WAGON TRAIN

 The year was 1841. The Arbuckle family -- from St. Joseph, Missouri -- made the fateful decision to join an 18-family wagon train heading southwest on the Santa Fe Trail. With rest stops, the 800-mile journey from nearby Fort Leavenworth, Kansas to Santa Fe would take about 90 days. By leaving in mid-May, the 68-person party hoped to reach their destination by mid-August. Free land and a chance for a fresh start was the lure for most. For others, it was the opportunity to start a new business, and a new life.

 The Arbuckles consisted of Chester (“Chet”), age 35; Rebecca (“Becky”), age 32; Rachel, age 14; Trent, age 12; and one-year old baby Leah. Chet and Becky had been married in 1826 in Independence, Missouri. Chet hoped to open a dry goods store in Santa Fe, to take advantage of the rapidly increasing trade between that town and Mexico City – long-linked by the Camino Real – as well as with Texas.

 The 18 Murphy wagons assembled at Fort Leavenworth (established in 1832), and the various families got to know each other while loading their supplies. Each wagon could carry between 1800-2200 pounds of necessaries, but only essential equipment was allowed – hence, no heirloom music organs, heavy surplus furniture, or boxes of books (other than the Bible) would be coming along.

 On May 16th, the group met their buckskin-clad Wagonmaster, Flint McCord, whose long ginger hair and reddish-brown beard gave evidence of his Scottish ancestry. He was tall and lean, in his late 30s, with a good six-foot frame of tough muscle. His blue eyes were penetrating and steady, his face and hands darkly sun-burnished. Flint had made this trip six times, he announced, and he began taking command by his opening remarks to his party.

 “The Santa Fe can be a son-of-a-bitch even under the best of circumstances, if the ladies here will pardon my language. The Trail splits off into two sections: the Direct Route, and the Mountain Branch. The Direct Route will save us 100 miles – about 10 days of travel – but it leaves the Arkansas River and takes us across hostile Indian territory and a flat waterless area called the Jornada del Muerte. If you speak any Mexican, you know that means ‘Journey of Death.’ It’s a 50-mile, 5-day ordeal with poor grass and no water. But after that, you hit the Lower Spring of the Cimarron River, and from there it’s a better march into Santa Fe. The Mountain Branch, on the other hand, forces us to contend with the difficult Rocky Mountains. The good news with that choice is that we can follow the Arkansas River further for water, and we get to stop at Bent’s Fort – the only supply depot and protection between here and Santa Fe. But that route also risks the danger of Indian attacks, rock avalanches, and busted wagon wheels. Both routes cross lands of the Pawnee, Kiowa, Osage, Kanza, and Kaw, but the worst tribes are the Apache, the Comanche, and the Cheyenne. I still have three arrowheads stuck in my back that the doc can’t cut out, so I know from hard experience.”

 Flint paused a moment while he took out his pipe, packed it with tobacco from a small leather pouch, lit it with a smoldering twig from the nearby campfire, drew smoke, and continued.

 “I’ve decided that with this group, the best course of action is to take the Direct Route. Three out of every four wagon trains do. If we fill our water barrels at the Arkansas and drink sparingly during our run across The Jonada – and schedule most of our travel for nighttime under a full moon – we should be fine. I’ve done it four times already, and never lost a pilgrim. If you object to my decision, then, hell, it’s a free country, and you can join up with the next party tackling the Rockies. Anybody want to back out? Now’s the time.”

 The 68 pioneers looked left and right at each other, some murmuring in discussion with their family for a few moments, but in the end, no one abandoned Flint McCord. The die was cast. Chet and Becky hugged their children, then grasped hands and solemnly nodded their approval.

