

Adventures on the American Frontier

Following the Frontier West

Part Two

Captain Becknell and the Santa Fe Trail



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In the early days of America, only the eastern part of the country was settled, and the West was a vast, unknown land. But as explorers and settlers worked their way west, so did the frontier. Over the eastern mountains and down the Ohio Valley it went, and up and down the Mississippi River. From there it started up the Missouri River, into the great wilderness of the north and west.



Past the place where Kansas City is today, the plains began, and there the government resettled many of the Native Americans who had lived in the East. No pioneer could settle there, nor in all the land from Texas to California, for the whole Southwest belonged to Spain.

By 1816, the town farthest to the west was Franklin, Missouri. Daniel Boone's sons had gone up the Missouri River for about 100 miles from the fur-trading towns of St. Louis and St. Charles, Missouri. They had



found trails of buffalo and deer that led to a "salt lick" not far from where Franklin was to grow. There, salt water bubbled from the earth as a spring and left salt that the wild animals licked from the rocks.

"We can get enough salt here to supply all the people around St. Charles, and maybe some to sell in St. Louis, too," the Boones decided. So they cut a wide trail all the way from St. Charles to the salt springs. It was called "Boone's Lick Road," and soon pioneers were following it west to Franklin.

One of the people who came to Franklin to live was Captain William Becknell. He had been an officer in the War of 1812, but after the war, he needed a new way to make a living.

One day, Captain Becknell rode out to the cabin of Ezekiel Williams. Captain Becknell liked to talk with old Zeke, for Zeke had been all over the West as a fur trapper. Zeke's talk of how the Comanches in the Southwest captured wild horses and mules to sell to white traders gave the



captain an idea.

“Zeke, how much did you say a man could buy mules for out in Comanche country?” he asked.

“I’d say \$2, maybe \$3 worth of trading goods,” said Zeke. “But bring those mules back here, and they’ll bring \$75 each.”

“That’s what I aim to do,” said Captain Becknell. “Show me again the best way to go.”

So Zeke scratched out a map in the dust before the doorstep of his cabin.