

Zane Grey and the Historic Trails of the Great Plains

by Dr. Kevin Blake

Zane Grey was fascinated with historic trails. Some of his most memorable books feature “trail” in the title, and his best-known epics, *The U. P. Trail* and *Western Union*, focus on historic trails. On March 20, 2021, I made a presentation to the Colorado-Cherokee Trail Chapter of the Oregon and California Trails Association about how Zane Grey’s books portray the national historic trails. This essay is a revision and expansion of that presentation.

Zane Grey exerted the greatest influence on how we perceive the American West through what we call his Westerns. These are the fifty-five full-length romance novels first published by Harpers and set in the American West. Zane Grey brought the entire American West alive for his readers, including the Great Plains, with books set in every state of the plains and mountains except for North Dakota. Although the greatest concentration of his Westerns is in the Four Corners region of the Colorado Plateau, mostly in northern Arizona and southern Utah, the

Great Plains contains the most significant cluster of Grey’s trail books (Blake, 1995).

To highlight the connections of Zane Grey’s westerns with the historic trails of the Great Plains, I examine five of Grey’s trail novels. The first three, *Western Union*, *Wyoming*, and *The Maverick Queen*, are set mostly along the Oregon Trail across western Nebraska and central Wyoming (Figure 1). *The U. P. Trail* is set primarily along the Overland Trail, a more southerly alternative to the Oregon Trail that crosses southern Wyoming. And *Fighting Caravans* is set mostly in central and southwestern Kansas along the Santa Fe Trail.

Zane Grey’s trail novels are valuable to study in several ways, including for how they portray daily life and some of the challenging circumstances of travel along the trails. The trail novels contain wonderful, imaginative descriptions of trail landscapes that can still be visited today. They also offer some insight into how Grey wrote his epics and what traits of the Great Plains Grey found most fascinating. Furthermore, this study of the trail novels raises some questions about Grey’s writings that deserve additional consideration.

Western Union is set in the summer and autumn of 1861 during the construction of the transcontinental telegraph line. Grey places most of the action between Gothenburg, Nebraska and Fort Bridger, Wyoming (Blake, 2013). How is *Western Union* a “trail novel” if it is about the telegraph line?

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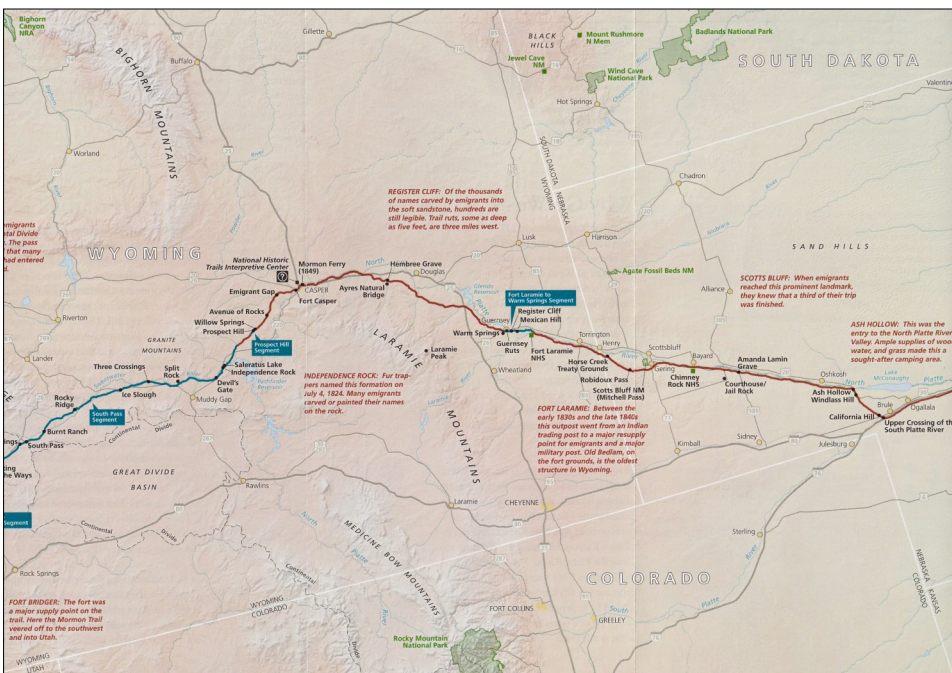


Figure 1.

