

### The Great Prairie Highway

**T**he Santa Fe Trail stirs imaginations as few other historic trails can. For 60 years the Trail was one thread in a web of international trade routes. It influenced economies as far away as New York and London. Spanning 900 miles of the Great Plains between the United States (Missouri) and Mexico (Santa Fe), it brought together a cultural mosaic of individuals who cooperated—and at times clashed. In the process, the rich and varied cultures of Great

Plains Indian peoples caught in the middle were changed forever. Soldiers used the Trail during the 1840s border disputes between the Republic of Texas and Mexico, 1846–1848 Mexican-American War, and America's Civil War, and troops policed conflicts between traders and Indian tribes. With the traders and military freighters tramped a curious company of gold-seekers, emigrants, adventurers, mountain men, hunters, American Indians, guides, packers, translators,

invalids, reporters, and Mexican children bound for schools in *Los Estados Unidos* (the United States).

Spain jealously protected the borders of its New Mexico colony, prohibiting manufacturing and international trade. Missourians and others visiting Santa Fe told of an isolated provincial capital starved for manufactured goods and supplies—a potential gateway to Mexico's interior markets. In 1821 the Mexican people revolted against Spanish

rule. With independence, they unlocked the gates of trade, using the Santa Fe Trail as the key. Encouraged by Mexican officials, the Santa Fe trade boomed, strengthening and linking the economies of Missouri and Mexico's northern provinces. The close of the Civil War in 1865 released America's industrial energies, and the railroad pushed westward, gradually shortening and then replacing the Santa Fe Trail.

### S a n t a F e T r a i l T i m e l i n e

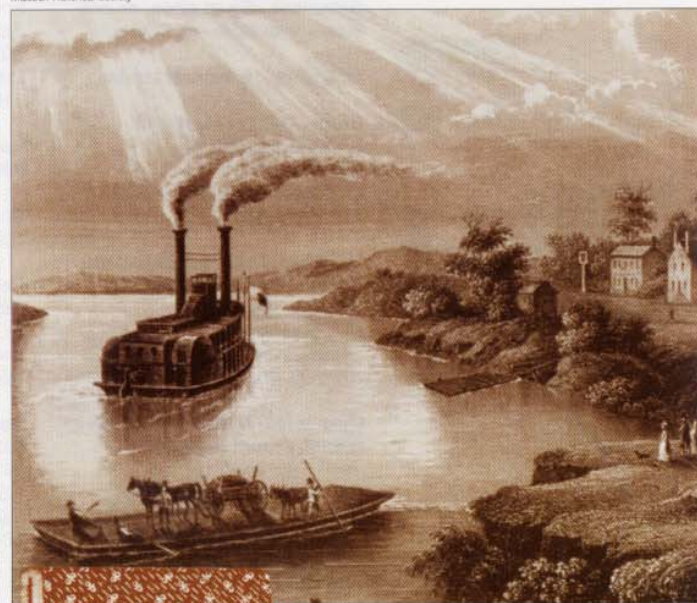
#### Pre-1540

American Indians establish trade and travel routes that later become part of Santa Fe Trail.

#### 1540-1541

Francisco Vázquez de Coronado explores from Mexico to Quivira (Kansas).

Missouri Historical Society



In 1821 the eastern Trail terminus was Franklin, Mo.; by 1832 Independence, Mo.; and by 1845, here at Westport Landing (now Kansas City, Mo.). Textiles (left) and hardware were traded west; silver and mules were traded east.



Smithsonian Institution

#### 1601

Juan de Oñate spends 5 months traveling with wagons and artillery through the Plains.

#### 1739

Paul and Peter Mallet make first French trading venture to Santa Fe from Illinois country.



Emily Fisher's Independence Hotel catered to Trail travelers.

William J. Curtis

"The road . . . contemplated will trespass upon the soil or infringe upon the jurisdiction of no state whatever. It runs a course and a distance to avoid all that; for it begins upon the outside line of the outside State [Missouri] and runs directly toward the setting sun, far away from all the States."

—Sen. Thomas Hart Benton, 1820





## Life on the Trail

**M**ovies and books often romanticize Santa Fe Trail treks as sagas of constant peril—violent prairie storms, fights with Indians, and thundering buffalo (bison) herds. However, a glimpse of buffalo, elk, antelope (pronghorn), or prairie dogs was sometimes the only break from the tedium of eight-week journeys. Trail travelers mostly experienced dust, mud, gnats and mosquitoes, and heat. Occasional swollen streams,

wildfires, strong winds, hailstorms, or blizzards could imperil wagon trains.

