Marion Sloan’s Journey on the Santa Fe Trail

Most travelers on the Santa Fe Trail were men. They were traders shipping goods up and down the trail to make money. An exception was Marion Sloan. Later in her life Marion wrote a book about her journey to Santa Fe. She was seven years old when she went with her mother and brother, Will, to Santa Fe. Marion’s mother, Elizabeth, was a widow. She was going west to seek opportunities in New Mexico or California.

“[Three army officers] offered mother, Will and me transportation … if mother would prepare their meals enroute for them. Mother gladly agreed…. In 1852 [the cost] was $250 and, of course, there was also half fare for the children. She saved $500 by cooking for the young men.

The dread cholera was raging in Fort Leavenworth the day our white-hooded wagons set sail on the western prairies.

Our long caravan, loaded with heavy, valuable merchandise, traveled slowly. Sometimes we were alarmed by the Indians, threatened by storms, and always it seemed we suffered for want of water.
Each noon we would halt for a brief hour’s rest. The lunch that we ate was a cold one. … After the noon rest, we would go on again until the sun was low in the West.

Each night there were two great circles of wagons. … While most of the drivers slept under the wagons, the women and children slept inside the wagons or in tents…. I would awaken to hear the coyote’s eerie cry in the darkness.

Soon we were on the Cimarron Cut-off and were building our cooking fires with buffalo chips [manure]. My chore was to gather the buffalo chips. I would stand back and kick them, then reach down and gather them carefully, for under them lived big spiders and centipedes. Sometimes scorpions ran from beneath them.

Once we traveled for two whole days without water . . . I felt sorrier for the straining mules than for myself.

At Fort Union … [we] rested. The parade ground was a shambles of buffalo hides, Mexican blankets and sheep pelts, things to be sent out on the outgoing east bound train that was camped there. After a time…we struck the westward trail again.

We were in Santa Fe before we knew it.