The Oregon Trail,
As seen in a 2015 brochure by the
National Park Service.

By setting the book during the construction phase of the telegraph line, much of the characterization and plot relate to the Oregon Trail. The dustjacket illustration of both the Harpers and the Grosset & Dunlap editions gives that sense by portraying telegraph line workers along with wagon train emigrants (Figure 2). Because the Western Union telegraph route generally paralleled the Oregon Trail (and the California, Mormon Pioneer, and Pony Express trails that generally followed the same corridor), Grey was able to focus on places and tales made famous by the trails.

In Chapter Two of *Western Union* Zane Grey pays homage to the Pony Express Trail that generally followed the Oregon Trail corridor through Nebraska and Wyoming. The main character of *Western Union*, Wayne Cameron, joins a wagon train along the Platte River of Nebraska, and just east of Gothenburg he sees his first Pony Express rider: “the horse was stretched out, running low and level, his mane and tail flying, and the rider’s scarf burned in the sunlight and waved out behind him . . . he flashed by, too swiftly for me to see anything clearly . . .” (Figure 3).



By and large, though, the characters of *Western Union* mostly face challenges typical of the Oregon Trail, not the Pony Express. One of the most memorable scenes of potential catastrophe along the Oregon Trail is about a prairie fire near what is today the small town of Ogallala, Nebraska. Grey wrote that the fire was “a monstrous wall of flame, in furious swift action, motivated by a gale of wind,” but that is just a small sample; the prairie fire passage goes on for over fifteen pages from the end of Chapter Six through Chapter Seven. I live in the Flint Hills of Kansas where we routinely burn the tallgrasses, so we experience controlled (and sometimes uncontrolled) prairie fires every year, and for me this book has the most powerful description of a prairie fire that I have ever read.

Today, it is possible to visit the site of this prairie fire scene by traveling west on Interstate 80 from Ogallala along the South Platte River. Look to the north and imagine the fire sweeping south across the grassland, fueled by the howling wind of a “norther” (a strong north wind screaming southward across the plains). You can picture the chaotic scene of the wagon trains being driven across the braided channels of the South Platte River onto sand bars so that they were protected from the worst of the fire. The cover of the 1949 British paperback reprint of *Western Union*, published by Pan Books, evocatively portrays this sequence (Figure 4).

Figure 3 (left).
The Pony Express
Statue at
Marysville, Kansas.

Figure 4 (right).
The Pan Books
dustjacket, 1949.
Courtesy of
David Leeson.

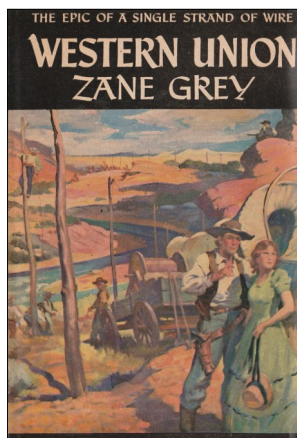
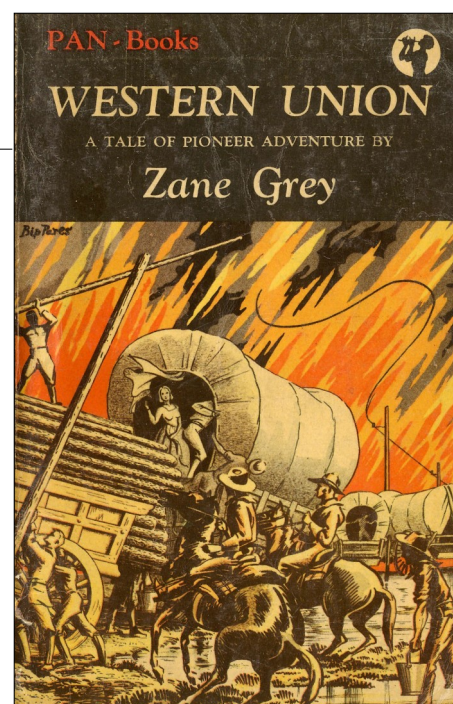


Figure 2.
Grosset & Dunlap
dustjacket art by
George Giguere.



