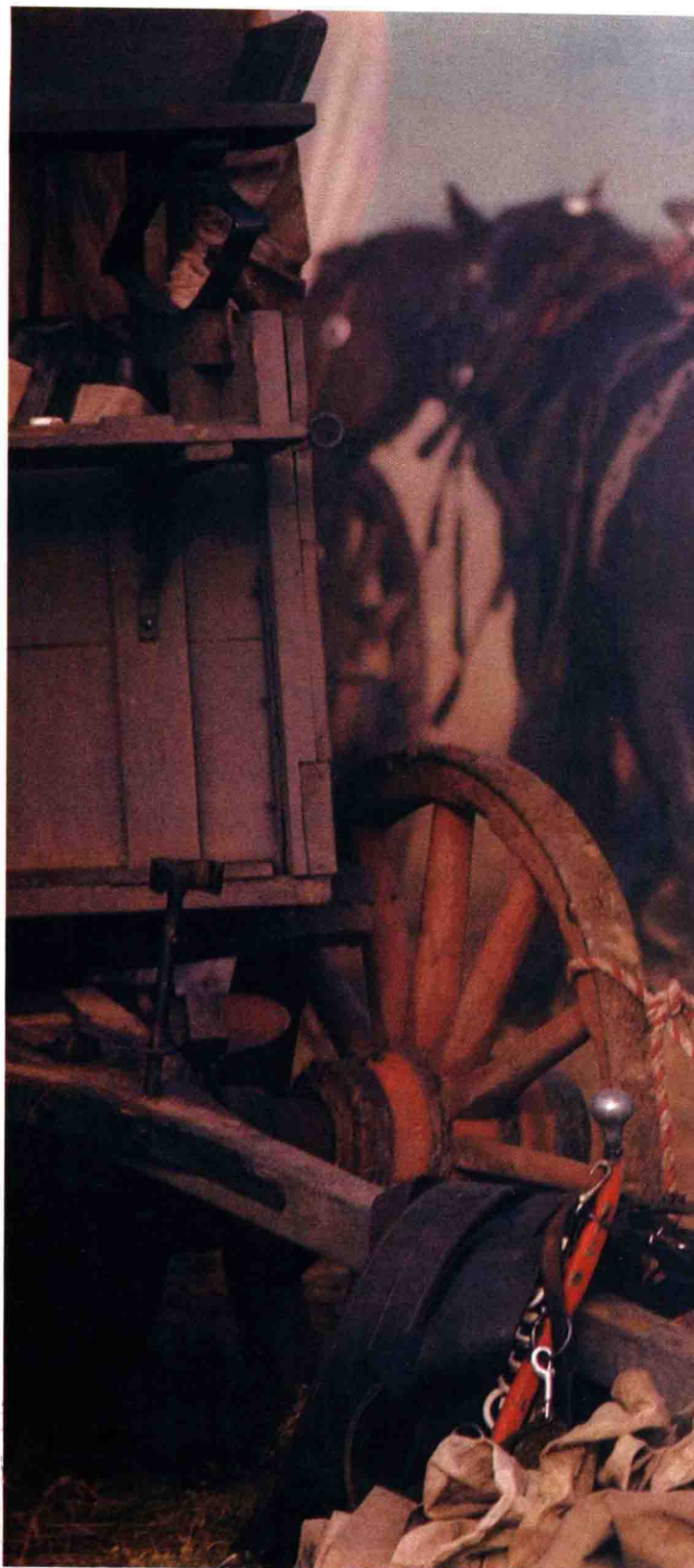




TRAILS WEST

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TRAILS WEST

Contributing Authors: MARC SIMMONS, WALLACE STEGNER, CHARLES MCCARRY, ROBERT LAXALT, DON DEDERA, LOUIS DE LA HABA

Contributing Photographers: DAVID HISER, LOWELL GEORGIA, MELINDA BERGE, JONATHAN T. WRIGHT, KERBY SMITH, TONY O'BRIEN, JIM BRANDENBURG, GORDON BEALL, R. STEVEN FULLER

