

From Trails to Rails



Santa Fe National Historic Trail

National Park Service
3 - Trails West, Inc.
Board of Parks and Recreation
Commissioners - Kansas City, Mo.

In the 1860s, a wagon train could travel about 15 miles a day—but a railroad train could go 20 miles per hour. Thus, when railroads began to move west across the prairies after the Civil War, the end of the wagon trails was inevitable. After the completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869, the Oregon and California Trails began to slowly disappear.

As the railroads moved west, Santa Fe Trail goods were shipped to the end of the rail line, and then taken by wagon train to New Mexico. By 1870, the Kansas Pacific Railroad had reached Colorado. Raton Pass fell under the rails of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad in 1878. The rumble of wagon wheels was replaced forever by the squeal of metal when the first train steamed into Santa Fe on February 16, 1880.

These historic trails live on in history and our imaginations. Trail ruts can still be found across the prairie. The trade and commerce that the Santa Fe Trail spawned continue today, as trains running on the Kansas City Southern Railroad track below you carry goods between the United States and Mexico.



On the Road, by Thomas P. Otter, 1860
Courtesy Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri
(Purchase: Nelson Trust)

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