

(Photo by the Author)

Plastered arch is at the entrance to San Miguel del Vado, N.M. San Miguel was the first settlement on the Santa Fe Trail encountered upon entry to New Mexico—not Las Vegas, as commonly reported.

The Santa Fe Trail: Road of Commerce and Adventure

By

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ON MAY 8, 1987, the President of the United States signed the bill that established the Santa Fe National Historic Trail to include both major branches or a total of 950 miles.

The major force behind the recognition of the importance of the trail was the Santa Fe Trail Association, established in September 1986 at the Trinidad Symposium as the Santa Fe Trail Council. While a number of individuals in the organization played major roles, the single most important person was Marc Simmons, who became the association's first president. There is a growing effort to inform the public about the historical significance of the trail, and to place informational markers along the route.

This paper seeks to introduce the reader to some of the people, places, and events associated with the history of the Santa Fe Trail. The trail was not a settlers' highway as was the Oregon Trail. It was a route for mountain men, commerce, military

expeditions, gold-seekers, health-seekers, and early-day tourists. The Santa Fe Trail came into use in 1821 and provided a road for the transportation of people and merchandise until it was completely replaced by the Santa Fe Railroad in 1880.

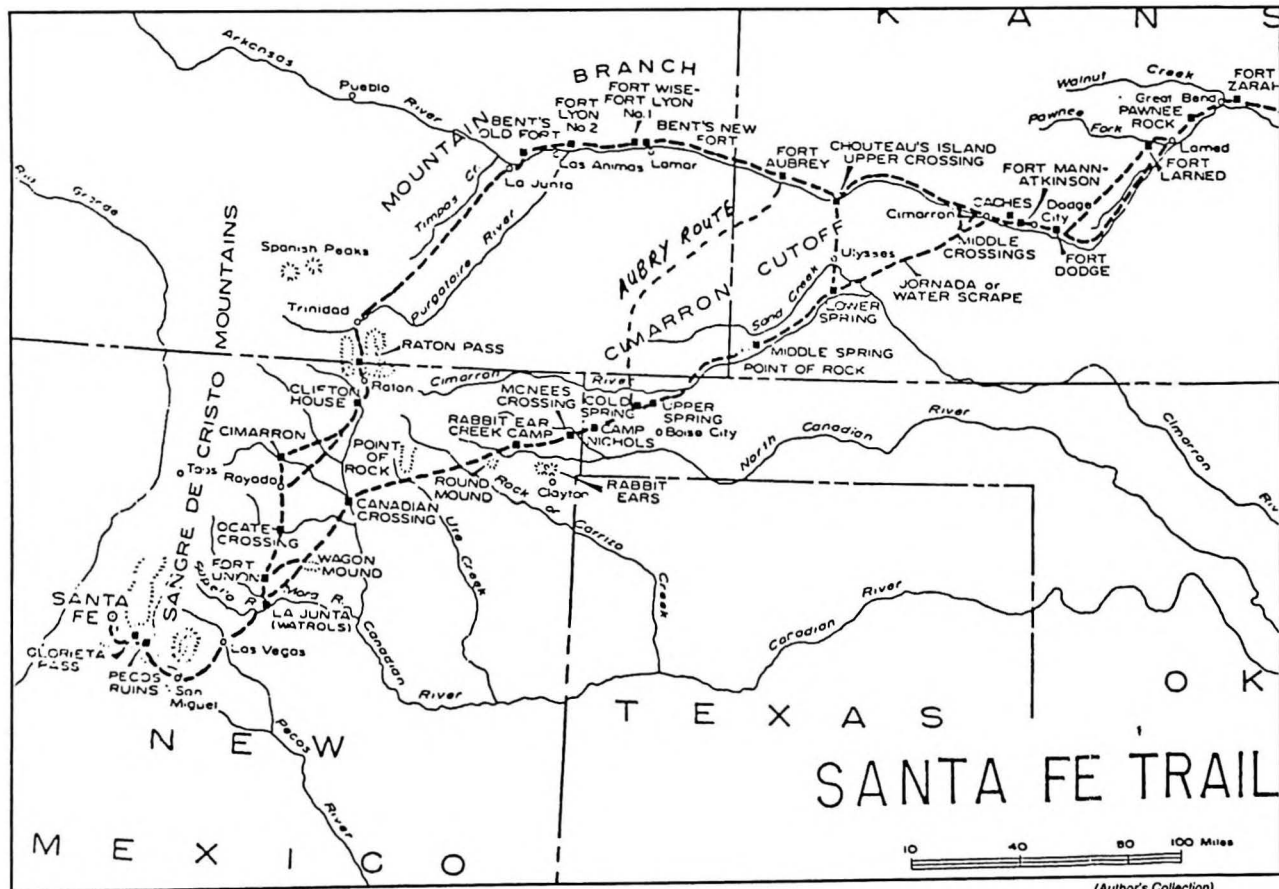
The first trip over the trail was in February 1821, when William Becknell of Franklin, Mo., who had fallen on hard times, advertised for men to join a westward expedition to trade for horses and mules, and to catch wild animals. Becknell had no plan to trade in New Mexico, as the reception given in the past to outsiders by Spanish authorities usually included being put in jail and having any trade goods confiscated. When Becknell's party ran into some soldiers from New Mexico, the men from Missouri were pleasantly surprised to be invited to Santa Fe to sell their goods. This new attitude was the result of Mexico having just won its independence and deciding to open its borders to foreign trade. Becknell and his men were back in Missouri by January 1822, with a very large profit and a message from the Mexican governor in Santa Fe saying that American traders were now welcome. William Becknell became known as the "Father of the Santa Fe Trail," but fame is often a matter of timing. His group was in Santa Fe only weeks before two other trading parties from the United States arrived there. Being first is what counts. Today, William Becknell lies buried in a grave in a field some five miles west of Clarksville, Texas, which proves that fame often does not last all that long.

