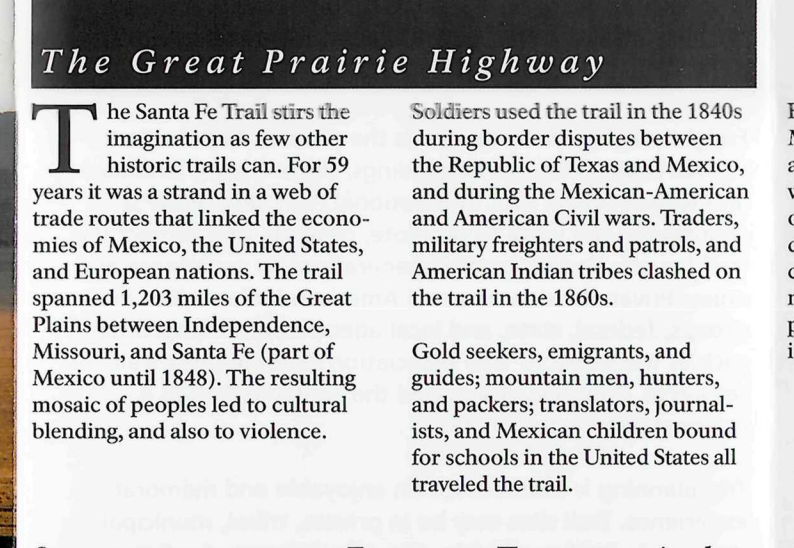




## The Great Prairie Highway

The Santa Fe Trail stirs the imagination as few other historic trails can. For 59 years it was a strand in a web of trade routes that linked the economies of Mexico, the United States, and European nations. The trail spanned 1,203 miles of the Great Plains between Independence, Missouri, and Santa Fe (part of Mexico until 1848). The resulting mosaic of peoples led to cultural blending, and also to violence.

Soldiers used the trail in the 1840s during border disputes between the Republic of Texas and Mexico, and during the Mexican-American and American Civil wars. Traders, military freighters and patrols, and American Indian tribes clashed on the trail in the 1860s.

Gold seekers, emigrants, and guides; mountain men, hunters, and packers; translators, journalists, and Mexican children bound for schools in the United States all traveled the trail.

Before 1821, Spain guarded New Mexico's borders, limiting access and impeding international trade with its colony. Missourians and others who visited Santa Fe described an isolated provincial capital, starved for supplies and manufactured goods, and a potential gateway to Mexico's interior markets.

When the United States and Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, most of northern Mexico became part of the United States. The trail was no longer an international route. By the 1870s the railroads had pushed far into the western states, and made travel along the trail obsolete.

## Santa Fe Trail Timeline

Before 1540  
American Indians create trade and travel routes that later become part of Santa Fe Trail.

1540-41  
Francisco Vázquez de Coronado of Spain explores from Mexico to central Kansas.

1601  
Juan de Oñate travels for five months with wagons and artillery through the Plains.

1739  
Paul and Peter Mallet make first French trading venture to Santa Fe from Illinois country.

1792  
Pedro Vial of France travels from Santa Fe to Saint Louis on behalf of Spain.

1819  
Financial panic creates need for hard currency in Missouri Territory.

The Adams-Onís Treaty between US and Spain sets Arkansas River as international boundary.

1821  
Mexico wins independence from Spain; welcomes William Becknell's party from Missouri to Santa Fe.

1825  
Sen. Thomas Hart Benton (right) of Missouri arranges federal survey of the trail.

1833-34  
Bent brothers, Charles (left) and William, and Cerán St. Vrain build Bent's Fort.

1836  
Texas wins independence from Mexico.

1844  
Trader Josiah Gregg chronicles his trips over the trail in *Commerce of the Prairies*.

1846  
US invades Mexico.

1848  
War ends. US acquires almost half of Mexico's lands (including New Mexico) in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (left).

1849-52  
California Gold Rush increases trail traffic.

1851  
Fort Union built to help protect trail commerce.

1861-65  
US Civil War. US Army wins 1862 battle at Glorietta Pass, New Mexico.

