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Homesick on the Road to Santa Fe:
James J. Webb's Private Diary, 1856

JANE LENZ ELDER

In the spring of 1856, James Josiah Webb prepared to leave his home in Cornwall Bridge, Connecticut, to travel west to New Mexico. An experienced plainsman and merchant who would eventually cross the Santa Fe Trail eighteen times during his life, Webb owned and acted as the eastern representative of one of Santa Fe's largest and best-known trading firms of the era, Webb & Kingsbury. This firm, an outgrowth of Webb's previous trading partnership with William S. Messervy, operated in New Mexico between 1853 and 1861. Webb's junior partner, John M. Kingsbury, who had begun in the trade as Messervy & Webb's clerk, acted as the firm's representative in Santa Fe while Webb stayed in the east to buy and ship goods, collect payments, and invest profits.

Webb had spent the late winter and early spring of 1856 in New York and Boston purchasing goods such as clothing, foodstuffs, hardware, and luxury items that would make up his Santa Fe store's inventory for the next year; he spent over $24,000 in Boston alone that season. After arranging to ship these goods by rail and water to Westport, Missouri, Webb planned to travel there himself and contract with a freighter to transport the goods across the prairie by ox-drawn wagons. He then planned to go on to Santa Fe himself in a lighter, speedier conveyance and meet with his junior partner, John Kingsbury.

As routine as these activities were for a man who had been actively engaged in the Santa Fe trade since before the Mexican War, in 1856 these same activities seem to have been the cause of some melancholy for Webb. This time, for the first time in his career, he was leaving loved

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ones behind in Connecticut. He had resolved that his wife, Lillie, who
two years before had accompanied him on a honeymoon trek to Santa
Fe, should remain in Cornwall Bridge with their one-year-old son,
Jimmie. Rather than subject them to the hazards of trail life, Webb pro­
cceeded west alone, "as it is a great task to take them across the plains,
and Jimmie is getting his teeth and subject to sick turns every few days." When Webb had written to his partner from Connecticut early that spring,
he had expressed confidence in his resolve to leave his family at home.
Once Webb found himself out on the prairie, however, his faith in that
decision provided little comfort in the face of the loneliness he felt with­
out his wife and son.

Webb was not the first traveler to reflect on home and hearth while
out in the vast stretches of territory over which the 800-mile Santa Fe
Trail ran. Countless others experienced similar inclinations to remember
absent loved ones or perhaps indulge in flights of fancy. The writers
among them, like Lewis Hector Garrard, found solace in recording their
thoughts:

It was my favorite pastime to take a blanket, and lie on the
ground with it wrapped around me, with back to the wind, apart
from the noisy camp, to read or scrawl a few words, in a blank
book, of the events of the day, or think of friends far away; or,
perchance, nodding, and, in a dreamy state, with the warm sun
beaming on me, build castles in the air.

As he concluded, perhaps apologetically, "Anyone in the Far West, is
romantically inclined."

Like Garrard, James J. Webb decided to put pencil to paper (in this
case a small, pocket-sized, leather book in which he made notes about
purchases)—a source apparently heretofore overlooked by scholars,
including Webb's biographer, Ralph P. Bieber. Webb addressed his brief
travel journal to his beloved wife and in light pencil in a cramped hand
described scenes and places they had previously enjoyed together as
newlyweds. Webb, a tough businessman and hardy adventurer, wrote
with unexpected sensitivity, his prose sometimes approaching the lyri­
cism of another well-known trail writer, Marion Sloan Russell. He cap­
tured the melancholy of the plains in one example as he addressed his
wife in the journal's opening in which he described his view of the sun­
set from a rise, the breadth and beauty of the surrounding landscape,
and its attendant emptiness. Shortly thereafter, however, the
commonplaces of trail life intruded and Webb concluded that day's en­
try with a phrase that echoed the activity around him: "I hear the whips
crack which reminds me that the mail is near...."
Ironically, in memoirs he dictated toward the end of his life, Webb asserted that thoughts and talk of home and loved ones far away had no place in trail life. On one particularly arduous winter crossing, he claimed to have actively discouraged such talk “as tending to depress the spirits and overcome the will.” Offenders, he continued, would be penalized a gallon of whiskey upon their arrival in Westport. “Tenderheartedness, sentimental love, or even affection strongly manifested,” Webb concluded, “have no place in the prairie, unless the object is present with you and under your protection.”