On May 22, 1822, Becknell left on his second trip to Santa Fe, but this time he had made several changes, including switching from packmules to three wagons pulled by mules. He followed a new route that became known as the Cimarron Cutoff, instead of going over the Sangre de Cristos, as he had done on his first trip. The exact location of this route was not settled until the wet year of 1834, when wagons on the cutoff left ruts that all future caravans could follow. The new route was faster, but travelers faced a lack of water and increased attacks from the Indians. There was no real solution to the need for water, but to meet Indian attacks, traders formed large caravans such as one that traveled west in May 1824, with 81 men, 234 wagons, 156 horses and mules, and one piece of field artillery.

As time went on, many merchants bypassed Santa Fe and took their merchandise on down the El Camino Real to Chihuahua, where one trader made \$190,000 from an investment of \$35,000. Cloth was an important item and often made up the bulk of the goods hauled down the trail. In return for their goods, the traders received gold, silver, mules, donkeys, and specialized products of Mexico. After the United States victory in the Mexican-American War, the small traders on the Santa Fe Trail were replaced by larger freight companies such as Russell, Majors and Waddell who received their start in the Santa Fe trade.

By 1850, mail service was established along the trail, and by the 1860s, there was daily stage service. As time went by, Independence replaced Old Franklin, and it was replaced, in turn, by Westport. Later, as the railroad was built, the caravans started from Hays, Kans., in 1868; Kit Carson, Colo., in 1871; and Las Vegas, N.M., in 1879. During this period, Miguel Otero, a merchant, moved his headquarters seven times to keep his firm at the trailhead. It all came to an end when the first locomotive reached Santa Fe on Feb. 16, 1880, over a branch line from Lamy, N.M..

The primary function of the Santa Fe Trail was commerce, and there were a number of men who led caravans over the trail including James Webb, Albert Speyer and Charles and William Bent; but one of the most interesting was Francois X. Aubry who had been born in Quebec, and had come to St. Louis to make his fortune. His career on the Santa Fe Trail began in 1846 when he arranged for his trade goods to be carried in another trader's wagon to Santa Fe. Aubry made a profit of several thousand dollars on his small investment. He also began keeping a journal of his travels and writing letters to the newspapers in which he shared his adventures on the trail with their readers. In 1847, he borrowed money from associates in St. Louis and made his



Map of portion of Santa Fe Trail details area of the Cimarron Crossing and Aubry's route.

(Author's Collection)



(Courtesy Kansas State Historical Society)

Francis or Francois X. Aubry (1824-1854), early-day Santa Fe trader and holder of speed records for the prairie crossing.

first independent trip to Santa Fe. He first made two trips in one year and then expanded to three trips a year, and along the way, made a small fortune. The slow pace of the caravan was not for him, and he would leave the wagons and ride ahead. In May 1848, on one trip from Santa Fe back to Independence, Aubry and six others rode ahead, but after 300 miles the others gave up, and he went on alone. On this ride, Aubry killed three horses and two mules by hard riding; went three days without food; was captured and robbed by Comanches; escaped and walked 40 miles to Ft. Mann for a fresh mount; and reached Independence on May 28, in eight days and ten hours.

