Chapter 2

The Santa Fe Trail

The Santa Fe Trail was pioneered by mountain men and explorers working their way southwestward during the early 1800s. By the 1840s it had become a major trade route between the United States and New Mexico. Although it is called the Santa Fe Trail in literature and folklore, it was really a well-traveled road for heavy-duty freight wagons. The route originally began in Franklin, Missouri, but after that town was nearly destroyed by a disastrous flood on the Missouri River, Independence became the eastern terminus, until it, too, suffered the ravages of the capricious Missouri River and had to yield its place to Westport (Kansas City). The route ran 780 miles in a southwestward direction through Kansas by way of modern-day Olathe, Gardner, Council Grove, Diamond Springs, Durham, and to the Great Bend of the Arkansas River. It followed the Arkansas River to a point near today’s Cimarron, Kansas, where it divided into two branches, the Mountain Branch and the Cimarron Cutoff.

The Mountain Branch followed the Arkansas River westward to Bent’s Old Fort, near present La Junta, Colorado, and from there it turned southwest and passed through Trinidad, Colorado. It entered New Mexico over 7,834-foot Raton Pass, then continued down through Northern New Mexico by way of Fort Union to another La Junta (now called Watrous) near Las Vegas, New Mexico, where the two branches of the trail joined.¹ The Mountain Branch had the advantage of splendid scenery, and in most places there were plenty of wood, water, and grass. It was safer than the Cimarron Cutoff, although not totally immune from Indian attack. Its chief disadvantages were that it went over high mountains, making travel more difficult, and in winter it was closed to wagon traffic because of heavy snow.
The Cimarron Cutoff, as the name implies, was developed as a shortcut; it saved the traveler about one hundred miles. This route did not cross any high mountain ranges, thus making it easier for wagons. It could also be traveled by wheeled vehicles in winter. However, this branch did have some disadvantages: Between the Arkansas and the Cimarron Rivers lay the Cimarron Desert, a stretch of waterless wasteland more than fifty miles across called the Water Scrape by the Americans and La Jornada del Muerte by the Mexicans. Another disadvantage was that it went through territory inhabited or frequented by the fierce Comanche and Kiowa Indians. It was while traveling this route in 1832 that the famed mountain man and explorer, Jedediah Smith, was ambushed and murdered by Comanche Indians. But in spite of its aridity and the danger from Indians, most travelers preferred this branch of the Santa Fe Trail. This was the route chosen by the Rose-Baley wagon train.

After crossing the Missouri River at Westport, the Rose company came to the trailhead of the Santa Fe Trail and started their journey down this fabled route. The Santa Fe and the Oregon-California Trails ran together for the first thirty or so miles from Westport before separating. As the emigrants advanced westward, civilization fell behind. The countryside gradually began to change. The landscape became more arid and farmland was replaced by open prairie. Kansas was still sparsely settled in 1858, with most of its population living in the eastern part of the state near the Kansas-Missouri border.

Soon the emigrants came to land inhabited by the Osage Indians, but the emigrants felt no fear as this tribe had long been subjugated and posed no threat. The same could not be said of some of the Whites in the area. The border warfare between proslavery and antislavery factions had brought a special breed of ruffians to the territory; murders and robberies were everyday occurrences, and no one’s life was safe. Bands of cattle rustlers and horse thieves roamed the countryside looking for victims, and if they happened upon a small, weakly armed outfit, they would not hesitate to kill anyone who offered resistance. On several occasions suspicious-looking characters rode into the Rose camp, but after observing the large group of well-armed young men, they soon rode off in search of easier prey.²

Because of the Mormon War, the Baley company also chose to travel to California by way of the Santa Fe Trail and the Southern
They crossed the Missouri River by steamboat at St. Joseph, Missouri, because it was nearer to their homes in Nodaway County than was Westport. After crossing the Missouri River and entering the Kansas Territory, they followed one of several feeder trails that connected with both the Oregon–California Trail and the Santa Fe Trail. This road took them through Topeka, soon to become the capital of Kansas Territory. They struck the Santa Fe Trail at Council Grove, which in 1858 was the last place where goods and services could be procured before reaching Santa Fe, New Mexico. They laid over here a couple of days to replenish their supplies and make final checks to their equipment before plunging forward on the long journey ahead.

