

1-1-1988

## Marc Simmons' Santa Fe Trail: A Review Essay

David Dary

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr>

---

### Recommended Citation

Dary, David. "Marc Simmons' Santa Fe Trail: A Review Essay." *New Mexico Historical Review* 63, 1 (1988).  
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol63/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Historical Review* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

# Marc Simmons' Santa Fe Trail: A Review Essay

---

DAVID DARY

Anyone familiar with recently published books concerning the Santa Fe Trail knows the name Marc Simmons. Since 1984, he has authored four published books—one with photographer Joan Myers—dealing with the trail. He also has become closely associated with efforts to preserve, protect, and promote the trail, and is currently president of the newly formed Santa Fe Trail Association, a non-profit organization. Through his published efforts, he is giving new life to the history of the trail with a modern perspective.

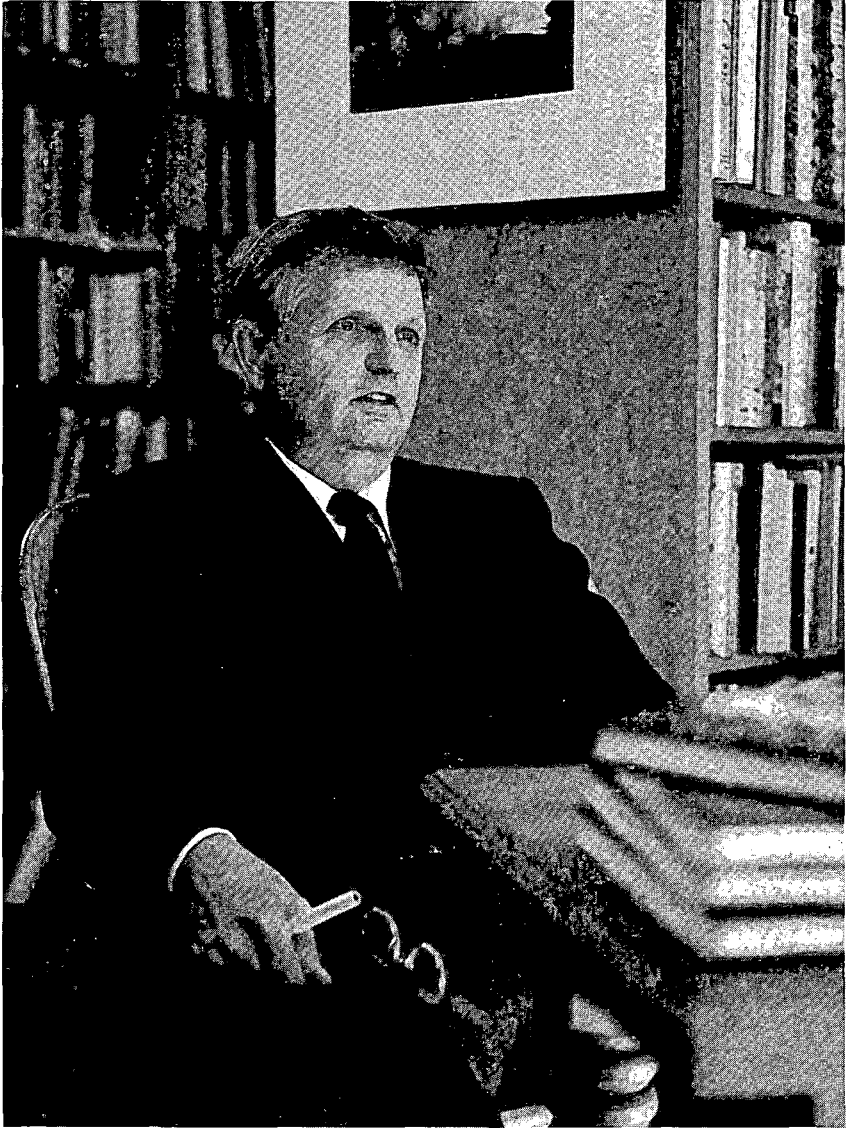
Simmons' love affair with the Southwest, and in turn the Santa Fe Trail, goes back to his youth when, as he recalled, "I started reading and collecting books on the area, and later, after delving deeply into primary historical sources, I began writing my own books and teaching."<sup>1</sup>

Born in 1937, Simmons received an undergraduate degree in Latin American Studies from the University of Texas, Austin, in 1958. Two years later he received his master's degree in Inter-American Affairs

---

David Dary is professor of journalism in the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications in the University of Kansas and author of the award-winning *Cowboy Culture* (1981) and *Entrepreneurs of the Old West* (1986).

1. Joan Myers and Marc Simmons, *Along the Santa Fe Trail* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), xvii.



Marc Simmons. Courtesy Marc Simmons.