1866  
Trail becomes shorter as railroads begin to push westward.

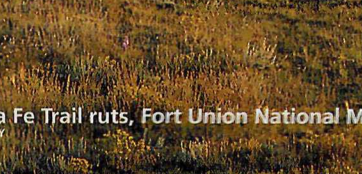
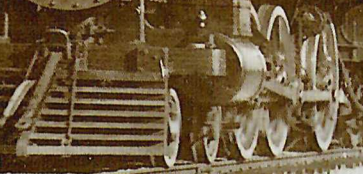
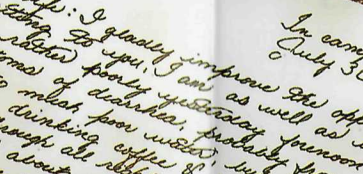
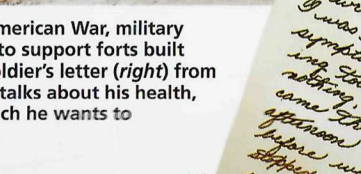
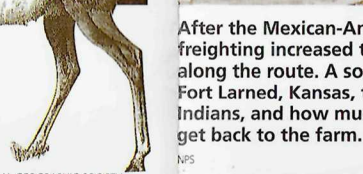
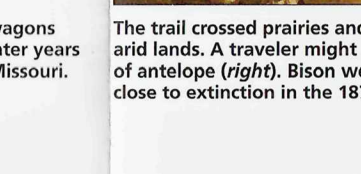
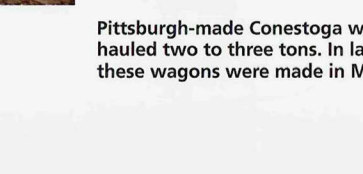
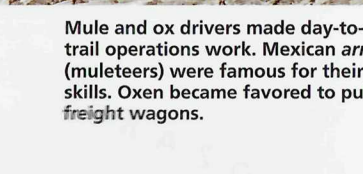
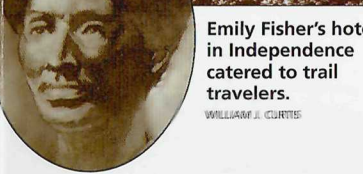
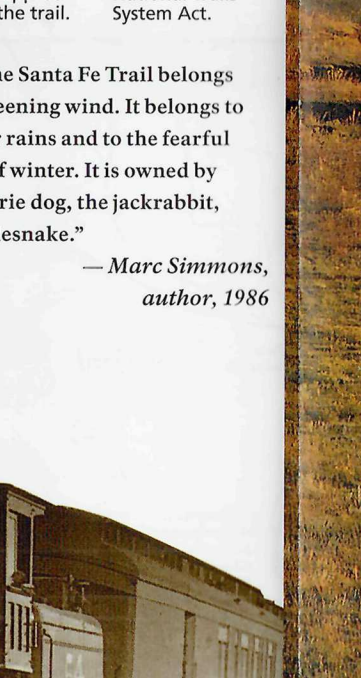
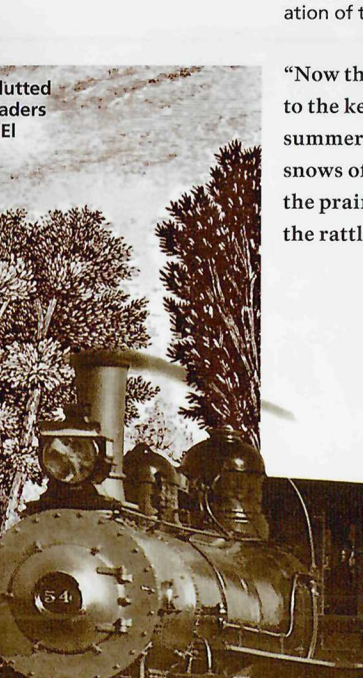