The two companies, the Roses and the Baleys, met on the evening of May 12, 1858, at Cottonwood Creek near present-day Durham, Kansas. Udell describes the meeting:

We came seven miles to Cottonwood Creek, and camped, to dry our provisions and clothing, it being a pleasant day. At night a large train from Nodaway County, Mo., called the Bailey [Baley] train, came near us and camped. Messrs. Bailey and Messrs. Hedgespeth [Hedgpeth] were the owners. They were also bound for California. Grass, wood and water plenty here, and a good road. Travel today, 7 miles, and 178 from Missouri River.

The two groups apparently found each other compatible and agreed to travel together to California. From this point to the Colorado River, they can properly be called the Rose-Baley wagon train. However, the two groups never formally merged, each retaining its separate identity. They kept their livestock (which were unbranded) separate and camped separately but near each other. They realized they would soon be entering country inhabited by unfriendly Indians, and they knew there was strength in traveling in large groups. Indians seldom attacked large well-armed trains, but were quick to pick off stragglers or small groups. Udell reported, “Since Messrs. Bailey [Baley] came up with us, we number forty men and fifty or sixty women and children, and nearly 500 head of cattle, mostly cows and oxen, and twenty wagons.”

Each night in his journal Udell recorded the location of the campsite, the weather, road conditions, the availability of wood, grass,
and water, the number of miles traveled that day, and the distance of the campsite from the Missouri River. One might wonder if he had an odometer or some other type of measuring device for this purpose, but he tells us that his calculations were made by using a simple procedure utilizing time and gait.\(^5\) He kept track of the time traveled and was able to estimate from the gait of the oxen the distance covered in one hour. Multiplying this by the number of hours traveled gave the distance covered that day; the sum of the miles traveled each day gave the approximate distance from the Missouri River, measured from their crossing at Westport. This method is something like dead reckoning used by sailors at sea in estimating their location. Udell's estimates of distances were surprisingly accurate for such a primitive method of measurement.

Soon the wagon train was in buffalo country; in 1858, buffalo still ranged over the western prairie in great numbers. Most members of the wagon train, having never seen these shaggy beasts before, were thrilled by the prospect of a buffalo hunt and fresh meat cooking on the campfire. Joel Hedgpeth Jr. tells about one such hunt which took place during the journey:

One hunt I well remember and will not forget. That hunt was on Sunday. We did not usually travel on. Sundays but that day it seemed necessary to travel part of the day at least to find a suitable camping place. Father had somewhat sharply—but wisely—chided the boys for recklessly running the horses. That day he chose to ride horseback and the animal he rode was my saddle horse; we called him Pioneer. During the travel that day someone found a buffalo and started in pursuit. Father joined in the chase and succeeded—on Pioneer—in getting near enough to the buffalo to deliver several telling shots with his pistol. The buffalo was killed and part of it brought into camp. When father rode up I heard Mother say to him very quietly and pleasantly, “Didn’t you know this is Sunday?” Father threw up his hands—almost in horror—and explained, “Well, I forgot all about it being Sunday.” And I’m sure this he never forgot until he joined the great Sabbath Anthem on High.\(^6\)

It was on this part of the journey that Thomas Hedgpeth caught a buffalo calf. The calf was adopted by a cow that had lost her calf; it remained with the family until it was killed by Indians near the end of
the journey. Quantities of buffalo meat were dried and made into jerky or carne seca as the Mexicans called it. Unfortunately, much meat was wasted and many animals unnecessarily killed. Udell described one such incident: “We Came twenty-two miles and camped on a small creek, twelve miles from Big Turkey Creek. Plenty of grass and water, but no wood. Immense numbers of buffalo. Our young men shot them down for sport and left them for the buzzards and wolves . . .” Apparently, the young men of this emigrant train, succumbed to the pleasures of the hunt and let excitement and emotion overrule their good judgment.

