

LONE ELM AND ELM GROVE: A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY?

by Craig Crease

[SFTA member Crease, Shawnee, Kansas, is an insurance agent with a long-standing interest in the Trail through Johnson County, Kansas. He especially thanks Gregory Franzwa, who first introduced his two-campground theory in print (a brief synopsis and map) in the third edition of *Maps of the Oregon Trail* (1990).]

Of all the sites that make up the Santa Fe Trail, few seem as comfortably fixed in place and time as the Lone Elm campground. Certainly its historical importance on the Trail has been well established. Unique as apparently the only major campground serving both the Santa Fe Trail and the Oregon Trail, this landmark figures in many diaries and journals, and is mentioned and identified in most secondary sources on the trails.

Traders and emigrants, mountain men and dragoons, 49ers and explorers all knew it. The Lone Elm register reads like a Who's Who of the American West. A busy place in its time, it served as camp on the first or second night out from Westport and Independence for travelers on the Trail.

Now a red granite DAR marker holds its lonely vigil, hunkered down among the weeds on a dusty backroads' corner south of Olathe, Kansas, in Johnson County. Although it does not specify it as such, this DAR monument, located on the old Newton Ainsworth property marks the purported location of this famous old rendezvous, the Lone Elm Campground.¹

Marked with great ceremony by the DAR in 1906, and accepted by historians ever since as Lone Elm, this site has been considered the location for a camp that was known by a variety of names. The traditional line of thought has been that "Round Grove," "Caravan Grove," and "Elm Grove," among other names, were all names for the same place and evolved into "Lone Elm" as the grove was cut away until only one elm tree remained. A careful evaluation of many primary and secondary sources supports a conclusion, however, that there were actually two separate major campgrounds that later came to be perceived as one.

There has been confusion about the site in the writings of several scholars. Hobart Stocking wrote in *The Road to Santa Fe*, "there is no one left to explain why the locality was variously mentioned as 'Round Prairie,' 'Round Grove,' and 'Caravan Grove,' since there was no other timber in sight."²

Dale Morgan summarized the traditional view in *The Rocky Mountain Journals of William Marshall Anderson*, "Round Grove, so called in 1825 by the commissioners appointed to mark the Santa Fe Trail, also became known as Caravan Grove, Elm Grove, and finally Lone Elm."³ Margaret Long noted that Dr. Frederick A. Wislizenus, who traveled the Trail in the 1840s, stated "there was a venerable Elm tree at Caravan or Elm Grove, 33 miles from Independence" and, from this concluded that "Caravan Grove on Caravan Creek is undoubtedly the location of Lone Elm camp memorialized by the Santa Fe Trail Marker Johnson-5."⁴

These scholars and others can hardly be blamed for the confusion because many travel diaries and journals weave a conflicting narrative when describing Lone Elm. Consider, for instance, the observations of those that were there in one short period in 1849:

April 9, 1849, Edward Smith: "Elm Grove, popular rendezvous point, consisted of a lone tree with the top cut off."⁵

April 18, 1849, Alexander Love: "Famous Lone Elm bereft of all branches. . . ."⁶

April 24, 1849, Cornelius Cole: "First camp at lone tree, though that famous tree itself had disappeared. . . ."⁷

April 30, 1849, Dr. Bonine: "Found Lone Elm a mere stump."⁸

April 30, 1849, Samuel Dundass, "Famous Lone Elm was 3 feet in diameter, with a beautiful spreading top."⁹

May 3, 1849, J. A. Pritchard: "At 3 P.M. we reached the noted Lone Elm, where we encamped for the night. This lone tree stands on the banks of a small stream."¹⁰

The glaring inconsistencies about the existence and condition of the "lone elm" in 1849 make one wonder if they could possibly be writing about the same location, and other observations are also confusing. Many observers seemed to sense imminent doom, or at least a precarious existence for the tree, yet descriptions of it continued to be recorded over a period of at least 12 years (1841-1853). Also at odds, in some cases, were the descriptions of the campground site itself.

