

DESCRIPTION OF THE SANTA FE TRAIL AND CIMARRON CROSSING NEAR INGALLS

Gray County, Kansas

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Consultant: D. W. "Doc" Barton, Ingalls, Kansas

There is still evidence of the old Spanish Santa Fe Trail, which ran through Southwestern Kansas in the early days. It was a natural route and was old and well-trod by primitive inhabitants long before this part of the country was opened to civilization.

There is no way of knowing who the first travelers were on this trail. Since the Old Spanish Trail is a direct course from the Cimarron River to the Arkansas River in Kansas, it is believed that the Indians made and used the trail for many years because it was a short route between watering places. There is proof that Coronado and his men later followed a primitive trail across the counties of Southwestern Kansas. The account they gave of the country, climate, and rivers is proof of that. The famous "Coronado Sword" found at the headwaters of the Pawnee, due north of the town of Ingalls, plus the Spanish style lance and the elaborate bit of ancient Spanish bridle, found in a box canyon near the Beaver River are other strong indications that Coronado's march lay across Southwestern Kansas. It is believed that he must have followed the ancient Santa Fe Trail at least part of the time.

Still later, traders to Santa Fe traveled over the old route. The Arkansas River's crossing was usually made at the Cimarron Crossing, where the present town of Ingalls stands. The primitive trail was used until it became too dangerous for travel. Indian and Mexican desperadoes in the territory south of the Arkansas River were hostile to traders and caravans. A new route was laid out following the north side of the Arkansas River from the Cimarron Crossing through Kansas.

The site of the Cimarron Crossing was perhaps one of the most dangerous places along the old trail. It is easy to imagine the sight that met the travelers' eyes from the east as they neared the Cimarron Crossing. They came towards the crossing from the North, as it had been necessary to leave the river route and travel north to escape the bluffs on the north side of the river for about five miles east of the crossing.

The trail ran south along a hillside. Hills obstructed the view on either side of the trail and any danger that might lurk behind those hills. Probably the range of vision was shortened to a distance of about half a mile behind them. Ahead of them stretched the trail to be cut in two by the Arkansas River. Today the tracks of that old trail, just before it reached the Cimarron Crossing, are still visible along the hillside. Seeing

them now, it seems almost unbelievable to think the early travelers could have braved the dangers and difficulties they had to meet.

The trail route is rough and broken, going up and down over the small hills and ridges. From the side of the hill, the eyes could travel southward. The only sign of vegetation, besides the buffalo grass and bluestem, would be the green line of trees along the Arkansas River course. High up on the hills south of the river, over which the Santa Fe Trail must pass, were blinding patches of white sand, standing glaringly against the unbroken green of the prairie grass.

These patches of sand must have given the travelers a clear conception of the perils awaiting them in the sand hills south of the river. Plus, it must have seemed much more dangerous to them since they were leaving the protection of the United States at the Cimarron Crossing and entering Mexican and Indian Territory.

From the hillside, the trail descended into a valley that ran down to the Arkansas River. The river bed was changed by a flood several years ago, so it is impossible to see just where the old trail crossed the river. D. W. "Doc" Barton of Ingalls, though, can point out the exact point of the crossing. *"I have seen many caravans cross the river at the Cimarron Crossing,"* says Mr. Barton. *"There was a massacre south of the river at one time, just at the end of the present river bridge. It happened before I came to this country, but the remains of the wagons and other relics were still there when I arrived. There were the remains of an old station here too. You see, I had an old Santa Fe Trail scout working for me for eight years, and he told me much about the old Santa Fe Trail"*.

The station, which Mr. Barton spoke about, was an old Spanish station, built here by the Spanish government to protect travelers and traders along the trail. The station was situated on the northern bank of the river, just east of the trail. Mr. Barton says that only old dugouts and parts of adobe walls and corrals were here when he came. After the station was abandoned, the buildings and corrals were soon destroyed by the buffalo pushing and rubbing against them. The station must have brought courage to travelers along the trail before it was abandoned, and Spain lost its possession north of the Arkansas River.

