

---

# The Wet and Dry Routes of the Santa Fe Trail

by David K. Clapsaddle

---

Between Pawnee Fork and Fort Atkinson there are, for about three-fourths of the distance, two routes—one known as the river route, the other as the dry route . . . The fork of the road is in a ravine, three and a half miles beyond Pawnee Fork crossing . . . At ten miles from Fort Atkinson the dry route strikes into the valley of the river. By our computation, this route, which is near fifty miles long, saves in distance about ten or eleven miles—but the river route is certainly preferable, as it affords good grazing and an abundance of water.

—Lt. William H. Whipple, 1852

Leaving Pawnee Rock and crossing Ash Creek, the Santa Fe Trail continued six miles to Pawnee Fork at present-day Larned in Pawnee County, Kansas.<sup>1</sup> From Pawnee Fork, the trail pursued the north bank of the Arkansas River to its south bend near present-day Ford. From the south bend, the trail followed the river westward to the middle crossing and beyond.

In the early years of the Santa Fe Trail, the road along the north bank of the Arkansas was used by a variety of travelers. During the fall of 1821, trappers Hugh

---

David K. Clapsaddle is coordinator of research and training at Larned State Hospital, Larned, Kansas. In addition to his responsibilities at the hospital, Clapsaddle is employed as an adjunct faculty member at Barton County Community College, Great Bend, and Southwestern College, Winfield.

1. Randolph B. Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler: A Hand-Book for Overland Expeditions* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1859), 261.



*The Opener of the Trail*

Glenn and Jacob Fowler pursued this route to the present site of Dodge City and westward to the Rocky Mountains.<sup>2</sup> In subsequent years, Missouri merchants followed the same course: the Cooper party, 1822 and 1823; the Baird-Chambers party, 1822; and the LeGrand-Marmaduke party, 1824.<sup>3</sup> In 1825, the Sibley Survey Commission plotted the road to Santa Fe along the north bank of the river; and through 1828, at least five additional caravans traversed the route along the Arkansas.<sup>4</sup> In 1829, Bvt. Maj. Bennett Riley used this road to conduct the first army escort on the Santa Fe Trail.<sup>5</sup>

In 1833, a caravan captained by Charles Bent and escorted by Capt. William Wycliffe's command departed the river valley near Pawnee Fork crossing to pursue an upland course to the Arkansas.<sup>6</sup> From that date forward, traffic on the Santa Fe Trail alter-

---

*By the mid-1850s, most of the traffic on the Santa Fe Trail was monopolized by the huge freighting companies.*

---

nated between the established road along the river and the road across the upland pioneered by Wycliffe. In time, these roads became known as the wet and the dry routes.

If Josiah Gregg is to be believed, the dry route was the road of preference for the majority of the merchants through the 1830s and into the next decade. Gregg, who made four trips to Santa Fe

between 1831 and 1840, carefully detailed an itinerary of the trail published in his classic 1844 *Commerce of the Prairies*. His itinerary did not identify any campsites along the wet route, but it did list Coon Creek, thirty-three miles from Pawnee Fork, as the only stop between the Pawnee and the Arkansas. In fact, James Webb, a well-known trader and contemporary of Gregg, referred to the dry route as the Coon Creek route. Moreover, Gregg's map of the trail depicts only the dry route, with no indication of the wet route.<sup>7</sup>

In July 1846, the Magoffin trading party camped with Col. Stephen Watts Kearny and the Army of the West at Pawnee Fork crossing. The Magoffins, along with other civilians and twenty government wagons, were allowed to proceed unescorted on the dry route. However, Kearny directed the main body of civilians and soldiers to take the river road. Kearny's choice signaled a new era for the wet route.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the duration of the Mexican War and into the 1850s, the wet route, also called the river route, the water road, and the lower road, became the preferred route for troop detachments and supply wagons with their multitude of animals. As Lt. William Whipple wrote in 1852, "the river route is certainly preferable, as it affords good grazing and an abundance of water."<sup>9</sup>

With the initiation of mail service between Independence and Santa Fe in 1850, the dry route experienced a marked increase in traffic. Lieutenant Whipple noted, "The Santa Fe mail riders, it is understood, always take this dry route."<sup>10</sup>

By the mid-1850s, most of the traffic on the Santa Fe Trail was monopolized by the huge freighting companies. Like the army, they continued to use the wet route almost exclusively. Such is apparent in H. B. Mollhausen's 1858 observation:

---

2. Elliott Coues, ed., *The Journal of Jacob Fowler* (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1965), 24-29. In the fall of 1821 and again in 1822, William Becknell crossed the Arkansas east of Walnut Creek and proceeded south of the river on his first two trips to Santa Fe. Louise Barry, *The Beginning of the West* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1972), 97, 105.

3. *Ibid.*, 105, 108, 110, 116.

4. Kate L. Gregg, ed., *The Road to Santa Fe: The Journal and Diaries of George Champlin Sibley* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1952), 72-77; Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 119-51.

5. Leo E. Oliva, *Soldiers on the Santa Fe Trail*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), 25-33.

6. Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 233-34. Wycliffe's trip was the first documented use of the dry route. Oliva, *Soldiers on the Santa Fe Trail*, 36.

7. Paul Horgan, *Josiah Gregg and His Vision of the Early West* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), 11; Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), 217, map following p. 58. See also Lt. W. B. Franklin's 1845 map. Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 609; James Josiah Webb, *Adventures in the Santa Fe Trade, 1844-1847*, The Southwest Historical Series, vol. 1 (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1931), 52. Gregg's estimate of thirty-three miles between Pawnee Fork and Coon Creek is inaccurate. The distance measures twenty-seven miles.

8. Stella M. Drumm, ed., *Down The Santa Fe Trail and Into Mexico: The Diary of Susan Shelby Magoffin, 1846-1847* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 40-50.

9. Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 1092.

10. *Ibid.*, 1092, 949.

By the way, there is a road across the upland known as the "Dry Road." It is even shorter than the road down the river which has been called the "Water Road," but the "Dry Road" is always avoided by the oxen caravans, and usually by the mule caravans, too, because of the lack of water.<sup>11</sup>

The next surge of traffic on the dry route occurred in the 1858-1859 gold rush to the Rocky Mountains. Gold seekers, hurrying across the prairie were piloted by guidebooks printed for that purpose. One such gold seeker was Augustus Voorhees. His June 15, 1858, diary entry reflects his hasty march over the dry route:

Remained in camp untill [sic] five o'clock, then drove all night. Got to Coon creek thirty miles at five o'clock in the morning; found no water the whole distance. We took the cutt [sic] off, which is to the north of the river road which turns to the left four or five miles west of the Pawnee Fork, which road it is necessary to travel in the dry season, as there is no water on the cut off until we strike the river sixty-five miles. The river road is twenty or thirty miles longer. We found plenty of water on Coon creek but it soon goes dry.<sup>12</sup>

In the 1860s, traffic was divided between the two roads, the wet route receiving the preponderant share of the freight caravans and the dry route monopolizing the stage runs.