 “That’s decided then,” Flint boomed and slapped his large hands together. “Now, listen up, everyone. I want every wagon to have six strong, healthy oxen – four to pull at any one time, and two tethered to the back for rotation. We can make about two miles an hour -- roughly ten miles a day, so as not to exhaust the oxen --but some days we’ll do a little more, and some days a little less. All depends on where we camp. Each family should also bring at least one horse or mule, to ride a bit when you get tired of walking beside your wagon. If you want to bring any cattle or a milk cow, no more than two. Our daily schedule will be like this: Up at 4 and leave at 7 after breakfast. Keep rolling until we stop for our mid-day dinner meal and some rest, then travel until 4 and set up camp. After chores and supper, everyone asleep right after sundown. As part of the deal, I take my meals with each family on a rotating basis. We'll also have rotated night guard duty, four men at all times, in two-hour shifts. For fresh meat -- and a welcome break from jerky and bacon – we’ll try for pronghorn, rabbit, deer, and prairie dogs. But if we come across a stray herd of buffalo, we leave them be – Indians don’t like you robbing their food. Also, everyone going outside of their wagon bonnet wears a hat. Too much sun on a bare head causes health problems. Another thing: I don’t mind a man enjoying a little taste of whiskey at day’s end, but I won’t abide any drunks. Or card game gamblers. Anyone caught stealing, you’ll deal with me, and when I’m finished with you, you’ll be cast out. I aim to have peaceable travel for the ninety days or so that we are together. Any questions?”

 A thin but ramrod straight man dressed in all black -- standing alongside a somber, pale woman also wearing all black – cleared his throat and spoke up.

 “Mr. McCord, I am the Reverend Ezekiel Danforth from Connecticut, and this is my dear wife, Prudence. We ask your permission to have a brief Bible reading aloud after supper each evening at the campfire. We would also like to lead a hymn and a closing nightly prayer, if you are agreeable.”

 Flint leisurely scratched his beard, then replied, “Well, sir, I would never object to a fine man of the cloth doing his work. The Good Book tends to help calm people’s fears when they enter a strange land, and that’s a fact, so I’m sure everyone here will appreciate your efforts, Preacher. Consider it done!” he slapped his thigh and smiled, revealing a missing lower tooth. “Now, friends, each family has already paid me half my fee, so I remind you again that the other half will be due when we reach Santa Fe. We leave tomorrow at sunrise. Make sure the Fort blacksmith double-checks your wheel rims, axles, tongue, and yokes, and have the harness maker check all your leatherworkings and bindings. I bid you all a fond good-day. If you’ll excuse me now, I have a bank deposit to make, and some final arrangements with the authorities before our early morning departure.”

 The Arbuckles checked the contents of their wagon again, for there would be no chance to re-provision until they arrived in Santa Fe almost three months from now. Most of the space in the twelve-foot long wagon bed was filled with food supplies (flour, bacon, coffee, tea, dried fruit, lard, sugar, rice, beans, corn meal, hardtack, salt, vinegar, baking soda), clothing, necessary tools, two lanterns, a few simple pieces of furniture, four wooden chairs, a laundry tub, soap, some basic medicines, a tent, blankets, pillows and bedding. In the wagon’s side box were cooking pots and pans, tin plates and cups, and other utensils. Two 40-gallon barrels for water were lashed to each side of the wagon. Under the wagon seat was a coil of rope, a towing chain, a container of axle grease, two rifles, a pistol, and ammunition. Last but not least, a spare wagon wheel was attached underneath the wagon itself. After Chet gave his approval, his family went to the Missouri River to bathe and then dress in clean clothes. The six oxen were fed, as were the one horse (“Phineas”) and one cow (“Sally”) that the Arbuckles were taking with them.

 Dawn broke clear and bright. Trent and Rachel were itching to get started, along with their parents and the other sixty-four pioneers. The 18 Murphy wagons were aligned in a neat column as directed. The Reverend Danforth gave a short blessing, worn black Bible in hand. Flint McCord gave the loud command: “Wagons Ho!” and off they went. The date was Monday, May 17, 1841.

 The breezy, cool, mostly sunny weather cooperated nicely for the twelve days it took to traverse the green, hilly ups and downs of eastern Kansas, as the train then moved into the start of flatter terrain. The party had covered about 120 miles so far when they arrived at the Neosho River. Water barrels were replenished as the party camped in a fine mile-wide grove of trees. One huge oak in particular was pointed out to the group by Flint.

