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# From Plains to Mountains

Travel down the old Santa Fe Trail, America's first great international commercial highway

TEXT BY STEVE GLASSMAN

**I**N 1821, WILLIAM BECKNELL, A MISSOURI River ferryboat operator, had an idea. And he needed one badly because the wolf was at the door. A financial panic had ruined his business. He'd heard the Mexicans had revolted against the Spanish. Zebulon Pike, the explorer, had returned from a stint in a Spanish prison with reports of high retail prices in Santa Fe. A yard of muslin could go for as much as \$3. So, Becknell fast-talked five fellow Missourians into heading across the plains to Santa Fe — at least that's how one story goes.

We can thank the Santa Fe Trail for a huge chunk of Southwestern real estate. The Trail is responsible for heroes of the stature of Kit Carson. Wagon trains parted throngs of buffalo. The teamsters were sometimes attacked by such Native Americans as the Comanche, Kiowa, Pawnee and Cheyenne. The Trail closed in 1880 when the Atchinson, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad rolled into the capital of New Mexico territory.

The Santa Fe Trail is still there, at least conceptually, and in 1987 Congress designated it as a National Historic Trail. Following it across a third or so of the country can put you in touch with American history in a way few other cross-country treks can. You start out in the eastern forest, traverse the prairies and end in the high pinion desert of New Mexico. The danger of perishing from thirst on a wild ride is no longer with us, especially if you're traveling with your trailer; however, the romance of the Trail is still there in the small towns and open country. So hitch up and caravan along as we hit a few of the high points on the modern Santa Fe Trail.

## MISSOURI

Tiny New Franklin, population 1,145, claims to be the modern head of the Trail, thanks to Old Franklin — Becknell's actual starting point — washing into the Missouri River years ago. To get there, exit Interstate 70 at Booneville, Missouri, halfway between Saint

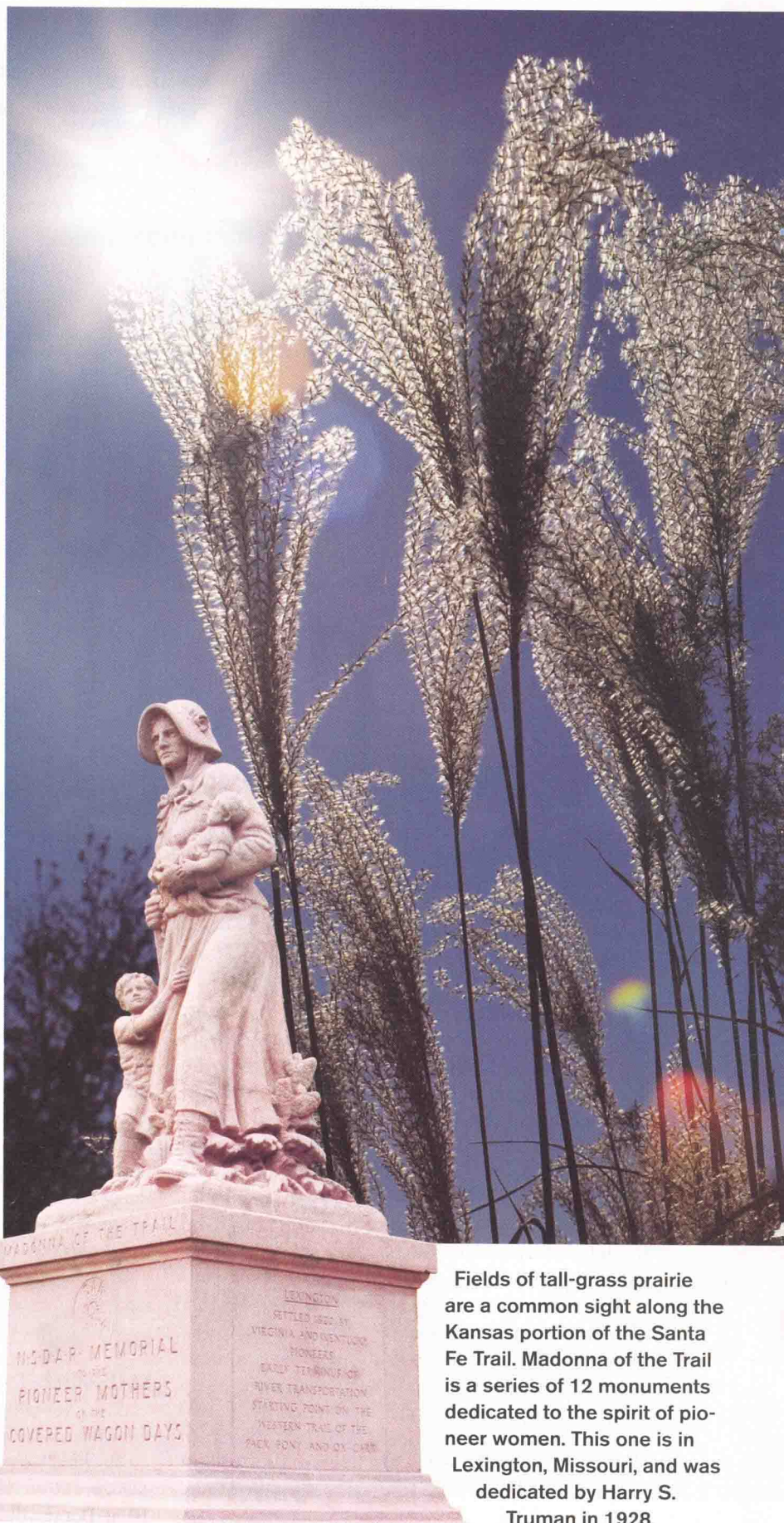
Louis and Kansas City. Go across the bridge over the Big Muddy. No less of an organization than the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution (NSDAR) have sanctified New Franklin's claim by planting a commemorative boulder in the middle of the town's one-block business district. Arrow Rock, just a few miles as the crow flies, is a fly-trapped-in-amber village. Though a working (tourist) community, the buildings retain their 19th century appearance. Lexington, a few more miles down the pike, also has a 19th century air, although it is a bustling little community. Don't miss the cannonball stuck in the column of the courthouse, thanks to a Civil War battle. The other must-see is the NSDAR Madonna of the Trail statue at the edge of the downtown area. Harry Truman, who worked to preserve the Old Trail, dedicated this monument back when he was a county official.