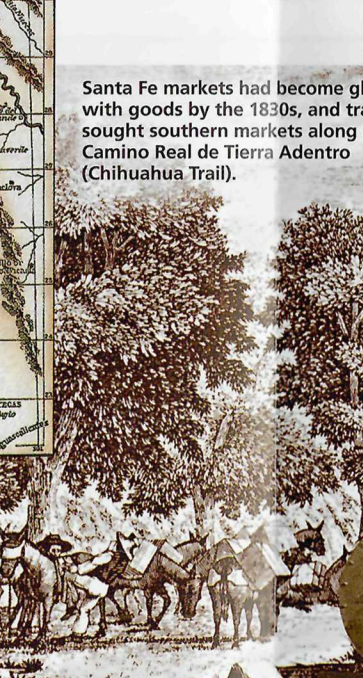
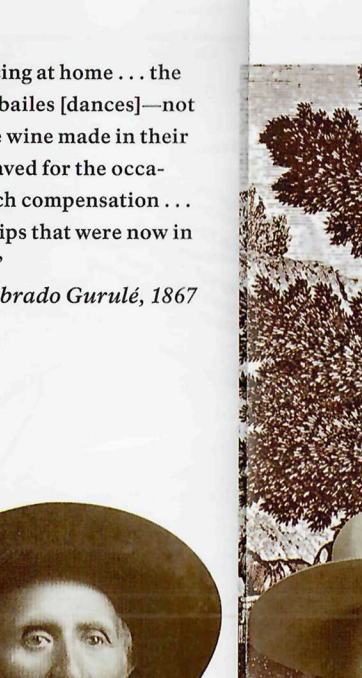
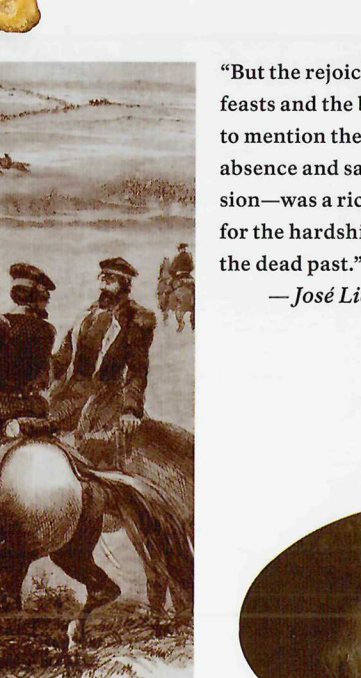
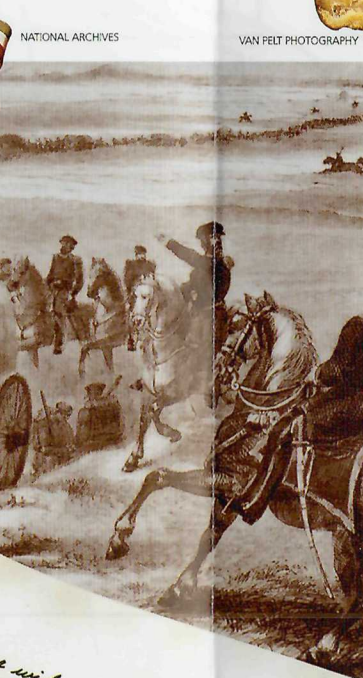
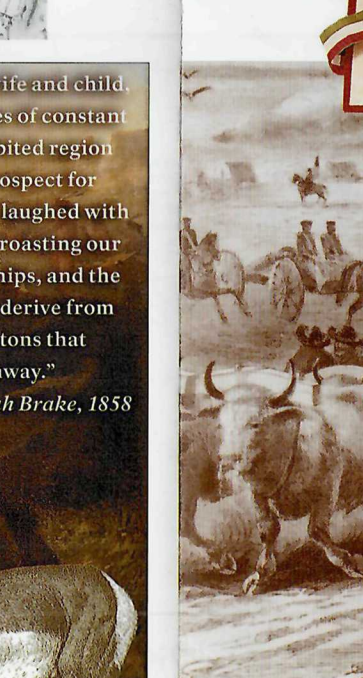
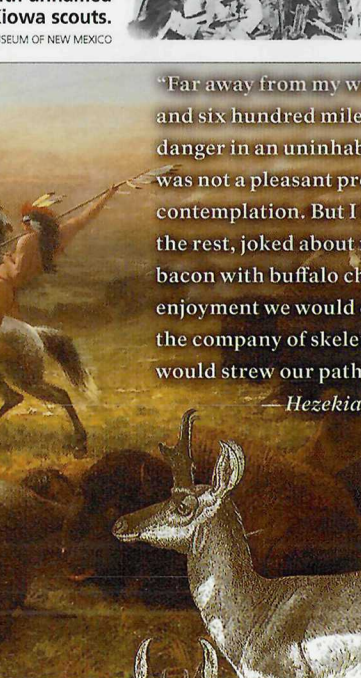
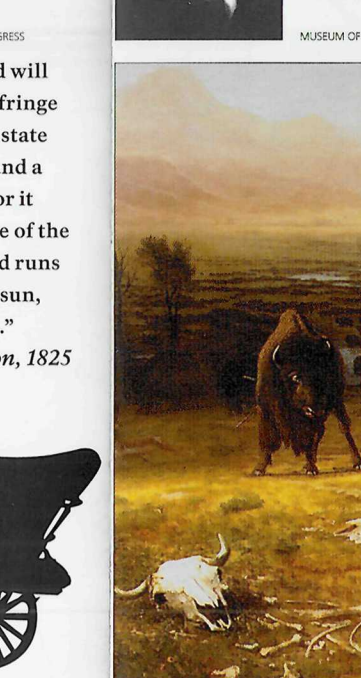
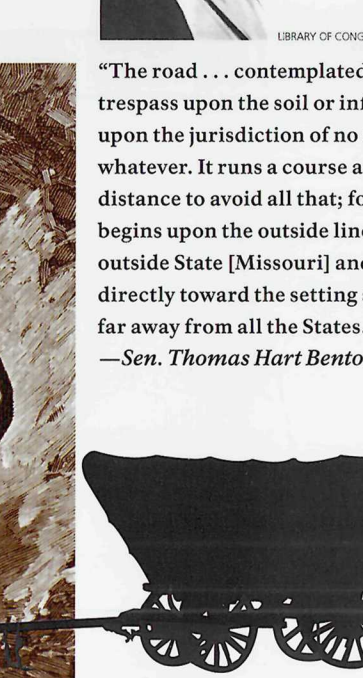
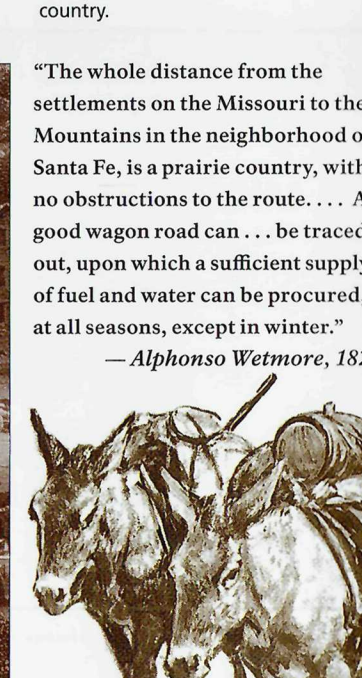
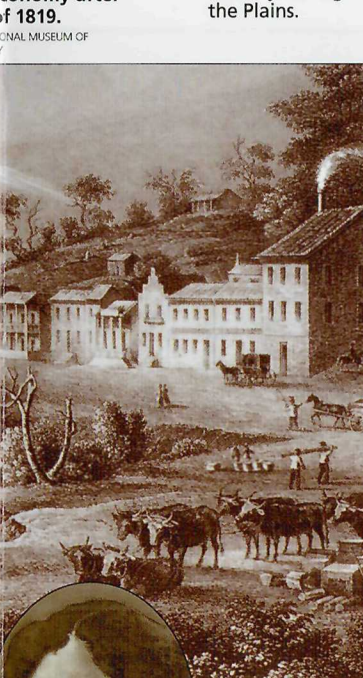
1878  
Railroad reaches Ratón Pass on the Mountain Route of the Santa Fe Trail.