Josiah Gregg apparently held the same opinion. In his *Commerce of the Prairies* (1844), he stated flatly that “Men under such bonds [of matrimony and parenthood] are peculiarly unfitted for the chequered life of a Santa Fe trader. The domestic hearth, with all its sacred and most endearing recollections, is sure to haunt them in the hour of trial, and almost every step of their journey is apt to be attended by melancholy reflections of home and domestic dependencies.”

As he penned his thoughts in his journal, however, Webb indulged in exactly the sort of domestic nostalgia that experienced traders and plainsmen cautioned against as he penned his thoughts in his journal.

The diary, reproduced below in its entirety, falls into two parts. The first part describes trail and camp life, including Webb’s hunting adventures and the foibles of his traveling companions. Although Webb occasionally commented on encounters with other groups of people, he imparted a sense of isolation and intimacy more indicative of accounts of sea voyages.

The second part begins with Webb’s arrival at Fort Union, the first large outpost on the New Mexico end of the trail. Indeed, his tone reminds one of a sailor returning to port. Webb’s loneliness diminished as he resumed his customary role as a man of affairs; he described the activities within the fort and he recorded select incidents and gossip he felt his wife might want to hear. The following text comes directly from the pages of Webb’s journal.

Cimmeron [sic] River, May [date illegible] 1856. Passed near “upper crossing” a Comanche village, about twenty lodges—two chiefs named “Without Moccasins” “Sin Zappatos” & “Camiza de Mugen”—men hungry, but treated us well. 15th wrote my wife by Mr. Perin from “Mudill Spring.”

Friday May 16th 6 o’clock p.m. I have just supped at Cold Spring on ham, [illegible], chile, warm bread crackers and coffee, and have walked along the road to see if I could not kill an antelope, but my mind refuses to attend to hunting. I cannot hunt, O thou loved ones far away. My beloved, I am seated on an eminence with an extensive view for miles
around, not a tree to be seen, scarcely a cloud in the sky, the sun now setting on my right, the moon just rising on my left. All seems pleasant but such a horrible stillness and solitude, not a living creature to be seen in this extended view. I am alone with my God, my thoughts are of Him and his kindness to me. While I adore Him and wonder at this vast solitude, other images present themselves. Those I love, and who have passed here before with me. My wife, my child, where are they? Are they well? Do they ever imagine the situation of Papa? Whether the weather is strong or pleasant, whether he is cheerful or sad, whether he is well or ill. I know you often have these thoughts run through your mind. I judge from my own reflections, and how lonesome and dreary is this journey. We, on our way in, camped at the Cold Spring. Then we together enjoyed the refreshing draught from that limpid spring. We praised it together; we drank of its waters together, we ate upon its banks together, but alas my mate is not here. I am alone. With you it must now be near 8 o’clock. You have finished supper and are about undressing our boy. Do you speak to him of Papa? He is laid down to rest. Mama sits in the twilight and thinks where, oh where, and how is Papa? Your thoughts are with him & I hope your prayers are for him. Aunt Harriet has just finished washing her dishes and sits down beside you. Well, Lil, where do you suppose Mr. Webb is now? Well, I don’t know. Probably somewhere about the Cimeron [sic]. I was just thinking about him. Let’s see. He started the fourth. He is now 12 days out. I think he is somewhere between the Cimeron & Cedar Spring. Oh, I wish I had gone with him. And you talk on a few minutes, and Aunt H. undertakes to knit, falls asleep, nods till her neck is near broken, and rises. Well, I think we had best go to bed. Good night, Lil, pleasant dreams, dreams about Josiah. Uncle Ira [has a] dream that the Indians are all around him, ha ha ha. I hear the whips crack which reminds me that the mail is near, and I kiss you a happy good night. A kiss for Jimmie too, bless his little heart.

