

4-1-1963

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Recommended Citation

Holmes, Kenneth L.. "The Benjamin Cooper Expeditions to Santa Fe in 1822 and 1823." *New Mexico Historical Review* 38, 2 (1963). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol38/iss2/3>

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THE BENJAMIN COOPER EXPEDITIONS TO
SANTA FE IN 1822 AND 1823

By KENNETH L. HOLMES*

WILLIAM BECKNELL was called by Hiram Chittenden "the founder of the Santa Fe trade and the father of the Santa Fe trail."¹ Becknell's expedition from Missouri to Santa Fe in 1821, the year of Missouri's statehood and Mexico's independence, helped to make known the new attitude of the New Mexicans toward Yankee traders. His trip of 1822 with wagons revealed greater possibilities than might have been realized if the trade were to depend on pack animals.

There has been a tendency, however, to emphasize the Becknell trips at the expense of several other Missouri travelers who played a significant part in opening the Santa Fe trade. Important among these venturesome men from the Boonslick country were the Coopers: Benjamin, Stephen, and Braxton, who went out with parties in 1822 and 1823.

The real leader of these expeditions was "Colonel" Benjamin Cooper. Ben Cooper was a Revolutionary War veteran,² having taken part in the Bluelick fight in Kentucky.³ He had fought in Indian skirmishes in Kentucky⁴ before emigrating to the Missouri frontier in 1808. He led a few members of the Cooper clan into the Boonslick country in that year. They were among the first settlers in that important area.⁵ They settled about a mile below Arrow Rock, for many years the meeting place of the Indian tribes for obtaining

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1. *A History of the American Fur Trade of the Far West* (Stanford, California), II, p. 501.

2. Mary Louise Dalton, "Names of Revolutionary Soldiers Known to Be Buried in Missouri," *Missouri Historical Review*, II, No. 1 (October, 1907), pp. 55-56.

3. Louis Houck, *A History of Missouri* (Chicago, 1908), III, p. 121, fn. 38.

4. *Ibid.*

5. John L. Thomas, "Some Historic Lines in Missouri," *Missouri Historical Review*, III, No. 3 (April, 1909), p. 213.

arrow-head material.⁶ Because of the hostility of the Indians and the lack of clarity as to Indian rights, the government had ordered the Cooper settlers to move closer to St. Louis. For a short time they lived at Hancock's Bottom, near St. Charles; then they moved to Loutre Island, not far below the mouth of the Gasconade. In February, 1810, Ben Cooper and a body of Kentuckians and Tennesseans started back into the Boonslick area and settled on both sides of the Missouri, laying the foundations of Boonsville and Franklin.⁷ Benjamin Cooper is usually given credit for having blazed the "Boonslick Trace" up the Missouri from St. Charles.⁸

In 1811 Benjamin Cooper was made a justice of the peace in the Femme Osage District by Governor Benjamin Howard.⁹ With the coming of the War of 1812 he was prominent in the frontier Indian fighting, being listed as a major in the executive journals of 1814.¹⁰

Cooper was involved in a partnership producing saltpeter for making gunpowder with John Ferrel and the ubiquitous John Day, who died in 1820 in far away Oregon in a valley which today bears his name.¹¹

The numerous newspaper references to Benjamin Cooper during the 1820's invariably call him "Col. Cooper." On August 19, 1824, Alphonso Wetmore wrote, in a report prepared for Congressman John Scott a statement purporting to tell of the importance of the Santa Fe trade for citizens of Missouri, that he had obtained most of his information from "Col. Benjamin Cooper." Wetmore called Cooper "a man of

6. T. C. Rainey, *Along the Old Trail: Pioneer Sketches of Arrow Rock and Vicinity* (Marshall, Missouri, 1924), pp. 9, 11.

7. Thomas, *op. cit.*

8. Raymond D. Thomas, "Missouri Valley Settlement," *Missouri Historical Review*, XXI, No. 1 (October, 1926), p. 32, fn. 42.

9. Thomas Maitland Marshall (editor), *The Life and Papers of Frederick Bates*, II (St. Louis, 1926), p. 196.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 286.