Preceding the establishment of the mail station in September 1859 some six miles west of present-day Larned, the trail divided at Forks in Santa Fe Road described by Lt. Randolph Marcy as three and a half miles beyond Pawnee Fork crossing.<sup>13</sup> Subsequent to the construction of the mail station and nearby Camp on Pawnee Fork (renamed Camp Alert and later Fort Larned), the trail split at a point about one and a half miles southwest of Ash Creek Crossing, northeast of present-day Larned.<sup>14</sup>



The Santa Fe Trail, as it followed along the Arkansas River in southwest Kansas, was the route of trappers as early as 1821.

11. H. B. Mollhausen, "Over the Santa Fe Trail Through Kansas in 1858," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 16 (November 1948): 348.

12. "The Diary of Augustus Voorhees," in *Pike's Peak Gold Rush Guidebooks of 1859*, The Southwest Historical Series, vol. 9 (1941), 341.

13. Leo E. Oliva, *Fort Larned on the Santa Fe Trail* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1982), 7; Marcy, *Prairie Traveler*, 261.

14. Oliva, *Fort Larned*, 7-8, 9-11; Military Campaign Map, State of Kansas, 1872, Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers, Record Group 77, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C. [Hereafter RG 77, National Archives.]



---

Running parallel to each other at a distance of up to ten miles, the wet and dry routes merged at a point ten miles east of Fort Atkinson, later described as being one mile east of Fort Dodge.<sup>15</sup> From this junction, the Santa Fe Trail continued westward as a single road.

### *The Wet Route Pre-1859*

Proceeding southwest of Ash Creek through present-day Larned, the wet route followed present-day Trail Street to Pawnee Fork. Two blocks west of Second and Trail streets is an old quarry site used by precentury Larnedites. This is the location identified by Commissioner George Sibley during the 1825 survey of the Santa Fe Trail. Sibley's September 1 diary entry reads:

The morning was cloudy and cool. Mercury 68 at 8 o'clock. The Pawnee River is here about 40 yards wide, banks pretty high, bottom sandy, Water at present Muddy. Timber Elm, Ash, Elder, Cotton Tree, Willow, and Grape Vines. Yesterday I turned off from the direct course and struck the Arkansas at the mouth of this River, and then coursed it up about a Mile to the fording place near which we are now encamped, which is just at the foot of a high rocky Hill. The path leading up from the mouth to the ford passes between the Pawnee and some Cliffs of Soft Rock, upon the smooth faces of which are cut the names of many Persons, who have at different times passed this way to and from New Mexico. Some Indian marks are also to be seen on these Rocks.<sup>16</sup>

Quarrying has greatly reduced the cliffs of soft rock to which Sibley referred, and the names there inscribed have long since disappeared. However, the location maintains much of its historical integrity with the high rocky hill, as Sibley described, rising sharply from Second Street two full city blocks before leveling off on Fourth Street.

15. Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 1092; Capt. William J. Lyster, Commanding Officer, Fort Larned, to Asst. Adjutant General, Department of Missouri, May 28, 1877, Post Orders, Letters Sent and Letters Received, Records of the U.S. Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920, Record Group 393, roll 2, pt. 1, National Archives and Records Service.

16. Gregg, *The Road to Santa Fe*, 72-73.

A few blocks southeast of the quarry site, the wet route reached Pawnee Fork crossing, now spanned by the U.S. Highway 56 bridge and the Santa Fe railroad trestle. James Webb recalled his first crossing of the Pawnee in 1844:

The second day after, we arrived at Pawnee Fork, and, as the crossing was very difficult, we concluded to turn out, repair the road, and prepare for crossing the next morning. The east bank must be from twenty to thirty feet above the water and very steep—so much so, that we were compelled to lock both hind wheels, hitch a yoke of good wheelers to the hind axle, and all the men that can be used to advantage to assist in holding back and prevent the wagon from turning over. Even with all these precautions, accidents frequently happen, and the descent is so rapid the teams get doubled up and oxen run over.

---

*Quarrying has greatly reduced the cliffs of soft rock, and the names there inscribed have long since disappeared.*

---

The next morning we began crossing; and when the wagons were about half across, one of Wethered's wagons turned over into the stream. The west bank was steep but not so high as the east one. Yet we had to double teams to get out and make a short and very difficult turn up the stream; so the wagon fell into deep water, and bottom up. All hands took to the water and in two or three hours succeeded in getting dry goods and wagon to camp on the opposite bank. The next two days were spent in opening the goods, and spreading them on the ground to dry, repacking, and loading up.<sup>17</sup>

17. Webb, *Adventures in the Santa Fe Trade*, 51-52.



From the 1820s and into the 1860s, caravans of freighting companies, operated by merchants and traders, followed the trail across southwest Kansas toward Santa Fe.

Railroad and highway construction has destroyed all evidence of the crossing, but the banks of the Pawnee still remain precariously high and steep.

Proceeding southwest past Forks in Santa Fe Road, the wet route reached a small hill nine miles beyond Pawnee Fork on present-day Highway 56. This rise was described by Sibley in his September 1, 1825, diary entry:

Apprehending more Rain and fearing to be detained here by high water, we set to work cutting down the Banks, and preparing the ford for the Waggons [sic] to cross. We got all safe over without any accident or much difficulty by 11 o'Clk. and then proceeded South West through a flat bottom about 6 Miles, and came to a High Ridge. The Waggons [sic] passed round the point, still keeping in the bottom about half a mile from the River. I rode upon the Ridge, from the top of which, I could distinctly trace the course of the Pawnee River for a great distance by the fringe of Trees along its banks. Its general course as far as I could see is from So[uth] W[est] to No[rth] E[ast]. It runs nearly parallel with the Arkansas at an average distance of about Six Miles apart, gradually diverging.<sup>18</sup>

18. Gregg, *The Road to Santa Fe*, 73.

While modern measurement exceeds Sibley's estimate of six miles to the high ridge, this hill is undoubtedly the ridge that the commissioner noted as it is the only elevation along the Arkansas for many miles.

Continuing to the southwest past present-day Garfield, the wet route reached Coon Creek, sometimes called Raccoon Creek.<sup>19</sup> Captain Marcy's odometer measured the distance at 11.43 miles from Pawnee Fork. The Highway 56 bridge that spans the little stream at this point was constructed at the original site of Coon Creek crossing.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond Coon Creek Crossing was Plain Camp, the first of three campsites on the wet route listed in Charles Folsom's 1842 itinerary as fifteen miles from Pawnee Fork. Conjecture is that this location was so named because it had no landmark to dis-

19. Otis E. Young, *The First Military Escort on the Santa Fe Trail*, 1829, (Glendale, Calif.: A. H. Clark Co., 1952), 82. This stream, the main branch of Coon Creek, originates in Ford County and runs north through Edwards and Pawnee counties before emptying into the Arkansas River about a half mile northeast of the crossing.

