Life on the Santa Fe Trail

The Santa Fe Trail ran from Independence, Missouri, to Santa Fe, New Mexico. The Trail opened in 1821, the year Mexico gained its independence from Spain. A decade later, the Trail had two main routes: the Mountain Fork, which went through Colorado, and the Cimarron Fork, which went through Kansas. Travel along the Trail reached its height after the Mexican Cession in 1848. The Civil War brought travel along the Santa Fe Trail to a halt, but people began traveling again after the war ended in 1865. The introduction of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad in 1879 made wagon travel a less attractive option, and the Santa Fe Trail fell into disuse.

When the pioneers who travelled the Trail decided to leave on their journey, they needed to consider several things. They had to plan ahead. Some of the things they had to consider were possible bad weather along the trail, food for their livestock, and a supply of water. They would take as many supplies as they could with them. Some of the food they would take included: yeast for baking, crackers, cornmeal, meat, eggs, dried meat, potatoes, rice, beans, and a big barrel of water. The pioneers might even take some chocolate for special occasions. They would also take a cow if they had one. They would use it for milk and meat. Pioneers made their own clothing so they brought cloth to sew, needles, thread, pins, scissors, and leather to fix worn-out shoes. They had to make their own repairs so they brought saws, hammers, axes, nails, string and knives.

The pioneers traveled in wagons, usually made of hickory, oak, or maple. The wagon could not carry more than 2,000 pounds. On the outside of the wagon, a canvas pulled across hoops kept out the rain, wind, and the hot sunshine. Pioneers would rub oil on the canvas to make it waterproof. Inside the wagon there were many hooks where the pioneers could hang weapons, clothes, milk cans, etc. When they were on the trail it was very noisy because all the pots and pans hanging off the wagons were clanging against each other. The wagons would travel in a straight single line making them look like a slow-moving train. If the trail was wide enough they would spread out to get away from the dust. At night the wagon master would have the wagons form a big circle for protection. Sometimes the children would play inside the wagon circle after dinner and just before bed time.

Children also had chores that included milking their cows, fetching water from a stream or a river that was nearby, helping their parents cook food, washing dishes, collecting buffalo chips or wood for the fire, shaking out dusty blankets and quilts, and hanging beef jerky to dry in the sun.

On many days the caravan would only travel ten to fifteen miles. On rainy and muddy days they might only travel one mile. It would take them five to seven days just to travel the distance we can drive a car in a single hour.

Each morning the pioneers would get up before daylight and gather their livestock and cook breakfast. Many times they would prepare lunch as well. After breakfast around 7:00 a.m. they hitched up the oxen and started down the trail. Since the wagon was so bumpy the pioneers who were not driving the wagon would walk behind or next to it much of the time. They would stop at lunchtime and rest for an hour or two. After a rest period they would travel down the trail until about four or five p.m. At night after they circled their wagons, they would gather around the campfires and sing songs, dance, tell stories and visit. Sometimes they slept inside the wagon but they also slept under the wagon, in a tent, and sometimes under the stars.