Kansas City has three important Trail centers. Fort Osage is located outside of the urban sprawl at Sibley, Missouri, just off U.S. 24. Jackson County has recreated this important Indian trading post, complete with log palisade fence and blockhouses. Independence, on the eastern fringe of Kansas City, headquartered the Trail for a much longer period. The downtown area is loaded with interesting features such as the splendid Thomas Hart Benton Trail murals in the Harry Truman Presidential Library. But for the purposes of this trip, you definitely won't want to miss a visit to the National Frontier Trails Museum ([www.frontiertrailsmuseum.org](http://www.frontiertrailsmuseum.org)), where you can learn the rich history of America's principle Western trails.

Westport, in the center of Kansas City, still maintains an unintended old-time-frontier flavor. While taking in the various monuments to the Trail in the area, stop by Kelly's Saloon and wet your whistle. You can justify the suds break because for a time the building was owned by A.G. Boone, Daniel's grandson.

## KANSAS

About half of the Trail ran through Kansas, and today U.S. 50-56 pretty much parallels the old wagon route. Take Interstate 35 from Kansas City and exit to U.S. 56 at Gardner. A



Fields of tall-grass prairie are a common sight along the Kansas portion of the Santa Fe Trail. Madonna of the Trail is a series of 12 monuments dedicated to the spirit of pioneer women. This one is in Lexington, Missouri, and was dedicated by Harry S. Truman in 1928.

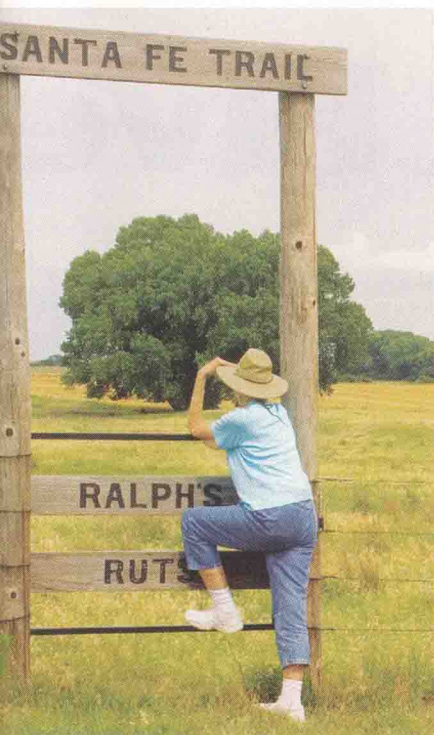


PHOTO BY STEVE GLASSMAN

**Ralph's Ruts owner Ralph Hathaway invites travelers into his pasture to view firsthand some of the nicest ruts left anywhere on the Old Trail.**

good first stop is Blackjack, a dozen miles west. Park your tow vehicle near the log cabin and cross the bridge to a small patch of undisturbed tall-grass prairie. By the time late summer rolls around, the vegetation will be alarmingly high and even a bit threatening.

