A Robbery on the Santa Fe Trail, 1827

Edited by James W. Covington

Introduction

After William Becknell had led 21 men and three wagons from Missouri to Santa Fe in 1822 and reaped a rich harvest on his second visit to the Mexican city, many traders were eager to make the trip and exchange their supplies of dry goods for livestock, furs, silver, and gold. The market for the gloves, plain and fancy prints, blue jeans, combs, looking glasses, scissors, and various other articles, was one that was to expand for many years. The amount of goods brought to Santa Fe from Missouri jumped from $2,000 in 1823 to $65,000 in 1825.

There were some hazards attached to this very lucrative business. Disasters could result from dangerous water supplies, prairie fires, and attacks by wild Indians. The Santa Fe trail wound its way through some of the most war-like tribes that could be found in North America. These tribes included the Osages, Kiowas, Pawnees, Comanches, and Apaches.

Many of the merchants hoped that the United States government would encourage the trade by marking the route, making treaties with the Indians, and the establishment of military posts in the immediate neighborhood. Sen. Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri introduced a bill in the senate which provided for the marking of the Santa Fe trail and negotiation of treaties with the Indian tribes. This measure was passed and became law on March 3, 1825. Benton had to overcome much opposition to his proposal because it provided for the surveying and marking of a road which was partly in non-American territory.

The task of surveying the road and making treaties with the Indians was begun, and by 1826 the trail had been surveyed and marked to Taos, N. Mex. Treaties were concluded with the Kansa and Osage tribes of Indians.

Traffic moved along the marked route, but, soon other difficulties arose. The Pawnees, Kiowas, and Comanches gave the traders some trouble when the caravans moved through their respective territories. The Pawnees were just as warlike as their neighbors, the Kiowas and Comanches, but they did not make war against

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the white man. Instead, these astrologers and philosophers of the Great Plains graded their station in life by the number of horses that they could steal.

All of the Plains Indians were great horse stealers, but the Pawnees were the masters. They knew every trick in the art of camouflage, psychological warfare, sudden attack, and quick retreat with the spoils.

The flow of horses, jacks, jennies, and mules on the Santa Fe trail was a most tempting sight for the Pawnees. It was not long before they began to attack the caravans and steal their livestock. The following letter is the story of how seven traders from Missouri lost many of their animals to the Pawnees. They were among the first traders to make the trip along the surveyed road, and they became so angry at being robbed on this government-built route that they wrote a letter to the Congress of the United States.

The Letter

To the honorable the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States in Congress assembled. 3

The Petition of Thomas Talbot, Elisha Stanley, William Wolfskill, James Collins, Edwin M. Ryland, James Fielding and Solomon Houck, all citizens of the State of Missouri and of the United States, humbly represents, that your Petitioners being desirous of participating with their fellow citizens in the trade carried on between the citizens of the United States especially those of Missouri, and the inhabitants and leading towns, and villages of Taos, Santa Fe etc. in the province of New Mexico, in the Republic of Mexico, did for that purpose make outfits in lawful merchandize suited to said leading towns and villages and having associated themselves together with sundry others for the purpose of safe handling mutual assistance and self defense, whilst passing from the State of Missouri Taos and Santa Fe through the Indian Countries between Missouri and Mexico, your Petitioners in company with a number of other traders left Fort Osage, a point on the Missouri River, sometime in the month of August in the year of 1826, on their journey to Taos and Santa Fe or for the purposes foresaid and pursued the beaten trace along the route lately surveyed and laid out by George C. Sibley and other commissioners of the United States, to survey and lay off a public road from Fort Osage in Missouri to Santa Fe, without any material deviation from the same. 2 . . . And passing peaceably and quietly through all the Indian tribes on the way your petitioners arrived safely with their merchandize in Taos and Santa Fe, where they paid the duties imposed on imported merchandize by the Government of Mexico, and bartered and sold their said merchandize in Santa Fe, Taos, Sonora and other villages, to the inhabitants and people of Mexico, for horses, mules, asses, and specie—