Trail hands scrambled at dawn in noise and confusion to round up, sort, and hitch up the animals. The wagons headed out, the air ringing with whoops and cries of "All's set!" and soon, "Catch up, catch up!" and "Stretch out!" Stopping at mid-morning, crews unhitched and grazed the teams, hauled water,

gathered wood or buffalo chips for fuel, and cooked and ate the day's main meal, created from a monotonous daily ration of one pound of flour, one pound or so of sowbelly (bacon), one ounce of coffee, two ounces of sugar, and a pinch of salt. Beans, dried apples, or buffalo or other game were occasional treats. Crews then repaired their wagons, yokes, and harnesses; greased wagon wheels; doctored animals; and hunted. They moved

on soon after noon, fording streams before that night's stop because overnight storms could turn trickling creeks into torrents. And stock that was cold in the harness first thing in the morning tended to be unruly. At day's end, crews took care of animals, made necessary repairs, chose night guards, and enjoyed a few hours of well-earned leisure and sleep.

**1792**

Frenchman Pedro Vial travels from Santa Fe to Saint Louis for Spanish government.

**1819**

Financial panic creates need for hard currency in Missouri Territory. Adams-Onís

Treaty between U.S. and Spain makes Arkansas River international boundary.

**1821**

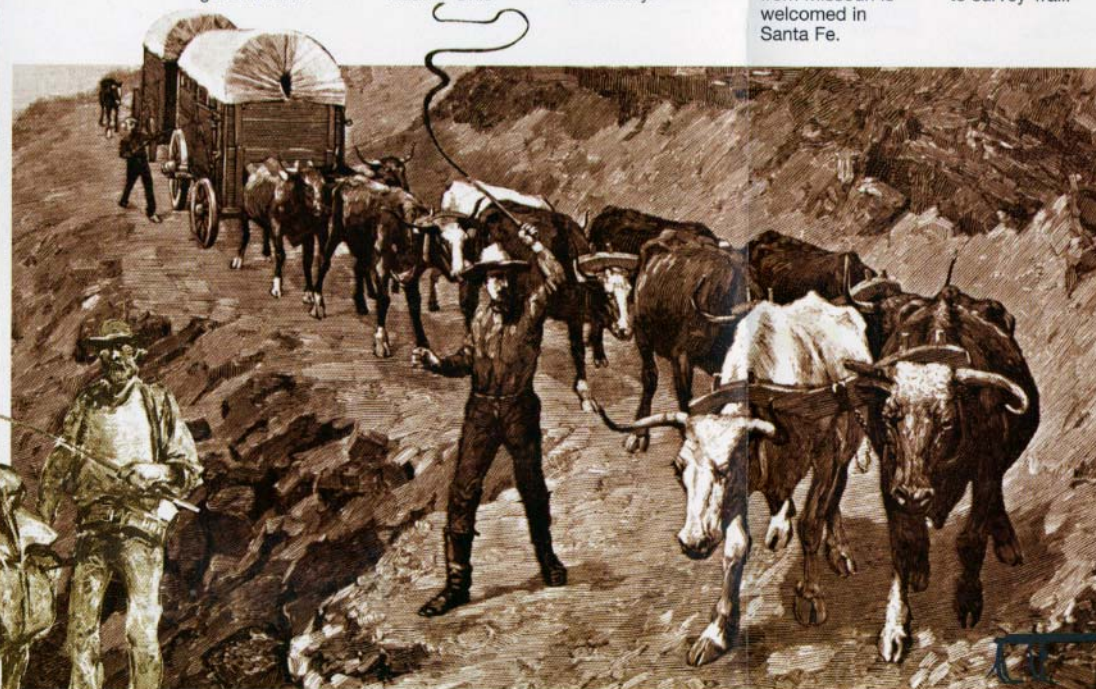
Mexico wins independence from Spain, and William Becknell's party from Missouri is welcomed in Santa Fe.

**1825**

Sen. Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri (right) arranges for U.S. Government to survey Trail.



