

Matt Fields on the Santa Fe Trail

1839

MATT FIELD ON THE SANTE FE TRAIL

Collected by Clyde H. and Mae Reed Porter, edited by John E. Sanders; University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1960

Matt Field described his journey to Mexico City in journals written largely in verse and in 85 articles in the New Orleans Picayune.

Field and a group of friends, in a spirit of derringdo, joined eight traders leaving Independence early in July, 1839.....

Page 63-

Precipitous bluffs shut off Independence from the river, but the spirit of western enterprise is at work, and former difficulties of access to the town are fast disappearing. From each landing place the roads are now in a state of prosperous improvement, and the rush of emigration and business to this quarter must speedily secure still further facility in means of conveyance.

As is customary among the new western settlements, a spacious square forms the centre of the town and from it the different streets branch in all directions. In the centre of this square there is now a handsome brick court-house two stories high, where legal business is transacted, and public meetings, balls, &c are held..

Field described the start of the trail:

"From the town of Independence the road runs for about four miles through a dense forest, very thinly scattered with farm houses, until it opens suddenly upon the broad, ocean-like, far-famed western prairies."

(Page 65) The whole road from the town, four miles, to where the prairie opened was at that time in bad order, and at one place a wagon tipped over in a gully, the body of the vehicle with all the merchandise being cast entirely clear of the wheels, which fell back into their proper position. On account of these disasters it was midnight when we reached and camped for the first time upon the prairie. The vast wilderness was sleeping in a silver flood of moonbeams.....Like the ocean, ever like the ocean, and only like the ocean is the far stretching wilderness of grass....The interminable solitude, not a house or a fence or a creature, not even a tree or any object to which our eyes are accustomed."

(Page 69) About half a day's travel brings the Santa Fe bound traders past the flourishing plantation of Farmer Rice, where leisure travellers often linger to enjoy his sweet bacon, fresh eggs, new milk, and the other nutritious and unsophisticated luxuries that always appease appetite without encumbering digestion. Eight miles further, after crossing a stream called Little Blue (Big Blue), another and the last farm house is reached, after leaving which the wayfarer turns again to see the solitary christian roof fade rapidly down to the horizon's verge, as the desert opens still vaster and wilder in advance.

Clyde and Mae Reed Porter, edited by John E. Sunder, MATT
FIELDS ON THE SANTA FE TRAIL: (Norman): University of
Oklahoma Press, 1960) series of articles published in the New
Orleans Picayne from December 1839 to October 1841--

The town of Independence in Jackson County, Missouri, is the principal meeting and starting place from whence traders set off for Santa Fe....It numbers about five thousand inhabitants,, or did eighteen months ago, at the time of this writer's experience. The location is well chosen, salubrious, and has many natural advantages, though one drawback upon its prosperity has been its removal some three miles from the river bank. The precipitous and irregular nature of the land nearer the water forbidding the formation of any settlement likely to spread and arrive of importance. The Mexican trade, together with the vast farming business of the neighborhood, the military posts about the outskirts and bordering the prairies, and the trade with Indian dwellings near all combining to promise prosperity to Independence....
....Presently the mules were driven in from the pasture and a busy time commences in the square, catching the fractious animals with halters and introducing them to the harness for their long journey. Full half a day is employed before the expedition finally gets into motion and winds slowly out of town. This is an exciting moment. Every window sash is raised, and anxious faces appear watching with interest the departure....The whole road from the town, four miles, to where the prairie opened was at that time in bad order, and at one place a wagon tipped over in a gully,, the body of the wheels vehicle with all the merchandise being cast entirely clear of the wheels, which fell back into their proper position....it was midnight when we reached and camped for the first time upon the prairie.

Page 69- From the town of Independence the road runs about four miles through a dense forest, very thinly scattered with farm houses, until it opens suddenly upon the broad, oceanlike farfamed Western prairies. Here it is that the young traveller becomes absorbed in the dreamy delight of long cherished and first gratified curiosity. The sight is not surpassed, not even by the snow-capp'd rocks of Oregon, while the far plains are black with buffalo, and then a new excitement springs up in the youthful hunter's breast, which the writer need not waste time describing, as it can only be appreciated by personal enjoyment.

About half a day's travel brings the Santa Fe bound traders past the flourishing plantation of Farmer Rice, where leisure travellers often linger to enjoy his sweet bacon, fresh eggs, new milk, and other nutritious and unsophisticated luxuries that always appease appetite without encumbering