

Crossing Raton Pass



When reading primary and secondary sources, it is necessary to evaluate the information given. Primary sources are those produced at the time of the event usually by someone who was present. Secondary sources are those that are made by someone who has studied the primary sources and make their own interpretations of the information.

In this activity, you will make judgments as to the reliability of the image you have been studying. The drawing you have been studying can be found in *Path to Glory: A Pictorial Celebration of the Santa Fe Trail* by Jami Parkison. It is an image of an oil painting. The caption under the picture reads, “William Becknell Expedition to Santa Fe, 1822: Daniel MacMorris. Oil. Santa Fe Collection from the Business Men’s Assurance Company.

Read the following **secondary information** based on writings from Becknell himself: Becknell’s first trip to Santa Fe, 1821, was for the stated purpose of catching wild horses. However he and some men who answered his ad for companions to accompany him left with pack horses carrying trade items such as calico cloth. They did not have any wagons with them. Becknell’s horse-pack train took the mountain route, following the Arkansas River west into the southeastern mountains of present-day Colorado. For several days, they struggled to cross Raton Pass.

From Becknell’s own writings (**primary source**) this is what he says of the pass.

“We had now some cliffs to ascend, which presented difficulties almost insurmountable and we were laboriously engaged nearly two days in rolling away large rocks, before we attempted to get our horses up, and even then one fell and was bruised to death.”

Additional **secondary information about Becknell** found in a caption under the painting by MacMorris (page 7), probably written by the author of the book Jami Parkison.

William Becknell set out on a second trip to Santa Fe on May 22, 1822, bringing \$3,000 worth of merchandise into Santa Fe. The trip was wildly lucrative. Profits were \$60,000 – 2,000 percent of the investment. Becknell’s first caravan to Santa Fe followed the labor-intensive route into Colorado and over the Raton Pass: The Mountain Route. The second time, Becknell took a short cut. Near the great bend of the Arkansas River, he headed southwest into Oklahoma and New Mexico. In the years after, most traders opted for this treacherous route, waterless and relentlessly stalked by hostile Indians. The Cimarron Cutoff saved time (about five or six days), but it cost lives.

1. View the image again. Based on both the primary source and secondary source information you have just read, explain how this could be an accurate interpretation of Becknell’s second trip.

2. What type of man do you think Becknell was? Justify your reasons.

Susan Magoffin

One of the most important historical records of the Santa Fe Trail is a journal (primary source) written by Susan Shelby Magoffin. In June 1846, Susan was an eighteen-year-old new bride traveling to Santa Fe with her husband who was a veteran Santa Fe trader. Susan’s diary describes the dangers and excitement of the trail.

Read the following account from her diary August 15, 1846 entry:

“Saturday 15. Camp No. 9. Still in the Raton, traveling on at a rate of half mile an hour, with the road growing worse and worse . . . Worse and worse the road! They are even taking the mules from the carriages this P.M. and half dozen men by bodily exertions are pulling them down the hills. And it takes a dozen men to steady a wagon with all its wheels locked—and for one who is some distance off to hear the crash it makes over the stones, is truly alarming. Till I rode ahead and understood the business, I supposed that every wagon had fallen over a precipice. We came to camp about half an hour after dusk, having accomplished the great travel of six or eight hundred yards during the day.”

