

THE HISTORY OF THE SANTA FE TRAIL AND ITS FOUNDER, WILLIAM BECKNELL

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HISTORY AND STORY OF THE SANTA FE TRAIL

THE TRAIL THAT CHANGED HISTORY— THE STORY OF THE SANTA FE TRAIL

Compiled by Allan J. Wheeler 2007 and last updated May 2013.

(See below for a list of sources used)

The Writing Style Used:

Generally history is written by scholars in a style which is off-putting to most of the general public. That often dry and somewhat ponderously detailed style is meant to be read by other scholars, researchers and students who are motivated by the need to know in order to further their own work. But this “scholar’s style” is discouraging most of the general public from enjoying the reading of history.

In addition to being boring to read the scholar often focuses on only a part of the story. What follows is an attempt to portray the more complete story which will take the reader from the beginning moments to the natural conclusion of a segment in history. And do so in an easy to read manner.

The story of any trail or road can be interesting in itself. But add the human element and the interest is enhanced. To the best of our knowledge this rendition of the Trail’s story is the first to include what the average traveler would have seen and experienced as they walked the Trail in the mid-eighteen hundreds.

It is this author’s purpose to make the telling of history interesting and enjoyable to read and learn from. It is our hope that the reader will profit from this change in style.

Forward

Until the Spanish Empire was expelled from Mexico in 1821 there could not have been a Santa Fe Trail or any similar international commercial trade trail which led from the aggressively expanding United States to the Spanish controlled southwest. Then in a period of less than one year that trail was opened due primarily to the efforts of one man and it changed the history of America.

After the Spanish government occupied the area which they termed “New” Mexico, in 1598 the Spanish were afraid that any trade or even contact with the English or the French would lead to an invasion of what they claimed as Spanish territory. Thus they prohibited trade with their eastern neighbors and closed their area to foreigners. The few adventurous souls from the east who ignored this ban were usually caught and their goods confiscated. Sometimes the interlopers were arrested, taken to Mexico and held captive.

Then, in August, 1821, the Spanish were expelled by the Mexicans who had been ill-treated by the often-arrogant

nine or more feet in diameter. The bed was four feet wide and some twelve to sixteen feet long. Variations upon this wagon design were many and customized to the nature of the goods transported. However, a larger bed width than four feet was not common since this required the space between axles to be larger than the well-worn six foot wide ruts of the trail. This wider measurement resulted in stability and steering problems.

The well-known Conestoga type wagon was eventually adapted to carry large bulk or heavy goods. Its origin was in Pennsylvania but eventually it was built in Missouri as were most of the other trail wagons used. Many of these wagons were built by Joseph Murphy and Company in St. Louis. But there were over 100 manufacturers of trail Wagons including Studebaker.

In addition to the freight wagons there were a number of carriages and small wagons for the transport of the traders themselves. They also were used to haul food and other consumables required during the trip.

Draft Animals

Pulling these wagons were teams of oxen (cattle, usually castrated bulls), mules (a cross between donkeys and horses) or, infrequently, large (beer-wagon type) draft horses. Each type of animal had its merits and detractions. Of the three types of animals the mule was initially favored for general use but the stronger oxen were required for extra heavy loads or for springtime travel when the trail was expected to be muddy. Then, after a trial use by the Army in 1830, the merits of oxen caught-on and by the demise of the Trail in 1880 some reports indicate that five out of six wagons were pulled by oxen

The number of teams required varied according to the size and the loaded weight of the wagon and, thus, the pairs used ranged from one or two to up to ten or more pairs. Oxen were used, at least in part, because of their lower, per head, cost (on average \$25 vs. \$100 for mules and horses). However, an ox needed iron shoes and was an eastern animal and not available in the southwest until much later. In addition, the oxen were often worn-out upon reaching Ft. Union and mules usually were not. Accompanying each wagon train was an extra supply of draft animals to allow for rotation and replacement.

Often, due to the heat, the draft animals, particularly oxen, had to be rested in mid-day. The train would move only early in the morning until about noon and then again in the later afternoon and averaged ten hours of movement per day. By contrast, a man on a horse, who wanted to, could average close to four miles per hour on a flat land trail if he had a strong, well-fed and watered horse and, thus, he could cover forty miles or more per day. An ox train averaged about 15 miles and a mule train about 20 miles per day. However, this figure can be misleading due to bad weather, breakdowns and other problems. Thus the the average time to complete the 770 mile trip from *Westport Landing to Santa Fe*, took 62 days which averages just 12 miles per day.

Teamsters/Bullwhackers/Wagonmasters

The wagons, especially the larger ones which were usually owned by the larger trading businesses or contract freight outfits, were driven by teamsters (often termed "Bullwhackers") who usually walked alongside an oxen pulled wagon and controlled the team with both verbal and whip commands. For a mule pulled wagon a teamster rode one of the rearmost mules and steered with a line connected to one of the lead animals. Some of the smaller mule or horse pulled wagons were driven from a seat mounted on the front of the wagon.

The life of a teamster was one of hardship and low pay (four to ten dollars per month plus food in the 1830's).