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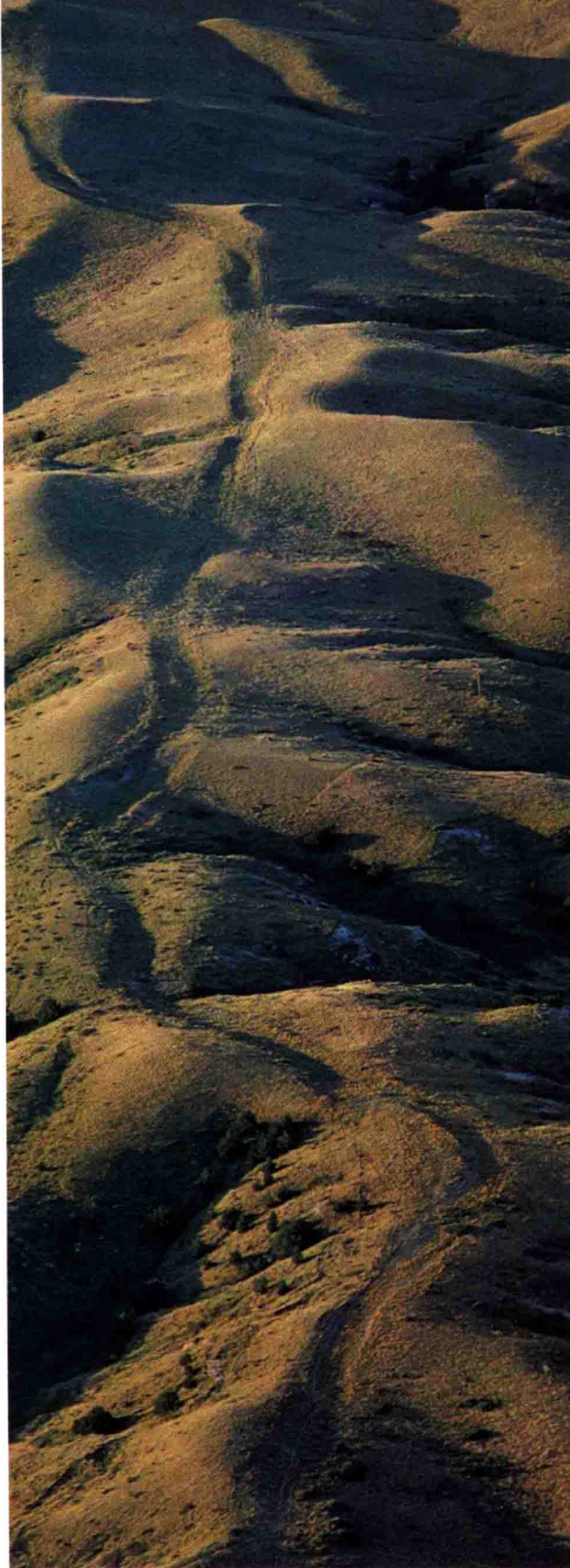
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Distinct in the dawn light, the 135-year-old trace of the Oregon Trail snakes along a windswept ridge above Ash Hollow, Nebraska. Pages 2-3: Wagon master Mel Heaton harnesses an Appaloosa on the Mormon Honeymoon Trail. Page 1: California-bound emigrants find themselves in desperate trouble, with an ox "lain down in its yoke to die." Endpapers: Reenacting a journey on the Oregon Trail, a 20th-century wagon train halts for the night near Chimney Rock, Nebraska. Hardcover design: Straining against ropes, pioneers try to aid their oxen over a rugged mountain passage.

PAGES 2-3: MELINDA BERGE; PAGE 1: "CROSSING THE PLAINS" BY CHARLES C. NAHL, CIRCA 1856, STANFORD UNIVERSITY MUSEUM OF ART, GIFT OF JANE L. STANFORD; END-PAPERS: DAVID HISER; HARDCOVER: FROM MELINDA BERGE PHOTOGRAPH OF BAS-RELIEF PANEL BY MAHONRI M. YOUNG, "THIS IS THE PLACE" MONUMENT, SALT LAKE CITY.



DAVID HISER

Foreword

We Americans have a long-standing love affair with the trails that led our westering ancestors toward the sunset. We have read about them in hundreds of books since Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail* appeared in the 1840's; we have glorified them in such classic films as *The Covered Wagon*; we have elevated television series like "Wagon Train" to the highest ratings. "Highways of conquest," we dubbed them, as we linked those rude tracks to the migrations that won the continent.

I felt their lure some 30 years ago when I drove westward from Chicago for my first look at the Far West. That land was not exactly unknown to me; I had been reading and teaching and writing about the West for 20 years in eastern and midwestern colleges, but not until a textbook in frontier history paid me a few royalties could I afford such a journey.