 “Folks, that there is the famous Treaty Oak. In 1825, early emigrants paid the Osage Indians $800 worth of goods for permission to cross their lands in perpetuity, and both parties made that pact right here under this tree. And the peace with that tribe has held ever since. Both the Osage and their neighbors the Kaw are mighty peaceful. They generally won’t bother us, so don’t worry.”

 Trent Arbuckle then spoke up. “Mr. McCord, when do you figure we’ll see our first Indians?”

 Flint chuckled and replied, “I know that you and the others are curious, boy, but if we don’t see any on this trip, consider yourself lucky.” He mimicked a scalping, and winked.

 The group was ordered to spend two extra days here (an area that would later be known as Council Grove), to rest the animals, bathe, and for the women to do their laundry. The following morning, however, broke cloudy and dark. Thunderstorms were rolling in from the northwest. Soon, lightning crashed and thunder boomed. “Sorry, folks, but we have to travel whether it’s dry or wet. Let’s move out.” An hour later, the wagon train was miserable, soaked in wind-whipped, torrential rains. But the storm eventually passed, and they bravely rolled and trudged onward. The wet teased out the smells of sagebrush and mesquite, and brought forth abundant, colorful wild flowers.

 Over the next thirteen days, it rained two more times but not as hard. Rachel Arbuckle first heard, then spied her first rattlesnake, which her father warily beheaded with a long-handled hoe. Meanwhile, several deer and antelope were spotted and shot by the hunters in the group, so fresh meat went gratefully into communal stew pots. Trent even bagged two jackrabbits. Becky attended to baby Leah and kept her family fed, trying her best to vary their diet despite the limited variety of provisions. She prided herself in making fresh biscuits every morning in her Dutch oven, and she faithfully milked Sally their cow every day – sharing the surplus milk with other mothers who had children but no cow. The group had adapted well to Flint McCord’s daily schedule. No injuries, accidents, or wagon breakdowns had occurred as of yet. Each night, Reverend Danforth read aloud from his Bible, and offered up prayers to the Almighty for the group’s safety and deliverance. All joined in, too, in the nightly religious hymns. But after their voices faded, there was absolute silence -- other than for a few crickets and the crackling of the large campfire in the middle of the encircled wagons. Not even a lone coyote howl was heard. The vast heavens above were inky black with wide splashes of twinkling distant stars – a constant reminder how far away the party was from any civilization, and that their former homes were just a memory now.

 By now it was June 10, and they had reached the impressive Arkansas River. Flint explained that they would rest here for two full days, staying on the right bank, because they wouldn’t have to cross the rushing waters until they reached the Direct Route cutoff point.

 Chet Arbuckle rotated Rachel and Trent riding on their horse, Phineas, when they appeared tired of walking alongside their wagon. Sometimes, Becky had Rachel watch Leah when the baby was asleep, so that she could stretch her legs a bit from mostly sitting inside the wagon out of the sun.

 Two days later, the wagon train saw the landmark called Pawnee Rock. It was a barren, grayish brown outcrop of sandstone – about 150’ high -- jutting out of a huge green mound of earth. From the top, Flint explained, you could see many miles in every direction. Various Indian tribes used this unique rock as a lookout spot to sight game and to ambush enemies.

 “Can we stop and climb it?” pleaded Trent.

 “Sure, boy, but I think we should spend no more than an hour here. You can also carve your name or initials in the rock. It’s pretty soft, and you can use your knife. Let me ride ahead and check out the perimeter first, though, to make sure that no hostiles are hiding behind.” Flint swung into his saddle and galloped away.

