



Voices from the Trail

The Santa Fe, Oregon, and California trails proved to be both challenging and exhilarating for the travelers in the caravans passing through this junction along one of the Westport routes. Letters and diaries are filled with adventures and excitement, as well as stories of hardship or loss. These are their words.

At Indian Creek my wife gave birth to a daughter between 12 and 1 a.m. and at 8 o'clock we rolled out again.

Mormon John Davies came through this trail junction with a wagon train of Oregon and California emigrants on July 1, 1854.

The train again in motion, we made Westport, a little trafficking village in the twilight of better times, thrown on, by the farthest wave of semi-civilization, upon western plains. This left, we are at once adrift beyond the pale of society, 'a law unto ourselves'. After a days ride through plains fragrant with the freshest imprint of the opening year...

Richard L. Wilson traveled the northern route from Westport in 1842.

On the old Santa Fe Trail we jumped from water hole to water hole across the state [of Kansas].

Recollection of an "old time trader."

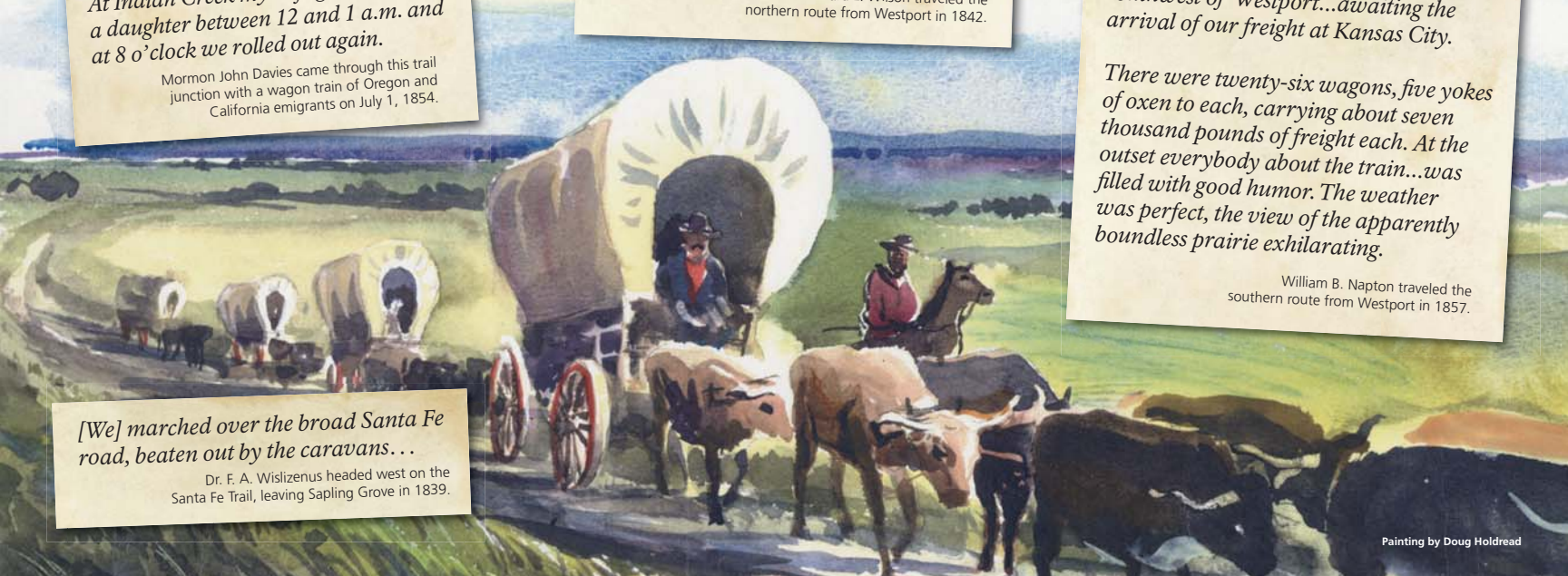
The work cattle and wagons were collected and a camp established, about the first of May, on the high rolling prairie near the Santa Fe Trail, three miles southwest of Westport...awaiting the arrival of our freight at Kansas City.

There were twenty-six wagons, five yokes of oxen to each, carrying about seven thousand pounds of freight each. At the outset everybody about the train...was filled with good humor. The weather was perfect, the view of the apparently boundless prairie exhilarating.

William B. Napton traveled the southern route from Westport in 1857.

[We] marched over the broad Santa Fe road, beaten out by the caravans...