When he arrived in Santa Fe, he usually made arrangements to wholesale his merchandise to avoid wasting time in the town, waiting around to sell his goods at retail.

In September 1848, Aubry established a new record time for horseback travel between Santa Fe and Independence that still stands. He covered the 780 miles in five days and 16 hours using a relay of horses. It is said that when he arrived in Independence on Sept. 17, it was discovered that his blood had caked him to the saddle. In 1851, he discovered a trail west of Chouteau's Island to Bear Creek and on to Cold Spring that was a major improvement moving from the mountain branch to the Cimarron Cutoff. He later trailed sheep to California and also became involved in the controversy over the location for the transcontinental railroad. He advocated the 35th Parallel which got him into an argument with Richard Weightman who favored the 32nd Parallel. The result was a saloon battle in which Weightman threw his whiskey

into Aubry's eyes. Aubry drew his five-shooter which he prematurely discharged into the ceiling, and Weightman pulled his bowie knife and stabbed Aubry who died in about 10 minutes. Francois Aubry was 30 years old.

A jury decided that Aubry was killed by Weightman in self-defense, and Weightman was set free, but the account of the fight stayed with him until his death fighting for the Confederacy at the Battle of Wilson's Creek in Missouri.

The activity of the U.S. Army on the trail began in 1829 when Maj. Bennet Riley and four companies of the 6th Infantry were ordered to provide an escort for a caravan. Having no funds to purchase horses or mules to pull the Army's wagons, Riley decided to experiment with oxen which were cheaper. They had never been used as draft animals on the Great Plains, but the experiment worked, and Charles Bent even borrowed one yoke to pull one of his wagons on to Santa Fe. The Army escort stopped on the north bank of the Arkansas River as the caravan crossed into New Mexico, but when Indians attacked the caravan a few miles south of the crossing, the troops crossed the river and fought off the attack. They stayed with the caravan for two more days of travel before returning to the north bank of the river. The troops camped near Chouteau's Island and awaited the return of the traders. During their wait, they withstood several Indian attacks and discovered that infantry was not the solution to the Indian problem.

In 1843 the problem was Texans not Indians. The government of the new nation of Texas had authorized attacks on Mexican merchants traveling the Santa Fe Trail, and the effort was led by Jacob Snively. The attackers were to split any financial gains with the Texas government, but this did not seem to be the plan envisioned by most of the attackers. (One attack was written about in *Murder on the Santa Fe Trail* by Marc Simmons.) In late February 1843, a wealthy Mexican merchant, Antonio José Chavez, left Santa Fe with a small party on a fast trip to St. Louis to purchase merchandise. His party consisted of himself and 20 men, two wagons, and 55 mules. However, 15 of the men turned back because of the harsh weather and threat of Indian attack. Chavez was forced to abandon one of his wagons and push on with only five servants. Near Pawnee Rock, Chavez sent a servant on a mule ahead to Independence for assistance. This man was captured by a party of Texans led by John McDaniel and forced to give information about the Chavez party. The Texans rode into the Chavez camp and quickly captured the Mexicans. There was a division of loot including specie, gold bullion, and furs with each man getting about \$500. At this point, more than half of the Texans said that they did not want to murder Chavez and rode out. Those who remained drew lots to see who would kill Chavez, and he was taken out of camp and killed by John McDaniel and Joseph Brown. In searching the body, the men discovered a money belt containing 39 gold doubloons, and when they searched the wagon, another \$2,000 in gold dust was discovered. The servants were searched and then released to walk back to Santa Fe from near present-day Lyons, Kans.

A posse led by William Gilpin came upon the scene of the crime and immediately began the search for the gang. The McDaniel brothers and seven others were captured and placed on trial in U.S. Circuit Court in St. Louis. The four charged only with larceny got off lightly, but David and John McDaniel and Joseph Brown were sentenced to hang. The execution was delayed by President Tyler, who pardoned David McDaniel. The other two men were then executed.