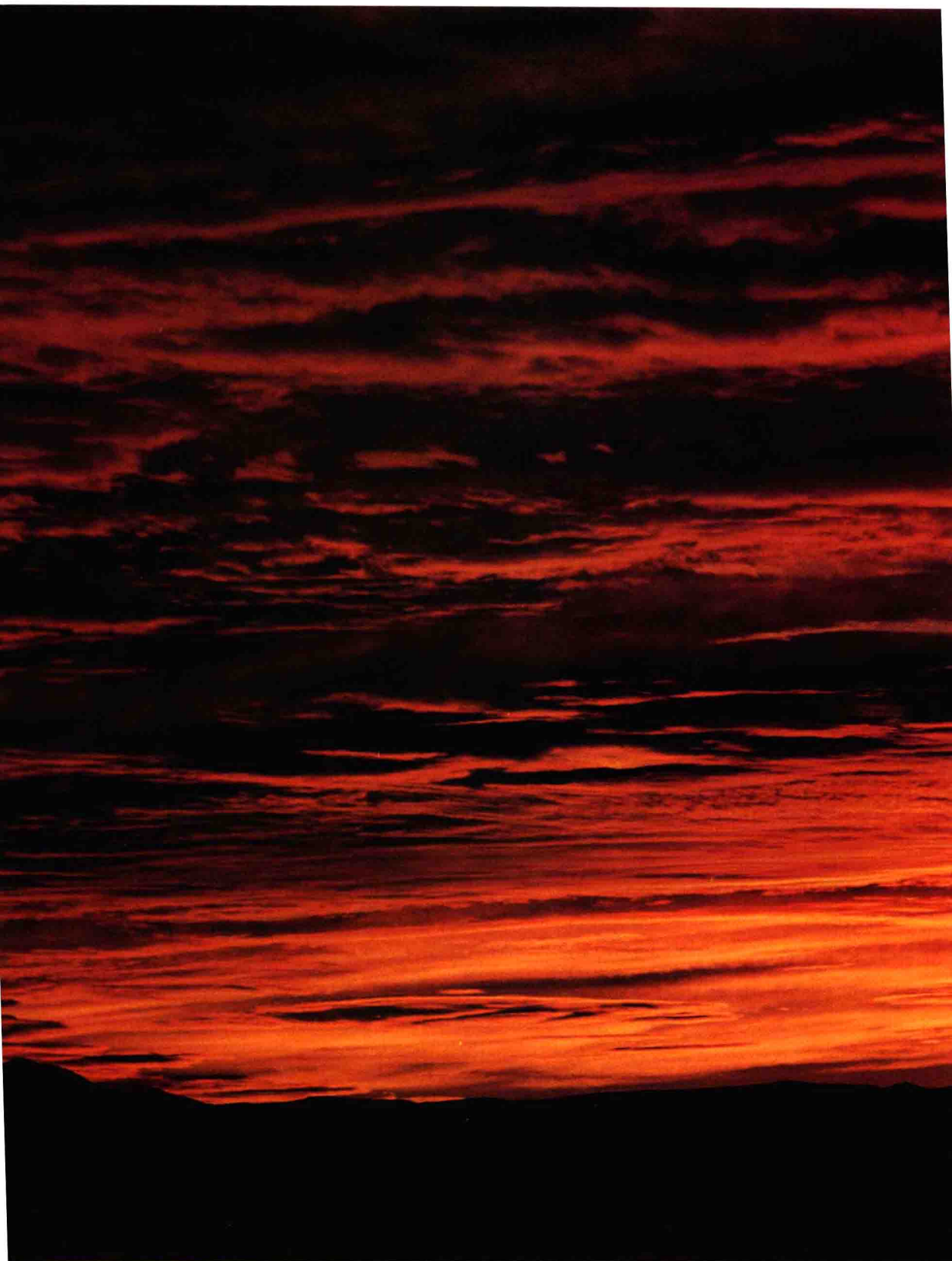
What an eye-opening adventure that was! I zigzagged back and forth across the Rockies a dozen times, following one trail after another, stopping now and then to explore the ruins of Fort Bridger, climb Independence Rock to trace the names of pioneers carved there, or thrill at the sight of the ruts of the wagon trains in Oregon's Blue Mountains.

