

The Santa Fe Trail  
SPECIAL ISSUE

# A Road of Culture and Commerce

## INTRODUCTION

by Thomas E. Chávez

In 1821 the United States, itself a young country of forty-five years, opened trade with Mexico the very year of that country's birth. For almost sixty years a good part of that trade was carried on overland via a relatively flat route that connected the eastern United States to northern Mexico. From both terminuses—the present states of Missouri and New Mexico—waterways and other trails transported trade goods into the interiors and beyond.

The trail and its trade was not an accident nor was it solely a product of citizens living on the frontiers of the respective countries. Rather the trade and the mode of that trade was officially sanctioned. More than a century and a half before the North American Free Trade Agreement, the United States and Mexico had embarked on a partnership only briefly interrupted by the Mexican War from 1846 to 1848 and the Mexican Revolution in 1917.

Very early on the United States government surveyed the route. After both houses of Congress passed the bill to survey "the road," as Senator Thomas Hart Benton called it, President James Monroe signed the legislation and left the action of carry-

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Arrival of the Caravan at Santa Fe, from *Josiah Gregg's Commerce of the Prairies*.

ing out the survey to his successor John Quincy Adams. In January 1825 Adams promptly appointed the team that surveyed and marked the trail all the way to Taos, New Mexico. From the Arkansas River to that final destination, the United States government survey team did its work with the permission of the Mexican government.<sup>1</sup> Adams also appointed United States consuls and commercial agents to Santa Fe and Chihuahua, respectively. Even Monterrey, California, then a part of Mexico, eventually would receive one of these minor diplomatic posts.<sup>2</sup>

1. The account of this survey is published in Ross Calvin, ed., *Lieutenant Emory Reports: A Reprint of Lieutenant W. H. Emory's "Notes of A Military Reconnaissance"* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1968).

2. Augustus Storrs was appointed to Santa Fe, Joshua Pilcher to Chihuahua, and eventually Thomas O. Larkin to Monterrey, California.

In the 1840s the United States Army received orders to protect caravans along the trail. Per the request of merchants and the Mexican government, the United States even tried to monitor liquor when used as a commodity to take advantage of Indians during trading. And, as Harry Myers points out, when a band of men recruited in Missouri by an official of the Republic of Texas ambushed and then killed a Mexican merchant, the United States Army tracked down the culprits who were then tried in federal court in Missouri. Many served time and two were hanged.

The very existence of the trade route that was born 175 years ago was because the new government of Mexico broke from its colonial and mercantilistic past to open its borders to international trade. All this graphically points out the obvious but overlooked. The Santa Fe Trail was a government sanctioned



Troops Going to Mexico, 1847, from Henry Inman's *The Old Santa Fé Trail*.

highway of commerce, a fact that gives it added relevancy today.

Even before the respective countries of the United States and Mexico existed, trade had been carried on over what would become the Santa Fe Trail. Francisco Vázquez de Coronado returned from a place he called Quivira (western Kansas) with the help of Indian guides who directed him and his men over a route that approximated the Santa Fe Trail (with the Cimarron Cutoff) in 1541. The first four-wheeled wagons carrying trade goods that traveled the Santa Fe Trail corridor were used by Juan de Oñate in an expedition, again to Quivira, in 1601. Prior to that, Native Americans from New Mexico's pueblos and the Navajo Nation traded with the Quivirans or Wichitas, as they are known today.

As we commemorate the 175th anniversary of William Becknell's first official, or should we say legal, expedition in 1821, we should note that before him a number of his own countrymen had traveled the route to trade. Early evidence of these people, men such as Robert McKnight and David Meri-

wether, begin to show up in Spanish documents even before the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Before them Frenchmen beginning with the Mallet brothers in 1737 traveled from the "Illinois country" into New Mexico looking for trade. Other Frenchmen such as Jean de Alarí, Pierre Satren, and the indomitable Pedro Vial crisscrossed the Plains. Vial, in the company of two New Mexicans, traveled to St. Louis and back in 1782. One relatively unknown New Mexican who undoubtedly was familiar with all the trail's landmarks was Juan Lucero. Between roughly 1790 and 1821 he made at least thirteen trips out onto the Plains; more than two of those trips went along the corridor that would become the Santa Fe Trail.

Probably the most popular time of the trail's history was after the Mexican War. The trail continued as an avenue of international trade as well as a route for military transport until the railroad followed the route to New Mexico and continued on to California.

3. See Spanish Archives of New Mexico, New Mexico State Records Center and Archives, Santa Fe.

The trail now crossed territory that belonged to the United States. Yet, because of its connection in New Mexico to the Chihuahua Trail it was still involved in international trade. Katie Bowen's letters, edited by Leo Oliva, give an account of travel on the trail with a military contingent.

As noted in Michael Olsen's article, the trail has been studied, traversed, romanticized, debated, and commemorated. In the last ten years study as well as appreciation of the trail has gone through a rebirth. Olsen and Sterling Evans note that even the interpretation of its significance has changed. Now historians note that it was a two-way commercial route over which very few immigrants but many merchants traveled. And the trade was truly international, extending through the United States and Mexico to Europe and the Orient.

Historians like me argue for the Santa Fe Trail's symbolic significance. More than a harbinger for empire, it was the last link that brought together the inevitable confluence of two great American societies each born in Europe and changed through its new-world experience. One society, basically originating in Britain, moved from the east to the west, while the other society, from Spain, moved from the south to the north. Both became new-world cultures called American, but they carried in their cultural baggage centuries-old religious biases born during the Reformation.

The hub of this meeting took place in northern New Mexico when the Santa Fe Trail linked up with the long existent Chihuahua Trail. The followers of manifest destiny, that attitude of predestined expansion, lunged across the Plains to encounter a Hispanic/Mexican/Indian society best described intellectu-

ally as neo-Aztec. This meeting, the adjustments to which we are still trying to understand, is a major episode in the North American experience. The result of this meeting of cultures is a major part of the North American dialogue today. Everything from "English only," to continued migration from the south, to politicians talking about "sucking sounds," is steeped in a heritage and attitudes that we all share. Studying the Santa Fe Trail, like throwing a rock in a still pond to see the effects of the ripples expanding in concentric circles, is to go to the heart of this country's patrimony.

Those early-day participants as well as those of us who live by the trail today—from Missouri through Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, and Texas to New Mexico—never doubted that it was interesting or important to them. The key is, and was, to convince the rest of the country. If the trail were not so important, then the young Republic of Texas had no reason to try to divert its trade. Or the last United States consul in Santa Fe did not have to risk his life crossing the Plains in 1842 to present a memorial to Secretary of State Daniel Webster in an attempt to get that legendary figure to pay more attention to the trade and developments in northern Mexico.<sup>4</sup>

We historians are saddled not with telling each other of the trail's importance but with convincing Bostonians (for example) why the Santa Fe Trail should be of interest to them. Hopefully the 175th commemoration, of which this special edition of *Kansas History* is a part, will help with the quest.

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4. The memorial is published; see Thomas E. Chávez, ed., *Conflict and Acculturation: Manuel Alvarez's 1842 "Memorial"* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1989).