1880  
Railroad reaches Santa Fe; the trail slips into history.

1906  
Daughters of the American Revolution begin erecting trail markers.

1986  
Santa Fe Trail Association forms to help preserve and promote awareness and appreciation of the trail.

1987  
Congress designates Santa Fe National Historic Trail under the National Trails System Act.



## Commerce of the Prairies

In September 1821, bankrupt and facing jail for his debts, William Becknell left Franklin, Missouri, for Santa Fe. He took five men, a string of pack horses, and \$300 worth of trade goods. Two and a half months later, they learned through a chance meeting with Captain Don Pedro Ignacio Gallego, alcalde (mayor) of Abiqui, that Mexico had won independence from Spain. The captain welcomed the Americans into the country to trade. They returned home with about \$6,000 in profit.

Becknell immediately made plans for a second trip, taking wagons along the route that became known as the Santa Fe Trail. Other traders followed, creating a web of social ties, business, tariffs, and laws that linked merchants in Missouri and New Mexico with those in New York, London, and Mexico City. Some traders converted to the Catholic faith, became citizens of Mexico, and married into Mexican families.

After New Mexico became a United States territory, trade and military freighting on the trail expanded. The firms of Otero & Sellar, and Russell, Majors, and Waddell (which later established the Pony Express) prospered from government contracts. Other companies ran mail and stagecoach services.

Manuel Harmony shipped English goods from New York City to Independence for freighting over the trail. New Mexican saloon owner Doña Gertrudis "La Tules" Barceló

invested in the trade, and Charles Ifield ran mercantile stores. The Wyandotte chief William Walker leased a warehouse in Independence, and others in his tribe invested in the trade. Hiram Young, who bought his freedom from slavery, grew wealthy by building trade wagons. He became one of the largest employers in Independence. Blacksmiths, hotel owners, *arrieros* (muleteers), lawyers, and others found their places along the trail.

In reality, a glimpse of bison, elk, pronghorn, or prairie dogs provided the only excitement for most who made the 8-week journey. Dust, mud, gnats and mosquitoes, and heat were constant.

Trail hands scrambled at dawn to manage unwilling livestock. Wagons headed out as the air rang with whoops and cries of "All's set! Catch up, catch up! Stretch out!"

At mid-morning, crews unhitched and grazed the teams, hauled water, gathered wood or buffalo chips for fuel, and cooked the main meal of the day. The daily ration was one pound per person of flour, one pound of sorghum (bacon), one ounce of coffee, two ounces of sugar, and a pinch of salt. Beans,

dried apples, and buffalo or other game were occasional treats.

At day's end, crews again cared for their livestock and repaired wagons and gear. They chose guards for the night and enjoyed a few hours of leisure and sleep before starting again.

Trail travelers thought the route uninhabited, but the prairies were the homelands and hunting grounds of Osage, Kansas (Kaw), Comanche, Kiowa, southern bands of Cheyenne and Arapaho, Plains Apache, Ute, Jicarilla Apache, and Puebloan tribes.

Early travelers often negotiated access through tribal territory with American Indians. They traded horses, mules, and other items. As trail traffic increased, so did confrontations. Misunderstandings arose from the lack of a shared language and conflicting values, such as the European American concept of land ownership. Even as tensions made military escorts necessary, traffic along the trail continued.

The government, railroads, and speculators parceled lands out to emigrants. Bison—the tribes' main food source and a key component in their material culture—were hunted nearly to extinction. By the 1870s the US Congress had forced most American Indians onto marginal lands in what is now Oklahoma.