 About ten minutes later, he signaled with his hat that all was safe, and the wagon moved ahead, and met up with him. Flint singled out Trent. “You wanna know how this place got its name, son? It was in 18 and 26. A young Kit Carson – the way I heard it, he was about 17 at the time – was here with a scouting party, and it was his turn for night guard duty. Well, he was startled by a strange noise around midnight, and thought it might be an attacking Pawnee. So he snuck around a rock corner and fired his rifle. But all he hit was his own mule, who had gotten loose in the night! Luckily, the critter lived. But Kit’s group teased him non-stop for days, and they dubbed the spot where it all happened ‘Pawnee Rock,’ And the name stuck to this day.” Flint flipped the brim of Trent’s hat downward with his index finger, then added, “Now climb up there and make your mark!”

 Trent excitedly scurried up the sandstone, and soon discovered a handful of other dates, names, and initials of people who had passed by this way before. He proudly carved his family name ‘Arbuckle’ with his buck knife and then quickly added ‘1841’ underneath. The view from the top of Pawnee Rock was spectacular, the 18 wagons looking like miniature toys resting below at the base.

 The wagon train continued nine more days before it arrived at the point where the Santa Fe Trail split in two. The date was June 23. Using their chains, the wagons attached themselves in pairs and carefully crossed the rushing Arkansas River guided by rope tethers. Once all were safe, Flint announced, “We will rest three days here. Have your stock drink all the water they can. Same for you. Then fill every water barrel and canteen to the brim. With my apologies to the Preacher, we will be going into Hell. La Jornada del Muerte. The absolute worst part of our journey. If you make it, you’ll have quite a tale to tell your grandchildren. So get ready to gird your loins.”

 That night, Chet and Becky gathered their brood close and reassured them as best they could. Other families did the same, each in their own way. The Reverend Danforth recited Psalm 23, and offered up extra prayers in an attempt to bolster the group’s courage. “God will be with us, as He was when He led the Israelites into the Promised Land,” Ezekiel guaranteed his flock of pioneers. Prudence then led a final, solemn rendition of “My Faith Looks Up to Thee,” before the group retired for the evening.

 It was Sunday, June 27 when the wagon train started on La Jornada del Muerte. As Flint had hoped, the moon would be at 2/3 phase that night, increasing to 3/4 phase the next two nights, then full phase for the final two nights. Daytime temperatures were humid and in the upper 80s here at the river, but would climb as they headed across the shade-less and barren aridity of La Jornada. The 68 brave souls could see the merciless flat area ahead, and each was confined to their own private thoughts of dread. The sky was devoid of clouds, the sun unblinking. A hot wind from the west blew brown dust.

 Flint’s plan was to travel three hours in the morning, then rest in and under the wagons and tents until nightfall, when travel would continue for four hours between 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. No guards were needed for the next few nights now, because even the Indians avoided this place of relentless misery.

 As time crept by, conversation was reduced to a minimum. The animals moaned and complained. The heated earth permeated the boots of everyone walking. Sweat evaporated quickly. The water barrel levels were slowly going down. Dehydration made appetites lag. Exhaustion came quicker. After day three, several pilgrims were prostrate in their wagons. The elderly and young suffered. Sally the milk cow stumbled and would not rise, and the Arbuckles were sadly forced to leave her behind. Soon, other cattle and horses dropped. Vultures appeared, circling their next meal. Flint had to be firm in his leadership and discipline. Keep going, almost there, don’t stop…

 After day four, the water was gone from all the barrels, most of it ladled out for the oxen and remaining stock. Only canteens held the remains of life-giving liquid. Fevers were breaking out among the weak. Eyes were listless and glassy. The party passed occasional piles of old bleached bones. Yet Flint McCord pointed ahead at the wagon ruts they were following, saying, “Look! The folks before us made it. And so will we! Don’t give out on me now, we are getting close to Lower Spring on the Cimarron River. Just one more day, you’ll see it. Water!”

 It was just after 9 a.m. on July 2 that the wagon train reached the safety of Lower Spring. Although the water was brackish, it was drinkable despite the taste, and the animals didn’t mind one bit. The pilgrims put their rifles down and rushed in a panic to drink, and several even plunged fully clothed into the water, filling their hats and pouring the blessed contents over their heads and faces.