To visit the Oregon Trail landmark that is most frequently mentioned in *Western Union*, a traveler today needs to drive northwest from Ogallala on U.S. Highway 26 and then Nebraska State Route 92 to the Chimney Rock National Historic Site. Grey describes this sandstone and clay spire this way: “there was something soul-freeing in the sight of this landmark . . . one of the most eagerly sought landmarks on the Oregon Trail . . . a spectral shaft of rock rising above the horizon to pierce the sky . . . a thing of beauty, a mirage from the highlands” (Figure 5).

In Chapter Ten, Grey writes with a similar verve about a buffalo stampede near Chimney Rock that bears down on the wagon train and threatens to overrun it. The characters form their wagons into a wedge, with the point facing the stampede, and haul two old wagons to the front to be set on fire:

“Then out there on the moonlit prairie I saw something. It moved. It was black. It was like the torrential flow of an ocean behind which there were unknown leagues of pushing waves. The fire, catching the top of the canvas wagons, flared up brighter. Then I recognized the shaggy front of a buffalo herd in stampede. It had a straight front and extended as far as I could see on both sides. The ground had become unstable. It was shaking under me. On the moment, when I ceased to be aware of an engulfing tremendous pressure, I knew that it had been the roar of this avalanche and that I could no longer hear it. I was deafened.”



Figure 5.
Chimney Rock, Nebraska.
Courtesy of Dr. Travis W. Smith.

Westward of Fort Laramie the construction of the telegraph line continues and the days along the Sweetwater River of central Wyoming in Chapter Twelve are the best of the trip. The travelers climb a “gray granite pile, looking as if it were a mosaic of separate rocks irregularly joined together.” From the top they gain their first view of the Wind River Range and then they cut their initials into Independence Rock (Figure 6). Of all the camps on the Oregon Trail, Grey writes that this one was the hardest to leave. Today, Independence Rock continues to be one of the most delightful places to visit along the Oregon Trail. This Wyoming State Historic Site can be reached by traveling fifty-five miles west of Casper along Wyoming State Route 220. Climbing the rock is still allowed.

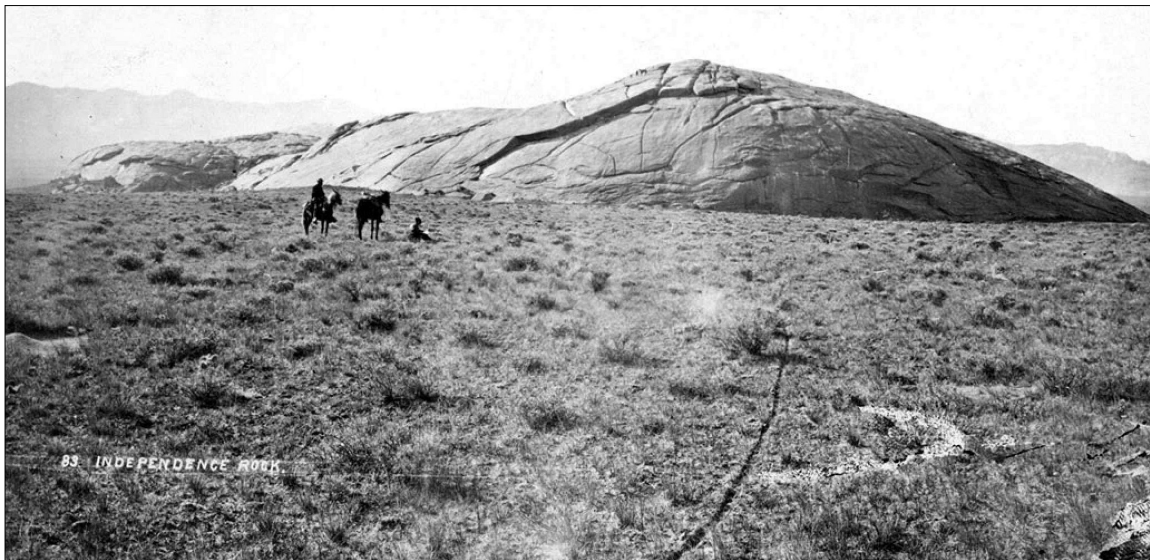


Figure 6.
Independence Rock,
Wyoming.
Photo taken by
William Henry
Jackson, 1870.

