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Chronicle Of Bennett C. Riley

Leo E. Oliva

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CAPTAIN (BREVET MAJOR) BENNETT C. RILEY
 Courtesy United States Cavalry Museum, Fort Riley, Kansas

Chronicle Of Bennett C. Riley

THE FIRST MILITARY ESCORT ON THE SANTA FE TRAIL, 1829



1787: Bennett C. Riley, a native of Virginia, is born at Alexandria on November 27.

1821: Successful commerce over the Santa Fe Trail begins after William Becknell and five others from Missouri take trade goods to the northern province of Mexico which had won independence from Spain that same year. During these early years traders have few problems with Plains Indians. They provide their own protection without the aid of the US Army.

1828: A trade caravan including some 200 men with 100 wagons and commodities valued at \$150,000 hits the trail. They have no troubles with Indians going to Mexico, but the return trip in the autumn encounters considerable Indian resistance, resulting

in three men killed (Robert McNees, Daniel Monroe, and John Means) and the loss of property worth \$40,000.

These losses cause merchants to question if they can afford the risk of crossing the plains without military protection. Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton introduces legislation to furnish four companies of infantry to escort the 1829 caravan. Hart's bill passes the Senate but not the House. Later, President Andrew Jackson promises military protection to the boundary of Mexico, but only seventy-five men and thirty-seven wagons go forth, with freight valued at \$60,000.

1829: Captain (Brevet Major) Riley is chosen for the first military escort on the Santa Fe Trail. It is only the second time US troops are sent to the Great Plains for

purposes other than exploration. Riley's escort, a battalion of the Sixth US Infantry, is hampered because there is no mounted regiment in the army at that time. The escort, comprised of Major Riley, ten other officers, and 174 enlisted men, marches from Leavenworth in early June to a rendezvous with the merchant caravan at Round Grove in present eastern Kansas.

JUNE 11: Riley's men meet up with the traders and begin the westward march the following day. It is the first battalion to travel through the Flint Hills.

The officers ride horses, the infantrymen walk, and their provisions and camp equipment are carried in wagons and carts. The carts are pulled by oxen because sufficient funds were not available to purchase mules or horses. This is the first use of oxen on the Santa Fe Trail. Despite the doubts of the traders, the oxen work well. The traders take note, and soon oxen are widely used as draft animals by the merchants and, later, by military freight contractors. The battalion also takes one six-pound cannon.

JUNE 18: The soldiers accompany the merchant caravan, led by Captain Charles Bent, westward without incident, reaching Council Grove.

JUNE 27: The caravan arrives at the Great Bend of the Arkansas River. The traders want to retain the escort as far as possible, so they do not cross the Arkansas River into Mexican territory. They travel upriver.

JULY 9: The caravan arrives at the edge of the Arkansas River west of present Lakin, Kansas, at the "Upper Crossing" near Chouteau's Island. During the trip of twenty-nine days from Round Grove there has been no direct contact with Plains Indians.

JULY 10: The traders cross their wagons to the south side of the Arkansas, camp overnight, and depart the following day. The merchants appeal to Riley to accompany them into Mexico, but he tells them his orders are to proceed only to the Mexican boundary. He sends a message with the traders to the governor of New Mexico, requesting him to provide a military escort for the returning caravan.



ATTACKING THE WAGON TRAIN (DETAIL)
Charles Russell
Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma

“Think what our feelings must have been to see them going off with our cattle and horses...”

The soldiers plan to camp near the Upper Crossing and await the return of the traders, expected within three months. They will hunt bison and other animals to sustain themselves, learning to survive on the plains. Major Riley will deal with a number of problems to assure the survival of his battalion and provide protection for the returning traders in the autumn. He will learn skills that the army will need for future expeditions on the Great Plains.

During the afternoon of the first day in camp, a party of nine men from the trade caravan return, riding at full speed, to announce that Indians have attacked the caravan about six miles south of the Arkansas. One of the merchants, Samuel Lamme, was killed. They beg Major Riley to bring the troops to their aid. This is an emergency and, despite orders

to the contrary, Riley quickly leads his command to relieve the besieged caravan.

The troops reach the wagon train that night.

JULY 11: Indians leave the vicinity the next morning. The traders request that Riley accompany them onward.

He does so for two more days and then, reluctant to proceed farther into foreign territory, he rests his troops one more day in camp with the caravan and returns to the Arkansas River.

JULY 14 - AUGUST 11: Major Riley and his troops move camp periodically for sanitation, grazing for the oxen, and hunting bison for food.

Indians attempt to raid their camp and steal the livestock several times, until, apparently, they consider further efforts to defeat the soldiers a waste of time and energy. They cannot drive off the soldiers, but neither can the troops retaliate with much effect.