A few ridges can be seen just south of the present river course. They disappear then, where roads and plowed fields, coupled with recent dust storms, have obliterated them. They reappear on the hills toward the southwest, where the march of time has not yet erased the signs of early life and travel in Southwest Kansas.

The Cimarron Crossing must have held a great significance for the early-day travelers. For those traveling toward Santa Fe, New Mexico, the Cimarron Crossing on the Arkansas River was the turning point from law and protection to lawlessness and danger. Those who traveled south from the Cimarron Crossing had to be more than ever on the lookout for danger. But for those traveling towards Independence,

Missouri, from Santa Fe, New Mexico over the old Spanish Santa Fe Trail, the Cimarron Crossing must have been more like a gateway to civilization. They could almost draw a breath of relief after the Arkansas River was crossed since their worst dangers were over, although they were by no means safe even then.

Today the crossing of the Arkansas, at that point, merely means passing from the small town of Ingalls into the outlying farm region or vice versa. In reality, though, it means the advancement of civilization and progress into the West. Only the ridges of the old trail and the living pioneers' memories remain to tell the story of the early-day struggles and adventures.

Today the sights from the old Santa Fe Trail as it enters the valley toward the Arkansas River are probably the same as the early days. However, the trail is not nearly as plain as it was then. The ridges are now covered with grass and weeds, where they must have been well worn in those early days. In some places, the ridges have disappeared altogether, where the rain and dust have filled them in. The trail runs about a quarter of a mile from the small cemetery, a grim reminder of life and death. It crosses the new oiled highway and continues southward into a maze of hills. It then runs along the side of a hill where it is plainly visible. Today there are trees along the river and the sand hills farther to the south. At this point, there is no sign of life or vegetation except the grass and weeds, which could have been prairie grass in the early days.

Further on, as the trail drops into the valley, the small town of Ingalls becomes visible, nestled back in the hills. The trail passes directly through the city, which is located on the site of the old Spanish station. It is here that the trail is lost, only to be found again south of the river.

The river where the old crossing used to be is wide and shallower than it is in other places. The banks are lower and easier to climb.

On the south side of the Arkansas River is the exact spot of an old Indian massacre. It is a shady park area*, equipped with tables and benches used in the summer months for picnics and other forms of recreation.

The Arkansas River, giving generously of its waters for irrigation farther west, is now reduced to a stream here, except during flooding. However, its banks are covered with green trees and bushes, creating an attractive picture.

There are seven separate sets of tracks, running side by side, now visible on the Old Santa Fe Trail here in certain places. Each set of tracks is from twelve to eighteen feet wide. The ridges were measured in different areas. Some measured six inches deep, and other places they measured were two feet deep. They have been filled in with dust in most places and are no longer packed as they must have been earlier. Although now overgrown with grass and weeds, it is still possible to trace that old trail route as

it slopes south from the hills toward the Arkansas River. The seven tracks are still easily discernible. There are no wheel tracks visible, but each worn place between the ridges seems to be about the right width for a wagon to pass through.

It is easy to imagine a line of white-topped canvas-covered wagons lumbering over the old trail, advancing steadily over the prairies, with nothing but grass underfoot and a bright sun overhead, and always an alertness and lookout for Indians. Freighters also traveled here as well as traders and parties of hunters. Where once moved such life and scenes of the past, now stand homes and cultivated fields where crops are raised and peaceful cattle graze.

** A record of a park being south of Ingalls could not be found. Some believe it did not exist until Sara McFarland, the Research Librarian at the Cimarron City Library, found an article in a scrapbook belonging to Earla Hildebrand Bevington from Cimarron. In it, there is a mention of a picnic that happened at the ACHORN PARK south of Ingalls, probably in the late 1930s. Sara's family attended the event – her grandparents, son, and niece – (Will & Barbara McFarland, Wiley McFarland, and Gloria McLerran). Although Sara's father does not remember the park's name, he does remember one that used to be south of Ingalls. Thanks to Sara, we now know that the park existed and we know its name.*

More details about ACHORN PARK are found in a story also written by Juanita Trebilcock titled INGALLS, Gray County, Kansas.