(another name for Latin American Studies) from the University of New Mexico, where in 1965 he was awarded a Ph.D. in history. Two years before he completed his doctorate, Simmons purchased one hundred fifty acres four miles from Cerrillos, about twenty miles southwest of Santa Fe. When not working on his doctorate, he constructed a small adobe house on his property located in what is called "the Little Garden of the Gods," sandy, red-rock country in a region well-known for mining. Nearby are turquoise, lead, and gold mines.<sup>2</sup>

"Its dirt floor and lack of modern conveniences gave meaning to the definition of 'roughing it,' but the hardships I considered minor, especially since the lack of twentieth-century encumbrances allowed me to live economically and work, in isolation, uninterrupted," wrote Simmons in 1986.<sup>3</sup>

His Spanish-style adobe house cost \$127 to build in 1963, and for ten years it was his home, but it lacked modern conveniences. He hauled water from Cerrillos and gathered juniper and piñon wood to burn in his fireplace. During the years that followed, Simmons constructed a small library (now a guest house), a large adobe house where he now lives, and a much larger library to house his many books, research documents, and an office. His home today resembles a Spanish-style compound of scattered adobe buildings. Although Simmons drilled a water well in 1985 and now does not have to haul water from Cerrillos, he still does not have electricity and the modern conveniences it brings, nor does he have indoor plumbing. He relies on fireplaces and wood stoves for heating. When he is home and not spending time conducting research in a library at Santa Fe or Albuquerque or at the site of some historic event, he relies on a post office mailbox in Cerrillos as his link to the modern world.<sup>4</sup>

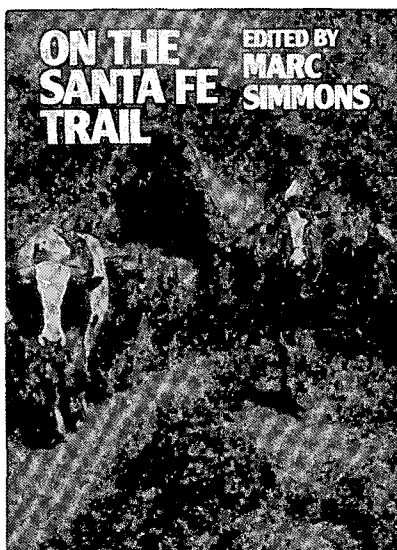
"Friends [have] accused me of wanting to turn back the clock, a charge I have consistently denied," wrote Simmons in 1986. "I entertain no desire to experience the Indian raids, smallpox epidemics, and poverty of books that characterized life on the southwestern frontier. But while I may not wish to see the clock turned back, I don't mind winding it up again. That is to say, a vicarious retreat into the past in search of what is interesting, useful, and entertaining I find a perfectly acceptable activity, even when practically everyone is stretching his neck toward the future and the far horizon of the Computer Age."<sup>5</sup>

2. Interview with Marc Simmons, November 10, 1987.

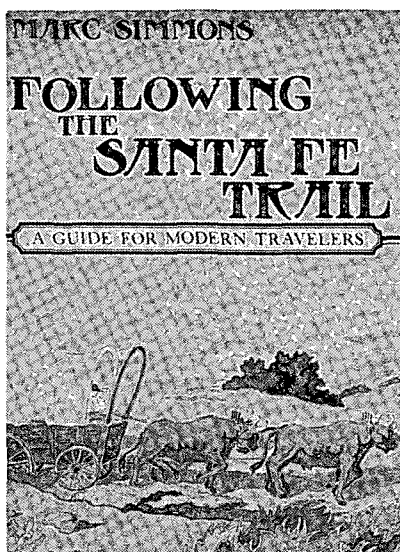
3. Myers and Simmons, *Along the Santa Fe Trail*, xvii.

4. Interview with Marc Simmons, November 10, 1987.

5. Myers and Simmons, *Along the Santa Fe Trail*, xvii.



*On the Santa Fe Trail.* Edited by Marc Simmons. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986. ix + 149 pp. Illustrations, map, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$19.95 cloth, \$7.95 paper.)

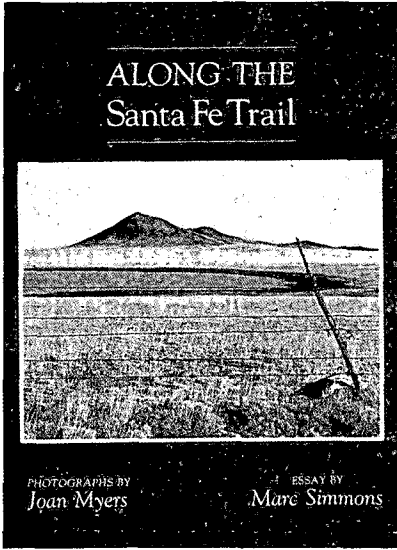


*Following the Santa Fe Trail: A Guide for Modern Travelers.* By Marc Simmons. (Santa Fe: Ancient City Press, 1986. xvii + 214 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendixes, index. \$22.95 cloth, \$10.95 paper.)

