



Airline pilot Heath Proctor peers across the horizon from a DC-6, flying between Los Angeles and Chicago



## AN AIRLINE PILOT

By Heath Proctor

Senior pilot of a transcontinental airline and a wartime colonel of the Air Transport Command in India, Heath Proctor discovered the Old Santa Fe Trail from the window of his DC-6. Popular Mechanics sent him by Jeep to explore the old wagon tracks

**M**AYBE I'm different from other airline pilots, but ever since I was a kid I've liked to look out of windows—house windows, automobile windows, train windows and in recent years cockpit windows.

Late one wintry afternoon on a flight from Chicago to Tucson, Ariz., I was engaged in my window-gazing pastime just west of the Cimarron River in Kansas. We were at a good altitude for observing scenery on a big scale and our DC-6 was purring like a kitten filled with high-octane milk. I had turned the controls over to my copilot and feeling warm and content was





Aerial view of old wagon-trail ruts, in foreground, brought out in sharp relief by snowfall

## RIDES THE WAGON TRAIL



looking down at wisps of snow being blown across the wide-open spaces.

In places, the short grass or ruts had caught enough snow to make a rather interesting pattern. Suddenly I sat bolt upright and pressed my head against the cockpit window. That was no haphazard pattern of ruts down there on the prairie. It was a trail, wide in places and narrowing from time to time where the going was apparently rough. This old trail headed majestically into the Southwest toward Wagon Mound, N. Mex., and Santa Fe. I knew I had found the old historic Santa Fe Trail!

I've always been an avid reader of American history and 25 years of chauffeuring planes has given me a bird's-eye view



Despite wind and weather, traces of the Santa Fe Trail are still visible across the prairie. It was used until the 1870 s



From a bluff, Proctor points out to Aubrey Cookman of *Popular Mechanics* a clear marking of the old route

of geography. This has made me appreciate some of those terrific distances traveled by our forefathers on horseback and in ox-drawn wagons. Back in 1935 I found the old Mason and Dixon Line and took a picture of it from the air. This photograph was widely printed because most Americans thought the line existed only in musty history books.

After finding the old Santa Fe Trail I could hardly wait to get to a library and

So many travelers scratched their names on one rock ledge that it has become known as "The Trail Album"

look up some dope on it. It was used principally as a freight route and was well-organized. This was in contrast to the old Oregon Trail, which was a "passenger" route traveled by stray groups of families.

The general route of the Santa Fe Trail, via the Arkansas River, was used by the Indians long before white men appeared. Early trappers and explorers followed it, but it wasn't until 1804 that the first pack train freighted the entire distance from the Missouri River to the Mexican settlement of Santa Fe. By 1824 wagons replaced the pack animals and the Santa Fe White Top became the standard vehicle.





Across Oklahoma, pairs of rutted tracks nearly a foot deep are reminders of the trail's once-heavy traffic

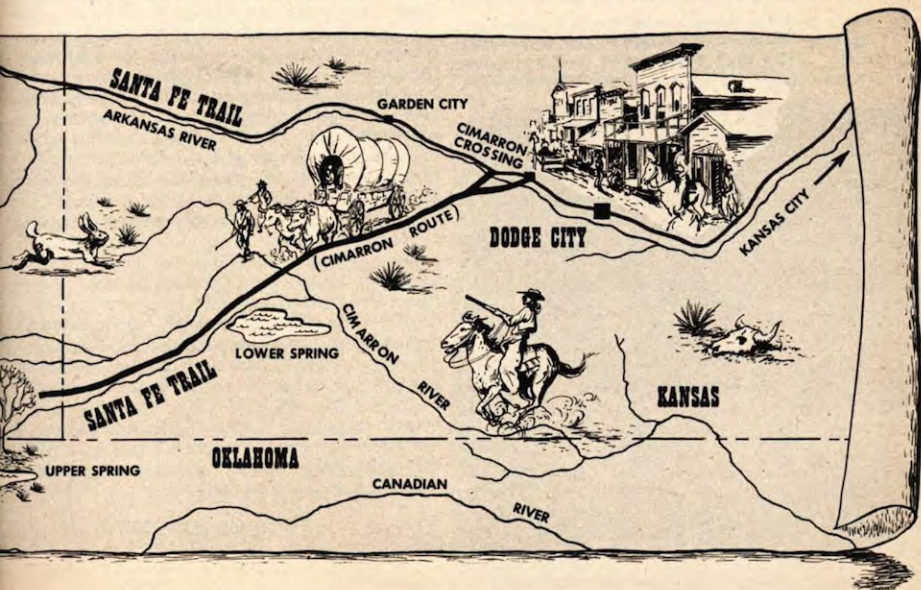
Every time I flew the route between Chicago, Tucson and Los Angeles I would go back among my passengers and point out the marks left by the old wagon trains. And having spotted this bit of history from the air I determined that some day, between flights, I'd come down to the ground and explore the trail on wheels.