11. "Last Will and Testament of John Day," *Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society*, XVII (December, 1916), p. 377.

good understanding, which, I believe, is not in the least impaired by age."¹²

The other two Coopers associated with the old colonel in the records of the opening of the Santa Fe trade were his two nephews, Braxton and Stephen. These were the sons of his younger brother, Sarshall, who was killed by the Indians on April 6, 1815.¹³ In later years the two younger men were often confused in the reports of the Santa Fe journeys and were each given credit by sundry authorities for being in charge of the Cooper expedition caravans.

Josiah Gregg wrote in *Commerce of the Prairies* of a party of Colonel Cooper and sons,"¹⁴ meaning undoubtedly the two nephews. Max L. Moorhead, in his edition of Gregg, footnotes the aforementioned reference indicating Benjamin Cooper as the leader of the 1822 party, but erroneously dubbing Stephen Cooper as the leader of the one in 1823.¹⁵ Stephen did not help matters in later years, when he had become a California settler, by giving himself most of the credit for whatever creditable happened on both journeys.¹⁶ Stephen's friend, Joel P. Walker, who went out on the 1823 Cooper expedition, confused matters even worse by saying in a reminiscence for Hubert Howe Bancroft in 1878 that he and Stephen Cooper had "raised a company of thirty one men

12. "Petition of Sundry Inhabitants of the State of Missouri, Upon the Subject of a Communication between the Said State and the Internal Provinces of Mexico, with a Letter from Alphonso Wetmore upon the Same Subject. February 14, 1825." *Senate Document 79*, Eighteenth Congress, Second Session (Washington, D. C., 1825), p. 5.

13. "News and Comments," *Missouri Historical Review*, XI, No. 2 (January, 1917), p. 231.

14. Max L. Moorhead (editor), Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1958), p. 14.

15. *Ibid.*, fn. 12.

16. Stephen Cooper told his story, essentially the same, but with slight variation in details, in three places:

1. "Sketch of the Life of an Old Pioneer of Missouri and California," *Colusa (California) Sun*, June 17, 1871, hereafter referred to as "Cooper, *Colusa Sun*."

2. Memoir in *History of Howard and Cooper Counties, Missouri* (St. Louis, Missouri, 1883), p. 154, hereafter referred to as "Cooper, *Howard and Cooper Counties*."

3. *Sketches from the Life, Maj. Stephen Cooper* (Oakland, California, 1888), copy in Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California, hereafter referred to as "Cooper, *Sketches from Life*."

and started for Santa Fe about the middle of May."¹⁷ Walker here is wrong about his date, too, for his story is about the 1823 journey. The contemporary reports in the *Missouri Intelligencer*, pioneer newspaper of Franklin, refer to "Col. Cooper" as leader of both the 1822 and the 1823 expeditions *without exception*. Although Benjamin Cooper must have counted on his two nephews for a great deal of help, the old veteran was the real commander of both parties, and it is fair to call them the Benjamin Cooper expeditions.

The first of these evidently came about as a response to the news brought back from Santa Fe by William Becknell in January 1822. Becknell returned to tell of a favorable reception by the New Mexicans, of great profits to be realized in a trade with the "Interior Provinces," and of the ease with which a journey could be made from Missouri to New Mexico through open country and up a gentle slope.¹⁸ He, himself, projected taking wagons on his next trip and planned to leave in May. The 1822 expedition led by Benjamin Cooper got under way about the middle of May, a few days before the second Becknell party, which left the Missouri settlements on May 22.¹⁹ There were fifteen men in the Cooper caravan.²⁰

On the way out the Coopers met the Hugh Glenn-Jacob Fowler party on the latter's return trip. It was at the Point of Rocks on the Arkansas River that contact between the two groups was made. Jacob Fowler wrote in his inimitable style in his journal that on "Wensday 12th June 1822" they met "Conl Coopers party from Boons Lick on their Way to the Spanish Settlement With Some goods and Some traps to take Bever."²¹

The *Missouri Intelligencer* published a mistaken report on September 3 that the Cooper party was in dire circumstances,

17. Joel P. Walker, "Opening of the Santa Fe Trade," ms., Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California.

18. "Journal of Two Expeditions from Boone's Lick to Santa Fe," (Franklin) *Missouri Intelligencer*, April 22, 1823.

19. *Missouri Intelligencer*, September 3, 1822.

