**Josiah Gregg Unit Lesson 6**

**Fauna: Transportation, Buffalo, and Rattlesnakes**

**Livestock**

How travelers made their way to and from Bent’s Fort boiled down to risk-taking, cost, and preference. Several livestock options were available to pull the supplies loaded onto wagons and carts. Horses, oxen, and mules each had their own advantages. Horses were known for their speed, yet they were the most expensive choice and were often stolen. Mules were the first commonly used animal on the Santa Fe Trail, but they required a diet beyond the trailside grasses and their endurance didn’t last as long as oxen. Oxen were the cheapest option and although they were the slowest, they could survive well on the Plains grasses.

Gregg recalls the hazards of crossing the Arkansas River with mules. He states, “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. Hence it is that oxen are much safer for fording streams than mules” (54). Just one river crossing gone wrong could compromise a party’s entire journey; therefore, choosing the best animal was important. Even though Gregg clearly did not favor the “dumpish” mules, he was aware that oxen had their downsides as well. He writes, “The fact is that though mules are generally easiest scared, oxen are decidedly the worst when once started. The principal advantage of the latter in this respect is that Indians have but little inducement to steal them, and therefore few attempts would be made upon a caravan of oxen” (95). Not only were oxen not as susceptible to theft, they also served as provisions in case of an emergency. Josiah observes, “we should long before have been in danger of starvation had it not been for our oxen; for we had not seen a buffalo since the day we first met with the Comanches. Some of our cattle being in good plight, and able, as we were, to spare a few from our teams, we made beef of them when urged by necessity: an extra advantage in ox teams on these perilous expeditions” (226).

Once transactions in Santa Fe were completed, wagon loads for the return trip were considerably lighter. Gregg notes that “not only are the teams unable to haul heavy loads, on account of the decay of pasturage at this season, but the approaching winter compels the traders to travel in greater haste; so that this trip is usually made in about forty days” (157). However, there were still a few new goods to be hauled on the return trip as well as new livestock acquired. Gregg states there “may be added a considerable number of mules and asses – some buffalo rugs, furs, and wool” (157). Given the wear on livestock over great distances, caravans depended on healthy animals built for the task.

Trading in livestock was a profitable business extension for Bent, St. Vrain & Company. Gregg witnessed the process of trade with the Comanche nation, both in how prices were set as well as the special deals that accompanied the sale. He writes, “We succeeded in purchasing several mules, which cost us between ten and twenty dollars worth of goods apiece. In Comanche trade the main trouble consists in fixing the price of the first animal. This being settled by the chiefs, it often happens that mule after mule is led up and the price received without further cavil. Each owner usually wants a general assortment; therefore the price must consist of several items, as a blanket, a looking-glass, an awl, a flint, a little tobacco, vermillion, beads, etc” (210).

**Buffalo**

The relationship between buffalo and Plains Indian cultures is well-established throughout history. Nearly every part of the buffalo was utilized and fashioned into some form of nourishment, tool, or decoration. Interdependence among land, animal, and human was part of Native American Plains identity. With the encroachment of Anglo settlers and travelers, the ranges, hunting cycles, and uses of buffalo began to change. While Josiah Gregg is en route, he observes buffalo robes being used as cushions and warmth among the members of his caravan. He states, “Outside of the wagons, also, the travelers spread their beds, which consist, for the most part, of buffalo-rugs and blankets” (50).

Buffalo robes were the primary trade item at Bent’s Old Fort and were mainly exported to buyers in the eastern U.S. who found them especially warm and practical when traveling by carriage. Hunted, tanned, and traded by local indigenous tribes for other goods, the presence of buffalo along the Borderlands guaranteed the success and prosperity of trading post merchants as well as tribal communities. Given the terrain of the Plains and the great number of animals that relied on its abundance, Gregg puts into perspective just how many buffalo roamed the landscape. He states, “to look for stock upon these prairies would be emphatically to search for a needle in a haystack; not only because they are virtually boundless, but that being everywhere alive with herds of buffalo, from which horses cannot be distinguished at a distance, one knows not whither to turn in search after the stray animals (53).

By 1851, trade in buffalo robes decreased significantly. However, many people, both indigenous and non-native noticed the gradual depletion of herds prior to the 1850s. By the late 1860s, the species became nearly extinct. Josiah Gregg makes a record of the buffalo population and pinpoints what he believes is the cause of its decline during the period from 1831-1840. He writes, “There is a current notion that the whites frighten [the buffalo] away…To be sure, to use a hunter’s phrase, they frighten a few out of their skins; yet for every one killed by the whites more than a hundred, perhaps a thousand, fall by the hands of the [Indians]” (92).

**Rattlesnakes**

Dangers along the Santa Fe Trail did not just exist in the form of weather, landscape, and warring societies, but also among the local animal species. Gregg states, “As we were toiling up through the sandy hillocks which border the southern banks of the Arkansas, the day being exceedingly warm, we came upon a perfect den of these reptiles [rattlesnakes]. I will not say thousands, though this perhaps were nearer the truth – but hundreds, at least, were coiled or crawling in every direction” (55). Of course, rattlesnakes would have threatened not just the human travelers, but their livestock as well, effectively ending the journey with just one strike.

Lesson 6 Questions

1. The Comanche were well-known for their large horse populations, horse-training, and horse-riding skills. Consider how buffalo hunting usually takes place on horseback and within Native American homelands during this era. Do you think buffalo populations would have declined as quickly without the horse? Why or why not?
2. Josiah Gregg claims that "whites" are not the main contributor to the buffalo population decline. Do you think Gregg’s opinion about the cause of dwindling buffalo herds would change over the next decades (the 1850’s and 1860’s)?  Why or why not?
3. Suppose you belonged to a Plains Indian tribe; do you think you would you have supported buffalo hunting strictly for the buffalo robe trade? Why or why not?