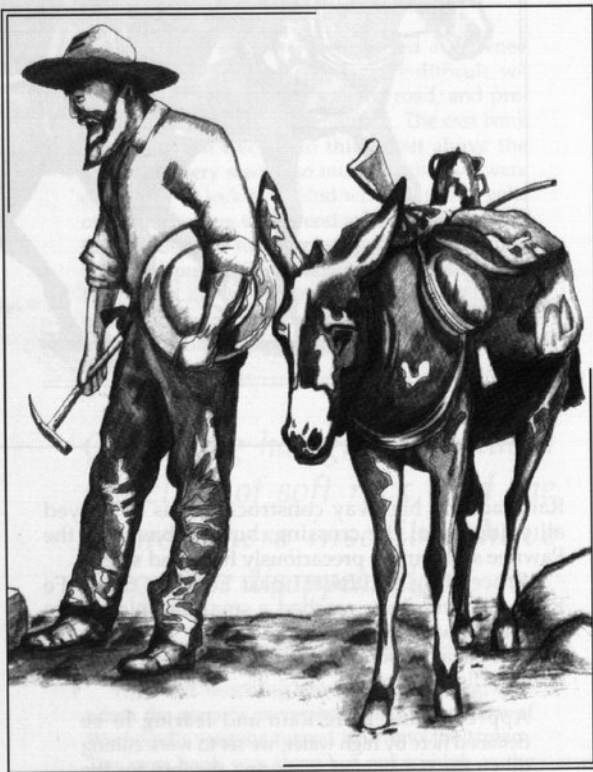
20. Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler*, 261. Southwest of Larned, U.S. Highway 56 replicates the wet route for seventeen miles as the highway was essentially constructed over the very ruts of the trail.

tinguish it from other like places along the Arkansas.<sup>21</sup>

Less than two miles upstream, Lt. John Love and his First Dragoons camped on July 25, 1847. With Love's forces were several traders, two government trains, and an army paymaster. On the following morning, three hundred Comanches attacked, killing five dragoons and driving off 130 oxen. Subsequently, this battle site became known as Love's Defeat.<sup>22</sup>

Five miles west of Plain Camp, Coon Creek runs close to the Arkansas River adjacent to the course followed by the wet route. In fact, the wet route was known as the lower Coon Creek Route. Here, on June 17, 1848, Lt. William B. Royall camped with his seventy-one raw recruits, Lt. Phillip Stremmel's artillery detachment, two government trains, an army paymaster, and a beef herd of 425 animals. On the following morning some seven hundred Comanches and Apaches attacked the camp. However, Royall's recruits, assisted by Stremmel's artillery, were able to withstand the attack without the loss of a single man.<sup>23</sup> Royall stated that the battle occurred five miles from Love's Defeat. However, he failed to designate in which direction, east or west. While some testimony suggests that the confrontation took place at the mouth of Coon Creek about five miles east of the battle, the evidence appears to favor the location five miles west.<sup>24</sup>

Such evidence is derived from the marches made by Royall's troops following the battle. On the day of the confrontation, Royall moved his entourage ten miles upstream, and two days later was able to reach Fort Mann on the evening of June 20. From the battle site to Fort Mann, the distance was fifty-three miles.<sup>25</sup> Allowing for the first day march of ten miles, the troops marched forty-three miles in the two succeeding days, a difficult feat with such a large party. As difficult



A surge of traffic on the dry route occurred during the 1858-1859 gold rush to the Rocky Mountains.

21. Charles J. Folsom, *Mexico in 1842* (New York: Wiley and Putnam; Robinson, Pratt and Co., 1842), 133-34, reprinted in "Trail Trip, 1841," *Wagon Tracks*, Santa Fe Trail Association Newsletter, 3 (November 1988): 14 and (February 1989): 9-10.

22. Oliva, *Soldiers on the Santa Fe Trail*, 82-84. Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 694-95. Bvt. Maj. Henry Kendrick's 1849 itinerary puts Love's Defeat at 16.57 miles from Pawnee Fork. Barry *Beginning of the West*, 815. Kendrick's calculation compares favorably with Henry Smith Turner's 1846 measurement of 16.75 miles from Pawnee Fork to a campsite occupied by a detachment from Kearny's forces en route to the Mexican War. Dwight L. Clarke, ed., *The Original Journals of Henry Smith Turner* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), 63.

23. Oliva, *Soldiers on the Santa Fe Trail*, 87-89.

24. Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 757-58.

25. *Ibid.*; Marcy, *Prairie Traveler*, 262; Folsom, *Mexico In 1842*, 133-34.



as the march was, it would have been next to impossible should the battle have taken place at the mouth of Coon Creek, thus adding ten miles to the trip.

Departing the battle site, the wet route passed to the east of present-day Kinsley about a half mile. Here remains the first of six sets of ruts found within the next ten miles. Beyond the last set of ruts was Little Pond, the second campsite identified in Folsom's 1842 itinerary as twenty-one miles from Plain Camp.<sup>26</sup> Here in the early morning hours of July 10, 1848, Capt. Gabriel de Korponay's command of seventy-one men engaged five to six hundred Comanches in a running battle of fifteen miles. On the previous evening de Korponay's troops had camped upstream a few miles. As darkness fell, de Korponay spotted a campfire some distance to the northeast. Assuming the fire to be that of an Indian war party, the captain reinforced the guard and braced for battle. In the absence of attack, de Korponay ordered reveille sounded at 2:30 A.M. and quietly marched his men toward the enemy. By 3:30 A.M., de Korponay was informed that the camp was not occupied by Comanches but by a scouting party from Colonel Gilpin's command. In an attempt to alert the scouting party to the presence of his troops, the captain ordered the ordinance march sounded. The result was unexpected. In de Korponay's own words, "In an instant the camp arose in confusion. The opposite bank was covered with Indians." In the ensuing confrontation, the Indians fired their carbines from the cover of timber and underbrush on the south side of the river. Ordering up an artillery piece, de Korponay returned the fire with grapeshot, ineffective at that distance. Subsequent six-pound balls found their mark, the first two killing three Indians. Frightened and confused by the artillery, the Indians fled their camp leaving behind their breakfast cooking on the fires. De Korponay later wrote that his "men partook sumptuously and in consequence the place and fight was named by them, Gabriel's Barbecue."<sup>27</sup>

The historical integrity of this area has been compromised by flood waters of the Arkansas especially during 1965. Prior to that time, an Indian

camp was discovered on the south side of the river in 1942 following a series of dust storms which uncovered fire pits and left exposed numerous artifacts, both of Indian and Anglo origin. In more recent years, the terrain has been further altered by irrigation and agriculture. On the north side of the river, a little pond, as the campsite's name suggests, is supplied by a windmill. This natural pond was dammed in 1940 to create a permanent water source for livestock.<sup>28</sup>

Departing Little Pond, the wet route proceeded to the south bend of the Arkansas. In this ten-and-a-half-mile stretch are two lengths of ruts at intervals of one and three and a half miles. Two and a half

---

*Frightened and confused by the artillery, the Indians fled their camp leaving behind their breakfast cooking on the fires.*

---

miles west of the south bend, the wet route left the river bottom and swung northwest in a seven-mile arc to avoid the sandy terrain along the north bank of the Arkansas. In so doing, the trail passed a spring flowing from a sandstone formation. No nineteenth-century reference can be found to this water source, but ruts in its immediate area indicate it was well known during the historic period. The following inscription is carved into the sandstone at the spring: "Black Pool Dis by E. Post 1843." Whether or not the inscription is authentic remains moot. Ironically, however, Charles C. Post recalled carving his name and address in the rocks at a pool he named Crescent Pool on July 5, 1859. Post identified this location as seventy-five miles west of Pawnee Fork in the Fort Atkinson area.<sup>29</sup> A mile and a half to the northwest of Black Pool, ruts of dramatic proportions traverse a full half mile of virgin sod.