On June 29, 1843, another group of Texans was encountered by Capt. Philip St. George Cooke and six companies of the 1st Dragoons who demanded that the Texans lay down their arms. Wisely, the Texans surrendered to Cooke and disbanded, with some of the Texans heading for Missouri and the remainder back to Texas. Cooke was ordered out in the fall to make certain there would be no more attacks on Mexican merchants by Texans. His actions were appreciated by both the Mexican officials in

Santa Fe and the Mexican traders.

The major military activity on the Santa Fe Trail was in 1846 when Col. Stephen Watts Kearny led the Army of the West down the trail to conquer New Mexico, and then march on to California. (That event is worthy of an entire paper, and therefore, it will only be mentioned here.) After the War with Mexico, the Army established a number of forts on and near the Santa Fe Trail. In fact, supplies for these forts became a major part of the goods hauled over the trail. These posts included Ft. Mann, Camp McKay, Camp Nichols, Ft. Riley, Ft. Larned, Ft. Wise, Ft. Zarah, Ft. Dodge, and Ft. Union.

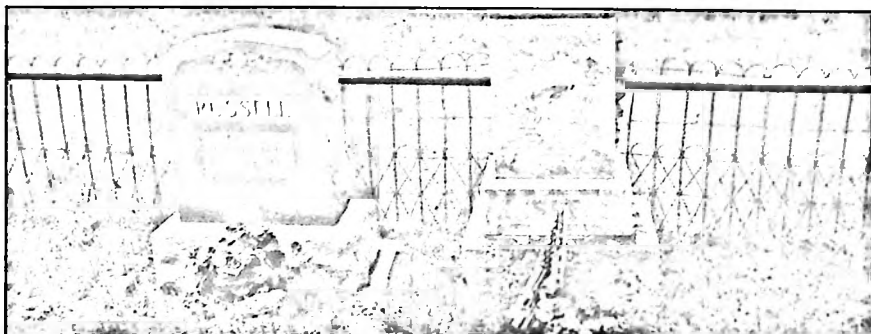
Traveling the Santa Fe Trail was often a dangerous journey especially if the party were small in number. There had been a number of Indian raids in the area around Wagon Mound including attacks on Aubry and on Jim Beckwourth, and Indians had raided within four miles of Las Vegas, N.M. Harry C. Myers in the February 1992 issue of *Wagon Tracks* tells about one of the attacks in his article, "Massacre on the Santa Fe Trail: Mr. White's Company of Unfortunates."

In June 1848, a group of traders had been attacked while crossing Manco Burro Pass east of Raton Pass, and two orphans, Mary age 4 and James age 6, had been captured by the attackers. Their father had been killed by Comanches near Pawnee Rock the year before. Several months later, the story had a happy ending when Taos merchants ransomed the children for \$160.

Another event did not end as happily the next year when James White, a successful trader, decided to take his wife and daughter with him to Santa Fe. They were traveling with Francois Aubry's caravan, and Aubry's wagonmaster, William Calloway, decided to go ahead of the caravan to acquire some fresh mules. Probably as a result of the harsh weather, White decided to join Calloway to get his family to Santa Fe and out of the cold. Around Oct. 24, Jicarilla Apaches attacked and killed all of the men in the group near Point of Rocks in Colfax County, N.M. The body of Mrs. White's black female servant was discovered a short distance from the bodies of the men, some days later.

A force of 90 men from Taos was organized to attempt to rescue Mrs. White and her daughter, and this group was soon joined by Kit Carson. On Nov. 9 the camp of the Apaches was discovered, and the tracking began. On Nov. 17 an attack was made on the Indians, and when the Apaches fled, the body of Mrs. White was found with an arrow in her back. She had received "brutal and horrible treatment [and] her death should never be regretted by her friends." This was the statement made by one of the men in the rescue party. The Whites' daughter Virginia was never found. There are a number of inaccurate accounts of this event including one by Uncle Dick Wootton, who claimed to have been in the rescue party and that the White family had been traveling in a stage coach.