May 7, 1845, John Ewing Howell, "Elm Grove consists of one elm with all the limbs trimmed off."¹¹

May 23, 1846, Dr. Wislizenus: "At

Lone Elm-tree we halted at noon: rather a poor camping place, with bad water, scanty grass, and a single elm-tree; some bushes are growing along the water. How long the venerable elm-tree, that must have seen many ages, will yet be respected by the traveller, I am unable to say; but I fear that its days are numbered, and that the little valley will look more desolate than ever."¹²

June 11, 1846, Susan Shelby Magoffin: "There is no other tree or bush or shrub save one Elm tree, which stands on a small elevation near the little creek or branch. The travellers always stop where there is water sufficient for all their animals. The grass is fine every place, it is so tall in some places as to conceal a man's waist."¹³

In view of these disparate descriptions and references to a valley, it is important to understand the actual physical attributes of the land recognized as Lone Elm campground today. No serious observer could describe any part of the purported site as a valley. The grade, for instance from the Lone Elm spring (just northwest of the middle of the northwest quarter of Section 23, as shown on the map) runs from an elevation of 1,040 feet above sea level at the spring to 1,064 feet at the middle of the top of the section, about a quarter-mile away. The elevation at the western edge of the section, also about a quarter-mile away, is 1,073 feet.¹⁴ A gradual slope of 33 feet over a distance of 1,320 feet (a quarter mile) is hardly perceptible as a grade and certainly does not qualify as a valley. Yet consider these first-hand narratives of people who were there.

May 31, 1839, Thomas Farnham: "We halted on the banks of a small stream called Elm Grove." The next day he wrote, "We are now encamped about 20 miles from the western line of the state of Missouri in the Shawnee Territory, in a little valley of the prairie called Elm Grove."¹⁵

June 2, 1841, Richard L. Wilson: "Giving the slip to a couple of days, just at sunset on the second, we descended a precipitous declivity to a place of which nothing remained but the name Elm Grove, and one solitary logan of a stricken tree 'To mark where an Elm grove had been.' A beautiful rivulet bubbled forth from the base of the hill, and as we wound our way down, we spied a single campfire . . . of an old Mexican hunter."¹⁶

Another point for consideration of the physical attributes of the site is the

existence of a spring and/or stream. The site today has a well capstone at the location of the spring. No direct reference to a spring at Lone Elm, other than references to the creek as a "spring branch" has been found in any primary source.

Physical differences aside, the most convincing testimonial for the existence of two major campgrounds instead of only one lies in the journal of Lt. Gaines P. Kingsbury in September 1835. Writing on the return of Col. Henry Dodge's dragoon expedition to the Rocky Mountains, as they traveled east along the Santa Fe Trail, Kingsbury noted that the dragoons passed "Round and Elm Groves" on Sept. 15, then proceeded northwardly to Grinter's Crossing of the Kansas River.¹⁷ Kingsbury referred to "groves" in the plural. This is also the earliest reference to the name "Elm Grove" that has been found. But the primary importance of his passage lies not in its early date but in its clear reference to two separate groves by names that all secondary sources have considered to be the same place. The evolution of names becomes a critical part of the enigma.

On first examination, it is easy to see how one might consider the progression of names from Round Grove to Caravan Grove to Elm Grove and, finally, to Lone Elm to be obvious. Round Grove was first mentioned by a Trail traveler in 1825 (more about this later) and last in 1846. Elm Grove was first used in 1835 and as late as 1849. The term Lone Elm was found in diaries and journals from 1844 through 1853.

Although there are numerous references in secondary sources to Caravan Grove, the only primary source located which used that term was the report of the Sibley survey of the Trail. George C. Sibley's journal of the resurvey in 1827 makes it clear that Round Grove and Caravan Grove were two different places.¹⁸ Because of its separate location, as well as the single primary-source use of that term, Caravan Grove can be eliminated as a serious contender for an alternate name for the place known today as Lone Elm.