26. Folsom, *Mexico In 1841*, 133-34.

27. Capt. Gabriel de Korponay to Col. John Gilpin, July 12, 1848, Korponay to Garland, July 12, 1848 enclosed with Garland to Roger Jones, August 2, 1848, AGO Letters Received, 340G 1848, Records of the Office of the Adjutant General, Record Group 94, National Archives and Records Service.

28. Author's interviews with Duane Alexander and Albert Birzer, June 10, 1990.

29. "The Arkansas Route: The Diary of Charles C. Post," in *Overland Routes to the Gold Fields 1859 From Contemporary Diaries*, The Southwest Historical Series, vol. 11 (1942), 42.

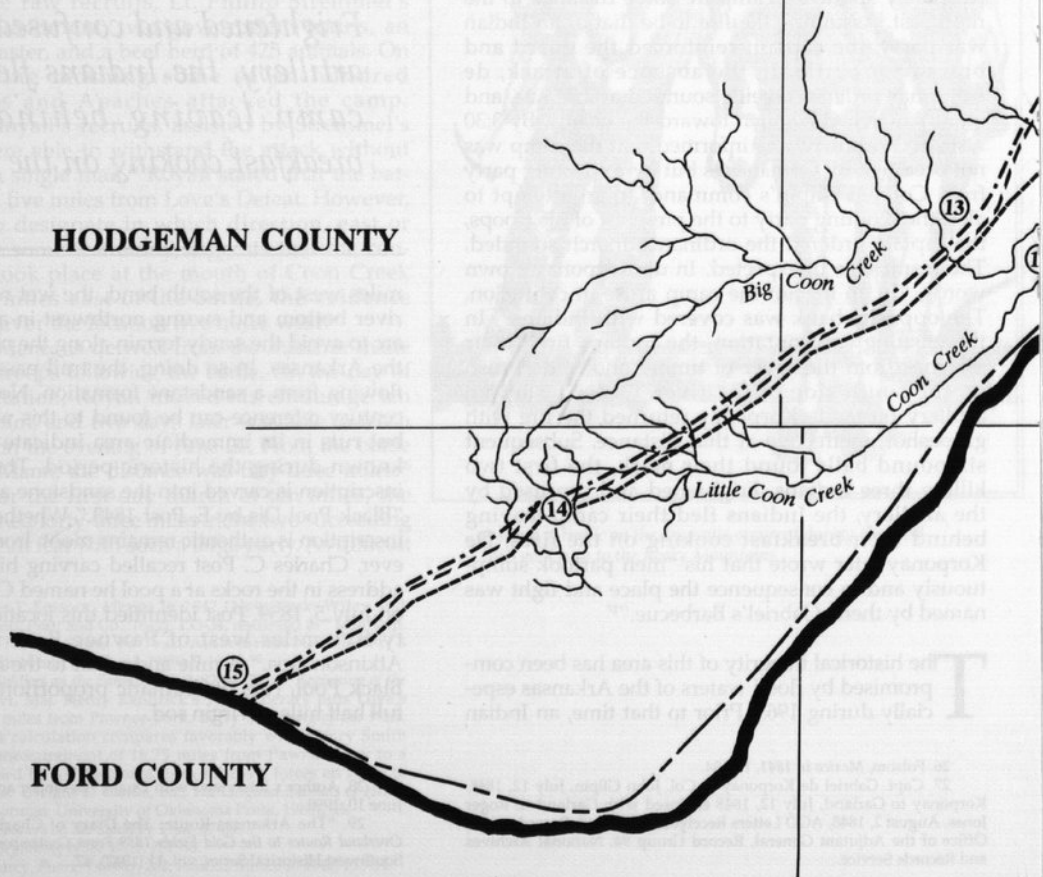


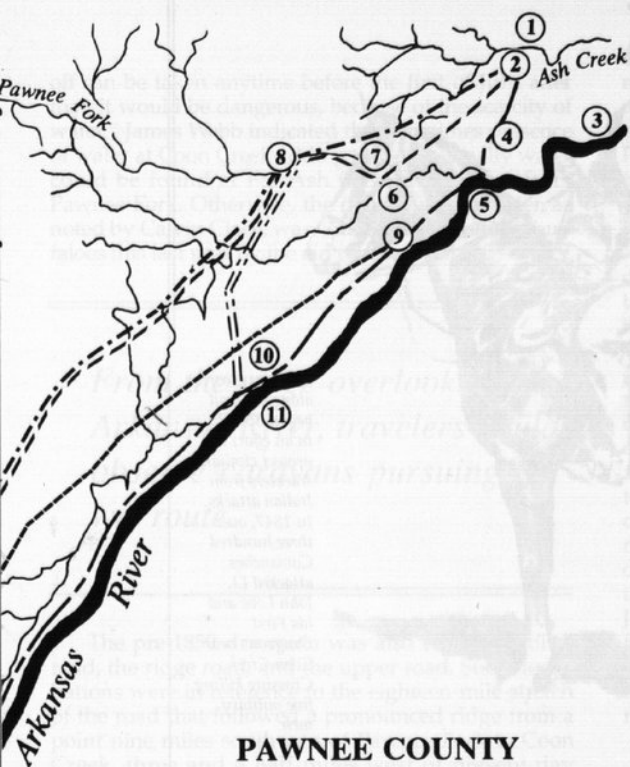
# THE WET AND DRY ROUTES OF THE SANTA FE TRAIL

adapted from  
"Military Campaign Map, Kansas, 1872"

HODGEMAN COUNTY

FORD COUNTY





## PAWNEE COUNTY

## EDWARDS COUNTY

### LEGEND

----- Wet Route

----- Dry Route (Pre-1859)

----- Dry Route (Post-1859)

..... Dry Route (Post-1866)

===== Fort Larned

===== Military Road

1. Ash Creek Crossing
2. Eastern Terminus, Wet Route and Post 1859-1866 Dry Routes
3. Present-day Dundee
4. Present-day Larned
5. Pawnee Fork Crossing (Wet Route)
6. Boyd's Ranch
7. Pawnee Fork Crossing (Dry Route)
8. Fort Larned
9. Forks in Santa Fe Road
10. Present-day Garfield
11. Coon Creek Crossing (Wet Route) and Junction of Wet Route and Fort Larned Military Road
12. Present-day Kinsley
13. Big Coon Creek Crossing (Dry Route)
14. Little Coon Creek Crossing (Dry Route)
15. Western Terminus, Wet and Dry Routes



Military escorts along the trail began in 1829 in an effort to protect civilian travelers from Indian attacks. In 1847, over three hundred Comanches attacked Lt. John Love and his First Dragoons near Coon Creek Crossing killing five military men.