Nooned at “Cottonwood.” As soon as we arrived in camp I took my gun & started ahence. I thought it would be a fine thing to kill an antelope, leave it on the way side & then hunt a [skunk?] and tell my wife all about it. I hunted the antelope, shot at & wounded him, but not badly, pursued him for a mile or two and gave up the chase. Tired as you may suppose. Start again for the road. Oh how hot, oh how tired, oh how dry, but I must get to the road before the carriages arrive. I made it just in time, but not in time to write my beloved and tell her how I killed the antelope, but now tell her how I did not kill him. I shot him too far back.

We have just finished supper, the boys are greasing the carriages. Judge Kirby B[enedict] and Solomon [Beuthner? Speigelberg?] are on the banks of the stream talking of clean shirts and preparations for meeting the ladies at Ft. Union. We have a lovely day. The mornings are cool, almost cold, which reminds us we are nearing the mountains. Oh
how I do wish you were with me. Blasa is to be married.18 "[She] is like all the Mexicans," Mrs. K[ingsbury] coughs, [complaining of] "her taking several little things."19 The word is out "drive up" and I must kiss you both a good night. How I would like a drink of [word illegible].

May 18th breakfasted Rock Creek. Nooned at Whetstone Branch.20 I start immediately after arriving in camp on a hunt & follow down the creek but after a long run could get a shot at no game. Crossed the ridge & the next hollow, found a fine patch of wild cherry bushes, thought I would sit down in the shade and take it easy, hold a short conversation with my dear wife and let the game come up to be killed. But I discovered some antelope behind me and returned in pursuit, was unsuccessful. Returning to the bushes, two antelope came running up the valley to a hole of water to drink. So if I had acted on first impulse I might have been successful. As it was I have a long run and got only tired. Took supper at "Point of Rocks" and slept in the prairie about 10 miles from Pt.of Rocks.21 I kiss you all good night.

May 19th, we are nearing Ft. Union, as any one might know from the slicking up in camp. Your loving husband has on a light colored shirt, standing collar, clean hands and face etc. Solomon shaved yesterday and today we have, after some persuasian, got him to cut off his whiskers. He since rides with his face muffled up in a large wool comfort to keep from taking cold. He is now dressing for the arrival. Judge B[enedict] is taking it easy. On arriving in camp he wanted me to make him a gin "cocktail, tolerably strong if you please Mr. Webb. I don’t feel very well today." I made it to suit him and his tongue is now running like the clapper of a fire bell.22 We are all in good health and spirits. I think of you, oh how many times during the day. We go within 7 miles of the Ft., sleep, & go on in the morning to breakfast. By the way I must give you a first hand [illegible word] four miles east of "Ch[---?]" we turned over about 9 o’clock at night. Nobody hurt. The next day after a great deal of study and effort Solomon was delivered of the following couplet

"Last night about nine o’clock
The old stage got a good knock.

Judge B. immediately added

"And on me fell a hundred and fifty pounds of Beef
Without my lief."

Solomon and the Judge sat on the same seat and Solomon fell on the Judge.
We have had a terribly pleasant time. Today we had a shower on us at Ocate but it is now pleasant. This is the only rain we have had since I last wrote you. It is now half past four, about half past six with you. I must kiss Jimmie good night, and as I shall not be able to write you again tonight, I will bid you good night also, kiss, kiss. Pleasant dreams my love.