 That was when tragedy struck.

 A band of twenty hostile Comanches on horseback were waiting for just this moment of weakness and distraction to strike from their hidden location behind the numerous trees growing at the river’s edge. Soon, arrows and spears were airborne, and the first man to get hit was Wagonmaster Flint McCord. A fatal arrow protruded from the side of his neck, which had sliced his carotid artery, causing blood to gush out.

 Instinctively, Flint wheeled with his rifle and dropped one of the approaching attackers, then dropped another two using his revolver. He quickly issued orders to the pilgrim men to grab their rifles and fire back, but to also release three horses and then cease firing, in hopes that the Comanches needed those mounts more rather than risk losing their braves. Chet immediately cut loose Phineas, and two nearby trail mates likewise obliged. Sure enough, the Indians stopped shooting and chased after the horses. Soon, the warriors were gone, leaving seven of their dead behind. But Flint had since collapsed to the ground.

 His voice growing weak and his breathing labored, Flint called out to the boy, Trent, who came running. “Fetch your Pa, boy,” Flint murmured. Chet Arbuckle came and called out, “I’m right here, Flint.”

 Chet slowly knelt down next to McCord. Flint said, “I’m a goner, Chet. I’m making you the new Wagonmaster. I've been watching you. You’re honest, brave, and smart. I know you can lead. Just keep heading southwest. Follow the wagon ruts. You’ll cross nine other shallow rivers or creeks. You’ve got to bring the train safely into Santa Fe. We are more than halfway there from here. You can be there by mid-August. I'm trusting you with their lives, Chet…” Flint McCord, bleeding out, went into a spasm of coughing, stopped, closed his blue eyes, and died.

 The whole party meanwhile had naturally assembled around their dying leader during this moment, and the Reverend Danforth offered up Flint’s soul to God. Two other men had been wounded during the Comanche attack, one arrow shot in the leg and the other in the shoulder. Both wounds looked non-fatal, and given proper removal and time to heal, both men were expected to live.

 Flint McCord was buried under a cottonwood near the Cimarron, with Trent carving a grave marker. Trent was solemnly presented with Flint’s rifle and pistol, and Chet was given Flint's horse, saddle, and knife. Stones were then carefully placed over the dirt burial mound. Prudence sang “Rock of Ages” and tears were shed without embarassment.

 The wagon train settlers were still in a state of shock when Chester Arbuckle took up the reins of command.

 “My dear friends, as you can see, we are on our own. There might be another wagon train a week behind us, or not. But we are close to our goal of Santa Fe. We can’t just wait here and hope. The Indians will probably be back to collect their dead, so we need to be gone by then. There is no turning back, no giving up. Our children are depending on us. We must depend on each other. We have enough supplies. I want the night guards doubled until further notice. Let’s fill our water barrels now and move on. The worst is over, I have to believe. Pray God we are spared any sickness, or injuries, or further hostile attacks. We will follow the right bank of this river, then we can expect nine other places to provide water along the way in the weeks to come. There will likely be grasses and game again, all the way into Santa Fe. I know this because I once talked with a trail guide named Linus Hunt when my family and I were back in St. Joe. He told me about four trail markers ahead on our route that we must look out for: Autograph Rock, Rabbit Ears, Wagon Rock, and Pecos Ruins. I have to believe that he told me the truth. Unless there are any questions, I say ‘Move out!’”

 Although no one could have known it at the time, Flint McCord had fallen near the spot where famous mountain man Jedediah Smith had been similarly ambushed and killed by a Comanche war party ten years earlier, at the age of 32.

 The wagon train traveled for four days. The July 4 holiday came and went unheralded, for no one was in any mood for celebration. But fever hit many of the settlers now, including Becky Arbuckle, possibly from the brackish water at Lower Spring. The accompanying chills and diarrhea were not curbed by the usual medicines. Chet called for a halt of three days, because many in the party were too weak to travel. Fortunately, they were now at water, a place known as Middle Spring, near a large rock outcrop. Unfortunately, gnats and mosquitoes plagued the emigrants. Buffalo chips now had to be gathered for cooking fuel, because there were few trees for firewood.