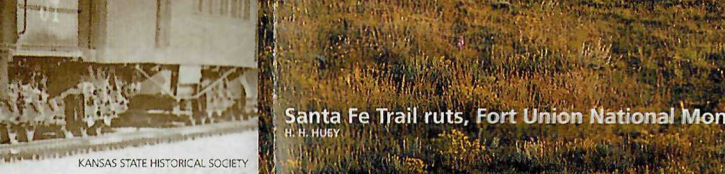
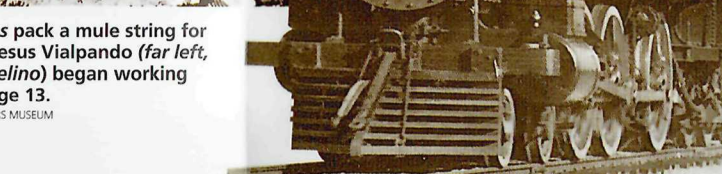
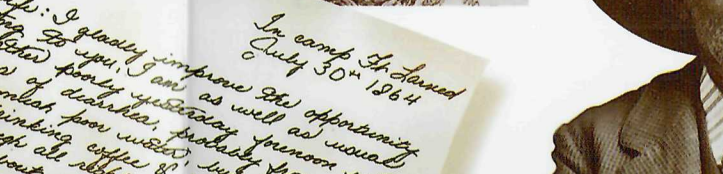
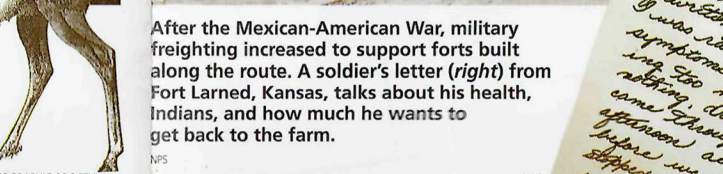
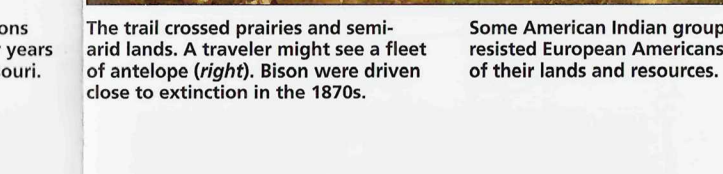
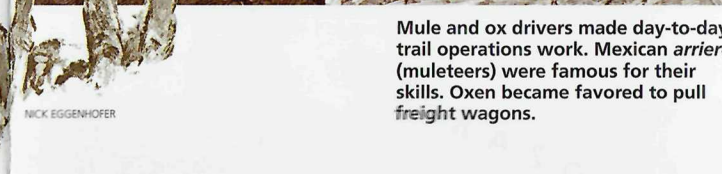
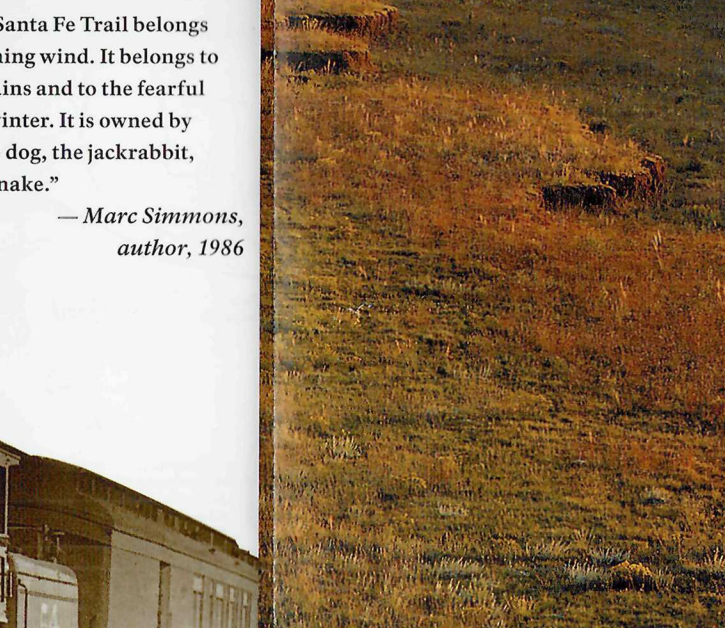
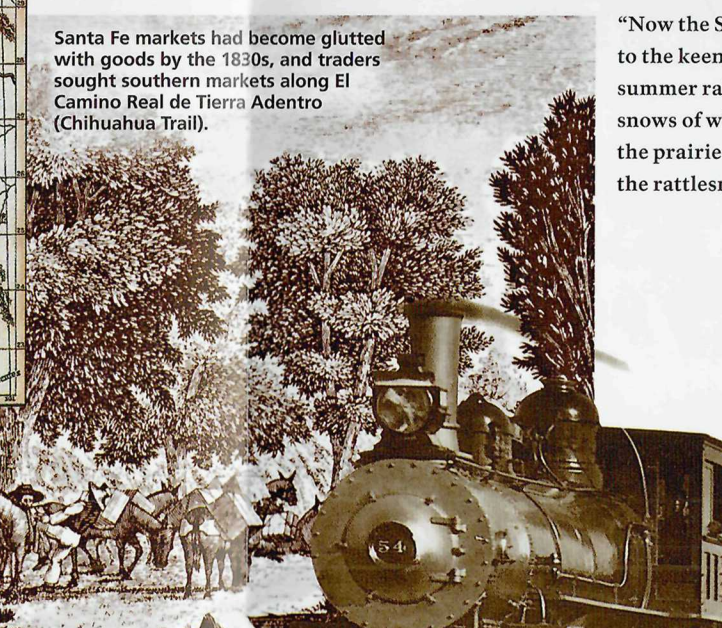
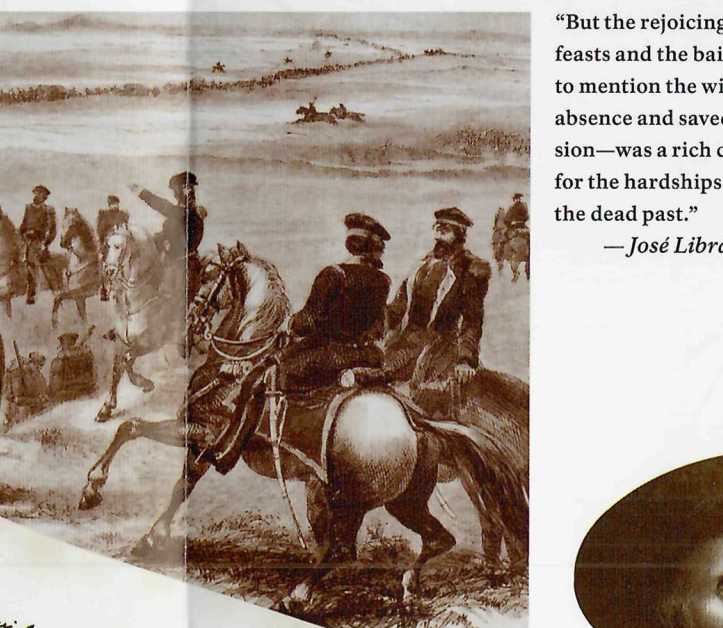
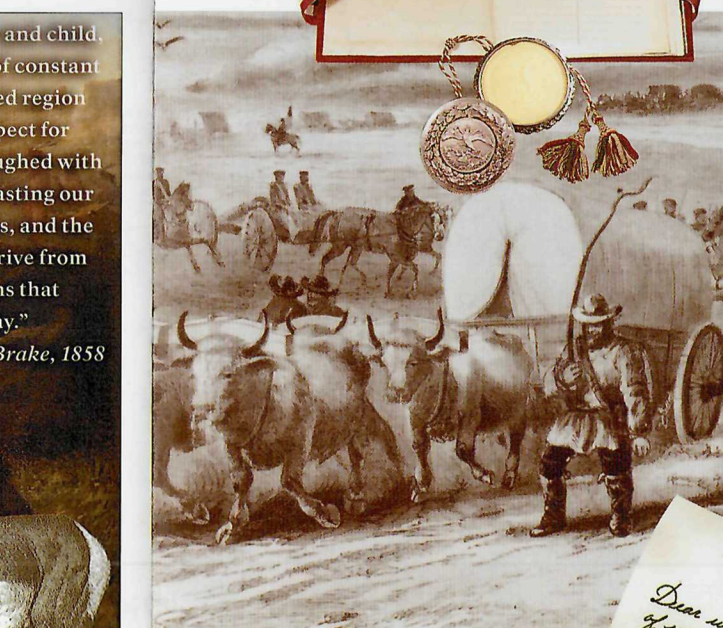
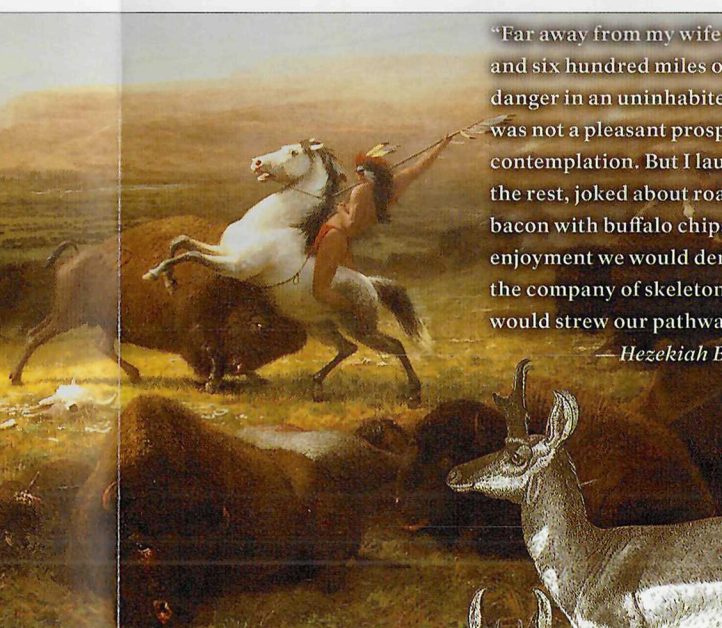
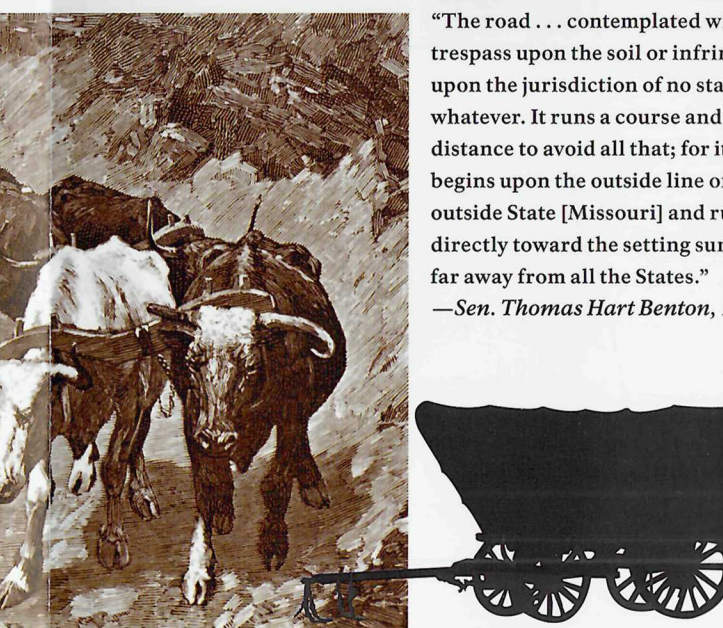
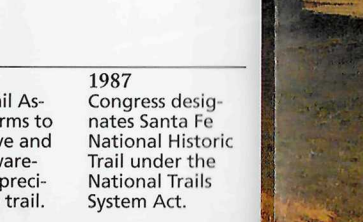
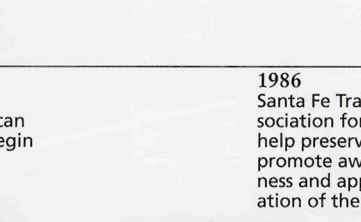
