

SOME ASPECTS OF THE SANTA FE TRAIL

1848-1880

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Much has been said and written about the Santa Fe Trail. Its origin, its commercial aspects, its romantic features, and its stirring tales of hardship and adventure, all have been told and retold. Most of the accounts, however, have been limited to the period before 1848. It is the purpose of this paper to continue the narrative from that time and to outline the story of the Trail between the Mexican War and the coming of the railroads.

Nor is the history of the Trail in its later years of any less importance than in the days of its pioneer development. With the annexation and occupation of Mexican territory, a new era in the history of the Santa Fe Trail began. No longer was its chief western terminus in a foreign land. Hence its commerce, formerly foreign, became primarily domestic, and though thereby deprived of much of its romantic character the value and variety of trade soon mounted to heights never dreamed of in former days. Moreover, the Trail became the one great bond that united the newly-acquired possessions in the far Southwest to the rest of the United States. It became a medium for the rather slow process of Americanizing a region which for two and a half centuries had been living under the influences of a Spanish civilization. Of even greater significance was its relation to the settlement of the immense stretch of land between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains. In 1848 the Trail passed through the Indian country and across vast, unsettled plains before it reached the territory of New Mexico and the country beyond. By 1880 thriving states and territories had arisen along the greater part of its course. The great unsettled West was passing away. It is this fact that gives the Santa Fe Trail its chief

claim to importance after the Mexican War, for the history of the Trail in its later years is simply a part of the history of the vanishing frontier.

The story of the Trail breaks up into three fairly distinct periods: (1) 1848-1860, a period of increased commerce and overland migration; (2) 1860-1867, a period of conflict; and (3) 1867-1880, the railroad period. The characteristics and problems of each of these periods of the Santa Fe Trail are practically identical with the characteristics and problems of the whole frontier for the same time.

One of the striking characteristics of the period between the Mexican and Civil wars was the increased commercial importance of the Trail, exhibited in the rapidly growing exports and imports to and from the Southwest. In 1849 and following a new feature in the history of the trail was introduced with the emigration of settlers to the gold fields of California by way of Santa Fe. This movement of population continued to a greater or less extent until 1858, when another emigration began—this time to the gold mines of Colorado. Another innovation came in 1850, when, due to the necessity of establishing a closer communication with the far-off territories, a regular overland mail was organized between Missouri and New Mexico and put into successful operation. All these activities across the Great Plains led to Indian hostilities, to a change in our Indian policy, and to the introduction of some system of military protection for the road by the United States. By 1860 the Southwest had been brought closer to the rest of the country and the existence of the frontier had been weakened but not severely shaken.

Several new problems presented themselves for solution in the period between 1860 and 1867. During these years the Trail was primarily a military highway with conflicts raging along the main route from Missouri to New Mexico. At the eastern end military protection was required against the depredations of Bushwhackers, "Red Legs," Guerillas, Jayhawkers, and ordinary highwaymen. Toward the central and western end protection became necessary to halt the advance of the troops of the Confederacy. And along the whole route

the best of protection was needed against the Indians who had finally risen with a vengeance to smite the white man for his encroachments upon their territory. These conflicts taxed the strength of the Federal troops to the utmost. Commerce and migration had increased in the meantime, and some people were beginning to realize that the Great American Desert was in reality a future home for thousands of settlers. While the occurrences along the Santa Fe Trail during these years contributed to the further weakening of the frontier, the period closed without any serious menace to its existence.

But a change was imminent. The Indian problem of the Trail, which had been an ever-present one since the days of the Mexican War, was finally solved in the last period of the Trail's history. The redoubtable Sheridan, with the aid of his brilliant subordinate Custer, crushed the Indians in a winter campaign in 1868 and 1869, and forced them on to reservations previously assigned to them by the national government. At the same time the eastern terminal of the Trail retreated westward before the rapid advance of the railroads. Countless settlers followed close upon the heels of the railroad builders, so that by 1880, when the locomotive made its appearance in Santa Fe, the greater part of the country through which the Trail had passed was dotted with settlers. A new day had dawned. It was the beginning of the end of the last American frontier. To this accomplishment the Santa Fe Trail had contributed not a little.