 During a routine chip gathering, Rachel came breathlessly running back to her father. “Pa, I just saw a horse in the distance. And it looked like someone lying on the ground next to it.”

 Because no one on the wagon train had a spyglass, Chet grabbed his gun and jumped on Flint's former horse (now re-named "Renegade") and rode out in the direction that his daughter indicated. There he found a painted pony and an Indian boy lying next to it. The lad looked to be around age 15, and he appeared to have fallen and badly broken his left leg. Chet knew nothing about identifying any Indian tribes, but he did notice that the colored body markings on the boy differed from those of the attacking Comanches from Lower Spring. The Indian pulled his knife to defend himself, because his quiver of hunting arrows and bow were out of reach. He spoke in a loud, threatening manner (which naturally Chet did not understand), but then winced in pain and shifted his leg and was resigned to silence.

 Chet slowly put his rifle down and offered the boy a drink from his canteen and a piece of jerky from a pocket. The Indian was wary, but greedily took both offerings. Chet then pantomimed that he would help the boy and take him and his pony back to camp. Chet carefully lifted the lad and placed him face down on the saddle of Renegade, then grabbed the paint by its mane and walked both animals the mile or so back to the wagon train.

 The settlers at the camp were startled at the sight of a young redskin. Some wanted him killed, as revenge for the death of Flint McCord and the wounding of their two comrades. Reverend Danforth calmly intervened, calling instead for mercy and Christian charity. Chet agreed with the preacher, and found a train member who knew how to set a broken bone and rig a splint. Chet then had the boy placed in his tent to rest after he was fed. “We can take him with us to Santa Fe. Someone there will know what to do with him,” Chet announced.

 Meanwhile, the two men who had been wounded at Lower Spring were unfortunately taking a turn for the worse. Both the leg wound and the shoulder wound were badly infected. Regrettably, little could be done. One settler mentioned that he heard that Indians routinely doused their arrowheads with dung or piss to hasten the death through blood poisoning of whatever they were hunting. The first man, Josiah Brown, died on July 8, and the next, Patrick Riley, died the following day. Both were properly buried and marked just outside the camp, their wives and children then comforted and aided by the group. The 68 pilgrim group were now down to 66. The party was rested, but those who were ill were still quite weak from their sickness. Yet Chet had no alternative but to keep moving the wagon train onward to Santa Fe.

 For the next six days – one during a cold, severe hailstorm – the wagon train kept rolling, eventually crossing, then leaving, the Cimarron River. Morale was flagging, but Ezekiel and Prudence did their best to help brighten people’s hopes. Chet Arbuckle proved a capable leader, supervising the replacement of two broken wagon wheels and making an inventory of group provisions. He also wisely and regularly checked that all oxen were rotated in their yokes.

 The Indian boy, whom the group named “Pompey” -- after Sacagawea’s son, who was born on the famous 1804-1806 Lewis and Clark Expedition – was gradually adapting to being with the party, and vis-versa. He rode in the Arbuckle wagon with a still prostrate Becky, and with Rachel, who was caring for baby Leah while her mother was ill. Rachel even named Pompey’s pony “Lewis,” and was plainly fascinated by the Indian boy. Communication between the two foreign races, though, was entirely done through slow pantomime.

 Pompey was observant and appeared clever. He particularly noticed the debilitating fever sickness lingering among many of the group, especially as they stopped to relieve themselves periodically with awful bouts of diarrhea. He communicated with Rachel to help him down out of their wagon at one point, and he motioned for her to dig up the roots of a particular plant alongside the trail. He next pantomimed for her to boil the roots in water and make a type of herbal brew that those suffering should drink. Some feverish members refused, suspecting Indian trickery, but others were eager for any chance of relief and soon drank the pungent brew. Happily, by the following morning, those with fever who drank the tea were noticeably improved, causing the others to relent and likewise drink. Chet gave Pompey some sugar as a reward for his helping doctor the sick, and Pompey responded with the first shy smile anyone had seen him surrender.