There are two most interesting accounts of travel on the Santa Fe Trail, both written by women. Susan Magoffin kept a travel diary, recording her trip to Santa Fe and on to Chihuahua before sailing from Matamoras back to the United States. Until recently, she was considered to be the first white woman to travel from the United States to Santa Fe over the Santa Fe Trail. Now, however, there is evidence that another woman preceded her and operated a hotel for a time in Santa Fe. Susan was 18 years old and had been the bride of Samuel Magoffin for all of eight months when she left Independence on June 11, 1846. Samuel and his brother James were successful traders, and Susan traveled in style with a small tent, a carriage, a maid, a driver and two servant boys. She was traveling the trail at the same time as the Army of the West under Colonel Kearny, and her brother-in-law was involved in the negotiations with New Mexico's Governor Manuel Armijo, resulting in the bloodless conquest of Santa Fe. Because of an accident while crossing Ash Creek in Kansas, Susan suffered a miscarriage and was forced to spend several days at Bent's Fort. She has provided

*(Photo by the Author)*

Headstone on the left marks the final resting place of Marian (or Marion) Russell in family plot in Stonewall, Colo., cemetery.

historians with an excellent description of the fort and the people who were there at the time. Before she sailed from Mexico, she suffered a bout of yellow fever, and the overall effect of the journey on her health was a factor in her death in 1855.

The second account of travel over the Santa Fe Trail is my favorite. It is the story of Marian Sloan Russell as she related it to her daughter-in-law in the 1930s. Her father was an Army surgeon who was killed at the Battle of Monterey during the Mexican War, and her stepfather was killed by Indians while on a scouting expedition. The result of all this was a desire on the part of her mother to join relatives in California. Having very little money, Mrs. Sloan, Marian's mother, worked out an arrangement with three young Army officers on their way to Ft. Union. She would cook for them and they would pay the cost of transportation and food for her and her two young children. The caravan was under the command of Francois Aubry and took two months to reach Ft. Union. Aubry was taking 200 horses to Ft. Union, but when they were stolen by Indians at Pawnee Rock, the entire caravan was held up until a group of men could return to Missouri and obtain replacements.

Marian Sloan Russell's descriptions of the prairie grass and flowers, the fierce thunderstorms, and the herds of buffalo are great to read today. The charm of the trail as she described it makes it possible to understand why a number of men and several women—including Marian's mother—made the journey several times. Marian also tells about the problems faced by the travelers including a real shortage of water at times.

The little family went on to Albuquerque where Mrs. Sloan rented a house and took in boarders. The family came to love New Mexico and its people, but in August 1856 they left for Ft. Leavenworth with a small caravan of only 20 wagons. There was a scare from some Apaches, and at Pawnee Rock, Marian's brother Will found two trappers dead in their cabin, their bodies still warm. The caravan was forced to stay at Diamond Springs, and after a time, Mrs. Sloan and Marian walked on to Council Grove some 16 miles away. The family lived in Leavenworth for four years; then in 1860 returned to live in Santa Fe for one year before heading to Kansas City in 1861. There Will joined the Union Army and the family did not see him again for some 50 years as his career after the Civil War took him to numerous places.

In 1862, Marian made her last trip in a caravan over the Santa Fe Trail, but her mother would make several more as the lure of the trail drew her back.

Marian met Lt. Richard Russell at Ft. Union in 1864, and six months after they met, they were married there. Marian went with her new husband when he was sta-

tioned at Camp Nichols under the command of Kit Carson, and after he resigned from the Army, they lived in Tecolote, N.M., and ran a trading post along the Santa Fe Trail. In 1871, the Russells moved to the Stonewall Valley Ranch west of Trinidad in Colorado. Richard was killed during the fighting over the Maxwell Land Grant in 1888.

At age 89 in 1934, Marian visited many of the places along the trail that had a place in her memories, including Ft. Union where she had been married; Camp Nichols where only a dent in the grass indicated the dugout where she and her new husband had lived; and Santa Fe, where the gateway arch was long gone. Marian died on Dec. 25, 1936, the result of injuries suffered in an auto accident.

The Santa Fe Trail was important for many reasons, and Marc Simmons lists three in *Along the Santa Fe Trail*: the trail helped shape the conception of Americans about the far side of the continent; it was an appropriate place for adventurous and enterprising men; and it helped dispel the idea of the Great American Desert and demonstrated the ease with which the United States might conquer the Southwest.

These are certainly important reasons, but I go more for the special feeling that surrounds the trail, and Marian Russell said it best.

"There have been many things in my life that I have striven to forget, but not those journeys over the Santa Fe Trail." She will always be Kit Carson's "Little Maid Marian."

At the first trail symposium in Trinidad in 1986, Marc Simmons in his keynote address stated that "the Santa Fe Trail lives on!" I would have to echo his statement as I have traveled the trail from Old Franklin to Santa Fe over both the Mountain and Cimarron branches, and I plan to head out over the trail a few more times because it has a special place in my heart.

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