

KANSAS HISTORY

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Old Santa Fe Trail ford, Pawnee Fork (River), Pawnee County, ca. 1900

Although great, navigable rivers are not a feature of the Kansas waterscape, smaller streams, creeks, and rivers such as this one in Pawnee County are. And nineteenth-century overlanders took them seriously. At worst rain-swollen waterways presented a serious hazard that brought long delays and threatened life and property; at best they simply slowed down the Santa Fe Trail caravan or, perhaps, provided a little diversion for the weary traveler.

The Santa Fe Trail forded Pawnee Fork about five miles east of the present site of Fort Larned, very near the Larned State Hospital. In 1858, when Heinrich B. Möllhausen made the eight-hundred-mile journey up from Santa Fe, the fork was known as "a favorite summer resort of the natives of that district," and his party expected something of a reception. "But to our surprise," he later recalled, "we found the valley deserted and empty"

"Although we had journeyed only 25 miles that day, we decided not to pass by the inviting spot, and established our small camp on the left bank of the river. I hastened to get down to the river with my fishing tackle but I threw my hook in vain for, although

numerous fish enlivened the water, none of them seemed to be inclined to touch the bait. For a long time, however, I sat on the edge of the water and watched the rushing stream which was about 20 feet wide and 3-5 feet deep. The stream flowed tempestuously around the accumulated driftwood, reflecting the steep banks with their shady trees in its moving surface."

Others found the Pawnee Fork less tranquil but had better luck with its aquatic inhabitants. Traveler Rufus Sage, whose party spent four weeks at the crossing in the spring of 1844 due to floodwaters, reported that the Indians called it "Otter creek" because of the "great number of those animals found upon it." He also found "an inexhaustible supply of cat-fish, which were caught in great numbers by our party."

In whatever state it was found, water was a vital ingredient in the overland journey and was taken seriously by the wise traveler. Then as now, this giver of life can be serene or tumultuous, plentiful or scarce, but it is most always, especially in a place like Kansas, unpredictable — something never to be taken for granted.

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VIRGIL W. DEAN
Editor

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Cover: The Ore Wagon, by
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commerce in the West. Back
Cover: The End of the
Trail, by Gerald Cassidy,
depicts trade on the Santa Fe
Trail. The Santa Fe Trail is
the subject of this special issue
of Kansas History.

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