Meanwhile, I kept learning more about the trail. Santa Fe back in the early days was part of Mexico and an important city, supplied mostly by the Spanish. As our forefathers expanded westward they naturally entered into competition with the Spanish for the rich Santa Fe market. Over

the trail they sent a flood of low-priced merchandise that entirely supplanted the Spanish or Mexican importations.

The Mexicans retaliated by levying a heavy tax on each wagonload of freight. Yankee ingenuity was put to work and soon the wagon trains took on a new look. They consisted of units made up of three wagons each, a large one followed by two smaller trailers. As they approached the

At Dodge City the Popular Mechanics party followed the Cimarron fork of pioneer freight path westward. Camp Nichols, built by the famous Col. Kit Carson, had a brief life as an Army post to protect travelers





Roy Hardin of the Boot Hill Museum in Dodge City shows Proctor one of a collection of rifles popular in the old West, when a gun was a man's "best friend"



Above, Merritt L. Beeson, son of a Dodge City pioneer, answering questions about an old map of the trail. Below, "Uncle Billy" Baker, county land agent for 25 years, holds a wheel hub found near Boise City



border, where taxes were collected, freight from the two trailers was loaded onto the large "schooner," the trailers were burned and one wagon lumbered and creaked slowly on into Santa Fe.

After the Civil War stagecoach service was established over the trail between Westport (the old name for Kansas City) and Santa Fe. Carrying 11 passengers, 9 inside and 2 in the boot on top of the stage behind the driver, the distance could be made in two weeks of continuous travel. They stopped only to eat and to change horses and drivers. The fare was \$250.

I was amazed at this figure compared with today's airline-passenger fare of \$45 for the same trip! The gap between those figures, and the fact that more people were buried along the wagon trails in one summer than have lost their lives in air accidents during the entire history of commercial flying, are testimonials to the advances made in transportation.

From the air I discovered that most of the trail has been obliterated by plow and weather. From Kansas City to Wagon Bed Spring, Kans., near where the trail reaches the Cimarron River, the ruts are visible only in a few scattered spots. I discovered later that it is almost impossible to find this remnant of the trail on the ground. Actually, it can be seen better from aloft because in places the route seems to have left more of a stain than a trace.

However, from the Cimarron River to Wagon Mound the old route is plainly visible and is a magnificent sight from 20,000 feet. The known camping places, such as Middle Spring, Upper (Flagg) Spring and Cold Spring can be located from a plane. In places the trail is surprisingly wide, with from four to six sets of ruts.

I had begun to doubt if I would ever realize my dream of exploring the trail on the ground when my telephone rang one evening. It was the editor of *Popular Mechanics*. Word had gotten around about my research on the Santa Fe Trail and the editor wanted to know if I would accompany an exploring party along the trail. Would I! Assigned to the story were Aubrey O. Cookman, Jr., an associate editor, Frank Fritz, a photographer, and a Jeep full of gas.

We rode a Santa Fe Railway streamliner to Dodge City, Kans., picked up the Jeep there and started out. The Jeep was a wonderful idea. The man who had marked "rough and rocky" on that part of the map we were to travel had been over it. We followed what is known as the Dry Cimarron Route on the old trail. On it are stretches of rolling prairie where the going is good, but there are others where a Jeep is about the only self-propelled passenger vehicle that could make the grade.

On an expedition such as ours one had better stay right with the tracks, rough or smooth, or he stands a good chance of losing them. We wanted to get right between those ruts and stay there, and we did, but at times we found it necessary to use everything that Jeep had in the way of four-wheel drive and extra-low gear.

The ruts are still deep, generally covered with short prairie grass, but not infrequently bared in rocky land by wind. The pilgrim attempting to follow the route had better carry a compass. In some places it becomes confused with later-day roads or is lost temporarily in heavy growth for a time and has to be relocated by zigzagging back and forth in a general direction of from 20 to 30 degrees south of west.

