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Santa Fé and the Far West (Letter)

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DOCUMENTARY

On the first page of the issue for December 4, 1841, of *Niles' National Register*, published at Baltimore, appeared the communication herewith, photostat of which was kindly supplied by Dr. F. W. Hodge.

The editor first met this letter in *Nouvelles Annales de Voyages et de Sciences Geographiques*, xciii, 308-313, and used it in part in *Old Santa Fe*, ii, 41, under the misapprehension that the French form was the original. That series consisted of 168 volumes, published at Paris from 1819 to 1860, and it is probable that this particular letter was drawn from the source here reproduced.—L. B. B.

SANTA FE AND THE FAR WEST

From the Evansville (Indiana) Journal

We are permitted by a gentleman residing in the neighboring county of Gibson to take the following extract from a private letter from a friend, dated,

Santa Fe, July 29, 1841.

I left Vincennes on the 23d April for St. Louis, with a view of ascertaining the object of the visit by the company raising for the Pacific ocean. When I arrived at St. Louis, I found I had to proceed to Independence, the upper county on the Missouri river and adjoining the Indian boundary, four hundred miles farther. There I found three different caravans busily recruiting; the reverend bishop Smidth, with a caravan to establish a mission amongst the Blackfeet Indians, in the valley of the Columbia river, who left with the caravan, to California by way of the head waters of the Columbia river, commanded by col. Bartletson and Richma, composed of about ninety persons, male and female. The second to California, composed of about one hundred men

and about thirty women and children—the yearly caravan composed of merchants to this city, Chihuahua and Senora, composed of about eighty men and forty wagons, loaded with merchandise, &c. The caravans all left between the 8th and 10th May. After ascertaining the object of the California caravan, governor Boggs and myself having understood positively a caravan was to leave from Santa Fe to join the one by the way of Columbia, raised ten men and agreed to leave in time to overtake the Santa Fe company at or near the Arkansas, but on the evening previous to our departure the governor's wife was taken unwell, and he was compelled to abandon the adventure. Accordingly, on the 19th May, myself with eight others, with three little wagons loaded with provisions and arms, and three riding mules, left the line of Missouri for the far west.

The Indian country as far as Council Grove, two hundred miles from the line, is perhaps as fine a tract of country as can be found in the world; there is rather a scarcity of timber, but in soil and water none superior. The Council Grove, as it is called, is the ancient site of once a proud and mighty city. It is situated on the main White river, which here forms a crescent or curve of about nine miles in circumference, and contains more than a hundred mounds, half of which are more than ten times as large as those near Vincennes—those in the centre are in the form of a square, many containing a surface of more than two acres, some in the form of a triangle and others perfectly round. Here the Pawnee, Arapaho, Camanchee, Loups, and Eutaw Indians, all of whom are at war with each other, meet and smoke the pipe once a year in peace. Every person and the things are sacred for many miles around this peaceful grove. This ceremony has been handed down for many centuries to the red men by their forefathers, and here their chiefs and great men are brought from hundreds of miles around to be interred; one of whom, but a few weeks before we passed, had a proud mound of stones erected to his memory, with a

pole painted red and a scalp appended thereto, to show that he had been a great brave. The numerous camps every where to be seen around here, at once convince the traveller that here is the great rendezvous of thousands annually. From thence onward, for four hundred miles, there is nothing to be seen but one eternal desert, without one, even one solitary stick of timber to cheer the eye for thirty days. Nothing here is to be had but buffalo dung to cook the food that is used, but of this the whole prairies are covered, and it is an excellent substitute.

We overtook the caravan in sight of the Arkansas, about four hundred miles from the line of the United States and eight hundred from St. Louis, without trouble by the Indians, and attached ourselves thereto for duty in crossing the river, which is much larger than at the mouth, and always muddy and rolling her quicksands into bars almost every hour, so that fords or crossings are dangerous and uncertain. From the Arkansas river the scarcity of water commences, and even the little to be had is so deeply impregnated with salt, sulphur, &c. that stern necessity alone brings the traveller to the use of it. On the Simerone river there are one or two good springs, at one of which we met of the Arapahoe Indians five hundred warriors, who treated us with a proper friendship, elated with their success ten days before, when, in battle, they killed seventy-six Pawnees. We gratified them with encamping on the battle ground, where the unburied bodies were yet almost unbroken. The next day we visited their lodge, six miles from the battle ground, where we had a full view of savage life in a perfect state of nature; amongst five hundred women and children there were but few that had ever before seen the dress and equipage of the white man.