Of the various aspects of the Trail thus outlined, only a few can be discussed in the brief space allotted to this paper. A necessary preliminary to an account of the Trail is a description of the route it traversed. Prior to the Civil War the main route, except for its eastern terminus, remained the same as it had been before 1846. It still passed from the Missouri River in a southwesterly direction through Council Grove and on to Santa Fe, whence one branch proceeded south by way of El Paso to Chihuahua and Durango in Mexico, and the other proceeded west to the Pacific. Leaving out of consideration the minor routes from the Arkansas frontier and from eastern Texas, the main route for a number of years

had Independence as its principal eastern terminus; but by the beginning of the Mexican War the towns of Westport and Kansas had arisen as rivals.¹ Though retarded by the cholera epidemic, these towns had made such rapid progress that by 1855 they had displaced Independence as the principal point of departure for the Santa Fe traders. Because of its superior shipping facilities on the Missouri River the City of Kansas or Kansas City, as Kansas was now called, became the main depot. Its growth from a small village with about 300 inhabitants in 1851 to a good-sized town of about 7,000 in 1860, was due almost entirely to its position at the eastern terminus of the Santa Fe Trail.² At the same time, with the growth of government transportation across the plains, Ft. Leavenworth, and later Leavenworth City, became of increasing importance as shipping points for government stores to the Indians and to the military forces on the plains and in the Southwest.³

Further changes occurred at the eastern end of the road between 1860 and 1867. On account of the unsettled conditions along the Kansas-Missouri border some of the Santa Fe business at Kansas City was driven to Leavenworth, the trade being about equally divided between these two towns. Specifically, this change was due to Ft. Leavenworth being made military headquarters of the Department of the West,

¹F. Dobel to Ferguson and Alvarez, Aug. 25, 1844, *Alvarez Papers* (Mss., New Mexico Historical Society); William Gillis to Sol. Sublette, Jan. 20, 1845, *Sublette Papers* (Mss., Missouri Historical Society); *Memoirs of James J. Webb, 1844-1847* (Webb Mss., James H. Webb Collection, New Haven), 114; W. H. Chick, "My Earlier Recollections of the Santa Fe Trail," in *Kansas City Star*, Dec. 14, 1906; L. H. Garrard, *Wah-to-yah and the Taos Trail* (Cincinnati, 1880), 1-5; C. C. Spalding, *Annals of the City of Kansas* (Kansas City, 1858), 32; *Daily Missouri Republican*, June 22, 25, 1846.

²*Kansas City Enterprise*, Jan. 19, May 24, 1856; *Western Journal of Commerce*, Jan. 9, Mar. 6, 1858, July 21, 1859; *Daily Mo. Rep.*, May 17, 1849, June 3, Aug. 11, 1851, Jan. 31, 1853, May 10, 1855, Jan. 10, Nov. 4, 1859; *St. Joseph Gazette*, May 5, 1848, Feb. 2, 1849; *Liberty Tribune*, Nov. 5, 1847; *Herald of Freedom*, Jan. 20, June 2, 1855; A. N. Doerschuk, *Westport* (Mss., Kansas City Public Library), 1-3; Union Historical Company, *History of Jackson County, Missouri* (Kansas City, 1881), 644.

³*Sen. Ex. Docs.*, 31 Cong., 2 Sess., No. 11, pp. 17, 22; *ibid.*, 33 Cong., 1 Sess., No. 37, p. 34; *West. Journal of Commerce*, Oct. 6, 1859; S. J. Spear, "Reminiscences," in *Kansas State Historical Society Collections*, XIII (1915), 346-351.

to the depredations on the Trail near Kansas City, and to the struggle between Northerner and Southerner in Kansas City itself. The route taken from Leavenworth was usually by way of Lawrence or Topeka, striking the old Trail somewhere between the present towns of Burlingame and Wilmington, and thence on to Council Grove.⁴ An additional change of greater significance came about in 1862, when a road was opened up to the north of the old Trail from Ft. Leavenworth to Ft. Larned by way of Topeka, Junction City, Salina, and Ellsworth. This road, used chiefly by the government for the transportation of troops and military stores before 1867, was destined to supersede the old Trail east of Ft. Larned when the railroad began to move westward.⁵