The first day we were chilled by our inability to locate wagon tracks, visible from the air, along the north bank of the Arkansas, west of Dodge City. The possibility that we might have the same difficulty on the Cimarron Route haunted us, and we lost no time heading out for the unbroken prairies of Cimarron County, Okla., and New Mexico.

The weather didn't cheer us any. It rained and the wind blew, and by the time we reached Boise City, Okla., we felt and looked like three real explorers.

From Boise City we drove north on U. S. Highway 287. We thought that south of the Cimarron River we could identify an area a mile or two wide in which the trail lay. We found the county has erected an historic marker at or near the place where the trail crosses the highway, so we turned west, crossed a parallel railroad and fence line and were out on the open grassland.

Three worried individuals climbed to the summit of the first high knoll to search the country with glasses. Here, if anywhere, was the place we should find our objective. We were not disappointed, for across a creek bottom to the north on a long grassy slope were four parallel tracks reaching away to the west-southwest as far as we could see.

Here were the actual footprints of the great westward migration of American civilization. I truly believe that we, by pure chance, stood then on the exact spot where the illustrator of Gregg's "Commerce of the Prairies" (1844) sketched his picture of a wagon train, four abreast, on the old trail.

This portion of the route was first attempted about 1813 by a party of 30 men using pack animals to carry freight. Failing to find water between the Arkansas and the Cimarron Rivers, they eventually made their way back to the Arkansas after great hardship and continued to Santa Fe over the mountain route.

During the next 10 years, however, buffalo hunters and traders located springs



On exhibit at the Dalton Boys' Hideout Museum near Meade, Kans., is an old-time chuck wagon. They served as mobile kitchens of early travel in the West



Above, Buck James displays a rusted bolt from one of the wagon trains that paused to rest on what is now his father's Oklahoma ranch. Below, the Popular Mechanics "pioneers" in camp on the James' ranch





Photo courtesy Beeson Museum, Dodge City, Kans.

Dodge City's main street in 1872. The newly laid tracks of the Santa Fe Railway that was to doom use of the old wagon route are in the foreground. Pioneer Beeson's father owned Long Branch saloon shown at left

and marked a route to Wagon Mound, which became for 40 years the principal freight road to Santa Fe. It wasn't until 1880 that the first train entered that trading center of early New Mexico.

Even the Jeep seemed to pick up pep as we bounced onto the grass-covered road. Hours later the tracks veered sharply to the North, and we could see them on the slope ahead slanting back in again.

A rocky mound came into view in the direction of the detoured tracks, and alongside it a clump of trees. It was "Upper Spring," known locally now as Flagg Spring. Here, in 1828, the first party of freighters to use wagons instead of pack

animals was waylaid by Comanche Indians on its return from Santa Fe.

Upper Spring is peaceful enough now. Boy Scouts have a hut there, and ranchers use the site for rounding up cattle. We took some pictures, searched for relics and moved out again on the trail.

Toward evening we reached Cold Spring. There were two camps here a couple of miles apart. Both sites boast sandstone formations in which trail travelers carved their names and dates of visit. There are literally hundreds of those autographs, of Army officers, buffalo hunters, travelers and trail drivers. The cliffs are a veritable Who's Who of the Santa Fe Trail.

"Miles of nothing" faced the trail explorers during most of their trek across the prairies of Oklahoma





Nearly 80 years later, the same Dodge City street and Santa Fe Railway roadbed shown on the opposite page

We spent the night at Cold Spring, spreading our sleeping rolls in the lee of the Jeep. Our wish to travel the trail of the 49ers had been granted and now we were camping at one of the regular trail camp sites. We had all the atmosphere, except the wagons and the Indians. Before morning we would have been almost willing to put up with a few Indians for the shelter of a wagon or two.

While no one in the party was heard to suggest that tourist camps or hotels might be found preferable to the camp sites on the old trail, the fuel problem did, oddly enough, fit into a schedule of daily travel that made unnecessary any more nights on the lone prairie.

We experienced only one disappointment, and that was that we didn't have time to travel more of that famous old trail. It's there today, but won't be for many more years. The encroachment of civilization on parts of it has been slow, and the wind and weather have been kind to those footprints of the old-timers on the prairie, but it can't be long now.

As I look down now from the heated cockpit of a DC-6 at those deserted tracks winding across the prairie, I'm reminded of a day not many years ago when I chanced to complain of the quality of an Air Force mess in a foreign theater, and was told by the Commanding Officer, "Buddy, you ain't never had it so good."

South of U.S. Highway 287, this boulder-strewn area was a popular camping and watering place on the old trail

