**Josiah Gregg: Commerce of the Prairies Lesson 2**

**Riverways: Sustenance & Safety**

**Sustenance & Safety**

One of the most significant factors to successful migration across the borderlands is access to water. Without it, wagon parties and their livestock are grounded indefinitely. The twists and turns of the Santa Fe Trail make the most of river geography. Because Bent’s Old Fort lies along the Santa Fe Trail, it’s also situated beside the Arkansas River which affords relief as a way station to its many weary visitors. Gregg stresses the necessity of a waterway when he states, “Finding but little water that night and none at all the next day, we began by noon to be sadly frightened; for nothing is more alarming to the prairie traveler than a water-scrape” (68).

New parties along the Trail often needed assistance finding and following the route itself. They required the precise locations and nature of the water systems they encountered. Knowing if the riverbeds were muddy, flooded, or dried up would help prepare them for the next leg of the journey. Gregg recounts the helpfulness of Native American peoples along the way: “On inquiring by means of signs for the nearest water, they pointed in the direction we were traveling: and finally taking the lead, they led us by the shortest way to the valley of the long-sought Cimarron, which with its delightful green-grass glades and flowing torrent…had all the aspect of an Elysian vale” (68-69). Gregg’s description of the area as an “Elysian vale” shares his feeling of contentment. He and his party finally reached an inviting, life-giving oasis.

Early maps of the country during the fur trade era show that settlements and towns in the West began near sources of water. This remains true for many major U.S. cities today. Before grocery stores were common every few miles, most families farmed the land where they lived. With an eye toward the country’s future settlement, Gregg remarks, “The necessity of irrigation has confined, and no doubt will continue to confine, agriculture principally to the valleys of the constant-flowing streams” (143). Gregg predicts that population growth in the West will start in places with reliable water sources. Gregg mentions the famous river: “called Rio Colorado by the Mexicans, and is known among Americans by its literal translation of Red River” (96).

Not only did water refresh the trail parties and their livestock, but at different points in the journey, those vital streams and rivers had to be crossed. This entailed risk to life and property as the animals assigned to the caravans were often prone to fear or became unsteady in the currents. Gregg writes the following when his party crossed the Arkansas River in June: “I have witnessed a whole team down at once, rendering it necessary to unharness and drag each mule out separately: in fact, more than common exertion is sometimes required to prevent these dumpish animals from drowning in their fright and struggles through the water, though the current be but shallow at the place (54). Josiah Gregg experienced the ongoing threat of losing his transportation altogether followed by being stranded for days before hope of rescue.