1. Petition of Talbot, et al., to the United States Congress (no date), National Archives, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, “Letters Received, Pawnee,” 1928.
2. Fort Osage was located on the south side of the Missouri river in present Jackson county, Missouri.
That your petitioners after having spent near one year in said towns and villages in Mexico, having collected a large number of mules, asses, some horses and specie, left Santa Fe on their journey homeward by the same surveyed road by which they had traveled to Santa Fe etc. and that they arrived safely with their stock at a certain point on said surveyed road, about twenty five miles west from the place where said road crosses the Panis fork of the river Arkansas—where your Petitioners encamped with their said stock of mules, asses, etc. during the night of the 12th October 1827 having taken the usual precaution to secure their stock, by placing sundry sentinels to guard near said stock, to prevent losses, your petitioners reposited in a short lived security, based upon the known amicable relations existing between the United States and the Indian tribe, particularly the tribe known by the name of Panis, who sometimes hunt on the waters of the Arkansas where your Petitioners then were, as your Petitioners have heard. And your Petitioners represent that a band of Indians (then unseen and unknown impelled by their love of plunder, and being regardless of the rights of American citizens with whose government they professed to be in amity) amounting to about thirty in number, about the middle of the night of the said 12th of October approached the encampment of your Petitioners in a warlike and deadly manner, and when within one hundred yards of the stock of your Petitioners the said Indians fired several guns, supposed to have been aimed at your Petitioners and those in company with them—that said Indians continued to approach said encampment and stock of your Petitioners until they came within some 25 or 30 yards of said stock, when they again fired several guns and raised an appalling and well known war whoop and by divers strange noises with rattles and shaking of Buffalo hides and the said Indians immediately succeeded in scaring the stock of your Petitioners in such a manner as to cause them to run away all together in a drove with great speed: and continued to scare and chase said stock and whip the mules and asses with their bows and bowstrings in such [unreadable] as to facilitate their speed greatly. And your Petitioners represent that being left with but three gentle animals tied and hobbled they were unable, either by speed or foot, or physical force to detain or retake any part of said stock in their pursuit of several miles and that said Indians succeeded in capturing and carrying away during said night as foresaid the whole of said stock (three excepted) amounting to one hundred and sixty-six in number. And your Petitioners represent that they continued their pursuit after said Indians and stock on the next day (October 13th) for several miles and until your Petitioners lost the trail and deemed it unsafe to venture further in their attempt to regain said stock. And your Petitioners represent that by great good fortune they regained sixty-six head of said stock on the 13th October which had been abandoned by, or had escaped from said Indians during the chase, and that said Indians despoiled your Petitioners of one hundred head of said stock which your Petitioners have never been able to regain. And your Petitioners represent that said stock has been valued and proved by witnesses, as by vouchers herewith presented with fully mentioned in a list or schedule of the same hereunto annexed. And your Petitioners represent

8. The Panis fork of the Arkansas is the Pawnee river. The attack probably took place on the north side of the Arkansas river in present Edwards county, Kansas.

4. The Pawnees or Panis signed a treaty of amity with the United States government in 1825.
that the said band of Indians who have thus lawlessly and violently despoiled and robbed your Petitioners as aforesaid, have since said robbery, been ascertained to be of the tribe of the Panis, who are said to inhabit the Platte and Cow Rivers, and are in amity with the United States, which ascertainment has been made by means of certain facts, peculiarities and circumstances, which are fully set forth in the affidavits of witnesses herewith presented. And your Petitioners represent that they have sustained great damage in consequence of said robbery, and inasmuch as your Petitioners believe that government is able and willing, as well as bound in good faith to protect every citizen's lawful rights and property, whether the same be found upon the bosom of the ocean, or in the heart of the wilderness there lawfully taken and possessed: And inasmuch as your Petitioners were at the time of said robbery pursuing a lawful commerce between the United States and Mexico, upon a highway laid out and sanctioned by the public authority of the government of the United States and being unable to retrieve their losses in any other way, your Petitioners humbly conceive that they are in justice and equity entitled to relief, there being no act of Congress expressly authorizing remuneration for losses sustained from Indians under circumstances like those.⁵ Wherefore your Petitioners, replying your justice, and protecting care, humbly pray relief in the [unreadable] by being allowed such sums as may be found just, to be paid them respectively by authority of a law making an appropriation in their behalf.⁶

[Signed by]

THOS. TALBOT
WILLIAM WOLFSKILL

ELISHA STANLEY
JAMES COLLINS
SOLOMON
HOUCK

EDWIN M. RYLAND
JAMES FIELDING

5. Military escorts were infrequently provided and the traders soon learned how to protect themselves.

6. There is a penciled note on this request that it was denied by action of a committee.