 On July 16, the train reached an area called Cold Spring, and more importantly, they finally saw nearby Autograph Rock, which confirmed that they were traveling on the correct trail. Unlike Pawnee Rock, this place was a thirty-foot tall sandstone cliff rather than a mound, but like Pawnee Rock, it had names, dates, and initials carved in it -- mostly around the base at ground level. Trent even spied one from 1806, from a “T. Potts,” before adding another “Arbuckle 1841” to the rock face. Chet, meanwhile, called for a rest of two days here, due to its sweet, fresh water. The grasses were rich for the animals too, and the hunters lucked into shooting 15 prairie dogs – almost one for each wagon. A small herd of buffalo were also spotted in the distance by Pompey – who was undoubtedly disappointed that his still healing leg was preventing him from any pursuit. But Chet remembered Flint’s former command to leave any buffalo alone, or risk the wrath of the natives. So the huge, majestic wooly beasts slowly went on their way, unmolested.

 It was five more days of travel until they glimpsed a mountain on their left with two distinct peaks. “This must be the Rabbit Ears,” Chet proclaimed. “Linus Hunt told me that from here it is about 200 miles or 20 days to Santa Fe. Let’s rest one day here by the river.” It was the afternoon of July 22, 1841, and the river the train camped by was the North Canadian River, which drained eastward into the Oklahoma Panhandle. The wagon train had covered almost 600 miles since May 17. It seemed like a long, long time since they had departed from Fort Leavenworth, but the group’s health and spirits were both good now. They were optimistic that they could make it alive to their final destination. In fact, they had already crossed into New Mexico Territory two days ago, unknowingly.

 After traveling eight more days, the distinct shape of Wagon Mound loomed straight ahead. Linus was right again! Chet thought with relief to himself, assured that they were on the right path. Sure enough, the small mountain resembled a Murphy wagon with its bonnet up. Other than one walking pilgrim twisting an ankle by unwittingly stepping into a prairie dog hole, there were no mishaps. Meanwhile, Pompey’s leg was healing nicely, and he was anxious to get his split removed so he could ride his paint, Lewis, again. He wanted badly to return home to his Apache village tribe, but of course he could not explain the whole story to his rescuers of how he had become separated from a pronghorn hunting party of six young braves when they fanned out, and how he had been thrown off his pony when it got spooked by a rattlesnake.

 On August 2, the second rest day, about 40 mounted Indian warriors suddenly appeared at the camp. Chet had every available firearm made ready, then bravely went out un-armed to meet an imposing brave whom he presumed was the leader. Chet made an attempt at sign-language, to let the band know that the emigrants were merely passing through and were peaceful. The leader, however, seemed unmoved and unimpressed and did not dismount. Chet quickly called for his son to bring a red wool blanket and Flint's old buck knife from the family wagon. When Trent complied, Chet formally offered the two items as gifts to the leader. The Indian’s face, however, was a study in passivity. He was in truth simply thinking about how best to kill all these white invaders with a minimum loss of life to his braves.

 At this dramatic moment, the stillness was broken when Pompey loudly called out a string of sentences in the Apache language, which shocked every person assembled. Rachel quickly helped Pompey out of her family wagon, and he hopped unaided on his good leg up to the war party. He and the leader then talked back and forth with vigor and apparently mutual understanding.

 Pompey then turned to Chet and pantomimed that although this was not his family tribe, these warriors were also fellow Apaches, and that he would leave with them now, and that they would eventually reunite him with his village. He also had related to the leader that these white men were friends who had rescued him, thereby saving his life, and begged that they should be allowed to leave unharmed.

 After this labored, lengthy exchange between Chet and Pompey, there was silence for a moment. Finally, the Apache leader grunted and raised his right arm in peace, and all looked well.