The road through this part of Kansas, having been traveled for some years, was reasonably good except when there had been heavy rain. Then, the ground would become a quagmire causing the wagon wheels to sink deep into the wet soil, making it difficult for the poor oxen to pull the wagons. Rain also caused rivers and creeks to become swollen and difficult to ford. Few bridges had been built on this part of the road, and since most of the streams were small and shallow, no ferries were in operation. Streams with steep banks were especially difficult to cross in wet weather because the animals could not get traction on the slippery slopes. Udell complained, “We had much wind and rain all the way from home.” Rain might have made travel more difficult but it was great for grass and water. As they traveled across the prairie, wood began to become scarce. When they came to a good supply they would gather up as much as they could haul in their wagons, and when wood was not available, they were sometimes able to substitute buffalo chips. Whenever they came to a place where grass, water, and wood were in plentiful supply, they frequently laid by for a day or so to give the women a chance to get caught up on their washing and baking and to give the men a chance to do some hunting or make repairs to their wagons.

Scouts were sent ahead to look for danger and to find suitable campsites. When camp was established, the work teams would be unhitched and turned out to graze with the loose stock, unless there was perceived to be a danger from rustlers or Indians, in which case they would be kept tied to the feed boxes on the wagons. At night, mounted guards were posted along the perimeters to keep the stock from being stolen or wandering off. After the evening meal was eaten
and the dishes washed and put away, many emigrant parties would gather around the campfire for some music, singing, or storytelling. Several members of this wagon train had brought along violins, guitars, harmonicas, and jews’ harps. Emigrant trains would sometimes hold impromptu dances around the blazing campfire, but given the strict religious background of some of the members of this group, it is doubtful that much dancing took place.

In spite of wet weather the wagon train made good time in traveling across the flat prairie lands of Kansas Territory. One day Udell recorded a distance of thirty miles traveled, and on several other occasions he recorded distances of twenty-two, twenty-four and twenty-six miles.

They arrived at the Great Bend of the Arkansas River on May 17, where they camped for the night. The trail did not cross the river at this point, but veered west from the river and crossed Walnut Creek near a large sandstone pinnacle known as Pawnee Rock. Travelers frequently stopped here and recorded their names on the soft rock. The members of the Rose-Baley wagon train apparently resisted this temptation, for according to Udell, they passed this spot on May 18 but did not stop. Even if they had carved their names on Pawnee Rock, the inscriptions would probably not be there today because in later years it was heavily quarried for its rock and gravel. The day they passed Pawnee Rock was also the day that the wagon train traveled a record distance of thirty miles. Perhaps speed was more important to the travelers than vanity, or at least it was that day.

The wagon train crossed the Arkansas River on May 24, 1858, at Middle Crossing. Udell described the river at this point as a swift-running stream about one-half mile in width, but only three feet deep. Some difficulty was encountered in fording the river due to the swiftness of the current, and quicksand on the bottom, but all crossed safely. Quicksand was a problem not only on the Arkansas River, but on many other Western streams. Experienced travelers developed a strategy for dealing with this menace. First, they would drive the loose stock across the stream, the large number of hoofs striking the bottom in rapid succession would tramp the quicksand under and firm the bottom. Then the wagons could be driven across with relative ease. Alpha Brown, Udell, and others, must have been well aware of this trick.
Near the Arkansas River, the wagon train came upon a small village of about one hundred Indians. At first the emigrants were somewhat alarmed, but when the Indians exhibited no hostility, tensions eased. This is the only Indian encounter on the Santa Fe that Udell mentions in his journal. No doubt Indians kept the wagon train under observation, but seeing that it was large and well-armed, they did not molest it. Indians continued to menace the Santa Fe Trail until long after the Civil War.