May 21, My dear wife, I yesterday had to perform a duty which altho' some [illegible word] it my imperative on me to perform on our [illegible word] at Ft. Union, I met Major [Cary M.] Fry, who asked me to his house. I was talking with Mr. [William F.] Moore and replied that I should certainly call. Should fear a scolding from my wife should I pass through without calling to see a friend who she esteemed so highly. Mr. Moore called me to one side, and said "have you not heard her [Ellen J. Fry's] treatment to Mrs. Kingsbury?" I had not. He then related to me as follows, the story was corroborated by others, and with much feeling. It seems Major Fry was in Santa Fe a few days before her [Kate Kingsbury] starting for the States and invited her to drive directly to his house and stop. She accordingly did so. It seems Mrs. F[ry] was out walking & seeing the mail coming down the street, she ran to the house, and locked the doors. Mrs. K arrived a moment after, alighted, knocked at the door, & Sally [perhaps a child or a servant] raised the window and replied that Mrs. F[ry] was out walking, & the door was locked & could not let her in. Mrs. K. replied that she presumed she would return soon and would wait in the carriage untill [sic] her return. After waiting some time, Mrs. F. opened the door and asked her in. Said she was just going up to the mail house to call on her, and had anticipated a fine visit with her there. The carriage had gone, Mrs. K. thought it strange, but could not suppose she meant to intimate that she could not accommodate her, and after remaining a while asked the privilege for her servant to wash some things for her boy [George Kingsbury]. Mrs. F. replied that it could not be in her Kitchen, but might go into the corral, but finally on considering a moment concluded that water was very scarce and she could not spare it, & finally told her she could not accommodate her but that they had very fine accommodations at the mail house. Mrs. K. left, walking to the mail house in the rain, Facunda [the Kingsbury's servant] carrying the babe & Mrs. K.'s satchel &c. Capt. [William] Shoemaker's son happened to be at the mail house, saw her coming, crying, met her a short distance from the house and invited her to return with him to his father's house. After his insisting upon it she returned and spent the night. There was a great deal of indignation felt and expressed at the Ft. I consider it the most heartless, inhospitable, and mean insult I ever knew offered to a respectable woman by a family pretending to respectability. I did not and shall never call on Mrs. F. or hereafter know the
Major except business may compel a short intercourse of a purely busi­ness character. I hope you will discontinue your correspondence with her without delay, excuse, or explanation. No good can possibly come of its continuance, and by continuing it you may sometime be exposed to a like insult or at least to ridicule. She is heartless, soulless, and entirely selfish. I have heard a part of the story before I met the Major and could not cut one I had known as a friend for so long until after reflection, particularly a family so much esteemed by my dear wife, but I have resolved to do nothing which can possible expose me, or those whom I love so dearly to a like indignity. I would freeze on the prairie before I would knock at their door for admission. I spent the night with Mr. Moore, had a good nights rest, a good breakfast. This is written at the foot of “Tecolote hill” while the mail party are breakfasting. We expect to arrive in Santa Fe tomorrow, 5 o’clock p.m. We have just finished supper at “Pajarito Spring,” that beautiful camp you so much admired. I went down to the spring, took a cup of water from its rocky basin, and drank the refreshing draught to the health of those I love at home. Oh how different the circumstances from when we were here together. I do again wish you were here. Why have I been induced to separate from you? Is it that I may prove my love for you by resisting temptation? The trial is a severe one, but I believe just. God help me to resist it. I must. I will. Oh I cannot forget you, even for a moment.

We had a good supper and ate with gusto. This lovely climate! My dearest love, you must not forget this beautiful climate. You have no such beautiful days & nights, mornings and evenings. I have seen but one little cloud about the size of my hat today. The climate is refreshing and envigorating [sic]. I should be happy if you were here. They have just finished harnessing and I must kiss you good night, kiss, kiss. Dream of your loving husband.

May 24th, Judge [Joab] Houghton is betting with all hands about his getting married.

The shift in the tone of James Webb’s letter after his arrival at Fort Union, from one of a lonesome lover to that of an autocratic husband dictating his wife’s choice of friends, might puzzle some readers. In relating the incident that occurred between Major Fry’s wife and Kate Kingsbury, Webb reacted with more vehemence than one would consider appropriate for such a petty case of inhospitality. Both Webbs knew, however, as a casual observer would not, that Kate Kingsbury was an invalid suffering from tuberculosis and that her son, also in delicate health, was handicapped by a serious, but unspecified, birth defect. One cannot judge from this evidence what prompted Mrs. Fry to
leave Kate Kingsbury standing on her doorstep in the rain. Perhaps she feared exposure to Kate’s illness; perhaps George Kingsbury’s physical deformity, about which so little was said, repelled her, or perhaps she merely disliked Mrs. Kingsbury.