After leaving these good and friendly Indians, we were cheered in eight or ten days with the far distant appearance of the Rocky Mountains. From day to day as we approached them, the beauty of the scenery increased, and

when within twenty miles, the reflection of the sun through the melting snow that eternally crowns their highest peaks is splendid beyond all description. Here the traveller beholds a chain of many hundred, nay, thousands of miles piled up, as it were, until they reach to heaven, with stone uncovered with verdure or shrubs of any kind; nothing but the white caps of snow, and rough and terrific precipices, varied for the eye to behold, until you reach the crossings of Red river, at the foot of the mountain, and here the pine and cedar tree again, on the mountain side and in the valley, greet the eye once more; and here on this plain we had to encounter about three hundred Eutaw warriors, but, after repeated skirmishing, they were fain to retreat, without effecting any damage of consequence. From here to the good town of Bogas we found water, wood, and good cheer. The caravan arrived in this city on the 2d July, all in good health, in less than two months, the quickest trip ever made over the desert.

Now for Santa Fe, or the Holy City. It is situated in a valley 10 miles long, and from 2 to 5 wide, surrounded by immense mountains covered with pine and cedar trees, and affords the most beautiful scene the eye can conceive or mind imagine. Santa Fe is the seat of government of New Mexico, and is commanded by a governor general. It is also a military post, port of entry, and depository of all the ancient archives of the neighboring states. The houses are built of raw bricks, two feet long, six inches deep, and one foot wide, made with straw and mud, and dried in the sun; and such is the durability that many houses more than two hundred years old are standing and look well; they are only one story high, handsomely whitewashed inside, with dirt floors. Even the palace in which his excellency resides has no other than a dirt floor, but they are generally covered with carpets; the houses are covered with stones and dirt, and are flat roofed, perfectly weather proof. The city contains six churches, generally richly fitted out. The population is about eight thousand inhabitants, all rigid Roman

Catholics. It is situated on a small branch of the Rio del Norte, and about 14 miles from the main river, which is near the size of the river Wabash at Vincennes.

The ladies, certainly, are far more beautiful in this country than those of the same ranks in America; their jetty black eyes, slender and delicate frame, with unusual small ankles and feet, together with their gay winning address, make you at once easy and happy in their company. Perhaps no people on earth love dress and attention more than the Spanish ladies and it may be said of a truth, that their amorous flirtations with the men are matters to boast of amongst themselves. They work but little; the fandango and siesta form the diversion of time. The fandango is a lascivious dance, partaking in part of the waltz, cotillion, and many amorous movements, and is certainly handsome and amusing. It is the national dance. In this the governor and most humble citizen move together, and in this consists all their republican boast.

The men are honest—perhaps more so than those of the same class in the United States, proud and vain of their blood—the descendants of the ancient Spaniards of their pure blood—those of the Spaniards and Puebla Indians, the descendants of their great monarch, Montezuma, doubly more so. The pure blood cannot inherit office here; the present governor general, and all the officers of state, are of the mixed blood of Montezuma. This has been the case since the year 1836. In that revolution fell the most honorable and beloved of all the native Spaniards in Mexico, and all his family were banished. In the city there is but one officer of justice, the Alcalde, and he has nothing to do.

The commerce of this place is certainly very considerable; and although there is but one gold mine worked here now, and one copper mine, yet the daily receipts afford about six or seven hundred dollars nett. More than from one to two hundred and twenty hands are employed at work.

The revolution has set every thing aback here in the mining departments, as they were generally held by natives of old Spain, and accounted forfeits to the general government after the revolution. This thing will soon be settled, and then the Holy City will appear in all her gaudy plumage again.

I start in two or three days to California. The company consists of about two hundred Americans and Spaniards, to co-operate on the 1st of January, 1842, with the Columbia caravan, at Monterey, on the bay of San Francisco. We expect the governor will allow us to settle, and concede to us certain lands, &c.