

## **Santa Fe Trail**

Excerpt from The Santa Fe Trail by R. L. Duffus

ISBN: 987-0-8263-0235-9

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together keep Americans out of New Mexico during the next few years. There was probably a good deal more trapping by Americans on Spanish soil than was ever set down in print, and some printed references do indicate that a few trappers reached Santa Fe. Thus the St. Louis *Inquirer*, in September 1822, observed that "it is becoming a familiar operation for our citizens to visit" New Mexico. Seemingly the phrase refers to a period of some duration and not merely to the expeditions of 1821 and 1822, to which we shall shortly come. The western fur traders and Indian traders were not easily daunted, nor did they pay over-much attention to international boundaries. And they had a hearty contempt for Mexicans, except in overwhelming force. It was a contempt often mingled with friendliness, but the friendliness was the lordly gesture of a haughty race toward one which it considered inferior.

A few definite accounts of Anglo-Saxons in New Mexico between 1812 and 1821 we do have. In 1814, after McKnight and his associates had been brutally laid by the heels, Joseph Philibert went with a party to hunt on the upper Arkansas. Next year he returned alone to St. Louis for supplies. He was delayed in getting back, and his men, after waiting for him for a time at the appointed rendezvous, were driven by hunger to throw themselves on the mercy of the Spaniards at Taos.

Meanwhile Philibert, having collected the goods and horses he needed, fell in with Jules De Mun and Auguste Pierre Chouteau, who were organizing a fur-hunting expedition, and agreed to join forces with them. Chouteau was a member of the great fur-trading family of St. Louis. The combined party made the journey safely to Huerfano Creek, where Philibert had his rendezvous, and there learned from some Indians that the missing

trappers were at Taos. De Mun was sent to find them. His letter to Governor William Clark, in which these events are related, makes no mention of any difficulty in getting over the mountains. It was not geography that worried the trappers at that moment, it was politics. Happily there had been a change of governor since the imprisonment of the McKnight party, and De Mun met with a pleasant reception.

“I arrived at Taos,” says De Mun, “where I found the men, who had been received with the greatest hospitality and allowed to pass the winter there. I went on to Santa Fe, to explain to the Governor the reasons of my coming into the country. As soon as I alighted in the capital I was presented to the then Governor, Don Alberto Mayenz, who at first expressed his surprise to see me; but no sooner had I told him the circumstances under which I came than he treated me very politely.”

De Mun, Chouteau, and Philibert returned reassured to their trapping enterprises, and for about a year their routine was broken only by trips to the American settlements and a brush or two with the Pawnees. Probably they had adventures enough to fill a five-foot shelf. But these adventures were part of the day's work. A trapper came to take them for granted. But meanwhile Governor Maynez, as the name is more correctly spelled, had been superseded by Pedro Maria de Allande who did not like Americans. De Allande brusquely ordered the trappers to leave Spanish territory, and they accordingly retired to the eastern slope of the range, which they believed to be American soil. But this did not satisfy the suspicious Spaniard. In March, when De Mun went into Taos to learn how the land lay, he was told that wild rumors were afloat in New Mexico.

“It was said,” he relates, “that at the first fork of

the Arkansas [the Rio de las Animas, Purgatoire or Picketwire] we had built a fort; that we had there twenty thousand men, with many cannon and ammunition, and other such idle tales." Two days later a solemn troop of two hundred soldiers arrived at Taos with orders to take De Mun back with them and search for the fabulous American army. De Mun led them to the trappers' camp, which of course turned out to be like all trappers' camps, with no trace of fort or invading host. The Americans were nevertheless given peremptory orders to clear out. Prevented from doing this by the snow in the mountains, they were intercepted two months later, probably on the American side of the line, and haled before the governor at Santa Fe. That choleric functionary immediately flew into a violent rage, in the course of which he threatened to have their brains blown out on the spot. He relented sufficiently to throw them alive into the dungeons in front of the Palace, where they were kept in chains for forty-four days. Little enough did they see during that period of the idyllic life of the quiet little town; no one gave banquets in their honor; no lovely señoritas washed their feet. But they lived through the hard experience, being a tough and seasoned lot. Finally they were brought before a court-martial. The bearded Americans in their ragged leather coats, blinking in the sudden light of day, faced their inquisitors. It was an anxious moment.