Now and then I asked myself why I was so fascinated by the trails I was following. I knew that, for some time, the number of people they carried was small. Between 1840 and the California gold rush, fewer than 20,000 men, women, and children followed those roads westward—a handful compared with the hordes then flooding the Mississippi Valley, or the hundreds of thousands crossing the Atlantic to seek a better life in the New World. Yet the story of the overland trails was told a thousand times for every one telling of the peopling of the Midwest. Why?

Excitement was there, of course: Indian attacks and desert hardship and even cannibalism. But I suspected that the greatest appeal of the trails lay in the role they played as avenues of progress for the enterprising. The men and women who followed them exemplified—and exaggerated—the hopes and dreams of all Americans for a better life. These were no cautious stay-at-homes content to endure fate's buffeting. They were bold adventurers, willing to risk everything to better themselves economically and socially. They were heeding Horace Greeley's advice—not just to "Go west, young man"—but to "Go west, young man, and grow up with the country!" The roads that the pioneers followed symbolized the spirit of enterprise that sustained the American dream.

Today that spirit flames less strongly in America, but the appeal of the trails has not diminished. As I read and admired the pages that follow in this superb book, I realized why. They tell of high adventure, but they tell also of the hopes and sacrifices that made our nation great. Six writers mirror that spirit as they describe their own experiences in retracing the trails today, and the hardships of the pioneers who preceded them. Talented photographers add their contemporary work to an absorbing selection of historical illustrations. This is a book that not only excites and entertains, but also helps us renew our faith in the West that was, and that lives still in our national spirit.

RAY ALLEN BILLINGTON
The Huntington Library
San Marino, California





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JONATHAN T. WRIGHT

course of the Bighorn River in southern Montana.

1 The Santa Fe Trail...



Highway of Commerce

By Marc Simmons



PRECEDING PAGES:
Under a blue New Mexico sky, Charlene Romero performs a Mexican folk dance at the annual fiesta in Santa Fe. The historic city, founded in 1609, served as a northern outpost of New Spain for more than two centuries. But it remained isolated from the United States until American merchants forged the Santa Fe Trail in 1821. The route carried a stream of merchants' wagons and increasing numbers of emigrants until replaced by the railroad in 1880.

The charioteer, as he smacks his whip, feels a bounding elasticity of soul within him . . . impossible to restrain;—even the mules prick up their ears with a peculiarly conceited air, as if in anticipation of that change of scene which will presently follow.”

The place was not Rome but Independence, Missouri; the writer was no classical scholar but a traveler on the American prairies, Josiah Gregg. The year was 1831, and Gregg was about to set out, in a train of a hundred freight wagons crammed to the tops of their sideboards with merchandise, for distant Santa Fe.

The teamster—Gregg’s charioteer—had been hired somewhere in the Missouri settlements for a wage of \$20 a month. For that sum he was expected to drive his fractious mules by day, pull his wagon into position at evening to form part of a defensive circle, stand a turn at night guard, and put up with thirst, sandstorms, rattlesnakes, mosquitoes, and scalp-raising Indians.

Late one midsummer’s day, at the opposite end of the road of Gregg’s adventure, I reflected upon the men of durable spirit who, in spite of looming hardships, could experience an expansion of soul at the prospect of a trip over the Santa Fe Trail. I was standing on the brow of a low hill overlooking New Mexico’s ancient capital, near the spot where drivers of the wagon caravans caught their first glimpse of journey’s end.

Far to the west, fanlike rays of the sloping sun tinged piles of oceanic clouds with shades of red and purple. Behind Santa Fe, in its darkening cup of a valley, rose the soaring ramparts of the Sangre de



Cristo Mountains. Earlier a passing shower had scrubbed them clean, so that now, catching the refracted beams of fading sunlight, they shone like glass. The rainfall had also liberated the perfume of ponderosa and piñon pine. The scented air, drifting down from the higher peaks, was as familiar to me as the adobe buildings and narrow streets of old Santa Fe.

From half a lifetime in New Mexico, I could understand the enthusiasm of men like Gregg's teamsters. On the surface, at least, they were drawn west by economic motives—the chance to turn a dollar in the southwestern trade. But perhaps unconsciously they also responded to the challenge of a stirring, spartan life on the trail, and even more to the spell cast by Santa Fe in its storybook setting. There in the gloaming, I felt keenly a sense of kinship with those long-ago travelers who had paused, just as I did now, to breathe deeply and look and marvel.

