



Kansas State University Libraries
New Prairie Press

Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal

The Santa Fe Trail (Sandy Carlson, editor)

American Indians And The Colonialism Of The Santa Fe Trail

James Riding In

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh>

Recommended Citation

Riding In, James (2021). "American Indians And The Colonialism Of The Santa Fe Trail," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*. <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2021/indigenouamericans/5>

To order hard copies of the Field Journals, go to shop.symphonyintheflinthills.org.

The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

AMERICAN INDIANS AND THE COLONIALISM OF THE SANTA FE TRAIL

The axiom that the winners interpret history rings true when it comes to the enduring legacy of the Santa Fe Trail.

This became exceedingly clear to me as I drove westward on U.S. 56, a stretch of highway in southeastern Kansas near where wagons once hauled people and goods over this famous trail that connected Missouri and New Mexico.

Although I was crossing the southern periphery of lands once claimed by my Pawnee ancestors, the overcast skies, along with my critical reflections about the horrors of the past and the dramatic changes in the land, added to a gloomy feeling that had overtaken me earlier that day. In considering the legacy of colonialism, I thought about the vast array of stereotypical misrepresentations found in the Euro-Americans' intellectual thoughts and popular culture that cast the Pawnees, Comanches, Cheyennes, Kiowas, Arapahos and other Indigenous peoples as backward, warlike savages who raided lumbering trains, took innocent lives and plundered without remorse.

Near present-day Great Bend, I stopped at the site of Fort Zarah, an installation constructed by U.S. soldiers in 1864 to protect trail traffic from Indians; it was abandoned five years later. In the 20th century, however, the state of Kansas constructed a roadside park on the site. A large marker reads: "In 1825, the Federal government surveyed the Santa Fe trail, great trade route from western Missouri to Santa Fe. Treaties with Kansas and Osage Indians safeguarded the eastern end of



Independence and the Opening of the West (detail)

Thomas Hart Benton
Mural at the Harry S. Truman Library

©2021 T.H. and R.P. Benton Testamentary Trusts / UMB Bank Trustee / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

the road but Plains tribes continued to make raids. Fort Zarah, at this point, was one of a chain of forts built on the trail to protect wagon trains and guard settlers. It was established in 1864 by Gen. Samuel R. Curtis and named for his son, Maj. H. Zarah Curtis, who had been killed in the Baxter Springs massacre, October 6, 1863. The fort was built of sandstone quarried in near-by bluffs. Fort Zarah was successfully defended against an attack by 100 Kiowas on October 2, 1868. It was abandoned in 1869.”

The marker’s narrative reflects an enduring problem with the trail’s history: that Indians were a threat to the country’s economic and political development. It did not offer the slightest hint at the harm the Santa Fe Trail brought Indians or why Kiowas had attacked the fort. Moreover, it suggests that Indian relations always involved violent conflict.

The Santa Fe Trail was the first Euro-American road to penetrate the Great Plains, passing through Indian country. A rich diversity of Indigenous peoples from nearly a dozen different Indian nations encountered the trail travelers; their interactions ranged from cooperation to warfare. However, travelers often described Indians with a repertoire of stereotypes that had existed since the onset of the European invasion of the Americas in both romantic and negative ways. Their stories resonated with a

comfortable plot line for Euro-Americans, depicting Indians as warlike, savage and uncouth beings who blocked the road to America’s progress. Although some historical encounters contain elements of truth about specific events, these stories rest squarely on the false premise that Indian savagery, not colonial expansion, was the root cause of conflict.

Today, contemporary sources continue to distort the trail’s history and rely on coded and overt language of conquest that rationalizes U.S. expansion into Indian lands. Repetitive recitals of this history through books, roadside markers, oral presentations and popular culture objectify Indians as “savage” threats while denying or ignoring the destructive consequences of U.S. expansionistic policies and settlement. Stated another way, written history about the trail is marred by conscious and protracted attempts to absolve Euro-Americans of culpability for their acts of aggression. Equally problematic is that this history rarely tells how much of the trail’s history involved friendly and cooperative interaction between Indians and non-Indians, including both Mexicans and Euro-Americans.