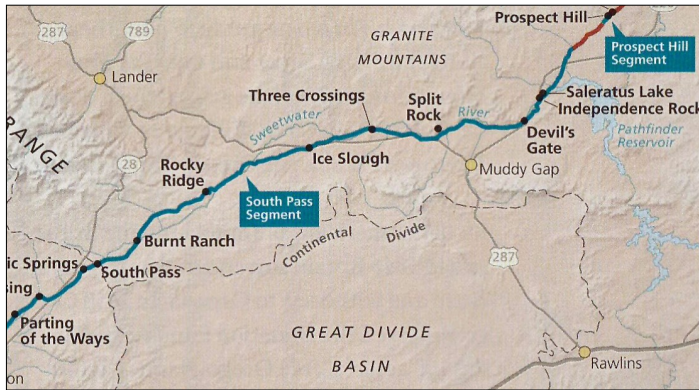


Figure 9.

The Oregon Trail National Park Service brochure map. This is the central Wyoming detail.

The other geographic mystery in Wyoming is where exactly is Uncle Nick's ranch? Martha Ann Dixon travels by car west from Split Rock, proceeding along the Sweetwater River, heading upstream, just like the Oregon Trail emigrants. When she reaches a bridge that crosses the river, she goes left and continues upstream. That places the ranch somewhere just a few miles southwest of the tiny settlement of Sweetwater Station, which is also near the site of the Willie Handcart Company Rescue in 1856 on the Mormon Pioneer Trail. Grey must have set the ranch near the label "South Pass Segment," which is shown in Figure 9. But is there a real ranch along the Oregon Trail that fits the description of the Uncle Nicks' ranch in Wyoming, and if so, exactly where is it?

Chuck Pfeiffer, the legendary pathfinder of Zane Grey's West Society who searched tirelessly for Grey's settings, looked in vain for the ranch when he traveled the backroads of this area (Pfeiffer, 1989). Pfeiffer's efforts, however, inspired ZGWS member Zen Ervin to make several trips there, talking with ranchers, studying maps, and driving more ranch roads. He found it! It is the old Ellis Ranch, located just south of the Sweetwater River a short distance east of the spot marked Rocky Ridge on Figure 9 (Ervin, 2012). The ranch is located only a hundred yards away from the Oregon Trail.

This is what Martha Ann Dixon sees in Chapter Six when she arrives at the ranch: "The river came first. It was indeed a bright ribbon, and in places several ribbons, flowing between islands of sand. But it struck her that there was very little water for so wide

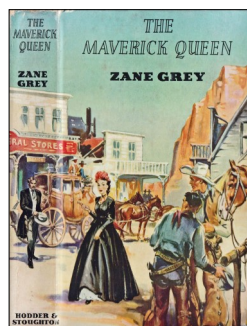
a river bottom. In times of flood the Sweetwater must be truly awe inspiring. The verdant banks and islands, the sparkling white and amber water, presented a vivid contrast to the sober range of grass and sage." The ranch itself has "a long low squat building without a vestige of green about it, and beyond it stood sheds and pens and fences. A gray, old log cabin, picturesque in its isolation and ruin, faced the west." (Figure 10).



Figure 10.

The site of Uncle Nick Bligh's ranch along the Sweetwater River, with the Antelope Hills in the distance. Courtesy of Zen Ervin.

It is remarkable that Zane Grey was able to describe this area of the Sweetwater Valley and the ranch setting with such precision given that, to the best of my knowledge, he did not visit this location. Grey based his descriptions on his prodigious knowledge of other western places that he had seen that had similar traits, and on the recollections of Berenice Campbell, one of his assistants who eventually developed a deeper relationship with him (Kant, 2008). Campbell was the prototype for Martha Ann Dixon; after she met Grey, she sold him her hitchhiking story for a share of the royalties (Pauly, 2005, p. 294).



Another book that features descriptions of the Oregon Trail landscape, even though the action does not focus on trail events, is *The Maverick Queen* (Figure 11).

Figure 11.