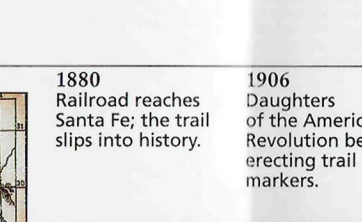
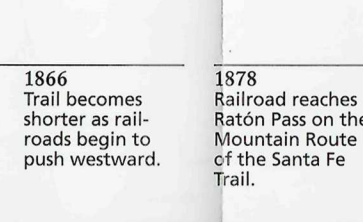
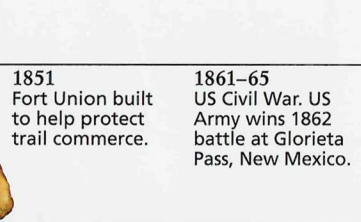
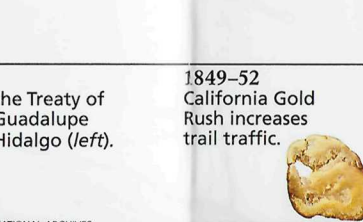
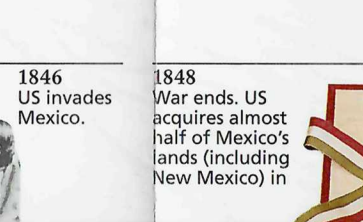
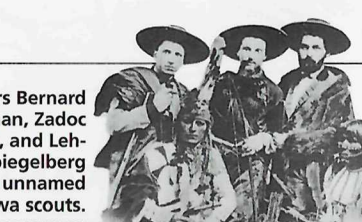
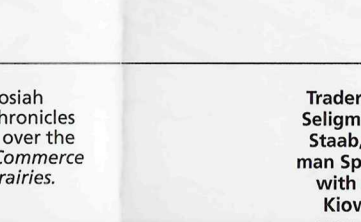
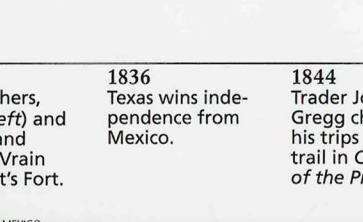
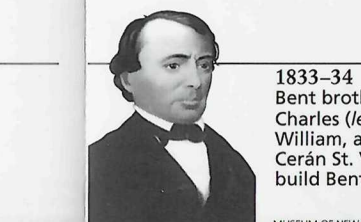
Suspensions and tensions among the United States, Republic of Texas, and Mexico heightened in the 1840s. The United States acquired Texas in 1845, and in 1846 the Mexican-American War erupted.