20. Cooper, *Howard and Cooper Counties*.

21. Elliott Coues (editor), *Journal of Jacob Fowler* (New York, 1898), p. 166.

having been "robbed by Indians, and left in a starving condition."²² This proved to be untrue, as was later admitted in the columns of the *Intelligencer*, which corrected the story of the party by saying he had learned "from a respectable gentleman of the company, with whom we have conversed, that nothing serious occurred to interrupt their progress during their absence."²³

The trip was later summarized briefly by Stephen Cooper :

Nothing worthy of mention happened to us on this expedition till we arrived at Tous, about sixty miles from Santa Fe, when, not knowing what our reception would be at that place, and having heard that orders had been given to stop us, the company halted, and I rode on alone to Santa Fe. I arrived there one Sunday morning, and rode through the streets some time before I could find any one with whom I could talk. Finally a well dressed, good-looking young man came up to me, who could speak very good English. He asked me if I had met any men on the way, looking for me? I told him no. He said a party had been sent out to take me and bring me to the Governor. He wanted me to go with him and give myself up. To this I agreed. He then wanted me to disarm myself, which I refused to do. He said it would never do to go into the presence of the Governor armed, but I told him I would not give up my arms any way. I had a rifle, a big knife suspended from my neck hanging down in front of me, and a large horse-pistol by my side. Finally, after a good deal of talk, he conducted me to the Governor's house just as I was. The Governor had just stepped out of the door as we rode up, and on my making my errand known he received me very politely, and gave permission for my company to come and trade, which they did accordingly, disposing of their goods advantageously.²⁴

The governor told Cooper, "Do the best you can and encourage a trade with us."²⁵ There is no certainty as to the identity of this governor. From July 5 to November, 1822, Francisco X. Chaves was *jefe político* and D. Facundo Melgares was *jefe militar*. In the fall of 1822 both functions were combined

22. *Missouri Intelligencer*, September 3, 1822.

23. *Ibid.*, October 8, 1822.

24. Cooper, *Colusa Sun*.

25. Cooper, *Sketches from Life*.

in one office. It seems likely that Stephen Cooper's interview was with Governor Chaves, but one cannot be sure.²⁶

The Ben Cooper party returned from New Mexico as summer waned into fall, arriving in Franklin, Missouri, again early in October.²⁷ The *Intelligencer* reported the arrival and told of the party having "met with some trifling losses on their return."²⁸ They brought back "specie, jacks, jennets, and mules."²⁹

In contrast to the above rather sketchy picture to be gleaned of the first expedition led by Colonel Benjamin Cooper from Missouri to Santa Fe, there is more information about the second trip a year later.

The *Missouri Intelligencer* gave them an enthusiastic send-off in its issue of May 13, 1823:

A company, consisting of about thirty individuals, left this county during the last week, on a commercial adventure to Santa Fe. They will proceed to Fort Osage, from whence they will take a direct course to the place of their destination. Each of them is provided with one or two pack-horses, and mules, on an average, about two hundred dollars worth of goods. We are gratified to learn that they have selected Col. Cooper, of our most respectable citizens (who visited that place last summer), to command them. His knowledge of the place, and his experience in Indian warfare, admirably qualify him for the task, and render him a very valuable acquisition to the company. The whole party is well armed, and will no doubt be able to resist successfully an attack from any of the wandering tribes of savages which it may encounter on the way. We wish the greatest success to so worthy a spirit of liberal enterprise.