On May 26, they traveled eighteen miles and camped at Sand Creek. Udell reported, “No running water, but it remains in holes, as yet. No wood, but good grass and good road. Weather pleasant.” And on May 27 he wrote, “We came ten miles to Semanone Creek [probably the Cimarron River], which we reached at 12:00 o’clock noon, and camped to rest until morning. The water brackish, with saltpetre. Grass plenty, but no wood. We have brought enough wood from Pawnee Fork to last us more than one hundred miles; but we have now to burn buffalo-chips.”

They frequently met large trains from New Mexico going to Missouri or to other places in the United States. Udell described one such encounter, “Yesterday we met a train of Government officers with their families, going from their stations in New Mexico to visit their connections in the States. They travel in fine style, with their servants to attend them in this wild and savage country.” After reaching the Cimarron River, the wagon train was out of the worst part of the Cimarron Desert. This river is dry most of the year, but water can usually be found by digging in the dry stream bed. Since the spring of 1858 was unusually wet, they were able to find water in pools and ponds, although of poor quality, as Udell describes. The road followed the Cimarron River for some distance into what is now Panhandle Oklahoma before reaching the New Mexico border.

In his May 30 journal entry, Udell complains that Tamerlane Davis, one of his hired men, had changed places with Paul Williamson, one of Mr. Brown’s hands, “Not with my consent, but I hope it may be for the better.” Could it be that the young hired hand was finding the Baptist minister a little difficult to get along with?

The wagon train crossed into the New Mexico Territory on June 1. The scenery began to change as they slowly gained elevation; the
ascent was gradual with no steep hills to be climbed. They were now entering the high desert. The higher elevation brought with it a change of both scenery and climate. The hills were wooded with pine, oak, and cedar, and in the canyons flowed rushing streams with water, pure and clear. The days were warm but the nights were cool and refreshing. These changes were most welcome after viewing nothing for weeks but the flat and endless prairie. Even Udell seemed to have switched into a more optimistic mood, for on June 3, he recorded, “Our large company continues harmonious and healthy, for which I am thankful to the Lord. Travel today, 22 miles, and 549 from Missouri River.”

They laid over at Rabbit-Ear Creek on June 4 to get caught up on their domestic chores, “A busy day with us,” Udell recorded. The next day they came eleven miles to Rabbit Creek where they found abundant grass and water; they traveled another nine miles and camped at the foot of a mountain, but without wood or water. “The country begins to assume a mountainous appearance,” Udell reported, “we passed several [mountains] to-day.” On June 6, they crossed Rock Creek and camped that night at Whetstone Creek. Udell stated that they traveled twelve miles over a good road between low mountains and came to the “Red River,” which they crossed at 10 a.m. on June 8. He apparently confused the Red River with the Canadian River, because the Red River flows many miles to the southeast of this location. Udell may be forgiven for occasional errors in place names because many of the rivers, streams, and other geographic features in the West had not yet been officially named, nor were there road signs or location markers conveniently placed along the route to inform travelers as is the case today.

After crossing the Canadian River on the morning of June 8, the emigrants decided to camp and take it easy for the remainder of the day. Udell took advantage of the layover to do some hunting. “I, with my horse, ran down and caught a young antelope, and we had excellent fresh meat for supper. The Rocky Mountains, snow capped, are in sight. Travel to-day, 12 miles and 621 from Missouri River.”

The next day they traveled twenty miles and camped near Wagon Wheel Rock [probably Wagon Mound]. “Here we camped; good road and grass all the way, but no wood; some of us went three miles off and brought wood into camp—some on horses and some
carried it on their shoulders; now distant 641 miles [sic] from Missouri River.” On June 11, they arrived at Water’s Ranch, home of the first white settler whom they had encountered since leaving eastern Kansas. “He is quite an intelligent, persevering man, from Vermont,” Udell writes. “His ranch is situated on Moho [Moro] Creek, a considerable tributary of Red River [Canadian River]. Fort Union is situated six miles above; it is quite a large military post. We came two miles farther and camped on the creek; 671 miles from Missouri River.”

