to overflow-

ing,” she penned in her diary. “Col. Kearny has arrived and it seems the world is coming with him.”

Bent’s Fort was destroyed in 1849, burned, some believe, by William Bent himself as the buffalo trade declined. But the fort was recreated on its original site in 1976 and opened to the public as a National Historic site. The Santa Fe Trail Association is planning a Bicentennial Symposium at the fort and other La Junta locations September 22-26.

SANTA FE TRAIL (continued on page 24)