The trail played a devastating role in diminishing the sovereignty of Indian nations. This sovereignty emanated from creation stories and was rooted in the history of this continent. Native peoples



Buffalo and Smoke

Phil Epp

governed themselves in accordance with their respective beliefs, values and customs. They often viewed the passing of uninvited travelers as trespassing, an offense punishable by the confiscation of personal property, corporal punishment and death. At the least, they expected gifts, or tolls, for the right to passage.

However, most Euro-Americans expressed contempt for the idea of Indian authority. U.S. and Mexican travelers willfully violated Indian sovereignty by failing to obtain prior consent from the appropriate Indian nations before embarking on their journeys. This problem was partially resolved in 1825 when U.S. commissioners signed right-

of-way treaties with two Indian nations whose lands touched the trail, but no further attempt was taken to acquire such approval from other Indian stakeholders until years later.

Instead, responding to calls from traders and western politicians for protection, U.S. policymakers gradually amassed a strong military presence throughout the region. In 1827, the U.S. Army established Cantonment Leavenworth in eastern Kansas to protect the Santa Fe Trail and maintain peace. Two years later, amid reports of increasing Indian opposition to the flow of traffic, officials sent troops to escort caravans en route to Santa Fe. By the



Uncertain Light
Norman Akers

mid-1860s, when Indian resistance on the trail had been reduced to five Indian nations – Comanches, Kiowas, Plains Apaches, Cheyennes and Arapahos – the U.S. Army garrisoned numerous cavalry and infantry units at forts Leavenworth, Zarah, Larned, Dodge, Lyon and Union. Additionally, forts Harker, Riley and Wallace stood north of the trail in Kansas.

Thus, the U.S. military established a firm foothold in the contested land. By the late 1860s, there would be no Indian peoples left along the trail. The survivors of this campaign of ethnic cleansing were placed on reservations in Wyoming, New Mexico and Oklahoma.

The governments of the United States and Mexico, as had Spain, based their claims to Indian lands on the doctrine

of discovery, an imperialistic concept found in international law. The discovery doctrine served as a legal premise for European nations to carve vast empires in the Americas, Asia, Africa and Australia as well as to politically subjugate, dispossess and deny fundamental human rights to Indigenous peoples. Concocted during the 15th and 16th centuries by European philosophers, clerics and monarchs, the doctrine was little more than a crass scheme to legitimize the European appropriation of lands belonging to non-Christians. In keeping with the prevailing rules of imperialism, Western colonizers claimed an exclusive right to acquire title to vast regions of land inhabited by Indigenous peoples.

Today, this pervasive master narrative tells the trail's history with 19th century assumptions regarding the alleged inferiority of Indians and the superiority of Euro-Americans. This language of racism continues to have a stranglehold on academic writings, historiography and popular thought. Anti-Indian rhetoric, either explicitly or implicitly, places the Santa Fe Trail and its relationship to Indians within the context of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism. Histories written from this perspective identify with the intrepid, heroic and rugged explorers, trappers, merchants, soldiers and settlers who overcame human barbarism and

harsh environmental obstacles to carve a great nation out of a wilderness. This myth objectifies Indians as savages who delighted in swooping down on non-offending travelers for the sake of extracting blood, scalps and booty. It misrepresents and denigrates Indians as being unworthy, irrational beings whose depravity excluded them from the rights afforded "civilized" nations. It informed the development of U.S. Indian policy and rationalizes recurring acts of aggression against Indigenous peoples.

The story of Indian relations with the Santa Fe Trail is woefully lacking, superficial, damaging and often devoid of reality. Here lies the problem of Santa Fe Trail historiography. Subsequent generations of scholars have since adopted the same disparaging stereotypes and themes used by trail travelers to describe Indians. These secondary accounts fall squarely within the genre of the master narrative and discourage honest intellectual inquiry.

James Riding In, Ph.D. (Pawnee), is an associate professor of American Indian studies at Arizona State University. Adapted from "American Indians and the Santa Fe Trail," a research white paper supported by the National Park Service in 2009. Reprinted with permission from the author.