Proceeding along the bluff overlooking the river valley, the wet route continued northwest for two miles. At this point, the lower crossing used in the 1822-1825 period departed the wet route about one mile to the south where it forded the Arkansas at the mouth of Mulberry Creek.<sup>30</sup>

One and a half miles west of the lower crossing's departure point, the wet route is marked by a number of well-defined ruts. Just beyond this location, the wet route turned southwest two miles to Small Drain, the third campsite identified in the Folsom itinerary. Here, Col. Jacob Snively reunited his forces with those of Eli Chandler following their humiliating surrender to Capt. Phillip St. George Cooke in June 1843.<sup>31</sup>

Back in the river bottom, the wet route marched two miles upstream to Jackson's Island, also known

as Jackson's Grove and Ferguson's Grove. This well-known spot on the wet route was located in a huge stand of trees extending about a fourth mile along the south bank of the Arkansas. It was here that Captain Cooke confronted Colonel Snively and his Texas freebooters who had come north with the intentions of robbing Mexican caravans along the Santa Fe Trail. From Jackson's Island, the wet route continued to its merger with the dry route, a distance of 5.1 miles according to Captain Marcy.<sup>32</sup>

#### *The Dry Route Pre-1859*

The dry route, appropriately named, was known for the lack of water along its course. As William B. Parsons wrote in 1859, "The cut

30. Oliva, *Soldiers on the Santa Fe Trail*, 17.

31. Folsom, *Mexico In 1842*, 133-34; Seymour V. Connor and Jimmy M. Skaggs, *Broadcloth and Britches: The Santa Fe Trade* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1976), 113.

32. Marcy, *Prairie Traveler*, 261; Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 619; John Galvin, ed., *Western America in 1846-1847: The Original Travel Diary of Lieutenant J. W. Abert* (San Francisco: John Howell-Books, 1966), 15; Oliva, *Soldiers on the Santa Fe Trail*, 45-48.



off can be taken anytime before the first of July, after that, it would be dangerous, because of the scarcity of water." James Webb indicated the sometimes presence of water at Coon Creek adding that occasionally water could be found at Far Ash Creek four miles from Pawnee Fork. Otherwise, the only source of water, as noted by Calvin Clark, was "out of holes made by buffaloes this last year by the aid of recent rains."<sup>33</sup>

---

*From the ridge overlooking the Arkansas River, travelers could observe caravans pursuing the wet route.*

---

The pre-1859 dry route was also called the bluff road, the ridge road, and the upper road. Such designations were in reference to the eighteen-mile stretch of the road that followed a pronounced ridge from a point nine miles southwest of Pawnee Fork to Coon Creek, three and a half miles west of present-day Kinsley. From the ridge overlooking the Arkansas River, travelers could observe the progress of caravans pursuing the wet route. One such sighting was recorded by F. X. Aubry. Returning from Santa Fe in 1850, he paused along the ridge road to catch a glimpse of wagons in the valley below. Aubry's June 27 journal entry succinctly reads, "saw on the lower road six trains of wagons."<sup>34</sup>

Such sightings were made possible by the close proximity of the dry route (ridge road) to the wet route. At Forks in Santa Fe Road, the dry route slowly diverged to the southwest. So slight was the divergence that at Cook Creek, twenty-seven and a half miles from Forks in Santa Fe Road, the dry route was only four miles removed from the wet

route. Because of the short distance between the two roads, Lt. William Emory's topographical engineer mistakenly took the upper road as they departed Pawnee Fork on July 16, 1846. Discovering the mistake on the following day, they made their way to the wet route and continued on in caravan with Kearny's Army of the West.<sup>35</sup>

Writers in the pre-1859 period, referring to the dry route as the cutoff and the straight route, conjectured that the dry route was several miles shorter than the wet route. Such was the conclusion of Lt. William Whipple who stated that the dry route saved about ten or eleven miles. Other writers were more generous. Voorhees said twenty or thirty miles.<sup>36</sup> Modern measurement indicates the difference between the two routes to be six miles.

Forks in Santa Fe Road, the pre-1859 eastern terminus of the dry route, was located at a point variously described as three and a half, four, five, and six miles southwest of Pawnee Fork crossing.<sup>37</sup> Whipple described this location as being located in a ravine, the slough identified by Webb as Far Ash Creek. Johnston added that the Forks was situated at "the first point of woods west of Pawnee Fork."<sup>38</sup> All such landmarks have long since disappeared, the historical integrity of the area having been destroyed by road construction and farming activity.

About two and a half miles from Forks in Santa Fe Road was a location known as Jones Point. Here in 1856, James Ross Larkin camped near a pool of muddy water he declared

35. Glavin, *Western America in 1846-1847*, 14-15.

36. Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 1092; "The Diary of Augustus Voorhees," 341. Measuring from the eastern terminus southwest of Ash Creek in the post-1859 period, the wet route totaled sixty-eight miles compared with sixty-one and a half miles for the dry route, a difference of six and a half miles. Captain Lyster, in 1877, compared the distances of the two routes using Fort Larned as the point of origin. Lyster calculated the wet route to be eight and 16/100 miles longer than the dry route.

37. "The Diary of Augustus Voorhees," 341. For distances from the Kansas City area to the Pike's Peak gold regions, see *Western Journal of Commerce*, Kansas City, Mo., November 6, 1858; *Westport Border Star*, January 28, 1859; Pease and Cole, *Complete Guide to the Gold Districts of Kansas and Nebraska* (Chicago: Wm. H. Rand, 1859), 10; O. B. Gunn, *New Map and Hand Book of Kansas & the Gold Mines* (Pittsburgh: W. S. Haven, 1859), 46. See also Lt. William H. Emory's 1847 map in Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 810.

38. Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 1092; Webb, *Adventures in the Santa Fe Trade*, 52; "Journal of Abraham Robinson Johnston, 1846," in *Marching With the Army of the West, 1846-1848, The Southwest Historical Series*, vol. 4 (1936), 85. Johnston's observation is complemented by John Udell's 1859 journal entry for May 20: "Traveled four miles. Wood near the road which is the last." John Udell, *John Udell Journal* (Los Angeles: N. A. Kovach, 1946), 9.

33. "The Parsons Guidebook," in *Pike's Peak Gold Rush Guidebooks of 1859*, 176; Webb, *Adventures in the Santa Fe Trade*, 52; *Two Diaries: The Diary & Journal of Calvin Perry Clark . . . together with the Diary of his Sister Helen E. Clark*, (Denver: Denver Public Library, 1962), 7.

34. Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 700, 691, 698, 948; Donald Chaput, *Francois X. Aubry: Trader, Trailmaker and Voyageur in the Southwest, 1846-1854* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1975), 216.

"unfit for use." Three years later, an event of far greater proportion occurred at the same site in conjunction with a mail party conducted by Michael Smith. On September 24, 1859, Smith's party, escorted by Lt. Elmer Otis and thirty troopers, arrived at Pawnee Fork. After pasturing the mules, the mail party resumed travel, unescorted, on the dry route. A few miles out, fifteen Kiowas rode out of a ravine demanding sugar and crackers. Upon complying with the Kiowas' demands, Smith and his brother Lawrence were shot. A third mail company employee, William Cole, though wounded, escaped through tall grass. The next morning Cole made his way back to the Pawnee where he found Otis and his men still

---

*Coon Creek was the scene of near disaster when runaway mules overturned a wagon spilling out four passengers.*

---

in camp. Returning to the scene of the attack with Cole, Otis and his men buried the Smith brothers and recovered the mail.<sup>39</sup>

Three miles beyond the site of the Smith brothers' deaths, ruts can be observed marking the dry route's ascent of the high ridge surmounted by George Sibley in 1825. From this point, only one mile from the wet route, the dry route's southwesterly trek to Coon Creek is plotted by ruts at intervals of six and three and a half miles.

The only stop of note on the pre-1859 dry route, Coon Creek, was the scene of near disaster in November 1853 when runaway mules overturned a wagon in the creek bed spilling out four passengers, among whom was the U.S. attorney for the territory of New Mexico, William W. H. Davis. Of special interest is the notation Davis made concerning the water casks filled at the Pawnee.<sup>40</sup> Such was the testi-

mony to the lack of water along the length of the dry route. Remaining at the crossing are cutdowns, one on the north side of the creek and two of pronounced proportion on the south.

Beyond Coon Creek, ruts at eight locations in a twenty-mile span trace the dry route to Little Coon Creek. Here, Samuel Owens, elected captain of a caravan at Council Grove in August 1844, was reelected captain after his caravan was joined by another group of traders someplace en route beyond Pawnee Fork.<sup>41</sup> In 1853, Little Coon Creek caught the attention of William Carr Lane. Returning from a disappointing year as governor of the territory of New Mexico, Carr observed that the tributary had been drained by the immense herds of buffalo in the area.<sup>42</sup>

Ten miles from Little Coon Creek, ruts of the dry route appear for the last time as they approach the western terminus of the wet and dry routes one mile east of the present-day Kansas Soldiers Home, formerly Fort Dodge. While ample evidence establishes this location as the major western terminus of the wet and dry routes, other information indicates that prior to 1859, the dry route, at times, bypassed this terminus to end on the Arkansas in the Fort Mann area. Such a route is indicated in Dr. F. A. Wisligenus' 1848 map. Yet another western terminus of the pre-1859 dry route was located at the south bend of the Arkansas in Lt. William H. Emory's map of 1847.<sup>43</sup>

#### *The Dry Route Post-1859*

In the post-1859 period, the dry route abandoned its eastern terminus at Forks in Santa Fe Road to originate about one and a half miles southwest of Ash Creek. From this point the dry route's west-southwestwardly trek can be traced by a series of ruts: the first, a mile and a half from the terminus; the second, another half mile; and the third, a mile and a half more at the southeast corner of the Larned Cemetery. From the cemetery site, the dry route proceeded on for about a mile to cross Pawnee Fork on the present-day Larned State Hospital grounds. Here remains a huge cutdown leading to the river channel. Describing this crossing, Capt. William J. Lyster wrote, "the Ford three miles below the fort appears to have been the best, and has the

39. James Brice, *Reminiscences of Ten Years Experience on the Western Plains* (Kansas City, Mo.: n.d.); Oliva, *Soldiers on the Santa Fe Trail*, 117-18; Morris F. Taylor, *First Mail West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971), 62-63. Barton H. Barbour, ed., *Reluctant Frontiersman* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1990), 78.

40. W. W. H. Davis, *El Gringo: New Mexico and Her People* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 29-30.

41. Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 526. In this account, Little Coon Creek is called Farther Coon Creek.

42. *Ibid.*, 1185.

43. *Ibid.*, 810-11.

*In the 1860s, stage lines were established along the dry route for carrying mail and passengers. Subject to Indian raids, stage stations were often short-lived along the Santa Fe Trail.*



longest trail leading to it."<sup>44</sup> Then, as now, the cut-down was of dramatic proportions.

About a fourth mile south of the crossing was Boyd's ranch, originally established near Pawnee Fork crossing on the wet route in 1864 by Samuel Parker. In 1865, Parker abandoned the ranch and moved upstream to the crossing on the dry route where he built a second ranch. In turn, he sold the ranch to partners Drought and Wagginer. Wagginer bought out Drought's interest and continued to operate the little enterprise through 1867 when Indians raided the ranch, burning the buildings and driving off the livestock.<sup>45</sup>

In the following year, A. H. Boyd purchased the burned-out remains and built a complex of buildings including a twenty-by-forty-foot sod house that served as store, saloon, and brothel. Boyd also constructed a toll bridge at the nearby crossing. While the bridge was destroyed by flood waters in 1869,

the ranch continued in operation through 1872. With the coming of the railroad, the need for such establishments ceased, and the ranch was converted to a family farm.<sup>46</sup> No physical evidence of the ranch remains. However, the ranch site, located on Larned State Hospital property, has been removed from cultivation by the Kansas State Historical Society for future excavation. Visitors to the area can readily identify the location by the weed growth in the staked off area in an otherwise cultivated field.

Corresponding with the date of the Smith brothers' deaths was the establishment of the mail station built on Pawnee Fork. On September 22, 1859, William Butze and a crew of men arrived at the Pawnee to construct a mail station for Hall and Porter, successors to Waldo Hall Company.<sup>47</sup> The location of the mail station, excavated in 1972, was about two and three-fourths miles west of the dry route crossing on the south side of the river. In November 1859, a post office named Pawnee Fork was established at the mail station. Butze was

44. Capt. Lyster to Asst. Adjutant General. This crossing was called the lower crossing as compared with another crossing about two miles upstream. Map of Fort Larned and area, 1864, RG 77, National Archives; 1865 Diary of William Ladd, author's private collection.

45. Henry Booth, "Centennial History of Pawnee County" (Unpublished manuscript, 1876), Santa Fe Trail Center Library, Larned.

46. David K. Clapsaddle, A. H. Boyd, Entrepreneur of the Prairie (Larned, Kans.: Larned Tiller and Toiler, n.d.), 9-20.

47. Oliva, Fort Larned, 7.



appointed postmaster.<sup>48</sup> The mail station site, identified by a simple marker, is included in a walking tour of the Fort Larned National Historic Site.

