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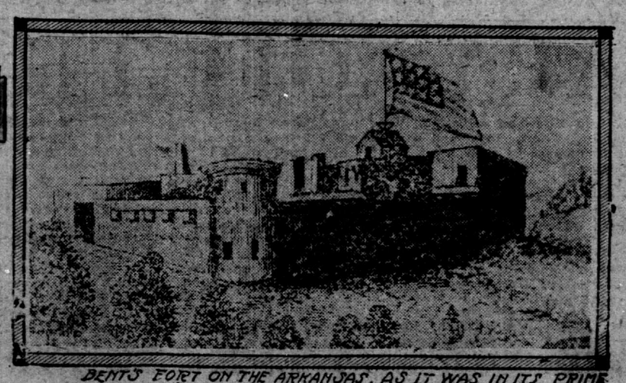
The CENTENARY of the SANTA FE TRAIL

THE "FONDA" AT SANTA FE TERMINUS OF THE OLD SANTA FE TRAIL

KIT CARSON'S GRAVE AT TAOS, NEW MEXICO



BENT'S FORT ON THE ARKANSAS, AS IT WAS IN ITS PRIME

By John L. Cowan

DURING the present year Rocky Ford, the famous "melon city" of Colorado, plans an appropriate celebration of the centenary of the inauguration of traffic over the Santa Fe trail. Just 100 years ago Robert McKnight, Samuel Chambers and James Baird, with a few companions, set out from the Missouri river for Santa Fe, hoping to find an easy road to fortune by opening up trade with the Mexicans. Pike's report on the wealth of the country and the opportunities open to American traders had been published in 1810; and Hidalgo's revolt in the same year gave promise that the period of Spain's rule, with the prohibitory tariffs enforced by that country, was about to be ended. The time appeared auspicious for the establishment of a new trade route with a region that was more favorably situated for doing business with St. Louis than with the marts in Mexico.

However, Hidalgo was captured and executed, and the Spaniards were (perhaps not without reason) suspicious of the designs of the American government. So McKnight and his associates were seized as spies, their goods were confiscated, and they were thrown into prison. Not until Mexican independence was achieved in 1821 by Iturbide were they released.

Years before the McKnight, Chambers and Baird expedition an attempt had been made to open up trade between the United States and the Mexican territory of which Santa Fe was the chief city. In 1804 William Morrison of Kaskaskia, Ill., sent a French creole named Baptiste Lalande to Santa Fe with a small stock of goods. Lalande reached Santa Fe in safety, disposed of the goods at a profit, and liked the country so well that he decided to stay, keeping his employer's money. Two years later Captain Zebulon M. Pike set forth on his famous expedition, designed to reconcile the differences of several Indian tribes and to explore the Arkansas and Red rivers. Whether Pike strayed into Spanish territory by accident or design need not here be debated; but he did not stop until he reached the Rio Grande, which he said he thought was the Red river. He camped for some time near the present location of Alamosa in southern Colorado. There, on February 26, 1807, Lieutenant Salcedo demanded his surrender for his invasion of Spanish territory. He was first conducted to Santa Fe and thence to Chihuahua, where he was questioned by the military authorities. Then he was liberated, but was conducted out of the country through Texas to United States soil in Louisiana.

Before Pike's expedition little was known of distances, directions, opportunities or obstacles in the great but undefined region vaguely called "Kanzas" and in the possessions of Spain that lay beyond. Pike mapped the way from the great bend of the Arkansas to the Rocky mountains and thence to Chihuahua, blazing the trail for the pioneers.

But it had always been Spain's policy to monopolize the trade of its colonies, and most Americans realized that profitable trade with Santa Fe was out of the question so long as Mexico remained a possession of Spain. The hope that Hidalgo's revolt would prove successful lured the adventurers of 1812 to disaster, as has already been told. Three years later Auguste P. Choteau and Julius de Mun of St. Louis, with a number of companions, tempted fate in the same manner. They were arrested and tried by court martial at Santa Fe, and their goods, valued at $30,000, were confiscated. Then each of them was given a horse and they were told to get out of the country. They lost no time in obeying the command and reached St. Louis safely.

This ended all efforts to establish overland trade with Mexico until after the success of Iturbide's revolution became assured. In 1821 several parties of traders set out from different points on the Missouri, led by William Becknell, Baxton Cooper, Jacob Fowler and Hugh Glen. None of these carried large stocks of goods, but the merchandise they did take was disposed of at a profit, and the year 1821 is memorable in the annals of the Santa Fe trail as witnessing the first successful trading expeditions ever conducted over it by Americans.

The next year Becknell made another trip, taking with him three wagons, these being the first wheeled vehicles to traverse the trail. Becknell's success and the accounts he gave of the prizes that awaited the enterprising led many others to undertake the same journey, and the traffic to Santa Fe soon attained notable proportions. Thus was inaugurated the "commerce of the prairies." The journey was short in comparison with that over the great trade route of South America from Lima, the chief seat of Spanish power on that continent, across the Andes and over the Bolivian plateau to Buenos Aires. It was short in comparison with that over the Oregon trail, which was to become a commonplace of later years; but it was by far the longest, most difficult and most hazardous overland commercial journey that the American people had up to that time undertaken. For long distances the trail passed over treeless plains, with stretches of waterless deserts, with blinding snowstorms and terrifying cyclones. In 1828 Samuel McNees and Daniel Munro were killed by a party of Pawnees, and for 40 years thereafter the Pawnees, Comanches, Apaches and Arapahoes lost no opportunity to plunder, harass, kill and scalp traders and travelers over the road to Santa Fe. In 1849 the white bandit, or road agent, made his appearance, and from that time forward constituted a danger as real as the Indians themselves.

Trade routes, like trade centers, are located and determined by nature rather than by the arbitrary caprice of man. The fact that wagons traversed the Santa Fe trail without preliminary road making almost from the beginning of its usefulness indicates that it was truly a natural highway. It was the road that nature built from the great plains to the great plateau. Today it is followed by the world's great railroad system. A half century ago it was traversed by great caravans of clumsy wagons drawn by oxen, mules and horses, carrying merchandise to the value of from $5,000,000 to $8,000,000 annually. More than three and a half centuries ago it was followed

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