One of the most eligible spots on the Trail, in the old days, was Council Grove in the Flint Hills. This rolling countryside has remained in grass, making for some of the nicest scenery

## Trail Guides

The must-have for modern-day Trail RVing is the book, *Following the Santa Fe Trail: A Guide for Modern Travelers*, by Marc Simmons and Hal Jackson. Also, check out the Santa Fe Trail Association online to pick up some Trail travel ideas ([www.santafetrail.org](http://www.santafetrail.org)). Reading further about the chapters of the Santa Fe Trail Association can turn up incredible insight into each location and give detailed accounts of local points of interest. — S.G.

in Kansas and the largest expanse of tall-grass prairie in the United States. You can see the remains of two famed trees: Council Oak, under which a notable treaty was signed giving Americans and Mexicans safe passage along the Trail through Osage territory in return for \$800; and Post Oak, where letters were left for those coming or going on the Trail. Old-time teamsters would hold up awhile at Council Grove and form into wagon trains for the formidable trek through Indian country.

Off the Trail, er U.S. 56, at Lost Springs, take the paved road west about 2½ miles. Today, the landscape is certifiably Kansas. Corn and wheat fields abound. A granite headstone near a bridge marks the crossing of the Trail. The inconsequential stream would not deserve mention farther east, but in bygone days this watering hole was an important overnight way station on the Trail. A tavern here, won in a card game, saw 11 men killed in drunken brawls. A sign mentions 17 drovers frozen by a blizzard and an Indian battle in the vicinity. From here on west, just about every way stop has a history that could be adapted into a John Wayne movie.

Dodge City is 150 miles down the road and houses many important Trail landmarks, such as Pawnee Rock and Fort Larned, which is a National Historic Site. Dodge City calls itself the Queen of Cow Towns, and it's still a major cattle center, accounting for huge feedlots and slaughterhouses. There is an Old West attraction for anyone's taste in this town. If you go in for tourist-kitsch you're in luck, with a frontier city and staged gunfights. If you want something more authentic, head east a few miles to the peaceful community of Fort Dodge. Not far away, however, the Trail splits into the main Cimarron Route that shot directly toward New Mexico, and to Mountain Branch, following the Arkansas River into Colorado.

Highway 56 southwest of Dodge City takes you through the Cimarron Desert, a dreaded place in Trail days. This is where an early expedition almost perished for want of water. Also, the West's most famous early explorer, Jedediah Smith, was killed by the Comanche here while lost and searching for water. In the

very southwestern corner of the state is the Cimarron National Grassland, where it's easy to get a feel for what those old-time Santa Fe teamsters saw.

## OKLAHOMA & NEW MEXICO


The land from the Kansas boundary to the Rockies in New Mexico must be one of the most sparsely populated regions of the country. Boise City, Oklahoma, and Clayton, New Mexico, are the only two communities you pass through, with populations of 1,483 and 2,524 residents, respectively.

On this drive, you can say goodbye to radio reception and hello to the romance of the Great West. Your companions on the 200 miles to Interstate 25 are pronghorn antelope, prairie dogs, cattle and the occasional herd of buffalo. And nearing the end of the trail just off of I-25 is Fort Union National Monument ([www.nps.gov/foun](http://www.nps.gov/foun)), which was established in 1851 as the guardian of the Santa Fe Trail.

## COLORADO

For those who chose the mountain route, no trek on the Trail would be complete without a stop at Bent's Old Fort, another National Historic Site. Located on Mountain Branch of the Trail, this adobe castle built by the trading firm of Bent and Saint Vrain in the early 1830s has been completely recreated by the National Park Service. The fort served as a staging ground for General Phil Kearney's march on New Mexico in the Mexican-American War.

Prior to heading out on the Trail, it's best to know the weather. Summer temperatures in the western Midwest and the Plains run warmer than much of the rest of the country, and prairie winds still serve up the occasional dust storm. Old-time teamsters traveled in the late Spring and early Fall, and that's not a bad recommendation today, either. Finally, be warned: Trekking the Santa Fe Trail is dangerous — that is, dangerously addictive. Hardly anyone ever does it just once, or in part. If you are not careful, you might end up a full-blown Trail buff. 

 Santa Fe National Historic Trail, (505) 988-6888, [www.nps.gov/safe](http://www.nps.gov/safe). Circle 203 on Reader Service Card.