Dr. F. A. Wislizenus headed west on the Santa Fe Trail, leaving Sapling Grove in 1839.





Opening the Floodgates

The Santa Fe Trail began in 1821 when William Becknell and a small group of men from Franklin, Missouri, followed a route west to Santa Fe, then a part of Mexico. This first successful trading party quickly opened the Santa Fe Trail for many more trading and government survey expeditions to make the most of this new international highway of commerce. Yet more than trade came out of these early expeditions — more people, new settlements, protective forts, and cultural change came to the West. Once these floodgates were open, expansion and settlement were inevitable, not only in the Southwest, but also in Oregon and California.

"from 'Sappling Grove' where there is an excellent fountain spring & a very good place to camp...The road runs a little round on the high ridge."

from "Sappling Grove" where there is a very good place to camp.



Courtesy of Kansas State Historical Society

With trade and travel arose the need for protection and the establishment of forts such as Fort Leavenworth, built in 1827 just 35 miles northwest of here. The new opportunities for trade not only led more people west, but encouraged exploration to find the best, fastest, most secure, and comfortable routes west.



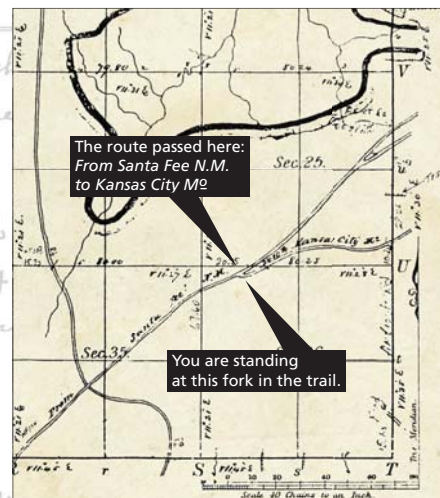
Artwork by Tom Phillips

New towns, such as Westport in 1834, provided services and goods to meet the needs of travelers by offering outfitters, hotels, grocers, and other services to those heading out along the trails.



Josiah Gregg, Commerce of the Prairies, 1844.

By the 1840s, the Santa Fe Trail coursed past local Methodist, Baptist, and Friends missions to the Shawnee Indians. Wagons bound for Oregon and California also began their trek west on the Santa Fe Trail, passing by here.



The route passed here:
From Santa Fe N.M.
to Kansas City Mo

You are standing
at this fork in the trail.

James Barre
The above Map of Township No. 12 South
Co. Principal Meridian Kansas Territory
is notes of the survey thereof on file in this Office, which
Surveyor General's Office.
Examined at T. J. 24 Nov. 1857

By 1854, surveyors were in the field establishing the U.S. Rectangular Land Survey System in anticipation of Kansas statehood. This 1857 map shows the fork in the Santa Fe Trail. The campsite at "Sappling Grove" was highlighted in George Sibley's 1827 government survey notes.

Wagons and Coaches... ...to Trains and Planes

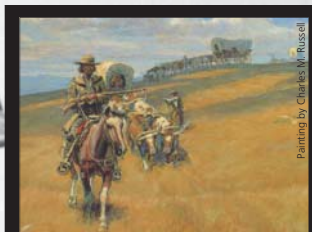


In Strang Park, a remnant of the railway bed still exists, just a few feet from the historic route of the Santa Fe Trail.

Courtesy of Lenexa Historical Society

The heyday of the trails had come and gone by the time William B. Strang Jr. platted out a residential development in this area in 1905. To promote his real estate plans and bring people out from Kansas City, he developed a trolley car railroad, the Missouri and Kansas Interurban Railway, which followed near the route of the Santa Fe, Oregon, and California trails from Westport to here until 1940.

Strang was not only a real estate developer and railway entrepreneur, he was also an aviation pioneer. He developed Aviation Park a couple of miles east of here. The park gained national attention during the early years of aviation with its biplane barnstorming exhibitions. Those aerial acrobatics took place right over the old trail routes.



Painting by Charles M. Russell

Traders and freight wagons passed through here as early as the 1820s. Emigrants and their conestoga wagons came through as early as the 1840s.



Library of Congress

From the 1850s to 1870s, the stagecoach — icon of the American West — rumbled through this trail junction.