And the coming of the railroad was near at hand. With the construction of the Kansas Pacific Railroad in the sixties, and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad in the seventies, the last period of the Santa Fe Trail began. In 1865 the Kansas Pacific reached Lawrence, in the following year Topeka and Junction City, and thereafter continued rapidly westward, locating its tracks far enough south to accommodate the Santa Fe trade. For a short time a small amount of the Santa Fe business was diverted from Leavenworth and Kansas City to Lawrence and Topeka, but by 1867 this trade overland by ox-team and by mule-team came to an end in all these towns, and proceeded instead from Junction City over the northern route by way of Ellsworth to Ft. Larned. This definitely marked the end of the Old Santa Fe Trail east

⁴*Chase Letters* (Mss., Kans. State Hist. Soc.), Aug. 8, 1863; *Official Records of the Rebellion* (hereafter cited as *O. R.*), Ser. I, Vol. III, p. 384; *House Ex. Docs.*, 39 Cong., 1 Sess., III, No. 105, p. 746; *Kansas City Journal of Commerce*, Mar. 27, Dec. 13, 1865, April 15, 1876; *Council Grove Press*, April 27, 1861; *Leavenworth Daily Conservative*, May 24, 1861, Sept. 28, 1862; *Smoky Hill and Republican Union*, Oct. 11, 1862; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, May 27, 1864; *Daily Mo. Rep.*, Aug. 19, 1861; R. M. Wright, "Personal Reminiscences," in *Kans. State Hist. Soc. Collections* VII (1902), 48; H. Smith, *The Santa Fe Trail* (Kansas City, 1907), 9-12; B. Smyth, *Heart of the New Kansas* (1880), 74-75; W. H. Miller, *History of Kansas City* (Kansas City, 1881), 103.

⁵*House Ex. Docs.*, 37 Cong., 3 Sess., No. 82, p. 676; *ibid.*, 39 Cong., 1 Sess., III, No. 105, pp. 744-746; *O. R.*, Ser. I, Vol. XLI, Pt. 2, p. 378; *ibid.*, Pt. 3, p. 37; *Smoky Hill and Rep. Union*, July 12, 1862, May 21, 1864; *Junction City Union*, May 4, 1867; *Kans. State Hist. Soc. Collections*, VII, 113; *ibid.*, XI (1910), 565-566.

of Ft. Larned.⁶ The change is graphically described in an exultant article in the *Junction City Union* in August, 1867: "A few years ago the freighting wagons and oxen passing through Council Grove were counted by thousands, the value of merchandise by millions. But the shriek of the iron horse has silenced the lowing of the panting ox, and the old trail looks desolate. The track of the commerce of the plains has changed, and with the change is destined to come other changes better and more blessed."⁷ As the Kansas Pacific proceeded westward across Kansas, the end of the railroad line became for a time the eastern terminus of the Trail. In 1867, Junction City, Salina, and Ellsworth, in turn, became eastern terminals; in 1868, Ellsworth and Hays City; in 1869, Sheridan; and in 1870, Kit Carson, Colorado. Ellsworth, while the eastern terminus, connected with the old Trail at Ft. Larned; Hays City at Ft. Dodge; and Sheridan and Kit Carson at Ft. Lyon. By the close of 1870, therefore, the Old Santa Fe Trail as a highway of through traffic had come to an end in Kansas, and had receded westward before the advance of the Kansas Pacific Railroad.⁸

But it was a full decade more before the Trail to Santa Fe passed into history. Kit Carson, Colorado, on the Kansas Pacific, remained the chief eastern terminus until 1873, when a line was completed south to West Las Animas on the Arkansas. Meanwhile, the Santa Fe Railroad began active operations and built with great energy across the state of Kansas, following the deserted course of the old Trail up the Arkansas until, early in 1873, it reached Granada in eastern

⁶*Santa Fe Weekly Gazette*, Jan. 14, Dec. 9, 16, 1865, April 21, 1866; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, in *Smoky Hill and Rep. Union*, Dec. 26, 1863; *Junction City Union*, Nov. 17, 1866, Mar. 9, Aug. 31, 1867; *Council Grove Democrat*, July 21, 1866; *K. C. Journal of Commerce*, Mar. 13, 1867; J. Maloy, *History of Morris County, Kansas* (Kans. State Hist. Soc., 1886), 102.