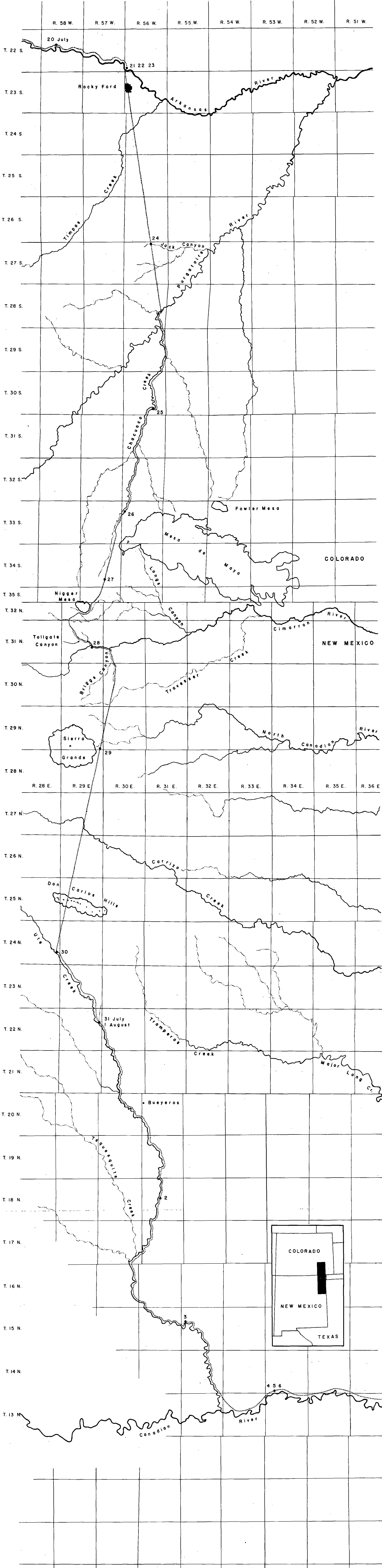
So the first 1823 caravan was on its way to Santa Fe. It is to be noted that the investment per capita had increased markedly since the first Becknell expedition in 1821, when

26. Lansing Bartlett Bloom, "New Mexico under Mexican Administration, 1821-1846," *Old Santa Fe*, I, No. 2 (October, 1913), pp. 154-155.

27. *Missouri Intelligencer*, October 8, 1822.

28. *Ibid.*

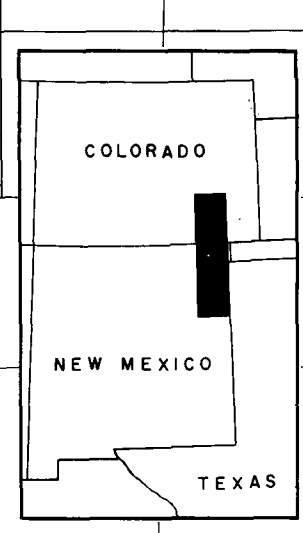
29. "Petition of Sundry Inhabitants . . . with a Letter from Alphonso Wetmore," *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.



R. 58 W. R. 57 W. R. 56 W. R. 55 W. R. 54 W. R. 53 W. R. 52 W. R. 51 W.

T. 22 S.
T. 23 S.
T. 24 S.
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R. 28 E. R. 29 E. R. 30 E. R. 31 E. R. 32 E. R. 33 E. R. 34 E. R. 35 E. R. 36 E.



each man was asked to put up a mere ten dollars.³⁰ Now each was starting with a \$200 ante of goods to be traded in the Mexican provinces. Their stock was made up principally of dry goods.³¹

The company traveled west until they reached the Little Arkansas about 300 miles from Franklin. On the first of June they were attacked by Indians, who stampeded their horses. Joel Walker described the event in later years with great vividness:

The plains were literally covered with Buffalo. Two men who were guarding the Animals came in and said they thought there were Indians near by. I told them to drive in the animals immediately. I had hardly given the order before bang! bang!! bang!!! went the guns of the Indians who also stampeded our horses. Cooper returned the fire. I was bare-headed, barefooted and without clothes, but I ran about a quarter of a mile thinking some of the horses would stop. I then heard some one following, and saw the Indians driving horses: we yelled and broke for camp. They caught four of the horses. I then with four of the Campers mounted a horse and started in pursuit of the Indians which we continued until 10 o'clock that night.³²

The Indians got away into the sand hills with fifty head of horses and mules, leaving only nine. According to Stephen Cooper, no member of the Santa Fe party was killed or wounded, but he, himself, killed one Indian.³³

They were thus left in an impossible position for continuing to Santa Fe, so it was decided that most of them would stay with the goods while a small party returned to the settlements for more horses. On June 17 the *Intelligencer* told of the calamity which had befallen the expedition and reported that six men had returned for more stock. The newspaper blamed the attack on the Osages and conjectured that

30. *Missouri Intelligencer*, June 25, 1821.

31. "Petition of Sundry Inhabitants . . . with a Letter from Alphonso Wetmore," *op. cit.*, p. 6.