In the following November, seventy-five troopers of Company K, First U.S. Cavalry under the command of Capt. George H. Stuart and Lt. David Bell arrived to establish camp at Pawnee Fork. The name of the little post was changed to Camp Alert on February 1, 1860; and in the following May changed again to Fort Larned. In June, the post was relocated a fourth mile to the southwest of its original site.<sup>49</sup> Theodore Weichselbaum recalled Camp Alert as being "right across the timbered ravine, northeast of where they were building Fort Larned." Such a location would have been near the mail station. Just east of the mail station, a bridge was constructed across the Pawnee during the winter of 1859–1860 by Butze and Lieutenant Bell. The bridge, according to Robert Peck, was a private enterprise for which Butze and Bell were never paid.<sup>50</sup> Reporting the bridge in his May 23, 1860, diary entry, Lt. J. E. B. Stuart described Camp Alert as being on the west above the bridge.<sup>51</sup> As such, Stuart's description confirms Weichselbaum's statement concerning the site of Camp Alert.

From the crossing near the site of Boyd's ranch, the dry route split into two separate branches. One branch departed directly to the southwest; the other pursued the south bank of the Pawnee west about two and three-fourths miles to the mail station. From this point, the road continued southeast a fourth mile to Fort Larned. Skirting the southeast corner of the parade grounds, the dry route departed the post and proceeded to the southwest.<sup>52</sup>

In 1864, the bridge built by Butze and Bell was burned by the Kiowas. However, the crossing continued to be used in the absence of the bridge. Comparing this crossing to the ford three miles east of Fort Larned, Captain Lyster wrote, "The next in importance as indicated by the size of the trail

crossing it, was one mile below the Fort."<sup>53</sup> Faint evidence of the crossing can be observed on the south bank of the Pawnee.

In 1866, the post office was moved from the mail station to Fort Larned. Needing a more direct route to the new post office, the stage company developed a road that ran from the eastern terminus of the dry route near Ash Creek to the north side of Pawnee Fork. Lt. M. R. Brown, engineer with the 1867 Hancock Expedition, designated this road as the Santa Fe Stage Route. Captain Lyster spoke of it as the dry route to Fort Zarah.<sup>54</sup> Following the north side of the river westward, the trail branched southwest at the site of the Butze and Bell bridge to connect with the road on the south side of the Pawnee before continuing westward to the present-day roadside park at Fort Larned National Historic Site. From this location, the road curled to the west side of the post where it crossed the Pawnee at the sutler's store. The site of the sutler's store, appropriately marked like the mail station, is included in the walking tour of historic Fort Larned. From the sutler's store, the dry route left the post, departing to the southwest.<sup>55</sup>

---

*In September 1867, after killing a man at the Cow Creek Station, Indians raided the Coon Creek Station driving off seven mules.*

---

Five miles southwest of Fort Larned, a single rut of the dry route remains in spite of the area having been cultivated for several years. Four miles farther downtrail, the dry route reached Rock Hollow, the first of five campsites between Forts Larned and Dodge.<sup>56</sup> True to its name, the campsite was in a low

48. Robert W. Baugham, *Kansas Post Offices* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1961), 99, 215.

49. Oliva, *Fort Larned*, 7–11.

50. "Statement of Theodore Weichselbaum, of Ogden, Riley County, July 17, 1908," *Kansas Historical Collections, 1909-1910* 11 (1910): 562; Brice, *Reminiscences of Ten Years Experience on the Western Plains*, 11.

51. W. Stitt Robinson, ed., "The Kiowa and Comanche Campaign of 1860 as Recorded in the Personal Diary of Lt. J.E.B. Stuart," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 23 (Winter 1957): 391.

52. Map of Ft. Larned and Area, 1864, RG 77, National Archives.

53. Medical History of Fort Larned, vol. 164-67, p. 2, RG 94, National Archives; Capt. Lyster to Asst. Adjutant General, 1860 Diary of William Ladd, author's personal collection.

54. Baugham, *Kansas Post Offices*, 46; The Hancock Expedition, Letters Received by the Office of the Adjutant General, 1869, RG 94, roll 563, National Archives; Capt. Lyster to Asst. Adjutant General.

55. Hancock Expedition, RG 94, National Archives.

56. "Route of Sanderson's Southern Overland Stage Company," *Junction City Union*, August 4, 1866.

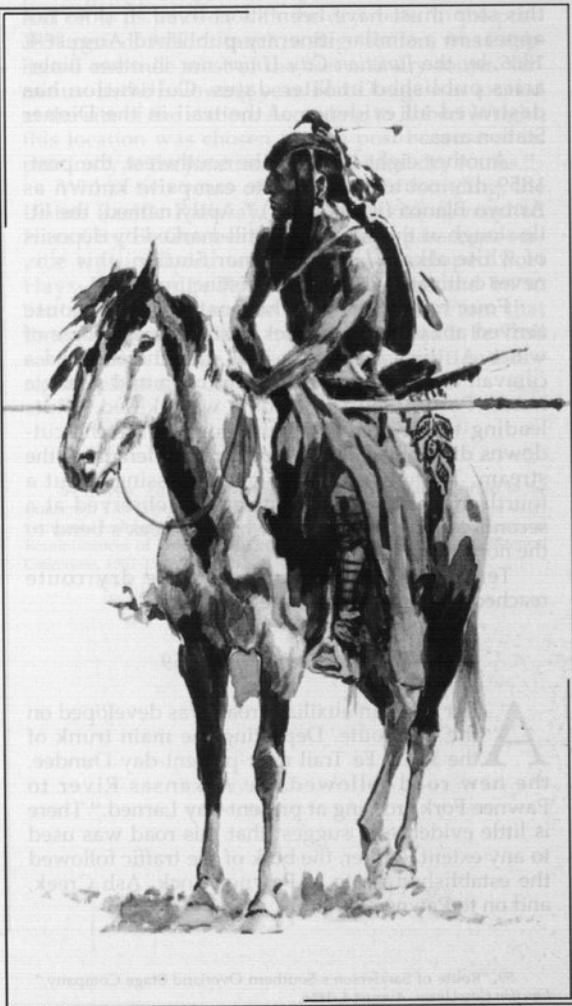
lying area adjacent to an outcropping of sandstone. Undisturbed by cultivation, two short lengths of ruts remain at this location.

Beyond Rock Hollow, ruts of the dry route appear at intervals of one and a half, two, and six and a half miles. From the last set of ruts, the road took a southerly course for two and a half miles to cross the terrain now occupied by Hillside Cemetery (three miles west of Kinsley). From the northwest corner of the cemetery where faint ruts can be detected, the dry route turned southwest for a mile and a half to the Coon Creek campsite used by travelers on the pre-1859 dry route.