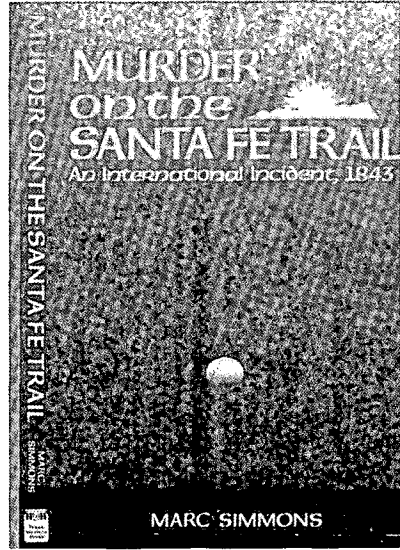
After receiving his doctorate in 1965, he spent two years teaching at the University of New Mexico, Colorado College in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and working for the Peace Corps in Santa Fe. In 1968, he went back to school and graduated from the North Texas Farrier School in Mineral Wells, Texas. Returning to Cerrillos, he earned his living from shoeing horses in northern New Mexico, and writing. "I'm not sure I could ever hold a regular job. I've never had an eight-to-five job." And Simmons has never married. "I've come close a couple of times, but finding a woman who wants to live as primitive a life as I do, well, such a woman is hard to find," he added.<sup>6</sup>

Although Simmons had explored portions of the Santa Fe Trail in New Mexico as a young man, it was not until 1978 that he made his first trip over the trail on assignment for the *National Geographic Society*. He contributed a chapter on the Santa Fe Trail in the society's book titled *Trails West*, published in 1979. By then, he already had published privately a seven-page pamphlet titled *Opening the Santa Fe Trail* (1971)

6. Interview with Marc Simmons, June 1986.



*Along the Santa Fe Trail.* By Joan Myers and Marc Simmons. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986. xxi + 184 pp. Illustrations, map, bibliography. \$39.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)



*Murder on the Santa Fe Trail: An International Incident, 1843.* By Marc Simmons. (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1987. xviii + 92 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$15.00.)

to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the opening of the trail. This now scarce pamphlet recalls the circumstances that led to the founding of the trail and details of the opening of the trail by Missouri trader William Becknell.<sup>7</sup> He also had written the Santa Fe Trail entry in *The Reader's Encyclopedia of the American West*, edited by Howard R. Lamar and published in 1977.<sup>8</sup>

Between 1978 and 1984, Simmons made five or six round trips over the trail between New Mexico and Missouri. Each round trip took two to three weeks, and he sometimes camped on the trail. His trips led to his *Following the Santa Fe Trail: A Guide for Modern Travelers* first published in Santa Fe in 1984. He made one or two more round trips over the trail and then revised his guide and included new maps and illustrations. The second edition was published in 1986. This book

7. Marc Simmons, *Opening the Santa Fe Trail* (Cerrillos, New Mexico: Galisteo Press, 1971).

8. Marc Simmons, "Santa Fe, New Mexico" and "Santa Fe and Chihuahua Trail," in Howard R. Lamar, ed., *Reader's Encyclopedia of the American West* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1977), 1082-84, 1084-85.

provides the reader with an up-to-date guide to the trail and its history using modern highways and other landmarks, and Simmons' introduction provides much background relating to existing markers and monuments, where trail ruts may still be seen, and advice for the modern traveler wishing to follow the route of the trail. The book has since filled a great need and has renewed interest in the trail.<sup>9</sup>

Two previous guides—Margaret Long's *The Santa Fe Trail* (1954) and Hobart E. Stocking's *The Road to Santa Fe* (1971)—filled the void in their days, but they are not as current nor as complete as Simmons' 1986 guide.<sup>10</sup>

Simmons' next published work was *Along the Santa Fe Trail* (1986) in which he teamed up with Santa Fe photographer Joan Myers to produce two personal, contemporary views of the trail. Myers' photographs depict not only landmarks but the vast open space traversed by the trail. Simmons' word picture recalls original accounts of those who traveled the trail taken from journals, diaries, and early newspapers and reflects his own experiences following the trail in modern times.<sup>11</sup>

The same year that *Along the Santa Fe Trail* was published by the University of New Mexico Press, the University Press of Kansas published Simmons' *On the Santa Fe Trail*, a collection of twelve contemporary narratives and reports relating to the active days of the trail

---

9. Marc Simmons, *Following the Santa Fe Trail: A Guide for Modern Travelers* (Santa Fe: Ancient City Press, 1984). This 215-page first edition uses as a cover illustration a painting titled "The Santa Fe Trail" by Frank Tenney Johnson. The revised and enlarged second edition with 214 pages was published in 1986 by the same publisher with a different cover illustration depicting wagons traversing the Santa Fe Trail. The second edition contains additional maps and illustrations, corrections, and additional material not in the first edition.

