

Back on the Trail, Jornada del Muerto

Every account by those who rode the Santa Fé Trail and who took the Cimarron Cutoff has one thing in common, all mention, directly or by implication, the threat of “no water.” Although there were many other exigencies with which to concern oneself, this was the potential problem universally feared by every trail rider.

The Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, better known as the Gateway Arch, has an excellent gift shop with a marvelous selection of books on the opening of the West. I, unfortunately for my budget, discovered this fact in January when I purchased some excellent books on the Santa Fé Trail. One is a part of a series called Voyage of Discovery. It is by Dan Murphy entitled simply, Santa Fe Trail. Our next adventure on the Jornada will be related by Murphy beginning on page 35.

Murphy, Dan. Santa Fe Trail. Las Vegas: KC Publications, 1994; pp. 35-37:

[NOTE: Murphy begins his account at the Middle Crossing near present-day Ingalls, Kansas, about five miles west of Cimarron, Kansas, on the Arkansas River.]

Decision point. There were two routes from here to Santa Fé. Follow the Arkansas into present-day Colorado, then over craggy Raton Pass and down the front range of the Rockies, to the gap where you could slip across to Santa Fé. Or cross the Arkansas River here and take a shortcut, cutting southwest toward New Mexico. It was shorter—but dry. And therein lay the rub. It was sand hillocks south of here, a terrible, dry haul to the Cimarron River. And would you find the Cimarron? Sometimes you went by compass like a ship on the sea, until ruts were clear. And when you got there, one watercourse looked like another, usually dry.

Still, traders liked the cutoff. The hundred miles saved might be a week's jump on the competition, and the dollars might be worth the risk.

The trick was not just to cross the prairie between Kansas City and Santa Fé. Any competent frontiersman with a horse—and that meant any frontiersman—could do that. Francis X. Aubrey made himself a legend by doing it in two hours less than six days. The trick was to drag a wagon across that 900 miles of grass and storm. A horse could carry a man, but a wagon could carry enough to make a man rich. So, the wagon would become the focus of the trip—to push, pull, cajole, repair, curse at, sleep under, modify into a boat, hide behind, sometimes finally to burn. But somehow the wagon and its straining animals had to get the cargo to the customers—who happened to be a third of a continent away.

Traders never did find a good crossing into the Jornada, because there wasn't one. Quicksand and holes bogged and tipped wagons and soaked cargo. The complex harness that hitched the animals to the heavy loads could break, or just as bad, tangle. Teams were unhitched and rehitched to double- and triple-up on the wagons, then crossed back to do it again. Then, while cargo dried in the sun, men filled everything that would hold water, even boots. Cooks prepared food for a couple of days, men and animals took final drinks they'd remember. Then, often in the evening to cross as much as possible in the cool night, they heaved on the wheels and started through the deep sand, leaving the Arkansas behind.

Not only was the Cimarron Desert hard, it came when men, animals, and wagons were weary. The long haul up the prairie had worn them out. Parts already thrice-repaired broke again, even harder to fix again.

The wood of wagon beds and parts shrank in the dry air. As the wooden wheels shrank the iron rims loosened or even came off. Back at the Arkansas they'd put the wheels in the water overnight to soak the wood and thus tighten the rims. But when they came off out here, you did the best you could with shims and wedges.

Indian raids were common on the Cimarron. It was their land, they knew how to survive on it, and besides the pride you could gain in defeating these intruders, there were those unimaginable goods to be had in the wagons!

But Indians or not, the desert would take its toll. Marian Russell in 1852 saw the same mirages others did here: "... a will o' the wisp that beckoned and taunted. Sometimes it would look like a party of mounted Indians and the women would cry and begin counting their children. Sometimes it would look like a tall castle set among the trees, or a blue lake with waves lapping white sand. It danced ever before us ..."

There was another illusion, one noted by the Spanish conquistador Coronado who had ventured onto these same plains some three centuries before. The sweep of the land made it seem as though the land gently sloped upward all around you. In the long afternoon you were an insect, slowly inching across the bottom of a vast bowl that moved along with you, meeting at the horizon the inverted bowl of the sky. Thirsty, weary, sometimes they dozed even as they walked, to jerk awake at the mirage of Indians coming over the rise. Men rested on wagon tongues, sometimes falling asleep to the wagon's monotonous, continual creaking, to fall over and be run over by the wagon—a surprisingly common accident. The Cimarron was no picnic.

