**Josiah Gregg: Commerce of the Prairies Lesson 4**

**Climate: Drought, Seasons, and Health**

**Drought & Seasons**

The climate of the Plains was a major consideration when traveling the Santa Fe Trail. Although people may occasionally find themselves stuck in a storm while driving highways today, the situation rarely lasts for long. However, during the fur trade, merchants had to plan their months-long journey to accommodate the seasons. Ongoing access to water and livestock grasses, the ability to make a campfire for warmth and cooking, and crossing the vast region safely without frostbite or being stuck in the mud were central to each caravan’s success.

Bent’s Old Fort lies on the north side of the Arkansas River and was accessed from the northern mountain route split of the Santa Fe Trail. The source of the Arkansas River lies in Leadville, Colorado and travels 1,469 miles across southeastern Colorado and into the states of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas which functioned as a lifeline to traders.

Josiah Gregg mentions the timing of his journey and the specific route his company selected which they based on the growing season. He says, “we deemed it expedient to abandon the regular route from Missouri for one wholly untried, from the borders of Arkansas, where the pasturage springs up nearly a month earlier” (171).

Traveling north to South Dakota, Gregg comments on the unique balance of natural resources along the route. He remarks, “From the Arkansas River to Chouteau’s Fort, our route presented an unbroken succession of grassy plains and fertile glades, intersected here and there with woody belts and numerous rivulets, most of which, however, are generally dry except during the rainy season” (181).

Gregg’s years on the Plains gave him a perspective not only on seasonal weather, but also on the ecological interdependence which led to observable changes in natural resources. He observes, “for we saw no buffalo after crossing the Arkansas River. It is true that owing to their disrelish for the long dry grass of the eastern prairies the buffalo are rarely found so far east in autumn as during the spring; yet I never saw them so scarce in this region before. In fact, at all seasons they are usually very abundant as far east as our point of leaving the Arkansas River” (162).

Traveling south to New Mexico, Gregg reports on the journey taken by William Sublette, well-known fur trader and co-owner of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. He states, “When Capt. Sublette’s party entered this arid plain it was parched with drought; and they were doomed to wander about for several days with all the horrors of a death from thirst staring them continually in the face” (82).

**Health**

Not only was weather and climate either a travel advantage or nuisance, it was also an important health consideration at the time. By medical professionals, it was believed that a trip west to breathe cleaner, drier air would help prevent and cure many ailments. Josiah, who graduated from medical school, writes, “Salubrity of climate is decidedly the most interesting feature in the character of New Mexico…Bilious diseases-the great scourge of the valley of the Mississippi-are here almost unknown. Apart from a fatal epidemic fever of a typhoid character that ravaged the whole province from 1837 to 1839, and which, added to the smallpox that followed in 1840, carried off nearly ten per cent of the population, New Mexico has experienced very little disease of a febrile character” (140).