10. Margaret Long, *The Santa Fe Trail: Following the Old Historic Trails of the Modern Highways* (Denver: W. H. Kistler Stationery Company, 1954), is a 281-page guide that includes careful mileage readings over the route from Westport, Missouri, to Santa Fe. Separate logs for side trips on variant routes are also given. This guide includes the texts of many of the granite markers placed along the trail by the Daughters of the American Revolution, a list of New Mexico stage stations, and the logs of many early travelers over the trail. Unfortunately, the guide was produced before the Interstate Highway system was completed and many secondary highways were rerouted and renumbered. Hobert E. Stocking's *The Road to Santa Fe* (New York: Hastings House, 1971) was prepared by a geologist and trail buff. Unfortunately the road directions lack clarity for the reader, and the work does not mention some important points along the trail. It is much better for the geology of the trail and historical information. Both works are out of print.

11. Simmons and Myers, *Along the Santa Fe Trail*. Photographs are by Myers; an essay by Simmons. This work is the combination of two personal, contemporary views of the trail. Simmons' narrative text, pages 3–87, reflects his personal travels of the trail. His preface, pages xvii–xxi, tells of Simmons' early involvement in trail history.

including Manuel Alvarez's 1842 report, James M. Fugate's 1853 adventures, and excerpts from David Kellogg's diary of 1858. Although these narratives and reports are individually available in some libraries, Simmons' published collection puts them between two covers and makes them easily accessible to scholars, trail buffs, and others.<sup>12</sup>

Simmons' most recent published work concerning the trail was his full-length account of the robbery and murder of Mexican trader Don Antonio José Chávez and his Missouri-bound party in 1843. *Murder on the Santa Fe Trail: An International Incident, 1843* was published in 1987 after winning the 1986 C. L. Sonnichsen Book Award offered by Texas Western Press at the University of Texas at El Paso.<sup>13</sup> Simmons' research into the incident uncovered much previously unpublished material and cleared up many questions about Chávez's death.

He had completed *Murder on the Santa Fe Trail* when he suffered near-fatal multiple injuries in a head-on automobile accident on November 14, 1986, near Golden, New Mexico. He underwent four major operations and remained hospitalized in Albuquerque until early February 1987, when he moved into an apartment near the hospital to continue physical therapy as an outpatient. He has since returned to his rustic home near Cerrillos to resume his writing and research about the Santa Fe Trail and southwestern history.<sup>14</sup>

Simmons continues to find what is interesting, useful, and entertaining in southwestern history. His writing is clear and crisp. His research is solid, reflecting the work of a true scholar. His recent contributions have focused new attention on the historic significance of the trail and generated broad interest among the public and scholars alike. He also has demonstrated that the history of the trail remains a fascinating field for research. He has taken full advantage of the fine bibliographical contribution to trail history produced by Jack D. Rittenhouse titled *The Santa Fe Trail: A Historical Bibliography* (1971), which describes 350 books, 250 articles from scholarly journals, and more

---

12. Marc Simmons, ed., *On the Santa Fe Trail* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986). This work contains a dozen contemporary narratives and reports covering the years 1842 through 1867. Two appendixes are included, one a table of major place names between Independence and Santa Fe via the Cimarron Cut-off, the other a list of the major campsites and landmarks on the Bent's Fort, or Mountain Branch, of the trail. The book was published in cloth and paper.

13. Marc Simmons, *Murder on the Santa Fe Trail: An International Incident, 1843* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1987).

14. *Wagon Tracks: Santa Fe Trail Council Newsletter* 1 (No. 2, 1987), 1. A front page story in this ten-page newsletter provides details of Simmons' accident, injuries, and treatment. The newsletter's editor is Leo E. Oliva, RR 1, Box 31, Woodston, Kansas 67675.



than 100 Congressional documents. It is a good starting point for anyone wishing to join Simmons in pursuing the history of the trail, a history that is closely tied to the early histories of Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, and New Mexico.<sup>15</sup>

As a historian and writer, Simmons is still quite interested in other aspects of southwestern history. He continues to produce monographs and articles for scholarly journals, magazines, and newspapers on topics other than the trail, and he is completing a history of Hispanic agriculture in New Mexico. But Marc Simmons is rapidly carving a niche for himself as the leading modern authority on the Santa Fe Trail.

---

15. Jack D. Rittenhouse, *The Santa Fe Trail: A Historical Bibliography* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971). This 271-page work includes a 27-page introduction by Rittenhouse that provides the reader with a fine thumbnail sketch of Santa Fe Trail history. This work has since been reprinted. It is an invaluable reference to literature of the trail. An excellent index is included.