

Traveling Trunk: *A Tale of Two Towns* by Dr. David Clapsaddle

Franklin was a little town on the north side of the Missouri River. Father said that it was named for Benjamin Franklin. Father knew a lot of things. He told me that in 1819 a steamboat from St. Louis named the Independence came to Franklin. In later years, other steamboats would bring tons of merchandise to be taken to New Mexico on the Santa Fe Trail.

Father owned a store in Franklin. He, Mother, and I lived in some rooms at the back of the building. Father gave me a little trunk for my eleventh birthday. It soon became my treasure chest where I hid my keepsakes: a musket ball, an old Indian hoe, a clam shell, a turkey beard, and a rattlesnake rattle. I kept the chest under my bed.

Father complained that business at the store was not good. People did not have much money to spend. Instead, they bartered, trading for things instead of buying them.

One day, Mr. William Becknell and his four friends came to Father's store. They purchased \$500 worth of trade goods. Father was happy. He had not sold that much merchandise in a long time. Mr. Becknell and his friends loaded the merchandise on pack horses and got ready to leave. They shook hands with Father and the other men who had come to bid them good-bye and good luck. Mr. Becknell said they were going to Comanche Country. I did not know where that was. Father said it was many miles away to the southwest.

Mr. Becknell and his men came back to Franklin several months later. No one had heard from them since they had left. We all thought they might have died --killed by Indians or froze to death on the plains. The truth is that they had found their way to Santa Fe, 900 miles away.

Father went to the saloon with Mr. Becknell. I begged to go along, but Father sent me home. Mother and I waited up for Father. It was late when he came back to the store to tell us

all about Mr. Becknell's trip to Santa Fe. Funny, the things you remember. I can still see Father's face in the flickering candlelight; but I can't remember much of what he told us. I do, though, remember the strange animals Mr. Becknell saw south of the Arkansas River. That would have been in Indian Territory then. Now it is the state of Kansas. There were funny little creatures that lived in holes where there was no grass. Mr. Becknell did not know what they were, but now we know they were prairie dogs. Mr. Becknell said that he ate one and that it was not bad tasting. Then there were rabbits like Mr. Becknell had never seen before! They had long ears. Now we know that they were jackrabbits. But of all the animals Mr. Becknell talked about, the wild horses were my favorite: black ones, brown ones, white ones. Some were spotted.

Mr. Becknell said that they followed the Arkansas River a long way to the southwest where they came to another river going south. There, they began to follow that river to the mountains. Passing through the mountains, they came upon some Mexican soldiers. Mr. Becknell said that they were afraid, but the soldiers treated them kindly. The soldiers did not speak English and Becknell's men did not know Spanish. But somehow, the soldiers took them to a little town named San Miguel. There lived a Frenchman, who spoke Spanish, who agreed to go with him to Santa Fe and serve as an interpreter.

The people of Santa Fe were poor. Mr. Becknell said that they lived in mud houses and that their stores did not have much of anything to sell. However, there were some rich people who had plenty of money. In no time at all, Mr. Becknell and his friends sold all their trade goods at a big profit. Funny, in Franklin, there was not much money but a lot of merchandise. In Santa Fe, there was not much merchandise but a lot of money.

How excited the whole town was when Mr. Becknell and his men rode into Franklin driving before them mules and donkeys. The animals had been taken in trade for the goods purchased from Father. They also brought back silver coins tied up in leather sacks. As Mr. Becknell stopped in front of Father's store, he cut open the bags, and the coins fell to the street and rolled over into the gutter. I ran to the gutter, scooped up a handful of coins, and took them to Mr. Becknell. He smiled and asked, "Young man, what is your name?" I said, "George, sir." "That's a good name," he replied and placed one of the coins in my hand. I showed the coin to Mother and then put it in my treasure chest. I still have the coin.

Anyway, that is how the Santa Fe Trail got started. That was a long time ago when I was just a child. I'm an old man now, but I'll never forget that day when Mr. Becknell put that silver coin in my hand.