 Pompey was helped on his pony with some effort by Trent and Chet, his left leg still awkward in its splint. He grinned and likewise raised his right arm in peace, and shouted something as a salute of sorts in Apache, then slowly departed with his forty whooping comrades. Chet breathed a sigh of relief, as did the other 66 badly-shaken pilgrims! That evening around the large center campfire, Reverend Danforth offered up additional prayers of thanks to the Almighty on behalf of the group.

 The following day, the wagon train broke camp, traveled for six days, then rested for three. This would be their last rest break, so laundry and bathing were again attended to. In just five more days, they would hopefully reach Santa Fe! They had crossed two more rivers, and had just one more to go -- the south fork of the Pecos. They had also passed the intersecting junction where the Mountain Branch merged with the Direct Route. From there, the Santa Fe Trail was one road again. But no other wagon trains were in sight from the north.

 At night by the communal campfire, families shared their plans and wishes for what they would do once they reached their final destination. Chet admitted looking forward to getting a new pair of boots. Becky confessed that what she most looked forward to was a long, hot bath with perfumed soap. Rachel wanted a fancy new yellow bonnet. Trent just wanted to eat an entire, freshly-made apple pie. And baby Leah simply gurgled and smiled.

 On August 12, the wagon train resumed its course. Before long, they crossed their last water source, ironically during a hefty rainstorm. They camped the next night at Pecos Ruins, a large Indian village that had been abandoned three years earlier. What was left of the reddish adobe brick buildings was impressive, but what most interested the party were the circular underground kivas, which were accessible by climbing down thick wooden ladders. These cool, mostly dark rooms had been used for various ancient tribal rituals. And although the emigrants didn't know it, the Spanish explorer Coronado had been here at this very place back in 1541, exactly 300 years ago.

 The final challenge for the wagon train was traversing the tricky Glorieta Pass through the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the range which ringed the east side of Santa Fe. Chet supervised the 18 wagons one at a time as they carefully negotiated the Pass. Once through, the overjoyed pilgrims saw their first glimpses of the Palace of the Governors, the central Plaza, and the many churches of their long-sought goal -- Santa Fe!

 Making their way single file, the party headed directly for the Plaza. At 7200' elevation, the town was bustling, the locals mostly a mixture of Mexicans and Texans. The air was crisp and scented with pine. Red chili peppers hung in woven strands on adobe doorways. Excited riders rode out to meet the new arrivals, shouting questions and yelling answers. It had taken the party 93 days to get here -- 75 hard days of travel and 18 rest days. They had traveled about 790 miles. In the decades to come, other wagon trains would be able to do the same route (later to be called the Cimarron Route) in two months rather than three, but this hearty band of 66 souls could be proudly counted among some of the earliest trail blazers. The date was Tuesday, August 17, 1841.

 The Reverend Danforth assembled his flock together for one final prayer of thanksgiving at the Plaza, then each family said their individual goodbyes, some tearful. Chet went to the authorities to report the names of the three brave souls who had died on the trail, then he collected the mail and grabbed a recent newspaper. He returned to the group and delivered the eagerly expected mail -- one letter was from his own sister -- then suggested that everyone write a letter to their kin informing them that they had arrived safely. He read aloud from the newspaper about President Tyler and other stories while the important task of putting pen to paper was being attended to.

 Chester Arbuckle was deeply moved by the thanks which each family gratefully bestowed on him -- the warm handshakes, the hugs, the kisses, the tears of gratitude. His last duty, however, was to collect the other half of the fee which each family owed their late Wagonmaster Flint McCord. When this was done, he called the group together one last time and decreed that these funds -- amounting to $900 -- be divided in half and be given to the widows of Patrick Riley and Josiah Brown. The pioneers applauded this fair and charitable decision. In the years to come, those in the group who stayed in or near Santa Fe became life-long friends and neighbors.

 As the group gradually dispersed, an exhausted but suddenly content Chet turned to his son, tossed an arm across his shoulder, and said with a big grin, "Now, Trent, don't tell our womenfolk yet...but let's see if we can find you that apple pie..."

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

 August 8, 2017