32. Walker, ms., *op. cit.*

33. Cooper, *Colusa Sun*.

the Indians, numbering about twenty, had followed Ben Cooper and his party for eighty miles with the view towards horse-stealing.

When the six reached their party twenty-two days after leaving for the east, they were amazed to see "fully fifteen hundred Indians in and around the same."³⁴ Some of the little group suggested that they turn around and go back, but they finally found the courage to approach the main camp and found that the Indians were friendly Caws on a buffalo hunt.³⁵

The reunited caravan meandered the Arkansas, stopping occasionally to hunt buffalo. In crossing the noted *jornada* between the Arkansas and the Cimarrón and beyond they suffered greatly from lack of water. Stephen Cooper wrote later that just after noon one day several of the men gave out and were unable to travel:

The rest of the company, with the exception of myself, cut the lash ropes from our packs, scattered the goods upon the ground, took the best horses and dashed off like crazy men for water, leaving me and the eight men behind. Some of those who were about to leave us fell on their knees and plead with me to go with them and save my own life, urging as a reason that the men were bound to die, and that I could do them no good by staying. I said I would not leave them as a breath of life was left in one of them; that if they found water they should return to us. This was one or two o'clock in the afternoon. When it became dark I made a fire of Buffalo chips, and fired guns in the air. About midnight four of the men returned with water, and we were all saved.³⁶

Others of the men ran onto a dirty pond which had been wallowed by buffalos. They remained there for two days, fighting off buffalo all the while. Joel Walker killed one, skinned it, and put water inside the skin of the thigh. Then

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

they left for the Arkansas looking for the rest of the party.³⁷

Joel Walker then told about one of those chance encounters on the trail, which, as R. L. Duffus has suggested, "are among the most fascinating and baffling features of some of the early narratives . . . they hint at so much and tell so little."³⁸ Walker and his wandering friends saw at a distance a group of men whom they supposed to be other members of the Cooper caravan. "I kept my eyes on them," says Walker, "and saw, as I supposed, an Indian with his hair flying up and down. He came up and to my immense astonishment I saw he was my brother, Capt. Joe Walker, who had started the year before trapping."³⁹

This "Joe Walker" was none other than the great trapper, Joseph Reddeford Walker, "West Wind," as the Indians called him, who was guiding members of the James Baird-Samuel Chambers party to a store of goods which they had buried when snowed in during the previous winter. The goods had already been found and unearthed to be taken on into the New Mexico settlements. This locale came later to be called "The Caches," and the holes in the ground were visible for many years, becoming a landmark along the Cimarrón cutoff. Gregg wrote, "Few travellers pass this way without visiting these mossy pits."⁴⁰

The Walker brothers and the other men continued the search for the remainder of the Cooper party and soon located them at the brink of a pond of water left by the rain-storm. There was a happy reunion on the banks of the Arkansas.⁴¹

Joseph Reddeford Walker had with him a Comanche Indian, Francisco Largo, probably a tall, lank fellow, who made large claims as a guide in that country. In later years he did

37. Walker, ms., *op. cit.*

38. R. L. Duffus, *The Santa Fe Trail* (New York, 1930), pp. 77-78.

39. Walker, ms., *op. cit.*

40. Josiah Gregg, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

41. Walker, ms., *op. cit.*

become quite an effective guide.⁴² On this trip, however, he proved undependable, and the party was soon astray again and short of water. There were 55 of them now in the combined parties, along with 200 horses and mules.⁴³

The ensuing story that Joel Walker tells of the agonizing days that followed indicates that it is probable that Josiah Gregg's tale of the sufferings of the second Becknell expedition really applies to the joint Benjamin Cooper-Joseph Walker parties.⁴⁴ Gregg has been the authority for the tradition that William Becknell's men had resorted to drinking the blood of mules and even drank the contents of a buffalo's stomach. One of the men is supposed to have said about the last, "that nothing ever passed his lips which gave him such exquisite delight as his first draught of that filthy beverage."⁴⁵

R. L. Duffus suggested in 1930, "It is barely possible that the near-tragedy in the desert happened, not to Becknell but to Cooper the next year, 1823."⁴⁶ The fact is, that Becknell had wagons in 1822, and Gregg's story shows no knowledge of this. Also Becknell, himself, related the story of a party other than his which had to drink the blood of their mules.⁴⁷ The one in question is probably this combined expedition of Colonel Cooper and Joe Walker.