Gen. Stephen Watts Kearny led his Army of the West down the Santa Fe Trail to take and hold New Mexico and Upper California, and to protect American traders on the trail. Kearny reached Santa Fe unchallenged. Other communities

including Taos and Mora fought back, but the US Army prevailed. When the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the war in 1848, the Santa Fe Trail became the lifeline for protection and communication between Missouri and Santa Fe.

From a succession of military forts such as Mann (1847), Atkinson (1850), Union (1851), Larned (1859), and Lyon (1860), the army sought to control conflict between American Indians and trail travelers. As the military presence grew, freighting and merchants' operations increased. In 1858 many of the 1,800 wagons that traveled over the Santa Fe Trail carried military supplies.

In 1862 the Civil War reached the West. Confederates from Texas pushed up the Rio Grande Valley. They hoped to seize New Mexico Territory, including Fort Union, and the Colorado goldfields. Santa Fe and Albuquerque fell to them, but at Glorietta Pass—the decisive battle of the western theater of the



"The whole distance from the settlements on the Missouri to the Mountains in the neighborhood of Santa Fe, is a prairie country, with no obstructions to the route. . . . A good wagon road can . . . be traced out, upon which a sufficient supply of fuel and water can be procured, at all seasons, except in winter."

—Alphonso Wetmore, 1824

"The road . . . contemplated will trespass upon the soil or infringe upon the jurisdiction of no state whatever. It runs a course and a distance to avoid all that; for it begins upon the outside line of the outside State [Missouri] and runs directly toward the setting sun, far away from all the States."

—Sen. Thomas Hart Benton, 1825

"Far away from my wife and child, and six hundred miles of constant danger in an uninhabited region was not a pleasant prospect for contemplation. But I laughed with the rest, joked about roasting our bacon with buffalo chips, and the enjoyment we would derive from the company of skeletons that would strew our pathway."

—Hezekiah Brake, 1858

After the Mexican-American War, military freighting increased to support forts built along the route. A soldier's letter (right) from Fort Larned, Kansas, talks about his health, Indians, and how much he wants to get back to the farm.

Some American Indian groups fiercely resisted European Americans' invasion of their lands and resources.

Pittsburg-made Conestoga wagons hauled two to three tons. In later years these wagons were made in Missouri.

Mule and ox drivers made day-to-day trail operations work. Mexican *arrieros* (muleteers) were famous for their skills. Oxen became favored to pull freight wagons.

The trail crossed prairies and semi-arid lands. A traveler might see a fleet of antelope (right). Bison were driven close to extinction in the 1870s.

After the Mexican-American War, military freighting increased to support forts built along the route. A soldier's letter (right) from Fort Larned, Kansas, talks about his health, Indians, and how much he wants to get back to the farm.

Some American Indian groups fiercely resisted European Americans' invasion of their lands and resources.

Pittsburg-made Conestoga wagons hauled two to three tons. In later years these wagons were made in Missouri.

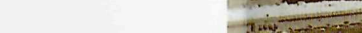
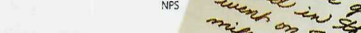
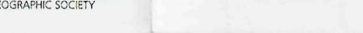
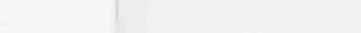
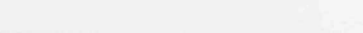
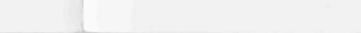
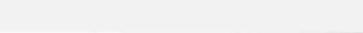
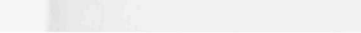
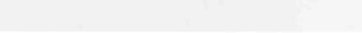
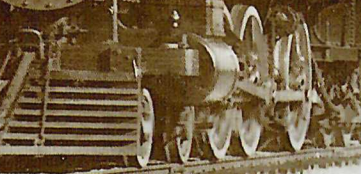
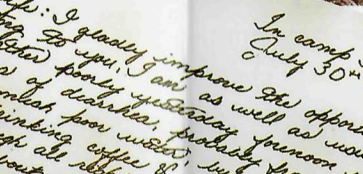
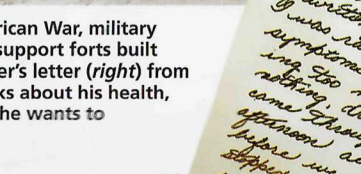
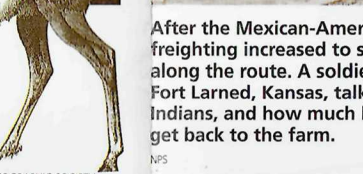
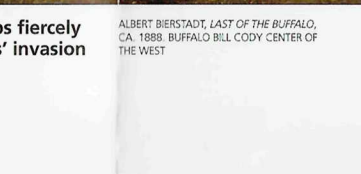
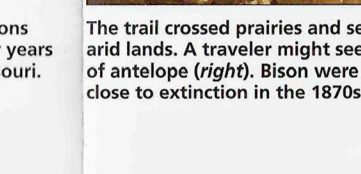
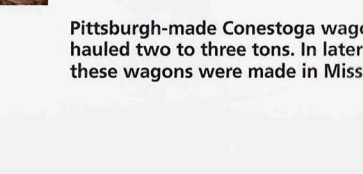
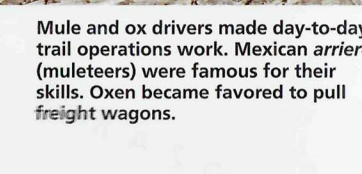
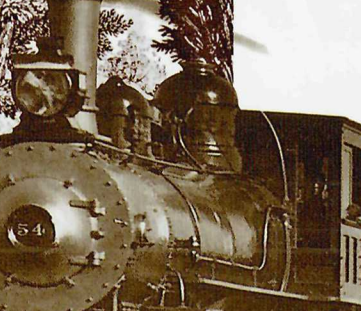
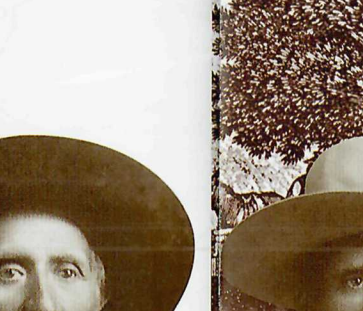
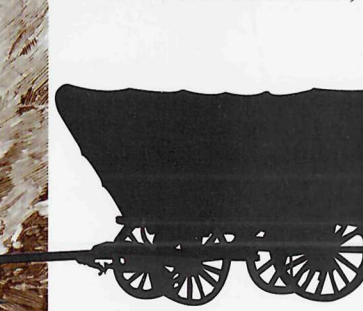
Mule and ox drivers made day-to-day trail operations work. Mexican *arrieros* (muleteers) were famous for their skills. Oxen became favored to pull freight wagons.