An annotation a few pages later in Webb’s notebook, dated 16 April 1857, indicates that Mrs. Fry regretted her behavior in that it had cost her the friendship of Lillie Webb. Webb quoted her as saying, “I never expect to have another friend I love so dearly as I loved Mrs. Webb.” But if Mrs. Fry felt any remorse about offending Kate Kingsbury, she never had the opportunity to express it. Both Kate and her son George fell seriously ill upon their arrival at her family’s home in Massachusetts. George died on 18 July 1856. John Kingsbury, summoned from Santa Fe, hastened east to help care for Kate, who lingered throughout the fall and winter. By spring of 1857 she felt strong enough to try to return to New Mexico, but died at an Arkansas River crossing. She was buried in Santa Fe, her husband and James J. Webb among the mourners.

Webb began the long journey home to Connecticut in the summer of 1857. Through circumstances no one could have anticipated, his New Mexico sojourn lasted a full year longer than he had intended. The year was not wasted, however. Webb spent some of his time serving in the lower house of the New Mexico legislature as one of four representatives for Santa Fe County. His remaining time he devoted to the business of trading. It proved to be his last opportunity to actively engage in the enterprise through which he had made his fortune. Although the firm of Webb & Kingsbury continued to operate for another four years, Webb never again returned to live in Santa Fe. His preoccupation with his family and his experimental farm in Connecticut eventually replaced his interest in his mercantile house. That Webb’s priorities were shifting is evident from the earlier portion of this brief travel journal. By the time he officially retired from the Santa Fe trade in 1861, James J. Webb’s transformation from western adventurer to Connecticut gentleman farmer and family man was complete.

NOTES

James J. Webb’s private diary consists of a clasped memo book in Box 8 of the James J. Webb papers in the Missouri Historical Society Archives. I would like to acknowledge archivist Martha Clevenger for her able assistance and for her permission to reproduce the fragment presented here. I also extend many thanks to Mark L. Gardner and David J. Weber, both of whom set the standard in scholarly support and generosity.


3. James W. Webb to John M. Kingsbury, 11 February 1856, Webb Papers, MHS.


5. Webb to Kingsbury, 10 March 1854, Webb Papers, MHS.

6. Webb to Kingsbury, 20 February 1856, Webb Papers, MHS.


8. Ibid., 91.


10. Ibid., 159–60.


12. Because Webb wrote in pencil and carried his notebook on his person, some words and phrases are illegible. One can imagine, from the worn and stained cover and the rubbed and obliterated notations, that his journal underwent the usual hardships associated with trail life, in addition to the possible indignity of lengthy sojourns in Webb's hip pocket.


15. An important camp site, Cedar Spring was the sole source of water for Camp Nichols. See Gregory M. Franzwa, The Santa Fe Trail Revisited (St. Louis, Missouri: The Patrice Press, 1989), 131; Gardner to Elder, personal correspondence, 22 August 1995.


17. Kirby Benedict had been appointed associate justice of the Supreme Court of New Mexico in 1853 by President Franklin Pierce. See Ralph Emerson Twitchell, Leading Facts of New Mexican History, 5 vols. (1911–1917; Albuquerque, New Mexico: Horn & Wallace), 2:393, n. 318. It remains unclear whether the Solomon to whom Webb referred was Solomon Beuthner, who ran a mercantile house in Taos with his brothers Joseph and Sampson, or if it was Solomon Spiegelberg, a member of the prominent Spiegelberg merchant family in Santa Fe.

18. Blasa was Kate Kingsbury's Mexican servant. Kate was John Kingsbury's wife.

19. This reference to Kate Kingsbury, whose "coughs" are a symptom of tuberculosis (from which she suffered) suggests that Webb and his party encountered her along the trail as she traveled east to Massachusetts. Kate's comment regarding Blasa's thieving ways—she considered her to be like "all the Mexicans"—reveals her attitude toward the people among whom she had been living for the previous two years.