One of the best known of that pioneering breed was Josiah Gregg himself. He joined his first caravan not as a teamster but as a health-seeker. Well educated but physically weak, he hoped that the western air and regular exercise would cure his various ailments. Although, he informs us, he commenced the journey as a semi-invalid riding in a carriage, "Before the close of the first week, I saddled my pony. And when we reached the buffalo range, I was not only as eager for the chase as the sturdiest of my companions, but I enjoyed far more exquisitely my share of the buffalo meat than all the delicacies which were ever devised to provoke the most fastidious appetite."

Josiah Gregg found both a remedy for ill health and a new vocation. The Santa Fe Trail claimed him, as it did so many others. Eight times he crossed and recrossed the plains as a merchant before settling down with quill and ink to capture on paper a fleeting era. His *Commerce of the Prairies*, first printed in 1844, remains the classic account of trail life and customs.

The main story of the Santa Fe Trail is neatly marked off at the beginning and end: The trail endured for a scant 60 years, from its opening in 1821 until 1880, when completion of the railroad to Santa Fe put it out of business. But another chapter has been added to the saga during the present century. People with a variety of motives and modes of travel—foot, horseback, wagon, or automobile—have been moved to retrace the old route. For them the spirit of the Santa Fe traders is somehow recaptured at the river crossings and watering holes, beneath the shadows of landmark mountains, in the quiet ruins of forts, and at those rare spots where, however faintly, caravan tracks are indelibly engraved in the earth.

On a steamy August morning I began my own journey over the Santa Fe Trail. In New Franklin, Missouri, I discovered that a plain granite marker sits squarely in the middle of the placid little town's main street. Its chiseled inscription reads: "Franklin, 'Cradle of the Santa Fe Trail.' This trail, one of the great highways of the world, stretched nearly one thousand miles from Franklin, Missouri, to Santa Fe, New Mexico. 'From Civilization to Sundown.'"

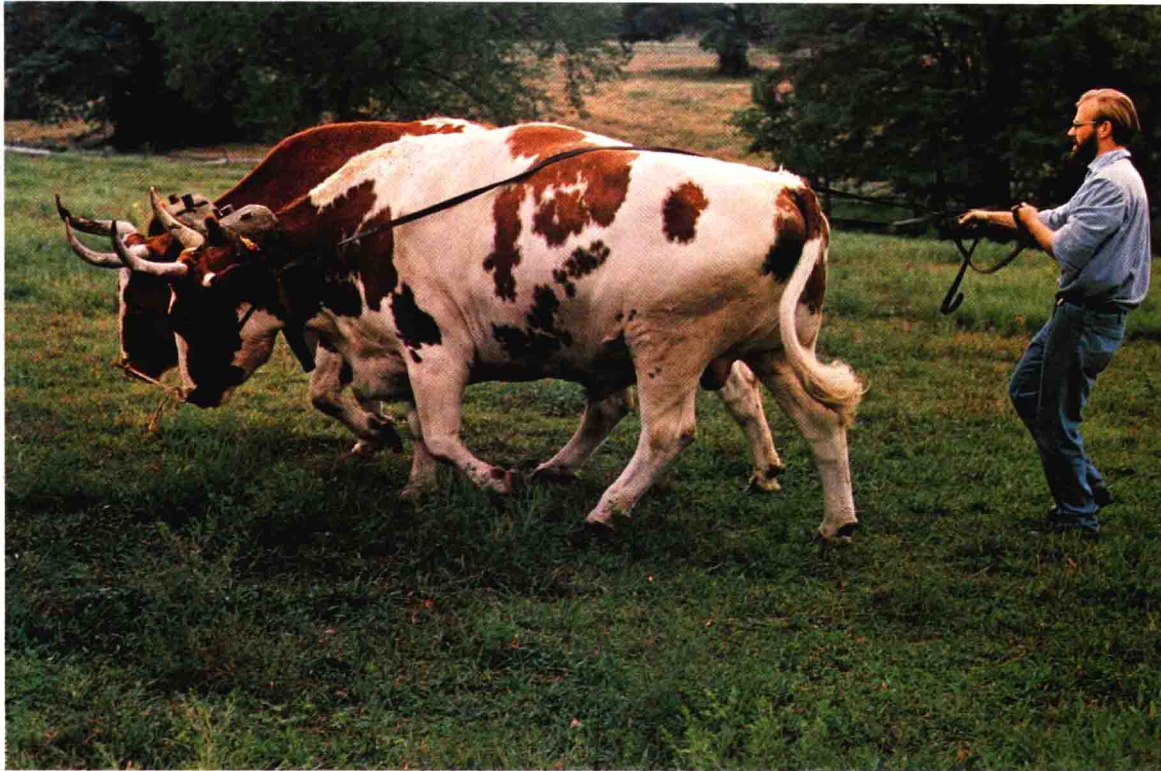
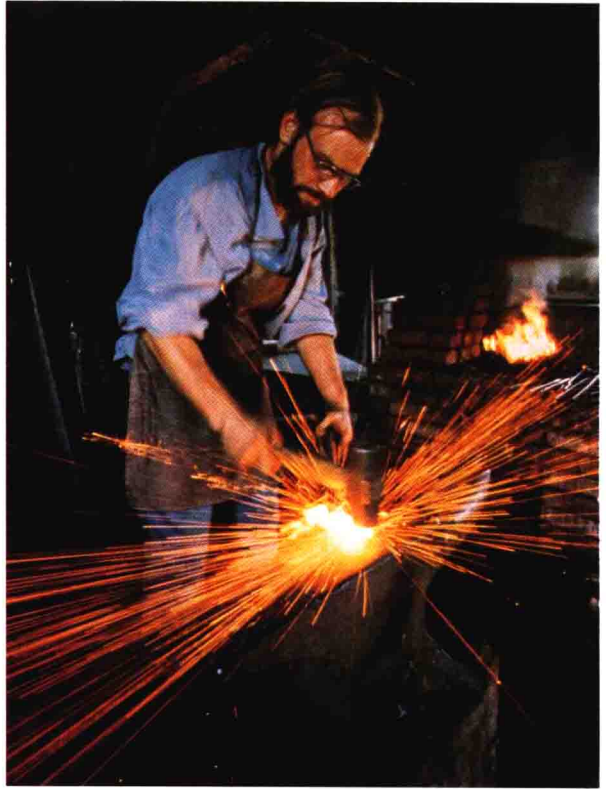
Among America's chief pathways of (Continued on page 16)