One of the men, William Huddart,⁴⁸ had become isolated from the rest and, when they found him, he had killed a buffalo and was sucking the blood of the animal to quench his thirst. He had become greatly confused; when they gave him a drink of water and put him on a mule, he insisted, "I had better have some more blood!"⁴⁹ Huddart, according to Joel Walker, "had crawled into the dead Buffalo and came out

42. Kate L. Gregg, *Road to Santa Fe* (Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1952).

43. Walker, ms., *op. cit.*

44. Gregg tells of the experience on pp. 14-15.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

46. Duffus, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

47. *Missouri Intelligencer*, June 25, 1825.

48. There is a brief story of William Huddart's later experiences in the Santa Fe trade in the *Missouri Intelligencer*, April 19, 1825.

49. Walker, ms., *op. cit.*

a specimen horrible to behold."⁵⁰ The men gave him a bath and a hair cut so that he looked more like a human being.

Soon the joint expedition reached the Cimarrón Springs, and during the remainder of their journey they "had no further difficulty."⁵¹

Upon their arrival in the New Mexico settlements they found that, on the whole, the people were friendly. Their dry goods from Missouri caused quite a stir. Joel Walker says, "We had two bales of bleached domestic which we sold for Forty five dollars a bale. We could have sold calico and cotton for any price asked. A little looking glass worth about ten cents was easily sold for a dollar."⁵²

While they were in New Mexico, one member of the party died, a "Mr. Mars," a Boone county man, who "unfortunately fell a victim to fever."⁵³

The return trip was uneventful enough to merit no word from the chroniclers of the party. They reached Franklin toward the end of October. The *Missouri Intelligencer* was glowing in its praise of the venture and dubbed the trip a profitable one, mentioning "above 400 Jacks, Jennets, and Mules, a quantity of beaver, and a considerable sum in specie."⁵⁴ The frontier newspaper pointed out that "the beaver and the livestock will bear a profit by transportation to some of the older states, and the specie, in these dull times, will serve to impart activity to the business of the country."⁵⁵

The story of the Benjamin Cooper party and its returns made national news, being publicized in the December 13, 1823, edition of *Niles Register*.⁵⁶ The Niles story was a paraphrase of the above-mentioned *Missouri Intelligencer* report. Three days later, on December 16th, a dispatch was sent from the Mexican embassy in Washington, D. C., to the Secretary

50. *Ibid.*

51. Cooper, *Colusa Sun*.

52. Walker, ms., *op. cit.*

53. *Missouri Intelligencer*, October 28, 1823.

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Niles Weekly Register*, December 13, 1823.

of Foreign Relations at Mexico City, quoting the *Niles Register* story.⁵⁷

Colonel Benjamin Cooper, his two nephews, and the other men brought back to the Missouri settlements the three principal items of commerce which would become staples among the imports from Santa Fe through the years ahead. The "Jacks, Jennets, and Mules" were part of the continuing influx of jack stock which laid the basis for the Missouri mule business, which would grow to dynamic proportions due to the expansion of the cotton kingdom down the Mississippi.⁵⁸

The importation of beaver furs from the "Interior Provinces" would stimulate the penetration of New Mexico and even far-off California by American trappers such as Ewing Young, William Wolfskill, Ceran St. Vrain, and many others and, along with the further demand for mules and mulestock, stimulate the opening of the New Mexico-California trails and the exploitation of the great Colorado basin.

The advent of Mexican specie would give financial impetus to the burgeoning frontier communities in Missouri and adjacent areas and help to alleviate some of the inadequacies of a barter economy in that region.

The Santa Fe trade had a multiple paternity, and one of the fathers was Colonel Benjamin Cooper of the Boonslick country.

57. "Torrens to Secretary of Foreign Relations," December 16, 1823, *La Diplomacia Mexicana* (Mexico City, 1912), II, p. 13, reported in William R. Manning, "Diplomacy Concerning the Santa Fe Road," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, I, No. 4 (March, 1915), p. 517.

58. For a study of this subject the best reference is John Ashton, "History of Jack Stock and Mules in Missouri," *The Monthly Bulletin*, Missouri State Board of Agriculture, Jefferson City, XXII, No. 8 (August, 1924).