20. Rock Creek and Whetstone Creek were two camp sites just east of Point of Rocks. Marcy, The Prairie Traveler, 264.

21. Point of Rocks was a famous Trail landmark in eastern New Mexico, from which a small, clear spring runs. Franzwa, The Santa Fe Trail Revisited, 161.
22. Judge Benedict’s fondness for alcohol landed him in a series of scrapes, some
of which Webb’s partner Kingsbury described. See, for example, Kingsbury to Webb,
6 November and 11 December 1859 in Elder and Weber, eds., *Trading in Santa Fe*,
Benedict: Frontier Federal Judge* (Glendale, California: The Arthur H. Clark Co.,

23. Ocate Crossing, near Fort Union. Simmons, *Following the Santa Fe Trail*,
144.

24. Major Cary M. Fry (born in Kentucky in 1814) was a United States Army
paymaster. New Mexico Census (Santa Fe County) 1860, p. 474.

25. William F. Moore, a native of New York, and his partner Burton F. Rees held
numerous supply contracts with the army throughout the 1850s for such commodi-
ties as corn, hay, and cattle. See Robert W. Frazer, *Forts and Supplies: The Role
of the Army in the Economy of the Southwest, 1841–1861* (Albuquerque: University
of New Mexico Press, 1983), 211, 249.

26. Mrs. Fry’s bad manners might have stemmed from her fear of Kate’s disease.
Another twenty-five years would pass before Dr. Robert Koch identified the tuber-
culosus bacillus, thereby classifying TB as a contagious illness. Nevertheless, Ameri-
cans in this period dreaded the capriciousness, prevalence, and tragic effects of the
disease about which so little was understood. See Sheila M. Rothman, *Living in the
Shadow of Death: Tuberculosis and the Social Experience of Illness in American

27. Captain William Shoemaker was the officer in charge of stores at Fort
Mexico Historical Review* 18 (July 1943), 276 n. 59.

28. Webb refers here to Tecolote Mesa, south of Las Vegas. Simmons, *Following

153.

30. Webb quoted Mrs. Fry’s statement at the top of a page in his notebook.
Further down the page, following some unrelated notes, he corrected the earlier
quote and added a comment of his own: “I never had a friend I loved so dearly as
I loved Mrs. Webb.” I think this was the expression of Mrs. Fry instead of the one
previously stated. I look upon this as one of the most unfortunate and possibly
uncalled for breach of friendship in my life. I cannot bear enmity against Mrs. Fry.
I cannot treat her with disrespect. Her kindness to my wife shall never be forgot-
ten, or unappreciated.”

31. Jane Lenz Elder and David J. Weber, “‘Without a Murmur’: The Death of
Kate Kingsbury on the Santa Fe Trail,” in *The Mexican Road: Trade, Travel, and
Confrontation on the Santa Fe Trail*, ed. Mark Gardner (Manhattan, Kansas: Sun-

Gilberto Espinosa Prize 1996

Malcolm Ebright, historian, lawyer, and president of the Center for Land Grant Studies of Gaudalupita, New Mexico, has been selected by the Board of Editors as the recipient of the 1996 Gilberto Espinosa Prize for the best article appearing in volume 71 of the New Mexico Historical Review. Ebright’s article, “Advocates for the Oppressed: Indians, Genizaros and their Spanish Advocates in New Mexico, 1700-1786,” appeared in the October 1996 issue.

Ebright holds a M.A. in English literature from the University of California at Los Angeles and a Juris Doctor, with honors, from Golden Gate University Law School in San Francisco. An expert researcher and witness in lawsuits concerning New Mexico land and water issues, Ebright maintains a law practice in Las Vegas, New Mexico. He is the founder of the Center for Land Grant Studies, a non-profit foundation dedicated to research and education concerning Southwest land and water history. Ebright has authored and edited numerous articles and books on land grants and New Mexico history including Spanish and Mexican Land Grants and the Law (1993), and Land Grants and Lawsuits in Northern New Mexico (1994).

Gilberto Espinosa, researcher, writer, well-known New Mexico lawyer and strong supporter of New Mexico state history, served as a consultant to the New Mexico Historical Review for many years. Following his death in 1983, Mr. Espinosa’s family and friends established the award in his honor. This is the twelfth year for the award, which includes a $100 prize. Previous winners include John O. Baxter, Michael C. Meyer, Robert M. Utley, Jake Spidle, Robert A. Trennert, John P. Wilson, Martin Ridge, Richard E. Ahlborn, G. Emien Hall, Elvis E. Fleming, and Nancy Hanks.

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