Udell does not mention visiting the fort, but it must have been a comforting feeling to be traveling in the vicinity of a large military installation staffed by fellow Americans. Fort Union was established in 1851 to replace Santa Fe as military department headquarters for the New Mexico Territory, because Santa Fe at that time was regarded as a pit of vice and immorality, and unfit for soldiers.

The emigrants now entered a more attractive countryside that showed definite signs of civilization. Farmers in the area, mostly Mexican, tended small plots irrigated with water that they were able to obtain from canyons and small streams. They grew small patches of corn, grain, vegetables, and a few fruit trees. This might have been the first time that many members of this wagon train had ever seen irrigated fields. The farmhouses were flat-roofed adobe brick structures and usually festooned with garlands of red chile peppers and garlic. There also were some large sheep and cattle ranches in the area.

Soon they arrived at the settlement of Las Vegas, New Mexico, which Udell called “Los Bayas.” Las Vegas was a small village at the time, inhabited mostly by Mexicans. Its buildings were all constructed of adobe brick, but to the weary emigrants it must have appeared as a metropolis built of alabaster and marble. In town, Udell wrote, was a large general store, a blacksmith shop, a flour mill, a Catholic Church, several saloons, and other small businesses. Near Las Vegas was the famous Montezuma Hot Springs. Many of the emigrants took advantage of its hot mineral water and had their first tub bath in weeks. If Udell was one of the bathers, he doesn’t mention it in his journal, but then, a Baptist minister wouldn’t be expected to comment on pleasures of the flesh!

After a short stay in Las Vegas the wagon train continued its westward journey. About three miles south of town the road forked; one fork went to Santa Fe while the other went toward Albuquerque. “From
wrong information, we took the Santa Fe road, which we afterwards learned was much further and a worse road,” Udell complained. “The numerous herds of sheep, goats, and jackasses have eaten out the grass through here, so that our stock are pinched with hunger.” On June 16, they camped in the vicinity of the well-known Pigeon Ranch, near Glorieta Pass, where just four years later a Civil War battle would be fought. His entry for June 17 stated: “At Rock Correll [Corral] we left the Santa Fe Road, twelve miles South of Santa Fe; we took the left-hand road, down through a ravine, past a spring, leading on to Albuquerque; came six miles and camped; no water; plenty of wood; little grass. . .” Udell says nothing about going into Santa Fe. The fame of Santa Fe was known far and wide; it seems incredible that they would come this far and this close to such a celebrated place without paying it a visit. It was by far the largest town that they came to on their journey to California.

L. J. Rose Jr., in his biography of his father, stated that the Rose company did go into Santa Fe and make some purchases of clothing and other articles. He wrote, “One can readily believe that the women fairly reveled in a shopping expedition, the first in three months.” Apparently the wagon train made a temporary split at this point, the shoppers going into Santa Fe, while those not interested in shopping continued on toward Albuquerque. As they were now in relatively safe country, there was no compelling reason for them to stay together; they would reunite before continuing to California. Udell mentions a shortage of grass and water near the settlements, and since they were driving a large herd of cattle, this would be another reason to separate. It is unknown whether any members of the Baley company went into Santa Fe. We know that Rose was very favorably impressed by what he observed in Santa Fe because he later returned there and purchased a hotel.

Why wouldn’t Udell and possibly some of the others want to go into Santa Fe after such a long and arduous journey? The reasons are probably the personalities of the individuals involved and the conditions that existed in the place at that time. Santa Fe had the reputation of being a wide-open town; saloons, fandango halls (dance halls), prostitutes, and gambling dens were everywhere. Desperados roamed the streets looking for victims, and gun fights and stabbings were daily occurrences. This might have been the reason that Udell and possibly others avoided the town.