

II. George Champlin Sibley: Blazing a Memory Trace

[Transparencies: Maps of The Santa Fé Trail, East & West (1).]

The first entrepreneur to make the trek from Missouri to Santa Fé was William Becknell in 1821. The purpose of his expedition was trade with the Comanche. On the way west he and his four partners encountered a party of Spanish Dragoons which informed them that Mexico, following its independence from Spain, had ended its restrictive trade policy with the United States. Becknell's group was persuaded to take their goods to Santa Fé for sale. Thus began the original NAFTA. And this trade was truly free. Commerce between the United States and northern Mexico was a lucrative endeavor since the area we know today as New Mexico received all its merchandise from the lower provinces by way of Vera Cruz but at exorbitant rates.

On his return to Missouri, Becknell wrote a journal which was published in April 1823 and contained the following observation:

An excellent road may be made from Fort Osage to Santa Fé. Few places would require much labor to render them passable; and a road might be laid out as not to run more than thirty miles over the mountains.

Interest in trade with Northern Mexico increased to the point that the federal government took up the issue of underwriting the survey of a trail from Kansas City to Santa Fé.

Just before leaving the White House in March of 1825, President James Monroe signed a bill providing \$10,000 for surveying and marking the road and \$20,000 for treaties with the Indians for a right of way. Incoming president John Quincy Adams appointed three commissioners for the project: Benjamin H. Reeves of Howard County, Missouri; Thomas Mather of Kaskaskia, Illinois, and George Champlin Sibley of Fort Osage, Missouri.

Sibley assembled what had to be purchased in St. Louis—wagons, supplies, horses to pull the wagons, and wagoners to drive them. Reeves purchased horses and mules, assembled a party of chainmen, hunters, and guards.

The commissioners were determined to assemble a crew where every man was a rifleman and hunter but at the same time be qualified to serve as chain bearer or axeman, and willing to submit cheerfully to all the necessary privations of the trip. It is important to point out early that a chain bearer or chainman is not a slave but a civil engineer.

English mathematician Edmund Gunter was professor of astronomy at Gresham College, London, from 1619 until his death in 1626. He developed the first table of common logarithms of the sine and tangent functions and introduced the terms cosine and cotangent.

Gunter's practical inventions included Gunter's chain. Commonly used for surveying, it was 22 yards long and divided into 100 links, each link 7.92 inches in length. Measurement of public land systems in the United States and Canada is based on Gunter's chain. A chain bearer or chainman is one of two men who use this surveyor's chain.

Once assembled, the Santa Fé expedition numbered forty persons. There were fifty-seven horses and mules, seven baggage wagons, a good supply of provisions, tools, and ammunition.

On Sunday, July 17, 1825, the survey began from Fort Osage. The first major objective was to meet with the Chiefs of the Osage Tribe which inhabited the Neosho River Valley in Kansas, a distance of about 125 miles. By August 8th they arrived at the Neosho River where they had council with the Osage and worked out the following treaty:

\$800 for the privilege of marking the road through the land of the Osages and for the free use of it forever. \$300 in hand, \$500 in credit to be used with an American trader in the village, one Auguste Pierre Chouteau [Shü-TOW].

Sibley wrote the following in his journal:

As we propose to meet the Osage Chiefs in council here, to negotiate a Treaty with them for the Road, I suggested the propriety of naming the place 'Council Grove' ... which was done.

The next order of business was to meet with the Kansa tribe in order to consummate a similar treaty with its Chiefs. That meeting took place on August 16th just south of McPherson, Kansas. The same deal was struck with the Kansa as with the Osage.

Blazing the trail westward was not too intense a task in the beginning. Many had pioneered the area and certain landmarks were well known to all who ventured out. The first major target of anyone heading toward Santa Fé was the bend in the Arkansas River known today as Great Bend, Kansas. At that point one could follow the Arkansas all the way to its headwaters in the Swatch Range of mountains in central Colorado.

Following this route kept travelers in the unorganized territory of the Louisiana Purchase. A key boundary which resulted from this treaty was the 100th meridian at the Arkansas River, a location which later became famous as Dodge City, Kansas. South of the Arkansas at any point beyond the 100th meridian placed you in Mexico.

The commissioners decided to stop their expedition just west of Dodge City near the area of Cimarron, Kansas, a point on the Arkansas where you can elect to cross over and head south into the Jornada, the flat, bleak, waterless tableland between the Arkansas and Cimarron Rivers, or continue westward to Colorado. Known as the Cimarron Cutoff, this trail was a hundred miles shorter than the one which took those bound for Santa Fé along the mountain route through Colorado. But it was Mexican territory, and the surveyors didn't have permission to chain that section of the route without approval from Washington.