At Coon Creek, known as Big Coon Creek in the post-1859 period, an M. Cottrill Company stage station was in operation by 1863. There, in the following year, Indians raided a caravan owned by Stuart, Slemmons and Company. During the confrontation, half the caravan's livestock was driven off and one teamster, Andrew Blanchard, was killed. Here, also in 1865, Indians attacked a government train returning to Fort Riley. Two Mexican drivers were killed. A thirteen-year-old Mexican boy, wounded and scalped, managed to survive the ordeal. In September 1867, after killing a man at the Cow Creek Station north of Fort Zarah, Indians raided the Coon Creek Station driving off seven mules.<sup>57</sup>

Robert Wright reported that in 1868 a small outpost called Fort Coon was located at Big Coon Creek garrisoned by a sergeant and ten troopers. According to Wright, the building was constructed of "sod with a heavy clay roof and port holes all around."<sup>58</sup> By the time of Wright's report, the stage line was discontinued on the dry route. In all likelihood, the army occupied the station following its abandonment by the stage company.

Beyond Big Coon Creek, the post-1859 dry route pursued the same course as its pre-1859 counterpart to the western terminus. In this thirty-mile stretch were three campsites used in the post-1859 period. The first of the campsites, called Dinner Station, was



Throughout the active duration of the Santa Fe Trail, Indians posed a threat by attacking civilian travelers, freighting companies, and government trains.

57. Ibid. Ironically, the tributary of Coon Creek, called Big Coon Creek in the post-1859 period, is known as Little Coon Creek in this century; Taylor, *First Mail West*, 95, 122; Connor and Skaggs, *Broadcloth and Britches*, 175-76; George A. Root, "Reminiscences of William Darnell," *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1926-1928 17 (1928): 506-7.

58. Robert M. Wright, *Dodge City, The Cowboy Capital and the Great Southwest* (Wichita, Kans.: *Wichita Eagle*, 1913), 108. According to Jack Montgomery of Kinsley, Kansas, some walls were still standing about a fourth mile southwest of the crossing as late as 1885. Montgomery's grandfather settled at the crossing in the 1870s, author's interview with Jack Montgomery, June 24, 1990.

located eight miles southwest of Coon Creek. Listed in an itinerary of the Santa Fe Trail published by the Lawrence *Kansas Weekly Tribune*, January 25, 1866, this stop must have been short-lived. It does not appear in a similar itinerary published August 4, 1866, by the *Junction City Union* nor in other itineraries published at later dates. Cultivation has destroyed all evidence of the trail in the Dinner Station area.

Another eight miles to the southwest, the post-1859 dry route reached the campsite known as Arroyo Blanco (white gully).<sup>59</sup> Aptly named, the little slough at this location is still marked by deposits of white alkali. Unlike Dinner Station, this site, never cultivated, boasts four distinct ruts.

Four miles farther, the post-1859 dry route arrived at Little Coon Creek, a sometimes source of water. At this campsite in 1867, Indians attacked a caravan driving off a number of oxen and a single horse. Fortunately, no traders were killed.<sup>60</sup> Ruts leading to the creek are numerous as are the cut-downs distributed over a quarter-mile length of the stream. To the west of the main crossing about a fourth mile, more cut-downs can be observed at a second crossing necessitated by the creek's bend to the north.

Ten miles to the southwest, the dry route reached its terminus with the wet route.

#### *The Wet Route Post-1859*

After 1859, an auxiliary road was developed on the wet route. Departing the main trunk of the Santa Fe Trail near present-day Dundee, the new road followed the Arkansas River to Pawnee Fork crossing at present-day Larned.<sup>61</sup> There is little evidence to suggest that this road was used to any extent. Rather, the bulk of the traffic followed the established route to Pawnee Rock, Ash Creek, and on to Pawnee Fork.

59. "Route of Sanderson's Southern Overland Stage Company," *Junction City Union*, August 4, 1866.

60. Ibid.; Capt. Lyster to Asst. Adjutant General; Charles Raber, "Life on the Plains, 1860 to 1868," *Kansas Historical Collections* 1923-1925 16 (1925): 338-39, in this account, Little Coon creek is called Dry Coon Creek. During the post-1859 period, this stream was also known as Whitewater and White Creek, "The Parsons Guidebook," 177, and "The Diary of Augustus Voorhees," 341. Although called Little Coon Creek, the stream was the main branch of Coon Creek, not a tributary.

61. Military Campaign Map, State of Kansas, 1872, RG 77, National Archives.



In 1860, the First U.S. Cavalry established a camp at Pawnee Fork naming the post Camp Alert and within a few months renaming it Fort Larned. As with the earlier dragoons, cavalry units were posted along the Santa Fe Trail for the purpose of protecting civilian and government traffic.



In the early 1860s, many of the trains, especially those hauling military supplies, chose a third option. Departing the eastern terminus of the wet and dry routes southwest of Ash Creek, they pursued the post-1859 dry route to Fort Larned.

About two and a half miles southwest of Fort Larned on the dry route, the wagons turned due south for seven and a half miles to merge with the wet route at Coon Creek one mile west of present-day Garfield. As reported by Captain Lyster, "it was customary for all ox trains going west from Ft. Larned to take the wet trail via Coon Creek Crossing, except after unusually heavy rain, when water could be found in holes and ravines usually dry."<sup>62</sup>

Ruts from this cutoff are maintained in a forty-four acre tract of native sod by the National Park Service three and a half miles southwest of Fort Larned.<sup>63</sup> At Coon Creek crossing near Garfield, four cutdowns can be observed on the north bank of the stream. A fourth mile to the south, evidence of the cutoff continues in the form of deeply carved ruts heading toward the junction with the wet route a few hundred yards to the southwest.

62. Ibid; Capt. Lyster to Asst. Adjutant General.

63. *Santa Fe Trail Ruts* (Fort Larned: Fort Larned National Historic Site, National Park Service, n.d.).

Beyond Coon Creek, the course of the wet route remained unchanged from the pre-1859 period, following the Arkansas around its south bend and on to its junction with the dry route. In the post-1859 period, Adkins ranch, a stage station, was established one mile west of the wet and dry routes' terminus. In the following year, Fort Dodge was located at the site of the station. According to Robert Wright, this location was chosen for the post because of its proximity to the junction of the wet and dry routes.<sup>64</sup>

Within two years of Fort Dodge's founding, the Union Pacific Railway, Eastern Division, reached Hays City. By October 1867, mail and passenger service was initiated on the newly developed Fort Hays-Fort Dodge Road to Fort Dodge and on to Santa Fe. Freight service soon followed. From that time forward, overland traffic on the Santa Fe Trail east of Fort Dodge ceased; both the wet and dry routes fell into disuse except for local traffic.<sup>65</sup> [KH]

64. Taylor, *First Mail West*, 107; David Kay Strate, *Sentinel to the Cimarron: The Frontier Experience of Fort Dodge, Kansas* (Dodge City: Cultural Heritage and Arts Center, 1970), 12; R. M. Wright, "Personal Reminiscences of Frontier Life in Southwest Kansas," *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1901-1902 7 (1902): 50.

65. Taylor, *First Mail West*, 123.