Johnson County Museum

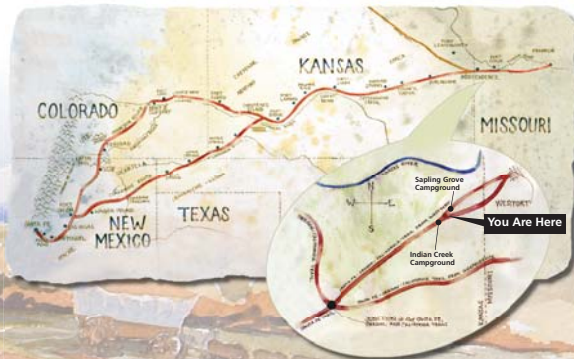
Crowds gathered to watch the aerial acrobatics of the planes hosted at Aviation Park.



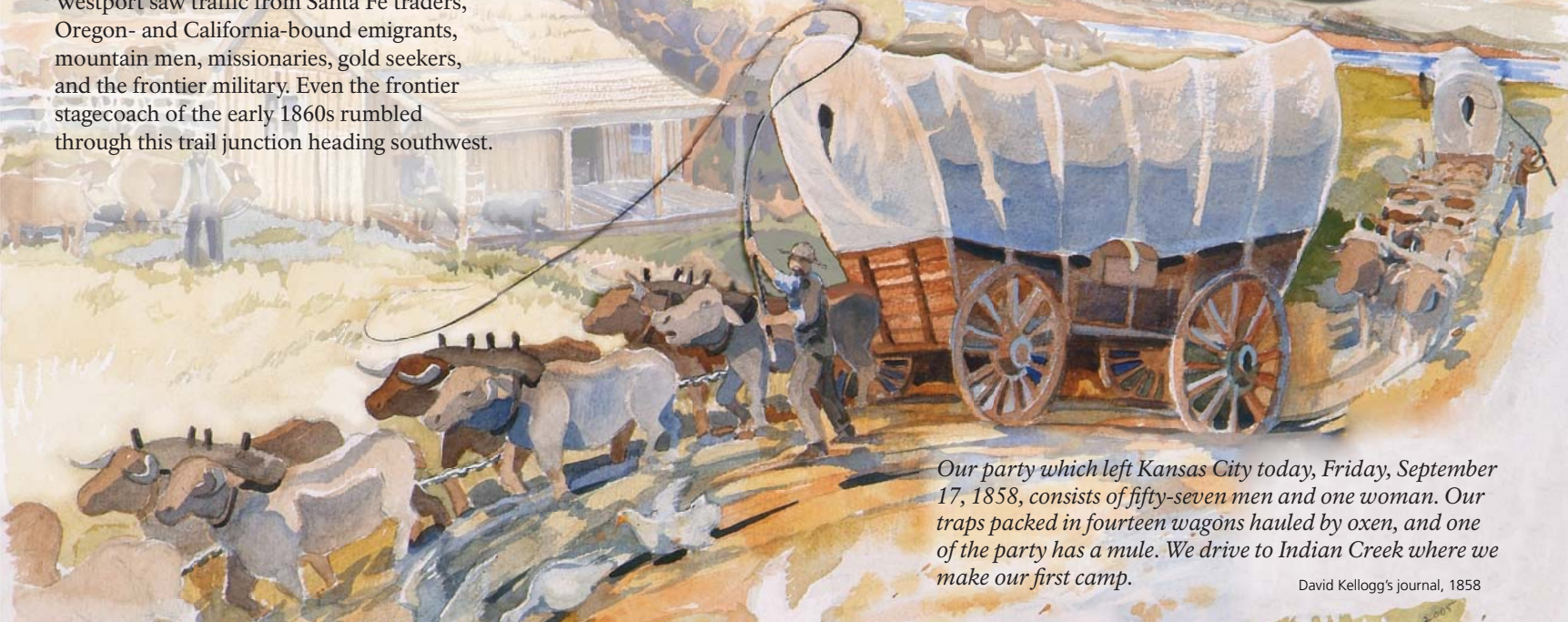
Two Routes from Westport

The Santa Fe Trail forked into two routes as it headed south from Westport. Along the routes were campgrounds for trail travelers — to the northeast of the junction was Sapling Grove and to the southwest was a campground called Flat Rock or Indian Creek.

Until the 1860s, these two routes out of Westport saw traffic from Santa Fe traders, Oregon- and California-bound emigrants, mountain men, missionaries, gold seekers, and the frontier military. Even the frontier stagecoach of the early 1860s rumbled through this trail junction heading southwest.



Artwork by Doug Holdread



Our party which left Kansas City today, Friday, September 17, 1858, consists of fifty-seven men and one woman. Our traps packed in fourteen wagons hauled by oxen, and one of the party has a mule. We drive to Indian Creek where we make our first camp.

David Kellogg's journal, 1858