The Hodder & Stoughton dustjacket.

This book features one of the most complicated plots ever tackled by Grey. A rancher nicknamed Kit Bandon, or Cattle Kate, is the alluring “maverick queen,” who acquires this nickname because she builds her cattle ranch by trading her favors for mavericks brought to her by cowboys who work for neighboring ranches. By the book’s end, Grey tells of Cattle Kate’s downfall when local ranchers hang her for supposedly encouraging cowboys to steal for her.

Grey sets the story mostly in South Pass City, Wyoming, and he locates Cattle Kate’s ranch on the headwaters of the Sweetwater River, just to the southeast of South Pass City along the Oregon Trail. South Pass City is also described in *Western Union*, but in *The Maverick Queen* Grey writes in Chapter Two, “It spread along the bed of a narrow valley, and despite its new raw atmosphere of pine-boarded buildings and canvas tents, it seemed the most picturesque mining town he had ever seen.”

Grey gathered the gist of this story from conversations he had with residents of Pinedale, Wyoming during his June 1937 trip. One difficulty with the plot is that Grey set the book in 1869-1870, but the book is loosely based on real events that took place in 1888-1889; another is that there were actually two hangings, Emma Watson and her husband, Jim Averill (Wheeler, 1975). Furthermore, those hangings took place about 120 miles away. Intriguingly, it is the Oregon Trail that provides a connection between the two. The white arrows on Figure 12, below, identify South Pass City and the approximate loca-

tion of Cattle Kate’s ranch in the book, and that is where Grey has the hanging take place. The events that inspired this book occurred east along the Sweetwater River at a location (marked with a red arrow in Figure 12) that is located today on the northwest edge of Pathfinder Reservoir.

The hangings in 1889 of Watson and Averill occurred along the Oregon Trail in the Sentinel Rocks, close to Independence Rock (Figure 13). The discordance between the real events and Grey’s book have caused readers to question exactly what is real in Grey’s book. Did Cattle Kate really exist? Did she “steal” cattle by inspiring cowboys to bring her mavericks? Was she hanged for stealing cattle, or was it a land grab by a rival rancher? Chuck Pfeiffer delved into this historical and geographical mystery in his *Footnotes to Grey’s Maverick Queen*, first published in 2002. If you want to know more about the connection between Grey’s book and the tragic events that unfolded along the Oregon Trail in 1888-1889, this is a must read.

The U. P. Trail, set in 1865-1869 from Omaha, NE to Promontory Summit, UT, is generally considered one of the finest Westerns ever written and Grey’s most successful epic (Wheeler, 1975). With a setting during the construction of the railroad, this book, like *Western Union*, also portrays wagon train emigration across Nebraska and Wyoming.

The U. P. Trail is set, however, on a more southerly emigration corridor through Wyoming than the Oregon Trail; this route is usually labeled by trail markers in Wyoming as the Overland Trail, though portions of it are also known as the Cherokee Trail. Interstate 80 generally parallels the Overland Trail corridor through much of Wyoming. The Overland Trail was most frequently used by emigrants between 1862 and 1869, during which time the threat of Indian attack along the Oregon Trail was perceived to be greater than along the Overland Trail.

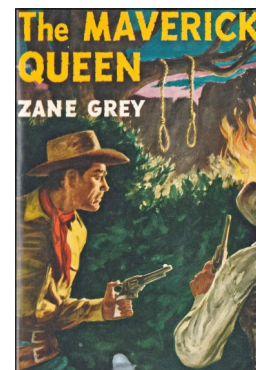


Figure 13.
The Grosset & Dunlap dustjacket.



Figure 12.
Wyoming highway map (detail), 1991.
The white arrows indicate the approximate location of Cattle Kate’s ranch, near South Pass City.

The action in *The U. P. Trail* starts just east of Laramie, Wyoming, with a fictional account of a wagon train bound eastward, returning from the California gold fields, attacked by Sioux Indians. Everyone is massacred except one young woman who is rescued by a group of railroad workers. The supposed Sioux massacre occurred along Lodgepole Creek in southeastern Wyoming's Laramie Range on a section of the Overland Trail that went over Cheyenne Pass (Pfeiffer and Blake, 2018).