There was a reason the wagon wheels shrunk in the dry air, that trail riders flagged under the heat, and that mirages caused natural illusions to become transformed into mental delusions—it was the absence of water. This dry stretch of some sixty miles was known as the Jornada, from the Spanish jornada del muerto, "the journey of death."

Our reason for taking our own pretend trip down the Santa Fé Trail is to dramatize the importance of being able to have available in one's inventory of ideas and in one's long-term memory traces wheel-tracks of righteousness which can resolve problems as they occur in life. Very few problems that life offers can be anticipated. Almost all catch us by surprise. Left with no time to prepare for problems ahead of time, it becomes imperative that we spend periods of prosperity learning basic principles which are fundamental in the solution to almost any exigency.

These principles we have identified and studied as the ten biblical problem-solving devices. They are available through Bible study and form wheel-tracks of righteousness which give divine guidance for the resolution of any circumstance life has to offer.

However, knowing the problem-solving devices and making application under pressure are two very different things. There is however, one major asset available to every believer which gives him the wherewithal to keep moving down the trail when human logic as well as an exhausted body cries out for surrender to the elements.

That concept is the sine qua non of the Christian way of life. Without it, there is no possibility for successful application of doctrine to life. Without it, there is no consistency to one's life, be it spiritual, moral, or social. The world in its fallen state is unquestionably opposed to our survival. There is nothing about this planet which actively contributes to our better health, our physical life, or our daily requirements for continued survival.

Confused, doctrinally ignorant people in these fading days of the second millennium—be they believers or unbelievers—have come to a conclusion reached by the philosophers of every generation: we have been assigned to an isolated planet in a universe of infinite size from which there is no escape.

Such individuals are forced to come to the human-viewpoint conclusion that our continued existence is completely and solely dependent upon utilizing the earth's available resources in order to live another day.

A fear of dying combined with a realization that one is in complete dependence upon the earth's resources for survival causes the heathen mind to drift toward pantheism: a belief that the world itself is God. Thus, proper worship of the world ensures that it will continue to provide us with our necessities of life. If we care for the world enough, then our Earth Mother will see fit to keep us alive.

It is from such worldly rationales that the modern environment movement has been spawned. Fear of death causes the unbeliever to begin a search for a means to attain eternal life. Without a knowledge of God, they inevitably turn to the creation rather than toward the Creator. As a result:

Romans 1:25 - ... they worship and serve the creature [Satan] rather than the Creator [God].

With this in mind it is interesting to consider several facts:

This world was indeed created by God as the only habitable environment for the human race. However, due to man's fall in the Garden, that environment fell.

Romans 8:20 - For the creation was subordinated at the Fall to futility against its own will but because of Him who has subordinated it in the time of hope.

Romans 8:21 - Therefore, the material universe itself shall be set free from slavery to the corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

This passage makes it clear that man's fall caused the Lord to withdraw the automatic universal provision of logistics from the earth.

Because of sin, the environment is fallen and is no longer a spontaneous provider to its inhabitants of an abundant food supply in a perfect, germ-free, dust-free, ozone-free, particulate-free biosphere.

Instead, the creation is at constant odds with its residents over their quest for basic necessities. This emphasizes a principle: fallen mankind is forced to fight for his life in an environment designed to kill him.

In order to survive, man must take personal responsibility to use the talents, abilities, and intelligence God gave him to cultivate the earth's resources in order to survive.

However, there are no guarantees! In order to acquire food, man is forced to deal with weather, insects, animals, diseases, and weeds.

Once fed, he still must confront illness, accident, disease, and plague all of which threaten the life of the well-fed body. And then when all is going right, when prosperity enables the unbeliever to acquire wealth, property, and a human concept of security, his domain is threatened by the tax man, the thief, or the politician.

For this old world to get so much credit for our survival, it surely does present a large number of threats to that survival.

Frustration over this fact causes the unbeliever to become nihilistic. The certainty of failure at the hands of Earth Mother leads to depression, despondency, and psychosis.

Therefore, how is the believer to orient and adjust to such a hostile environment? How is he to live his life knowing that the very planet he lives upon is designed to kill him?

We are reminded of Paul's experiences which he enumerates in:

2 Corinthians 11:26 - I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among the brethren;

2 Corinthians 11:27 - I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

In turn, God promises to all believers that He, no matter what the circumstances, will always provide our necessities: food, clothing, shelter; doctrine and grace:

2 Peter 1:3 - His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us ...