Please note the commissioners' orientation to higher authority and respect for Mexico's national sovereignty. Sibley felt they could legally continue to survey the route if they did not actually mark the trail without permission. It was finally decided that both Colonel Mather and Colonel Reeves would return to Fort Osage.

On September 21st, Mather and Reeves began their return trip to Missouri and Sibley made preparations to ford the Arkansas. It was felt that the surveyors could wait no longer if they were to make Santa Fé before winter.

Sibley's group of 13 men along with two wagons and 19 horses headed west on September 22nd. On October 30th, George Sibley rode into the Mexican village of San Fernando where he decided to spend the winter. It took 39 days to make the trip from the Arkansas River to San Fernando—a stretch of only 277 miles, an average of just over 7 miles per day, or as the surveyors would say, seven miles and six chains per day.

From the Arkansas crossing, through the Jornada, along the Cimarron River into Taos, Mexico, Sibley made notes which assisted him in accurately charting the trail on his return route the following summer. His work and that of his party opened the famous trail between the Missouri River and Santa Fé upon which thousands of merchants would travel.

Each wagon train which struck down the Santa Fé Trail knew the journey's end and the basic route to get there. But there were many obstacles along the way which required flexibility, ingenuity, perseverance, courage, and, most of all, faith in a Divine Providence Who would lead them to their destination.

We will now note some of the highlights of three such expeditions and the exigencies its travelers encountered on the Road to Santa Fé.

III. Josiah Gregg: On the Trail in 1831

Each of the three expeditions we will highlight in our study will be in many ways completely different from the others. The trials one faces on such a journey—over 700 miles requiring over four months to traverse—are mostly dictated by circumstance. Too much rain, no rain; plenty of water, no water; herds of buffalo, no buffalo; plenty of food, no firewood; plenty of firewood, no food; Indian attacks, animal attacks; rivers to ford, deserts to cross; mountains to climb, gullies to avoid; quicksand and driftwood; rattlesnakes and horseflies; broken wagon wheels and injured men; endless acres of lush pasture grass, miles of bare, sandy prairie; oases to quench the burning throat, mirages to fool a thirsty man.

Each day presented a new set of exigencies which had to be dealt with and conquered. The ability to instantly orient and adjust became the most treasured skill. The flexibility to seek alternate solutions when projected plans went awry became the secret to survival. But no matter what, the pioneers pressed on toward their ultimate objective—arrival in Santa Fé with goods intact and profits to be earned in the Mexican markets. Many prospered from their tenacity and endurance under maximum pressure. Others didn't do so well. It all boiled down to the ability to facilitate the wheel-track into the path of least resistance.

Our first adventurer is Josiah Gregg. His book, *Commerce of the Prairies*, is considered the classic work on the trade and commerce of the Santa Fé Trail. I have picked out several excerpts from his book to highlight some of the principles we have learned from Bible doctrine.

Please remember, most of the people we will encounter are believers who chose to strike out on an adventure armed only with their intellect and a faith that God would protect and guide them if they would but use their wits and apply truth to experience. Let's see how well they did.

Gregg, Josiah. *Commerce of the Prairies*. Edited by Max L. Moorhead. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954, page 24:

The ordinary supplies for each man's consumption during the journey, are about fifty pounds of flour, as many more of bacon, ten of coffee and twenty of sugar, and a little salt.

The buffalo is chiefly depended upon for fresh meat, and great is the joy of the traveler when that noble animal first appears in sight.

The wagons most in use upon the Prairies are manufactured in Pittsburg; and are usually drawn by eight mules or the same number of oxen.

Oxen were found, to the surprise of the traders, to perform almost equal to mules. They possess many advantages, such as pulling heavier loads than the same number of mules, particularly through muddy or sandy places; but they generally fall off in strength as the prairie grass becomes drier and shorter, and often arrive at their destination in a most shocking plight.

The inferiority of oxen as regards endurance is partially owing to the tenderness of their feet; for there are very few among the thousands who have traveled on the Prairies that ever knew how to shoe them properly. Mules, for the most part, perform the entire trip without being shod at all.

Supplies being at length procured, and all necessary preliminaries systematically gone through, the trader begins the difficult task of loading his wagons. Those who understand their business, take every precaution so to stow away their packages that no jolting on the road can afterwards disturb the order in which they had been disposed. The ingenuity displayed on these occasions has frequently been such, that after a tedious journey of 800 miles, the goods have been found to have sustained much less injury than ... from the ordinary handling ... upon our western steam-boats.