The most powerful descriptions in *The U. P. Trail* are of the ephemeral railroad construction camps that sprouted at the end of each completed section of tracks. These camps brought together all walks of life, including emigrants along the Overland Trail and workers on the Union Pacific. Desolation, impermanence, and debauchery combined to cause these camps to become known as "Hell on Wheels" towns (Figure 14). In some instances, towns like North Platte and Laramie evolved from the ashes of the Hell on Wheels camps, but others sprang up and then blew away to nothing in just a few months. The wickedest of them all was on the east bank of the crossing of the North Platte River at a place called Benton.



Figure 14.

Promontory Point, Utah, by Andrew J. Russell, 1869,
Courtesy of the Union Pacific Railroad Museum.

Zane Grey writes of Benton: "... set where no town could ever live in the heart of barrenness, alkali, and desolation, on the face of the windy desert, alive with dust-devils, sweeping along, yellow and funnel-shaped ... the hell that was reported to abide at Benton was in harmony with its setting."

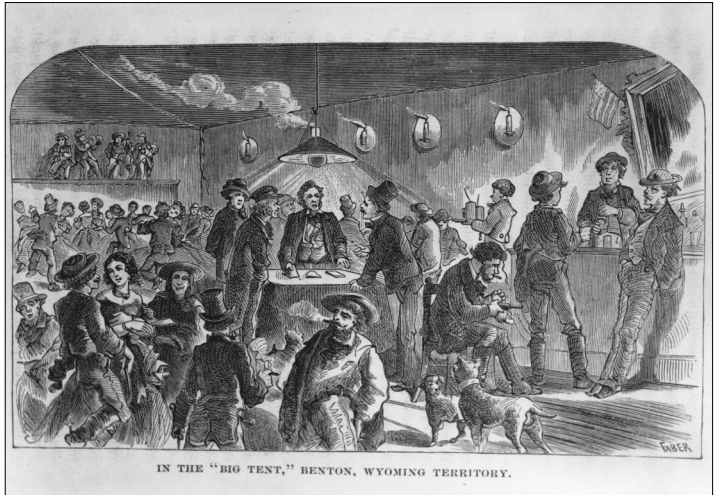


Figure 15.

Illustration of the "Big Tent" in Benton, WY, 1868.
Courtesy of the University of Wyoming
American Heritage Center.

The most infamous den of iniquity in Benton was the gambling hall called the "Big Tent," a canvas-covered frame building a hundred feet long and forty feet wide, complete with dance floor (Figure 15). Though Benton only lasted four months, its depravities were available at over twenty saloons and five dance halls. Though nothing of Benton remains today, the landscape character can be appreciated by visiting Fort Steele State Historic Site, located a few miles east of Rawlins, Wyoming on the west bank of the North Platte River.

For the curious reader of these four Wyoming trail novels, I ask this: why did Grey write only of the Great Plains portions of these famous historic trails? After all, the transcontinental railroad went on to Sacramento, just like the telegraph wire. And the travails of the Oregon and California trails were only half over when the emigrants were traveling beside the Sweetwater River. Certainly, as a resident of California from 1918 to the end of his life, Grey knew well the land farther west of Wyoming, so I wonder if there was something more appealing about the Great Plains to him than the Intermountain West or the Coastal West.

As a native of eastern Ohio and a long-time resident of Pennsylvania and New York, Zane Grey had an Easterner's view of the West when he began writing.

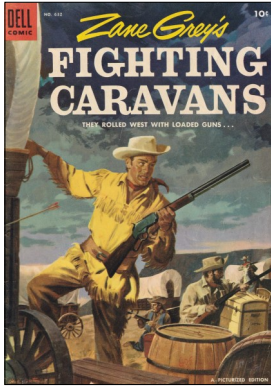


Figure 16.
The Dell comic, 1955.