Library of Congress



Mule and ox drivers made day-to-day Trail operations work. Mexican *arrieros* (muleteers) were famous for their abilities. Oxen became favored to pull freight wagons.

Denver Public Library Western History Department

"The whole distance from the settlements on the Missouri to the Mountains in the neighborhood of Santa Fe, is a prairie country, with no obstructions to the route. . . . A good wagon road can . . . be traced out, upon which a sufficient supply of fuel and water can be procured, at all seasons, except in winter."

— Alphonso Wetmore, 1824



Pittsburgh-made Conestoga wagons hauled two to three tons. Wagons were made in Missouri later.



## "The Vast Plain, Like a Green Ocean"

**W**estward from Missouri, forests—and then tall-grass prairie—give way to shortgrass prairie in Kansas. In western Kansas, roughly at the Hundredth Meridian, semi-arid conditions develop. For Trail travelers, venturing into the unknown void of the plains could hold the fear of hardship or the promise of adventure. Long days traveling through seemingly endless expanses of tall- and shortgrass prairie, with a few narrow ribbons of trees along the waterways, evoked vivid descriptions. "In spring, the vast plain

heaves and rolls around like a green ocean," wrote one early traveler. Another marveled at a mirage in which "horses and the riders upon them presented a remarkable picture, apparently extending into the air . . . 45 to 60 feet high. . . . At the same time I could see beautiful clear lakes of water with . . . bulrushes and other vegetation . . ." Other Trail travelers dreamed of cures for sickness from the "purity" of the plains.

Deceptively empty of human presence as the prairie landscape may

appear, the lands the Trail passed through were the long-held homelands of many American Indian peoples. Here were the hunting grounds of the Comanche, Kiowa, southern bands of Cheyenne and Arapaho, and Plains Apache, as well as the homelands of the Osage, Kansas (Kaw), Jicarilla Apache, Ute, and Pueblo. Most early encounters were peaceful negotiations centering on access to tribal lands and trade in horses, mules, and other items that Indians, Mexicans, and Americans coveted. As Trail traffic increased, so

did confrontations—resulting from misunderstandings and conflicting values—that disrupted traditional American Indian lifeways and Trail traffic. Mexican and American troops provided escorts for wagon trains. Growing numbers of Trail travelers and settlers moved west, bringing the railroad with them. As lands were parceled out and buffalo were hunted nearly to extinction, Indian peoples were pushed aside or assigned to reservations.



**1833–1834**  
The Bent brothers, Charles (*left*) and William, and Cerán St. Vrain build Bent's Fort.

Museum of New Mexico

**1836**  
Texas wins independence from Mexico.

**1844**  
Trader Josiah Gregg chronicles his trips over the Trail in *Commerce of the Prairies*.

Traders Bernard Seligman, Zadoc Staab, and Lehman Spiegelberg with unnamed Kiowa scouts.

Museum of New Mexico

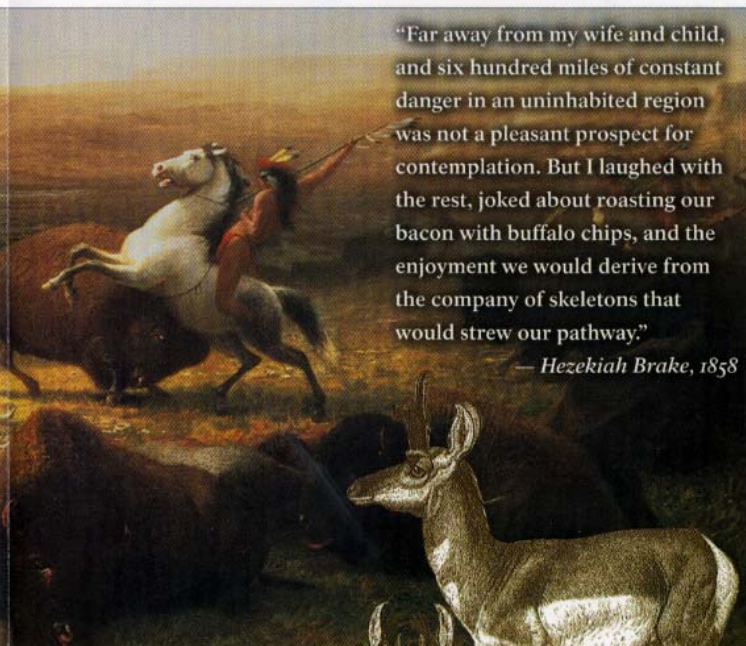


**1846**  
U.S. invades Mexico.



The Trail crossed prairies and semi-arid lands. Travelers might see fleet antelope (*right*). Buffalo were driven close to extinction in the 1870s.

