

# The Bandera PROPHEET

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The Bandera Prophet

Trading goods between Mexico and Texas began as soon as the Spanish had established a colonial government in the new world. Trade routes flourished between cities like Monterey and Chihuahua with more northern towns like Refugio and San Antonio. The most important route for this area became known as the Chihuahua Trail. The plazas of San Antonio were filled with Mexican carts carrying an ever-increasing supply of merchandise brought not only from Mexico, but from the ports of Galveston and Indianola.

To haul these goods were the Mexican ox carts, huge two-wheel contraptions made entirely of wood. Not one part of metal could be found in their construction. The cart's seven wheels were cut from three pieces of flat timber and fastened together in a crude circle by wooden pins and buckskin thongs. A hole was cut in the center of the wheel where a wooden axle passed through. As no lubrication was used, the friction caused as wood ground against wood could cause the axle to smoke. To avoid a potential fire, prickly pear pads would be shoved around the axle – an early version of a brake pad.

Improvements on the ox-drawn carts arrived in Texas just before the Civil War. The “prairie schooner” was faster and could haul 7,000 pounds of weight as compared to the measly 5,000 pounds of weight carried by the carts. The new wagons had wheels about six feet high in the rear and five feet high in the front with solid iron tires and a wagon bed of 24 feet long. A heavy canvas fastened above the cargo made it waterproof. While a Mexican cart was drawn by five or six yoke of oxen, the prairie schooner was pulled by 10 mules.

The trips up the Chihuahua Trail were no dull affair. Passengers were carried on most of the trips and at times, when an all-night stay was made, the Mexican drivers would spread a heavy canvas on the ground and would form an orchestra with their guitars, and there in the light of a camp fire and inside the circle of wagons, a regular hoe-down was enjoyed. Buffalo was plentiful during this time. One train of wagons returning empty from Chihuahua decided to kill and pack buffalo meat and hides near Fort Concho. They hauled their cargo to San Antonio hoping to make a tidy profit. The hides were sold but there was no market for buffalo steak, so the whole cargo of 50,000 pounds was hauled 10 miles south of the city to be dumped.

August Santelben made one of the last trips over the Trail when he brought a large shipment of gold and silver out of Mexico into Texas. To protect this valuable cargo against robbers, the army furnished a calvary escort to San Antonio and onto a bank in Galveston. It was all safely delivered, over \$500,000 worth, earning Santleben a hefty profit \$17,500. The completion of the railroad in Texas brought the end of the Chihuahua Trail in 1877. One of Texas' greatest arteries of commerce passed into history.