"Many questions were asked," relates De Mun, "but particularly why we had stayed so long in the Spanish dominions. I answered that, being on the waters of the Arkansas river, we did not consider ourselves in the domains of Spain, as we had a license to go as far as the headwaters of said river. The president denied that our Government had a right to grant such a license, and

entered into such a rage as prevented his speaking, contenting himself with striking his fist several times on the table, saying, 'Gentlemen, we must have this man shot!' . . . He talked much of a big river that was the boundary line between the two countries, but did not know its name. When mention was made of the Mississippi he jumped up, saying that that was the river he meant; that Spain had never ceded the west side of it. It may be easy to judge of our feelings, to see our lives in the hands of such a man."

They filed back to their dungeon and lay the night in great suspense. Next day they were informed of the verdict. All their possessions, amounting, as De Mun estimated, to \$30,380, were to be confiscated. They were to be allowed one horse apiece with which to return home — or at least relieve the Spaniards of their undesirable presence. To add insult to injury they were forced to kneel to hear the sentence read and then to kiss the paper on which it was written. There was nothing for them to do but make their miserable way back to St. Louis, with nothing but a few equine scarecrows to show for their original investment of capital and two years of hard and dangerous living.

A few other names crop up during this period. There was, for instance, Ezekiel Williams, who wrote the narrative of his wanderings not because he wished to enrich the literature of his country but for the extremely practical purpose of clearing himself of the charge of murdering one of his companions. Williams, if we are to believe his story, became separated from his trapping party on the Arkansas in 1812 and came four hundred miles down the river alone. Perhaps he really did this and perhaps he did not. Williams seems to have been one of those tall liars whom the western country from time to time

developed. But trappers existed who were capable of such feats as Williams describes. Behind the thick curtain of our ignorance we can discern stirring events and fabulously romantic lives. Lone campfires rose on many a perilous spot. Gaunt forelopers of the westward movement were making sure the path that the great procession was to follow. They came like bees to honey, like moths to the flame.

To one man, David Meriwether, was reserved the distinction of being, so far as there is record, the last American trader to be imprisoned by the Spaniards on New Mexican soil. In 1819 Meriwether was travelling across the prairies with a party of Pawnees — a dangerous kind of vacation for any white man. Out of the mountains rode the Spanish Colonel Vizcarra with a swarm of cavalymen at his heels; the Pawnees were beaten and scattered and Meriwether was captured and taken to Santa Fe. The Spaniards were in constant fear of American aggression. They accused Meriwether of being a spy. The governor at this time was Melgares — that same Melgares whom Pike had described as “having much of the urbanity of a Frenchman.” He had little enough urbanity as he glared at poor Meriwether. His first impulse was to strip the American, and a black servant whom Meriwether had with him, of all their belongings and turn them loose in the wilderness. Meriwether coolly pointed out that winter was coming on and that the governor’s proposal was equivalent to murder.

There was a flicker of the old urbanity. Melgares gave orders that the two intruders should be given a mule, a gun, and a little ammunition apiece. The Spanish horsemen rode with them into the mountains beyond Taos, then left them to find their way home if they

could—or perish if they could not. Meriwether was a man of grim resolution. When the Spaniards had attacked the Pawnees he had named a rendezvous for such members of the party as might manage to escape. He went there, found three Pawnees, and in their company managed, after incredible adventures, to get back east to the United States. Thirty-four years later Meriwether returned to Santa Fe, this time not as a wretched captive but as governor of the American Territory of New Mexico. The old *carcel* in which he had been confined was still standing, but it is soberly stated that at the very moment he took his oath of office the roof fell in.

Two years after Meriwether's imprisonment the revolutionary army under Iturbide marched into the City of Mexico, and the power of Spain in Mexico was for ever at an end. The reverberations of that great event were soon felt in Santa Fe. Never again, except for a single brief period and for a plausible reason, was the New Mexican frontier to be closed to American trade.

The tides of destiny had turned. The Trail, that had been so long quiet, flowed with eager life. First came a sprinkling of men on horseback, with pack animals, then the wagons began to roll westward, and every year, until the coming of the railroad, the procession grew longer and more dense. Long before the discovery of gold drew multitudes to distant and romantic California the road to Santa Fe was as familiar to the traders as the main streets of their native villages. The Americans were to be held back no more. Their dust was to blur the clear horizon for ever and ever.

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