Some American Indian groups resisted encroachment by Euro-Americans on their lands and resources.



"Far away from my wife and child, and six hundred miles of constant danger in an uninhabited region was not a pleasant prospect for contemplation. But I laughed with the rest, joked about roasting our bacon with buffalo chips, and the enjoyment we would derive from the company of skeletons that would strew our pathway."

— Hezekiah Brake, 1858

Buffalo Bill Historical Center



National Geographic Society



# Soldiers and Forts

**S**uspicion and tension between the United States and Mexico accelerated in the 1840s, because Americans wanted territorial expansion. Texans raided into New Mexico, and the United States annexed Texas. The Mexican-American War erupted in 1846. Gen. Stephen Watts Kearny led his Army of the West down the Santa Fe Trail to take and hold New Mexico and Upper California and to protect American traders on the Trail. He marched unchallenged into Santa

Fe, and, although communities such as Taos and Mora fought back, American control prevailed. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the war in 1848.

The Santa Fe Trail became the lifeline for protection and communication between Missouri and Santa Fe. From a succession of military forts such as Mann (1847), Atkinson (1850), Union (1851), Larned (1859), and Lyon (1860), the army tried to control conflicts between

American Indians and Trail travelers. As the military presence grew, freighting and merchant operations burgeoned. In 1858 many of the 1,800 wagons traveling the Santa Fe Trail carried military supplies.

In 1862 the Civil War arrived in the West. Confederates from Texas pushed up the Rio Grande Valley into New Mexico, intent on seizing the territory and Fort Union, and ultimately the rich Colorado gold fields. Albuquerque and Santa Fe

fell. But the tide turned at Glorieta Pass, New Mexico, on the Santa Fe Trail, in a decisive western battle of the Civil War. Union forces secured victory when they torched the nearby Confederate supply train. The Confederates abandoned hope of reaching Fort Union—and of keeping their foothold in New Mexico. The Union Army held the Southwest and its vital Santa Fe Trail supply line.

**1848**

War ends. United States acquires almost half of Mexico's lands (including New Mexico) in the



Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (left).

National Archives

**1849–1852**

California Gold Rush increases Trail traffic.



Van Pelt Photography

**1851**

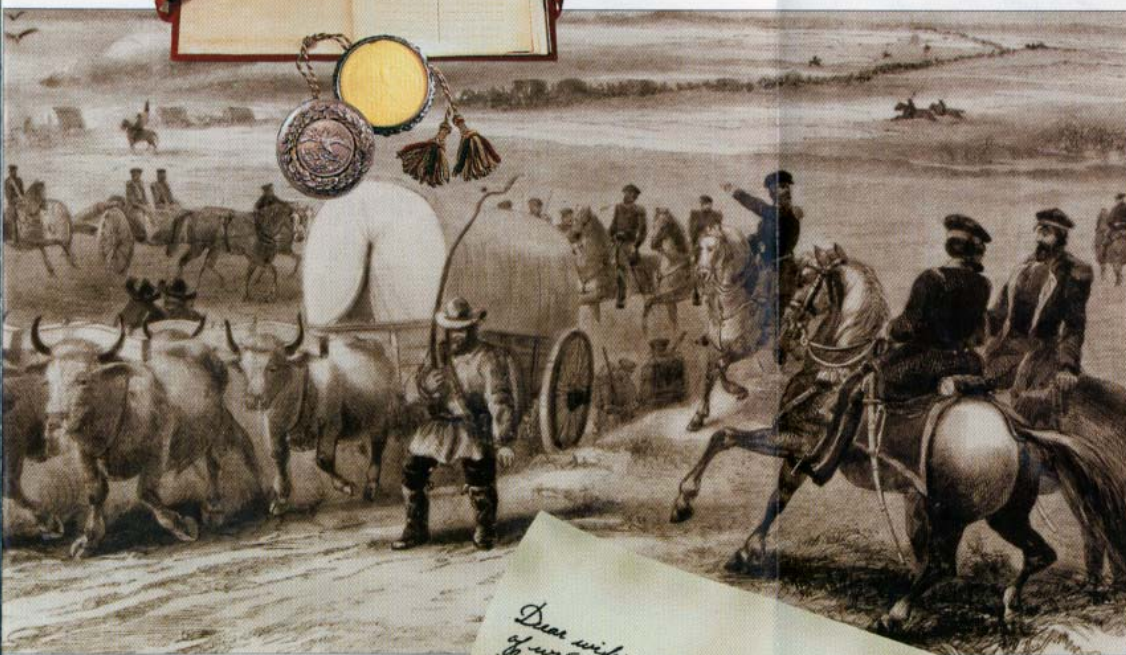
Fort Union is established to help protect Trail commerce.