The infantrymen defend their camp and inflict losses with their arms and the small cannon, but, being foot soldiers,

they are unable to take the offensive against mounted warriors. Riley expresses the frustration of their situation following an attack on August 3: “Think what our feelings must have been to see them going off with our cattle and horses, when if we had been mounted, we could have beaten them to pieces.” The 1829 escort suffers a few casualties. Several soldiers are injured and four killed: Privates George Gordon, Samuel Arrison, Matthew King, and William Nation. They also lose many of the oxen and horses.

The wagon train they accompanied to the middle of the Great Plains faces Indian resistance for forty more days as the traders struggle to reach Santa Fe. They are eventually aided by 120 ciboleros, Mexican buffalo hunters, who join them for protection, and, later, assistance arrives from Taos when Ewing Young and some ninety-five trappers fight through the Indians to help them. As the size of the caravan increases, Indian resistance decreases. Despite almost daily threats,

no other traders are killed and no property is lost. Mexican troops meet them at the settlements in New Mexico. At Santa Fe the traders explain their difficulties and present Major Riley’s letter to the governor. In response Colonel José Antonio Vizcarra is directed to organize and lead an escort for the return trip to the Arkansas in the autumn.

OCTOBER 10: Although the traders had agreed to arrive by this date, there is no sign of the caravan. Major Riley had agreed to wait for the returning traders until this date.

OCTOBER 11: Major Riley orders that the cannon be fired once and that troops begin their march back to Cantonment Leavenworth. They travel about three miles when a party from the caravan overtakes them and reports that the wagon train, escorted by Mexican soldiers, is about a day’s march away.

Riley orders the battalion to camp where they are.

OCTOBER 12: The wagon train and Mexican troops arrive the following

day. The caravan and Mexican escort have been on the Santa Fe Trail since September 6. The caravan includes ninety-six traders, sixteen “Spanish refugees” (including six women), a New Mexican official (Santiago Abreu), twenty-nine wagons, two pieces of artillery, and about 2000 horses, mules, and donkeys. Colonel Vizcarra’s escort includes seventy-two Mexican soldiers, ninety-one hired Anglo-Americans, thirty-four Indian auxiliaries, and twenty-four muleteers and hostlers.

Colonel Vizcarra’s command has provided protection for the caravan at a cost. On October 6, during an apparently friendly encounter with a large band of Indians (possibly Kiowa and Comanche), hostilities broke out. It is reported to Riley that eight of the Indians and three of the escort soldiers were killed. The Indians were driven off and the traders suffered no losses.

Gathered on the north side of the Arkansas River in present Kearny County, Kansas, are more than 500

people, including Anglo-Americans, Mexicans, Spaniards, Frenchmen, and Indians of several tribes, with more than 2000 animals, including oxen, horses, mules, and donkeys. Lieutenant Philip St. George Cooke declares it is “the strangest collection of men and animals that had perhaps ever met on the frontier of the United States.” This international gathering spends two days together in friendly celebration, including bison hunting, Indian rituals, demonstrations of horsemanship, and military reviews.

OCTOBER 14: The two groups part amicably. Neither party encounters opposition during the journey home. Riley escorts the caravan to the Little Arkansas River, at which point he considers them safe from Indian trouble, and pushes on quickly to avoid the approach of winter.

NOVEMBER 5: The troops leave the Santa Fe Trail in present Douglas County, Kansas, and cross the Kansas River.

NOVEMBER 6: Vizcarra’s command arrives in Santa Fe.

NOVEMBER 8: Aided by an Indian guide, troops arrive at Cantonment Leavenworth, having been away for five months.

After a distinguished military career spanning forty years, Bennett C. Riley died in Buffalo, New York, June 9, 1853, at the age of sixty-five.

The first Army battalion to patrol the Santa Fe Trail under Riley’s leadership met several important objectives. It proved the efficiency of oxen on the plains. The trade caravan experienced no Indian hostilities while under the charge of the soldiers. The battalion had protected itself while encamped on the Arkansas. For several months the soldiers had subsisted on bison meat and other game, along with the few provisions carried with them. It had demonstrated that mounted troops were essential to deal with the Plains Indians who harassed traders and travelers on the trail. Riley had opened a more direct connection between the Santa Fe Trail and Cantonment Leavenworth.... These

experiences contributed to the creation of a mounted battalion a few years later. The next escort of a caravan on the Santa Fe Trail by US troops, in 1833, was conducted by the US Mounted Rangers, forerunners of the Dragoons who later became the US Cavalry. It is interesting to note that Major Riley, who never served with a mounted regiment, contributed to the creation of the cavalry, which would become an important part of the military post named in his honor.

The 1829 escorts provided an important first chapter in the military history of the Santa Fe Trail and the Great Plains. Major Riley had provided the first military protection of the Santa Fe trade, and his namesake, Fort Riley, was purposely situated to provide military protection for travelers on the Santa Fe, Oregon-California, and Mormon trails.

Leo E. Oliva, Woodston, Kansas, is a retired professor of history at Fort Hays State University and author of eight books and numerous articles about frontier military history.