The trail crossed prairies and semi-arid lands. A traveler might see a fleet of antelope (right). Bison were driven close to extinction in the 1870s.

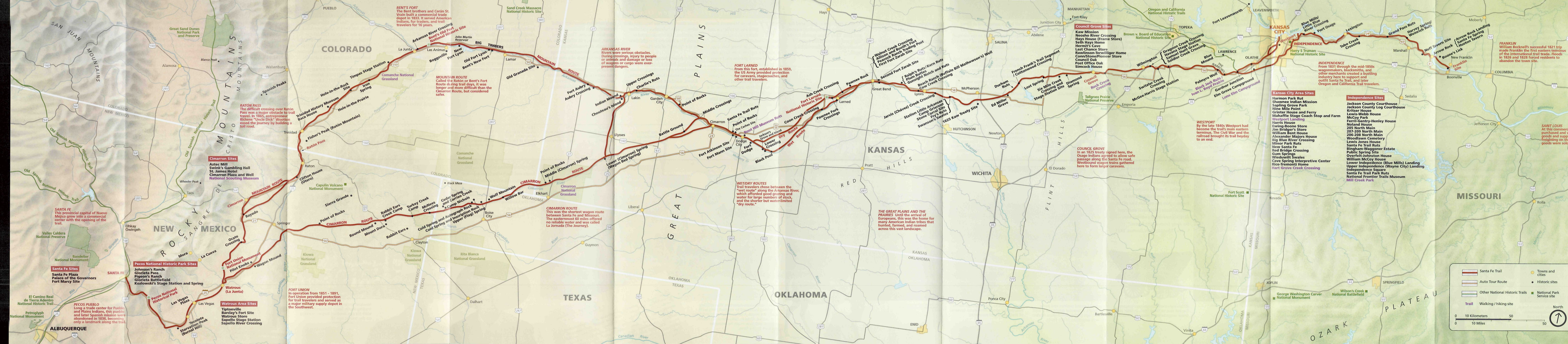
After the Mexican-American War, military freighting increased to support forts built along the route. A soldier's letter (right) from Fort Larned, Kansas, talks about his health, Indians, and how much he wants to get back to the farm.

Some American Indian groups fiercely resisted European Americans' invasion of their lands and resources.

Pittsburg-made Conestoga wagons hauled two to three tons. In later years these wagons were made in Missouri.







## Visiting the Santa Fe Trail Today

Freight wagons no longer cross the prairies, but the Santa Fe Trail legacy endures in buildings, historic sites, landmarks, and wagon-wheel ruts. The National Park Service (NPS) coordinates the work to promote, develop, and protect the trail for you and for coming generations to experience and enjoy. Private landowners and American Indian tribes and groups; federal, state, and local agencies; and nonprofits such as the Santa Fe Trail Association manage most trail resources. Congress designated the Santa Fe Trail as a national historic trail in 1987.

Trip planning is essential for an enjoyable and memorable experience. Trail sites may be in private, tribal, municipal, state, or federal ownership. Check websites and call the sites before you travel. Sites on private land, for example, may not be open to the public. Follow the official Santa Fe National Historic Trail signs (*right*) to retrace the trail along highways, streets, and backcountry roads.

Background colors on the big map (see *color key below*) suggest the vegetation changes travelers saw en route. The white box on the US map silhouette (*below*) shows the area the big map covers.

**Trail Sites on Federal Lands**

Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site (NPS) [www.nps.gov/beol](http://www.nps.gov/beol)

Cimarron and Comanche National Grasslands (US Forest Service) [www.fs.usda.gov/psic](http://www.fs.usda.gov/psic)

Fort Larned National Historic Site (NPS) [www.nps.gov/fols](http://www.nps.gov/fols)

Fort Union National Monument (NPS) [www.nps.gov/foun](http://www.nps.gov/foun)

Kiowa National Grassland (US Forest Service) [www.fs.usda.gov/cibola](http://www.fs.usda.gov/cibola)

Pecos National Historical Park (NPS) [www.nps.gov/peco](http://www.nps.gov/peco)

Santa Fe National Forest (US Forest Service) [www.fs.usda.gov/santafe](http://www.fs.usda.gov/santafe)

**Trail Information**

National Trails Office National Park Service PO Box 728 Santa Fe, NM 87504 [www.nps.gov/safe](http://www.nps.gov/safe) 505-988-6098

Santa Fe Trail Association Santa Fe Trail Center 1349 K-156 Hwy. Larned, KS 67550 [www.santafetrail.org](http://www.santafetrail.org) 620-285-2054

To learn more about trails visit [www.nps.gov/nts](http://www.nps.gov/nts). To learn more about national parks visit [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov).

USPO 2020-411223/02614 Last updated 2020 Printed on recycled paper.