**1861–1865**

U.S. Civil War. 1862 battle at Glorieta Pass holds Southwest for the Union.

**1869**

Trail grows shorter as railroads push westward.



After the Mexican-American and Civil wars, military freighting grew, to support forts built along the route. This soldier's letter (right) from Fort Larned talks about his health, Indians, and how much he wants to get back to the farm.

Dear wife: I greatly improve the opportunity of writing to you. I am as well as usual. I was rather poorly yesterday forenoon with symptoms of diabetes, probably from eating too much of diabetes, probably from eating, drinking coffee 8-10 (afternoon) about 11 o'clock. I stopped we are

In camp Ft. Larned  
July 30<sup>th</sup> 1864

"But the rejoicing at home . . . the feasts and the bails [dances]—not to mention the wine made in their absence and saved for the occasion—was a rich compensation . . . for the hardships that were now in the dead past."

— José Librado Gurulé, 1867





# Commerce of the Prairies

**T**he story of the Santa Fe Trail is a story of business—international, national, and local. In 1821 William Becknell, bankrupt and facing jail for debts, packed goods to Santa Fe. Capt. Don Pedro Ignacio Gallego and more than 400 troops met Becknell and five others from Missouri on November 13 outside Las Vegas, N. Mex. The Americans were welcomed and encouraged to trade. Entrepreneurs and experienced business people followed—James Webb, Antonio José Chávez, Charles Beaubien, David Waldo, and others.

The Santa Fe Trade developed into a complex web of international business, social ties, tariffs, and laws. Missouri and New Mexico merchants had connections with New York, London, and Paris.

Traders exploited social and legal systems to facilitate business. Partnerships, such as Goldstein, Bean, Peacock & Armijo, formed and dissolved. David Waldo “converted” to Catholicism—and also became a Mexican citizen. Dr. Eugene Leitensdorfer, of Missouri, married Soledad Abreu, daughter of a former New Mexico governor.

Trader Manuel Alvarez claimed citizenship in Spain, the United States, and Mexico.

After the Mexican-American War, Trail trade and military freighting boomed. Firms such as Russell, Majors and Waddell, and Otero and Sellar obtained and subcontracted lucrative government contracts. Others operated mail and stage-coach services.

Trade created other opportunities. From New York, Manuel Harmony shipped English goods to Independence for freighting over the Santa

Fe Trail. New Mexican saloon-owner Doña Gertrudis “La Tules” Barceló invested in trade, and trader Charles Ilfeld ran mercantile stores. Wyandotte Chief William Walker leased a warehouse in Independence, and his tribe invested in the trade. Hiram Young bought his freedom from slavery and became a wealthy maker of trade wagons—and one of the largest employers in Independence. Blacksmiths, hotel owners, *arrieros* (muleteers), lawyers, and many others also found their places along the Trail. Trade flourished.

