

Barrels, Bundles, bales

When William Becknell took the first wagons to Santa Fe in 1822, he packed merchandise that he felt sure would sell. He made wise choices, for he claimed he sold his \$3,000 worth of goods for \$60,000. (And, because they were scarce in Santa Fe, Becknell sold a wagon worth \$150 for \$700.

Cloth and Hardware To Santa Fe

Becknell's 1822 cargo probably included several kinds of cloth: muslin, drilling, print, taffeta, calico, broadcloth, linen, and velveteen. The Missouri trader also took other *dry goods*, clothing, buttons, buckles, handkerchiefs, razor straps, writing paper, thread, needles, thimbles, knitting pins, scissors, pots, pans, coffee mills, knives, shovels, hoes, axes, and wine.

In the following years, most Santa Fe traders carried merchandise similar to Becknell's. Cloth, clothing, hardware, knives, sewing *notions*, jewelry, and religious objects were popular trade items in Santa Fe.

Before the Mexican War, the Mexican government had a list of **contraband** goods. Foreign traders were forbidden to sell (or were heavily taxed for) items such as iron, lead, gunpowder, candlewick, tobacco, and shoes. After New Mexico became an American territory, freighters on the

Trail hauled everything from military supplies and mining machinery to canned goods and bottled beer.

Money and Mules back to Missouri

Missouri traders often returned home with gold and silver coins, silver *bullion*, gold dust, furs, blankets, wool, mules, and donkeys – cargoes that took little wagon room.

Since it was expensive to pull empty wagons, many traders sold or abandoned their extra equipment in Santa Fe. In the days of contraband, some traders burned wagons and sold the scrap iron illegally.

A profitable business

Traders' profits varied. When the Santa Fe trade was new and Mexicans were eager for American goods, many people made money.

A Missouri woman, Fanny Marshall, invested \$60 in William Becknell's 1822 trip – and received \$900 in return! Two years later, Meredith Marmaduke hauled \$30,000 in goods to Santa Fe and returned east with gold, silver, furs, and mules worth \$180,000.

However, as more traders flocked to Santa Fe, the little city became flooded with goods. Traders made less profit from each wagonload and needed to sell more loads to make up the difference. Large companies with many wagons began trading. This forced many small merchants out of business.

At the same time, more and more wagons traveled to markets beyond Santa Fe. By 1840, one-half of all freight on the Trail went on south to Chihuahua and other cities. In the years just before the Mexican War, merchants from Mexico carried more Trail goods than Americans.

After the Mexican War large freighting companies contracted with American merchants and the U.S. Army to haul much of the Trail merchandise. The firm of Russell, Majors & Waddell made \$300,000 from one large Army freighting contract in the 1850's.

What did Shipping cost?

For many years, it cost about \$8 to \$10 to ship 100 pounds of merchandise on the Trail, or about a penny a pound per hundred miles. In fall and winter months, freighters charged higher rates because of the possibility of bad weather.

Shipping costs dropped as railroads built closer to New Mexico. In 1865 14 cents, 1871 2 cents.

Hard work, Long hours

Not counting passengers, wagon trains to Santa Fe usually carried one or two men for each wagon. An average-sized *caravan* had 26 wagons – 25 full of cargo, and one carrying supplies. A train that size needed 32 to 36 men. During the eight-week trip, the men worked hard and their hours were long.

Much of the time, Trail hands walked or rode in clouds of burning alkali dust. Buffalo gnats buzzed in their ears all day, and at night mosquitoes often made sleeping impossible.

Men carried a variety of weapons: rifles, shotguns, pistols, and knives. Their dress was a frontier “grab-bag” – blue jean jackets, leather hunting shirts, flannel vests, and merchants’ fancy coats. No matter what the clothing, however, at the end of the Trail everything was covered with dust, mud, sweat, food grease, tobacco juice, and manure.

According to the famous author Mark Twain, Trail hands were often “a very, very rough set.” Arguments and fistfights were common.

Trail Bosses

In private trains, one *wagonmaster*, or trail boss, was in charge of the whole wagon train. He made the rules that everyone followed. Some wagonmasters, like Alexander Majors, said that their trains would not travel on Sundays. Majors also

asked his men to sign pledges against whipping their animals, and using profane language and liquor.

The wagonmaster rode ahead of the caravan to choose the next campsite. He also watched for bad places in the road, picked spots to cross streams, and scouted for Indians. His salary was the highest of all the men working on a train, or about \$150 a month (in the 1860’s).

The assistant wagonmaster received about \$85. He kept slower wagons moving and helped new *greenhorns* learn their jobs. The assistant rode at the end of the train.

‘Whackers and ‘skinnners

there was one teamster, or driver, for each wagon; bullwhackers drove oxen and mule skinnners drove mules. Teamsters were paid \$70 to \$75 a month, with mule skinnners usually getting more than bullwhackers.

No bullwhacker was without a bull-whip – some up to 20 feet long. It took two hands to crack the buckskin “poppers” at the end of the longest whips, but some drivers could flick the flies off an ox’s ear without hitting the animal. A bullwhacker shouted commands to control his animals: “gee” to turn right, “haw” to turn left, and “whoa” to stop. A mule skinner rode the *nigh* mule on the team nearest the wagon. He controlled his animals with reins.

Other men were paid about a dollar a day. Two day herders

and one night herder took care of the extra stock – 30 to 40 mules or oxen to replace worn-out animals along the way. Three or four extra men were often hired to replace those who deserted or became ill or injured.

Divisions of men

Wagonmasters usually organized their men at Council Grove. Large caravans were formed into groups of 25 wagons. Each of these divisions chose a captain, lieutenant, and a sergeant of the guard. All men in the train (whether workers or travelers) were divided into groups of eight called *reliefs*. Each relief had to stand guard one-fourth of the night, every other night.

The men were also divided into cooking groups. Each *mess* had from eight to twelve members and its own cooking equipment. Usually, one man did the cooking. The others shared the jobs of getting water, gathering wood or *buffalo chips* for fuel, and cleaning up.

Bacon, beans, bread

Most freighters gave their men a daily food *ration*. For each man, a cook was allowed to use one and a quarter pounds of flour, a pound of *sowbelly*, one ounce of coffee, and two and one-half ounces of sugar. There were enough beans for one meal per week, and dried apples twice a month. Most traders provided fresh buffalo meat.