Reaching from Missouri to New Mexico—more than 900 miles—the Santa Fe Trail cut across prairie, mountain, and desert. Travelers had a choice of two branches: The northern angled through the Colorado Rockies, a difficult passage for wagons; the southern, or Cimarron cutoff, shortened the journey by a hundred miles but took travelers far from reliable sources of water.



Salute to tradition at Independence

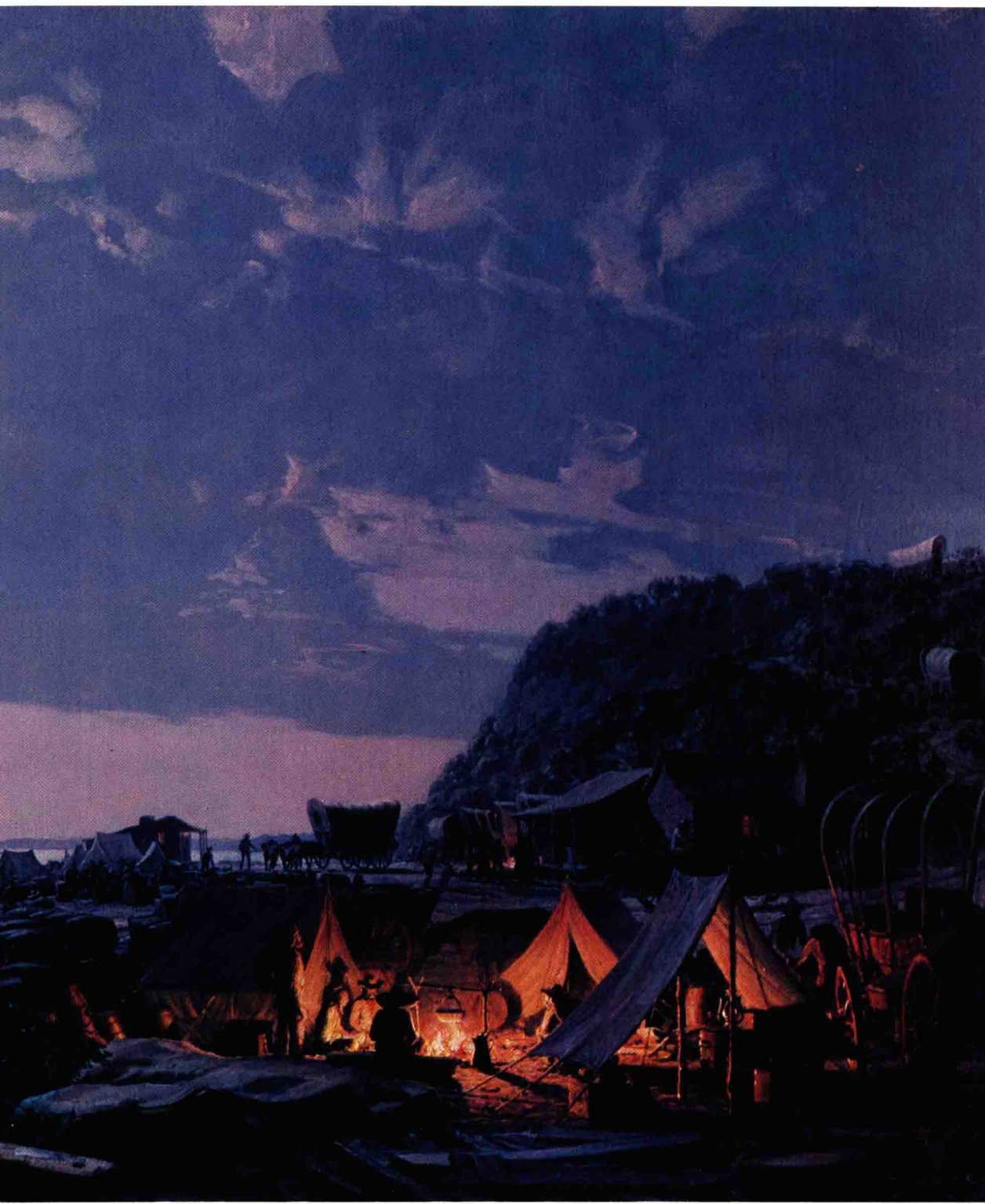
Independence, Missouri—once the principal departure point for westbound travelers on the Santa Fe, Oregon, and California trails—commemorates the past at an annual September festival in Courthouse Square. Emigrants gathered here in early spring to buy supplies, outfit wagons, and select teams of oxen or mules before starting the long trek west. In the pioneer tradition, Carl Smart breaks a yoke of oxen to harness in Missouri Town 1855, a recreated frontier village near Independence. Many wagoners preferred oxen over mules or horses because of their greater strength and endurance. In the village's blacksmith shop, Smart welds a hinge for a wagon toolbox.



OPPOSITE AND ABOVE: KERBY SMITH; UPPER RIGHT: DAVID HISER



By moonlight, roustabouts unload a steamboat from St. Louis at Wayne City Landing on the Missouri River. Wagons haul the cargo



PAINTING BY JOHN STOBART, 1977, FROM BIG CHIEF ROOFING COMPANY COLLECTION,
ARDMORE, OKLAHOMA; COURTESY KENNEDY GALLERIES, INC., NEW YORK

*up the steep hill to nearby Independence, for repacking on large
overland freight wagons heading westward on the Santa Fe Trail.*

Harsh reality of the trail: Two Sisters of Loretto kneel at the grave of a companion who has died of cholera on the way to Santa Fe in 1867. The dread disease claimed more lives on the emigrant roads than all the Indian attacks combined.

westward expansion, the Santa Fe Trail was the oldest, and the first over which wagons were used. It served primarily as a commercial route, traveled by swarms of eager merchants and freighters. But the trail also accommodated mountain men, military expeditions, California-bound emigrants, and a sprinkling of early-day tourists. Taken all together, their experiences form an epic history.

While I was copying down the inscription on the Franklin marker, a friendly farmer in bib overalls came up. "Saw you standing in the street," he said. "I've been here all my life, and I've never gotten around to reading this stone. Thought I ought to take a look."

We talked awhile, and he remarked, "When I was a boy, old-timers claimed that the first Santa Fe traders marked the trail by bending down branches of saplings. You can still see some of our oldest trees, left over from that time, with limbs bent toward the ground