⁷*Junction City Union*, Aug. 31, 1867.

⁸*Report of Pres. of Union Pacific R. R., E. D., to Sec. of Int.* (St. Louis, 1867); *Kansas Pacific Railroad, Annual Report*, 1868, 10, 12, 36; *ibid.*, 1869, 8; *ibid.*, 1870, 8, 14, 19; U. P. R. R., E. D., *Economy to the Government* (Washington, 1868), 3, 22; *House Ex. Docs.*, 42 Cong., 2 Sess., Pt. 2, No. 1, p. 38; *Junction City Union*, Jan. 19, Mar. 16, May 25, 1867; *Hays City Railway Advance*, June 23, 1868; *Santa Fe Daily New Mexican*, April 25, 26, 1870; *Rocky Mountain Directory* (Denver, 1870), 124; J. L. Tracy, *Guide to the Great West* (St. Louis, 1871), 66-67.

Colorado. From the autumn of that year Granada, on the Santa Fe, and West Las Animas, on the Kansas Pacific, became competing points for the trade of southern Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona, and this relation continued until December, 1875, when both railroads extended their lines west to La Junta, which in turn became the main re-shipping point. Early in 1876, the Santa Fe Railroad reached Pueblo, and soon afterward the Denver and Rio Grande was opened from Pueblo to El Moro, extensions which moved the terminus of the Trail still further south to El Moro. Then as the Santa Fe pushed southward from La Junta through the Raton Pass and on to New Mexico, Trinidad, Colorado, in 1878, and Otero and Las Vegas, New Mexico, in 1879, became the respective terminals; and finally on February 9, 1880, "the locomotive thundered into Santa Fe, and broke the spell which for three centuries had shut from the modern world the city of the Holy Faith of Saint Francis."¹⁰ While the natives crowded around and looked upon this new method of transportation with curiosity and amazement, they were told that this would be the beginning of a new and better period in the history of their territory.

Only a brief treatment of one more topic can be presented: the Overland Stage and Mail to Santa Fe. The establishment of an overland stage to Santa Fe was the result of conditions produced by the Mexican War. Before this conflict letters and newspapers to and from New Mexico were entrusted to traders and travelers who would see to it that they

⁹Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, *Annual Report, 1872-1873*, 12, 25-26; *ibid.*, 1874, 28, 35, 36; *ibid.*, 1875, 6-8, 25, 29; K. P. R. R., *Annual Report, 1873*, 7, 20; *ibid.*, 1875, 17; *House Ex. Docs.*, 42 Cong., 3 Sess., Pt. 2, No. 1, p. 47; *Santa Fe Daily New Mexican*, Aug. 6, Nov. 12, 1873; *Santa Fe Weekly New Mexican*, Dec. 28, 1875, Feb. 1, 8, 1876; *Rocky Mountain Directory* (Denver, 1870), 411; *Rocky Mountain News, Routes of Travel in Colorado* (Denver, 1874), 17, 52; A. C. Wheeler, *The Iron Trail* (New York, 1876), 20-21; O. L. Baskin & Co., *History of the Arkansas Valley, Colorado* (Chicago, 1881), 845-846.

¹⁰A., T. & S. F. R. R., *Annual Report, 1876*, 6, 25; *ibid.*, 1878, 26; *ibid.*, 1879, 25-26; K. P. R. R., *San Juan Mines: Albuquerque Review*, June 10, 1876; *Santa Fe Weekly New Mexican*, April 25, 1876, Sept. 21, Nov. 9, 1878, Feb. 15, June 7, 14, 1879, Feb. 14, 21, 1880; W. S. Hinckley, *Early Days of the Santa Fe* (Topeka, 1909), 41, 43; J. E. Greene, "Santa Fe Trade," in U. S. Cav. Assoc. *Journal*, X (1897), 277; Baskin & Co., *Hist. Ark. Val.*, Col., 846.