**1878**  
Railroad reaches  
Ratón Pass on the  
Mountain Route.



**1880**  
Railroad reaches  
Santa Fe; Santa  
Fe Trail slips into  
history.

**1906**  
The Daughters of  
the American Rev-  
olution begins  
erecting Trail  
markers.

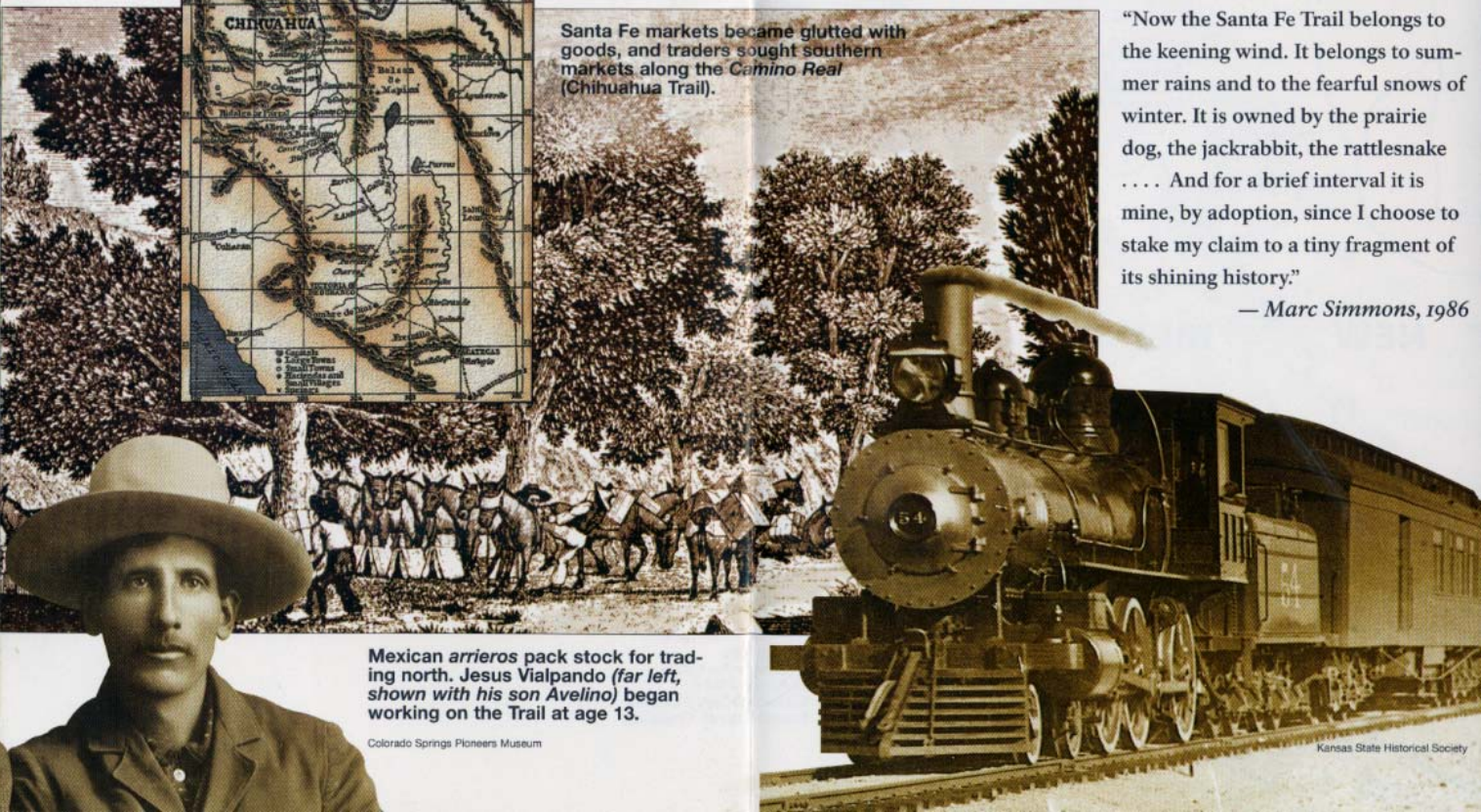
**1986**  
Santa Fe Trail  
Association forms  
to help preserve  
and promote  
awareness and  
appreciation of  
Trail.

**1987**  
Congress desig-  
nates Santa Fe  
National Historic  
Trail under the  
National Trails  
System Act.

Santa Fe markets became glutted with goods, and traders sought southern markets along the *Camino Real* (Chihuahua Trail).

“Now the Santa Fe Trail belongs to the keening wind. It belongs to summer rains and to the fearful snows of winter. It is owned by the prairie dog, the jackrabbit, the rattlesnake . . . . And for a brief interval it is mine, by adoption, since I choose to stake my claim to a tiny fragment of its shining history.”

— Marc Simmons, 1986



Mexican *arrieros* pack stock for trading north. Jesus Vialpando (far left, shown with his son Avelino) began working on the Trail at age 13.

Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum

Kansas State Historical Society