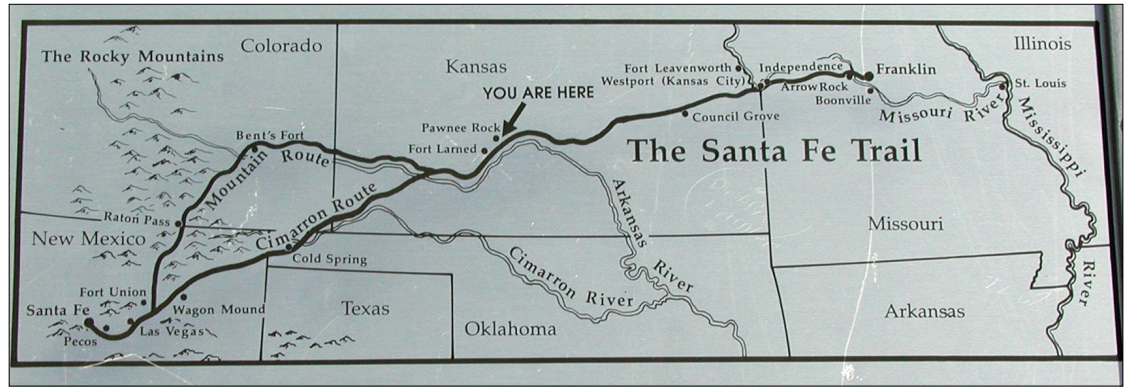


Figure 17.
A Santa Fe Trail map on a sign at Pawnee Rock, Kansas.

He knew well the stories of his Zane ancestors struggling to settle the “Old Northwest,” territory that today is part of the Midwest. Thus, in the late 1800s, the Great Plains was firmly in Grey’s conception of the West. The great American heroes of the late 1800s were the most notable characters of the plains. These were the plainsmen, including the likes of Buffalo Bill, Pawnee Bill, Kit Carson, and Buffalo Jones, and the gamblers and sheriffs of the wide-open plains towns like Wild Bill Hickok, Doc Holliday, and Wyatt Earp. The cowboy and gunman of the plains did not join the pantheon of American heroes until the first decades of the 1900s, thanks to Owen Wister and even more to Zane Grey. Thus, throughout Grey’s life the Great Plains had the most colorful characters that could be lionized in fiction.

Zane Grey would have also been struck by the mind-boggling difference of the landscape of the plains compared to the more forested places east and west. The endless treeless expanse and wild weather of the plains was unlike anything previously known to Easterners, who were far more powerfully influenced by the plains than by the snow-covered mountains farther west. No place other than the Great Plains could produce such unique phenomena to weave into a story as a prairie fire, buffalo stampede, thunderstorm, tornado, or raging shallow muddy river in flood. For novelists like Zane Grey, the harsh Great Plains not only made good copy, it was unique. And, as the letters of their marriage show, Dolly was constantly haranguing Zane to find fresh material for his books (Kant, 2008).

Given Grey’s fascination with the Great Plains, there is one more trail novel worth examining here: *Fighting Caravans*, set along the Santa Fe Trail, mostly in Kansas, from 1856 to 1871 (Figure 16). One of my favorite aspects about this story is how Grey mentions real places on the trail in Kansas that you can visit today, such as Council Grove, Diamond Springs, and Fort Larned, which is described in chapter three as “a wonderful place that bustled with activity with one large store, where eight clerks had all they could do to wait on the nearly 100 hunters and trappers there to sell their winter catch of furs” (Figure 17). The geography of *Fighting Caravans* gets a bit confusing, as sometimes the characters are traveling east when they should be traveling west, but at least most places are described using their actual names.

An especially memorable aspect of this trail story is that this is Zane Grey’s ode to the prairie (Figure 18). Despite the rigors of the Santa Fe Trail in the mid-1800s, Grey forecasts a future for the plains that predicts agricultural productivity in Chapter Seven: “traveling and fighting, that is all there is to the Great Plains today (in 1858), but someday these Great Plains will be great farms. It’s rich soil all the way across and wonderful pasture for stock.” Grey also waxes poetic about this landscape in chapter two: “the prairieland had swallowed them . . . the prairie grass waved and shadowed; a rich thick amber light lay like a mantle over the plain; the sky was a blue sea.”



Figure
18.

Konza
Prairie,
Kansas.