were delivered to their destinations. But with the outbreak of hostilities in 1846, the War Department, in order to meet the demand for communication with the troops in Northern Mexico, organized a military pony express to this region, which, in August, 1849, developed into a regular monthly service from Ft. Leavenworth to Santa Fe.¹¹ This arrangement proved to be insufficient to meet the increased demands for communication in time of peace, and as a result in 1850 the Postmaster General ordered the establishment of a regular wagon mail between Independence and Santa Fe. Waldo, Hall and Company, of Independence, were awarded the contract. They were required to transport the mail once a month each way commencing July 1, and to complete each trip in thirty days.¹²

This was the beginning of a regular overland stage and mail from Missouri to New Mexico and the first of its kind across the plains. In 1857, because of increased traffic, it started to run semi-monthly; in 1858, weekly; in 1866, tri-weekly; and in 1868, daily.¹³ Before 1861, it reached Santa Fe by way of the Cimarron route, but thereafter, due to the gold rush to Colorado and to the establishment of Ft. Lyon, it changed to the mountain route by way of Ft. Lyon, Bent's Fort, and Raton Pass. In spite of snow storms and hail storms, in spite of flooded rivers, muddy roads, and Indian attacks, the sturdy Santa Fe coach continued to rumble over the rolling plains in warm weather and in cold weather

¹¹Alvarez, Bent, and Gregg Letters, 1839-1846 (Mss., Benjamin M. Read Collection, Santa Fe); *Sen. Ex. Docs.*, 31 Cong., 1 Sess., No. 26, pp. 26, 31; *Santa Fe Republican*, Nov. 27, 1847, April 2, July 18, 1848; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, Nov. 24, 1849; *Daily Mo. Rep.*, Aug. 19, 1846, Feb. 19, 22, Sept. 9, 1847, April 21, Sept. 12, 1849; Garrard, *Wah-to-yah*, 29.

¹²David Waldo to David Waldo, Nov. 6, 1851, *Waldo Papers* (Mss., Mo. Hist. Soc.); *Santa Fe Nuevo Mexicano—Extra*, July 30, 1850 (Benjamin M. Read Collection, Santa Fe); *Daily Mo. Rep.*, June 4, July 26, Oct. 21, 1850; *Liberty Tribune*, July 12, 1850.

¹³*K. C. Ent.*, July 25, 1857; *Daily Mo. Rep.*, July 26, 1857; *K. C. Journal of Commerce*, April 10, 1859; *Council Grove Democrat*, May 18, 1866; *Santa Fe Weekly Gazette*, July 7, 1866; *Hays City Railway Advance*, June 23, 1868; James Brice, *Reminiscences of Ten Years Experience on the Western Plains* (Kansas City, 1905), 1-4.

with great regularity, only to cease its activities with the coming of the railroads.¹⁴

But before the day of the railroad and of the telegraph, the Santa Fe Stage provided the quickest means of communication and transportation between the United States and its territories in the Southwest. It was the pioneer stage route across the plains, and was the forerunner of the great overland stage lines to the Pacific, which, in turn, pointed the way for the transcontinental railroads of a later day. Through it the government communicated with its civil and military officers in New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado, as well as with its military forces on the Great Plains. The latest news from the "states" and from abroad was brought by it to Santa Fe. It carried the mail and express, both important to merchants and to frontier inhabitants. Then, too, travelers and some emigrants used it as the best conveyance to and from the Southwest. In short, the overland stage and mail from Missouri to New Mexico was an important factor in keeping the southwest territories in constant touch with the rest of the United States, and remained so until displaced by its more famous successors, the telegraph and the railroad.

These are but brief sketches of certain aspects of the Santa Fe Trail between 1848 and 1880. Additional phases remain to be treated, such as overland commerce, overland migration, military conflicts, Indian relations, railroad building, and the coming of settlers. A further consideration of these subjects would reveal that about the Santa Fe Trail was woven much of the history of the vanishing frontier.

¹⁴*K. C. Journal of Commerce*, April 10, 1859; *Daily Mo. Rep.*, Aug. 27, 1859; *West. Journal of Commerce*, Feb. 21, 1861; Brice, *Reminiscences*, 14.