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## Charles Withington and the Santa Fe Trail in North Lyon County

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# Charles Withington and the Santa Fe Trail in North Lyon County

The road to Santa Fe opened in 1821. Four years later officials of the United States government met with members of the Osage tribe under the branches of an oak tree in what is now Council Grove to draw up a treaty providing for safe passage of wagons through Osage lands.



Courtesy Kansas Heritage Center, Dodge City, Kansas

In 1846 Charles H. Withington, who had worked with the Sac and Fox Indians in Iowa, came to what is now Osage County where he was a gunsmith for the tribe on their Kansas reserve. In 1851 he kept a store in Council Grove where he had been appointed a mail agent. Just a month after Kansas Territory opened for settlement in May 1854, Withington moved east along the Santa Fe Trail into what is now the Buster and Pete Wheat ranch in north Lyon County. There, at a crossing over 142 Mile Creek (which is 142 miles

from Fort Osage, Missouri, as measured by George Sibley in 1825), about ten miles northeast of the event site of this year's Symphony in the Flint Hills, he constructed a log cabin to operate a store and an inn of sorts for Santa Fe freighters and new settlers.

His residence/store was of a peculiar construction. As his business increased, he would add another one-room cabin onto his original building until he eventually had a string of some half-dozen rooms with a continuous porch along the south side.

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Withington was a man of great energy and endurance. Not only did he have the store, he also built a toll bridge, over which the travelers would pay to cross 142 Mile Creek...

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For the next two years Withington's place was the headquarters for all the immigrants in this portion of the Neosho Valley. Many settlers told of stopping for a day or two at his post and then leaving the Santa Fe Trail to travel south over grasslands with only an occasional wagon track to be seen. Withington himself often went with the settlers to help them find the kind of claim they were looking for, which meant leaving his business for days while assisting the settlers. Many expressions of good will were made for Mr. Withington by the early settlers for his kind and liberal acts.

Withington was a man of great

energy and endurance. Not only did he have the store, he also built a toll bridge, over which the travelers would pay to cross 142 Mile Creek, or they could ford the creek upstream.

The year 1858 was the beginning of the great gold rush for Pikes Peak, and "Pikes Peak or Bust" was painted on hundreds of wagons. Participants in the rush to the "Kansas gold fields" were dubbed "fifty-niners" after 1859, the peak year of the rush. In one day more than 500 wagons passed 142 Mile Creek. The rush continued until 1861 when Kansas became a state and Colorado became a territory. It was estimated that 100,000 gold-seekers, men and women, went to the West during this period of time.

Travel over the trail continued heavily in the 1860s. From May 21 to November 25, 1865, records show 4,472 wagons; 5,197 men; 1,267 horses; 6,452 mules; 38,281 oxen; 112 carriages; and 13,056 tons of freight crossing his toll bridge. The bridge operated into the late 1860s and was sold to Lyon County in the



CHARLES WITHINGTON  
*Courtesy Don Schiesser*



1870s. The old wooden bridge was torn down in 1882 and replaced with a more modern one.

Withington also supplied fresh horses for the Westport and Council Grove Stage Company which carried both passengers and mail. A stage coach could carry up to eleven passengers and a guard. The fare from Independence to Santa Fe was \$250, which included meals of hard tack, bacon, and coffee, with an occasional antelope or buffalo steak. The trip required two weeks. The stage line discontinued operations in 1866.

Among other business ventures Withington also operated a blacksmith shop and at one time had ten forges at work repairing wagons headed to or from Santa Fe. Once a U.S. Army general and several companies of troops camped for an extended period near the blacksmith shop as their wagons were being repaired for the trip west.

Withington was appointed the first postmaster in what is now Lyon County by President Franklin Pierce in 1855. The

post office at his store was named "Allen."

Eventually moving several miles south when the Council Grove, Osage City & Ottawa Railroad was built, it became the present town of that same name. Mail was delivered to his store by stage coaches going east or west, and people from the south part of the county would deliver and collect mail to take to settlers along the Cottonwood and Neosho rivers.

In mid-September of 1856, Jayhawkers, who had looted and killed near present-day Neosho Rapids, a pro-slavery area in the southeastern part of the county, stopped by Withington's store on their way back to Topeka. They robbed or destroyed his entire inventory which was worth over \$3,000. It was believed by settlers that the Anderson boys (Jim and Bloody Bill) were in the gang led by Captain John E. Cook who was later hanged at Harper's Ferry with John Brown.

Withington's reputation for uprightness led to his appointment as a constable in January of 1855. Later that same year he was elected one of the

first county commissioners. In the general election of that year he won election to the Territorial Council, but as a Free-State man the Pro-Slavery legislature refused to seat him. Two years later he won re-election as a county commissioner.

Today, Charles Withington's fame has faded, but like the Santa Fe Trail itself, whose ruts are still visible in parts of north Lyon County, he left his mark and his early influence is still evident.

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*Don Schiesser lives in Allen, KS. He served in the Korean War and retired from active duty and the National Guard after 27 ½ years. Don also retired after 27 years as an electronics instructor at Flint Hills Vocational Technical College in Emporia. He now devotes his time to family genealogy, local history, and his family. His interest in history was a result of delivering papers to Sherman E. Johnston, who carried mail by horseback on the original Santa Fe Trail. This article is adapted from "History of Allen, Kansas" printed in Our Land--- A History of Lyon County, Kansas.*



OLD ALLEN AS DESCRIBED BY RUSS VANDIVORT  
On the South side of Santa Fe Road looking North. (LEFT TO RIGHT) toll bridge, store, barn and forges, well, 5 or 6 cabins, end to end, cabin/post office, graveyard.  
Illustrated by Mark Moser, age 13