The Pawnee Rock to Fort Larned trail segment is the primary setting of *Fighting Caravans*, an oft-mentioned place where the most dramatic action occurs. In Chapter Fourteen Pawnee Rock is “a favorite camp along the great trail . . . buffalo were always seen grazing . . . a favorite hunting-ground for all tribes of the plains.” Pawnee Rock, located nine miles northeast of the town of Larned on U. S. Highway 56, is a fine stop if you are traveling the Santa Fe Trail today (Figure 19). It has interpretive plaques and signs, an impressive granite monument, and a native stone observation shelter with good views of the surrounding farmland. Fort Larned National Historic Site, located seven miles west of Larned on Kansas Highway 156, offers one of the most complete and authentic army posts you can visit along any national historic trail.

Here is a mystery for the curious reader of *Fighting Caravans* and for someone who really knows the Santa Fe Trail. A landform called Point of Rocks is mentioned several times in the book, but which Point of Rocks does Grey mean? There are prominent Santa Fe Trail landmarks by this name in both southwestern Kansas (in Cimarron National Grassland, Morton County) and northeastern New Mexico (east of Springer, Colfax County). The first couple of times I read the book I thought Grey meant the Point of Rocks in New Mexico, but now I am less certain. Perhaps since 2021 is the 200th anniversary of the Santa Fe Trail, this year could be a good time to ferret this out.

My concluding table attempts to summarize the role of the historic trails in Grey’s trail novels of the Great Plains. *Fighting Caravans*, for example, is set

along the Santa Fe Trail and the trail is the major the setting of the book. Furthermore, the trail is a major feature of the plot of the book; without the Santa Fe Trail events, there is no book, thus *Fighting Caravans* is a “major trail book.” The second book listed, *The Fugitive Trail*, is set briefly at Doan’s Post along the Western Cattle Trail, but this is a minor setting in the book as most of the book is set elsewhere. Also, the trail is not a major part of the plot of the book, thus this could be characterized as a “minor trail book.” *Knights of the Range* is set along the Santa Fe Trail in Cimarron, New Mexico, and the ranch setting in the book is based on the famous Maxwell Ranch, thus the trail setting is a major part of the book. But, unlike *Fighting Caravans*, the Santa Fe Trail is insignificant in the plot of *Knights of the Range*. It is essentially a rustling tale that could have been set anywhere, thus this book has a major trail setting but a minor trail plot.

The thirteen books listed in my table constitute what most readers will think of when they think of Zane Grey’s trail novels. Whether readers pick up one that is devoted entirely to telling the tale of a trail, such as *The Trail Driver*, or one that has only brief encounters with a trail, such as *Raiders of Spanish Peaks*, they are sure to gain valuable knowledge of what makes these trails legendary in America’s history and landscape.



Figure 19.
Pawnee Rock, Kansas.

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TITLE	TRAIL	TRAIL SETTING	TRAIL AS PLOT DEVICE
<i>Fighting Caravans</i>	Santa Fe (Pawnee Rock & Fort Larned, KS)	major	X
<i>The Fugitive Trail</i>	Western Cattle (Doans Post, TX)	minor	
<i>Knights of the Range</i>	Santa Fe (Maxwell Ranch, NM)	major	
<i>The Lost Wagon Train</i>	Santa Fe (Cimarron Branch & Fort Union, NM)	major	X
<i>The Maverick Queen</i>	Oregon (South Pass City, WY)	major	
<i>Raiders of Spanish Peaks</i>	Santa Fe (Mountain Branch)	minor	
<i>The Shepherd of Guadalupe</i>	Santa Fe (Las Vegas, NM) & Butterfield Overland (Guadalupe Mountains, TX) & Goodnight-Loving (eastern NM)	major	
<i>The Trail Driver</i>	Chisholm & Western Cattle (Colorado River Crossing, TX)	major	X
<i>Twin Sombreros</i>	Santa Fe (Las Animas, CO) & Western Cattle (Doans Post, TX)	minor	
<i>The U. P. Trail</i>	Central Overland (Benton, WY)	major	X
<i>West of the Pecos</i>	Butterfield Overland (Horsehead Crossing, TX) & Goodnight-Loving (Horsehead Crossing, TX)	major	
<i>Western Union</i>	Oregon (Chimney Rock, NE)	major	X
<i>Wyoming</i>	Oregon (Sweetwater River, WY)	major	
Oregon Trail notation encompasses the California, Mormon Pioneer, and Pony Express trails.			