Although the earliest recorded reference to the name Round Grove was also the Sibley survey, that name may well have been used earlier by Trail travelers. According to the October 22, 1825, diary entry of Benjamin H. Reeves, a member of the survey team, "A short distance farther & came to a small grove near the divide [on the ridge between the drainage of the Osage and Kansas or Kaw rivers] called the 'Round Grove' which is on Kaw

waters."¹⁹ It appears that Reeves was writing about a place-name that someone else besides that survey party had previously used. If the survey party had given it that name, Reeves would likely have mentioned it. The journalists with the survey usually made a point of noting sites they definitely did name (such as Council Grove and Diamond Spring).²⁰ It is important to remember that some members of the survey party had been over the Trail before and were probably familiar with earlier place-names, such as Round Grove.

At any rate, the name Round Grove was used longer in primary sources than any other name for the location, 1825 to 1846. The term Elm Grove was first used in 1835, thus it overlapped Round Grove usage for 11 years. Eleven years seems a long time for both names to last for the same place, if indeed they were the same. So far as can be determined, no primary source ever put the two together, except for Kingsbury in 1835, or even suggested that Round Grove was a predecessor name for Elm Grove (only secondary sources reached such a conclusion.) Thus Elm Grove, as with Caravan Grove, can be removed from serious consideration as another name for the place known as Lone Elm today. Elm Grove most likely was the other camp-ground.

To understand the positioning of Elm Grove, it is important to realize there were two main trunks of the Santa Fe Trail in present Johnson County. One ran southwest from Independence, crossing the Missouri boundary at about present 121st Street, at the site of Little Santa Fe. Then it ran in a general southwest direction to Lone Elm, and from there to Bull Creek, (current site 1500 feet west of Lanesfield School), a distance of nine miles.

The other major branch ran southwest from Westport, crossing the Missouri border into present Johnson County at about 69th and State Line Road of today. A third route also ran southwest out of Westport but substantially northwest of the 69th crossing. This third road dropped down past Shawnee Methodist Mission and joined the other trail out of Westport at about present 88th Terrace and Farley in Overland Park. It then ran as one road generally southwest through present-day Olathe and on to Elm Grove (just southwest of Olathe), and then on to the above mentioned Bull Creek site, a distance of about eight and three-fourths miles. The trails from Independence and Westport joined west of present Gardner. Not far from where they met, the Oregon Trail

branched to the northwest and the Santa Fe Trail continued southwest.

Over time, for what reasons is not clear, modern Trail historians have focused on the route from Independence (121st and State Line to Lone Elm and beyond) as the main Santa Fe Trail in Johnson county, and disposed of the northern trunk as a mere "cut-off." The evidence is substantial and compelling, however, that the route from Westport saw as much or more traffic. Because the traffic on the Westport branch through Elm Grove and beyond is important to resolving the confusion over the campgrounds, the solid work of Irene Paden (done in the 1930s) provides vital information.²¹

Referring to the Independence branch, Paden concluded, "In the prairie, east of Gardner, it was joined by the strand from Westport which eventually so overshadowed the earlier road that the name Santa Fe Trail has become almost its exclusive property." Paden was the first trail historian to describe the actual location of Elm Grove, although she called it Lone Elm, thus adding to the confusion.

She wrote: "About a third of the way from Olathe to Gardner, or thirty-four miles from Independence, we passed near the site of the famous old Lone Elm where many camped on the first night out from Westport. Being very definite as to location, it was often used as a rendezvous. It was on the headwaters of Cedar Creek, and the solitary elm, three feet in thickness, was credited with being the only tree on the prairie within sight of the road. . . . We were still traveling southwest on the slight elevation, called, by courtesy, a ridge and now approached the point where the Westport road met the southern route from Independence."

The site described by Paden is west-southwest of Olathe near where U.S. Highway 56 crosses Cedar Creek. Although she called this place Lone Elm, she described the Elm Grove camp-ground. The site currently recognized as Lone Elm is about two and one-half miles southeast of the place she noted and directly south of Olathe, not southwest.

The WPA *Guide to Kansas*, also from the 1930s, contained the following statement in reviewing points of interest around Olathe: "Just east of the concrete bridge on which US 50 crosses Cedar Creek, is a Santa Fe and Oregon Trail marker. . . ."²² That particular marker has disappeared since the 1930s.

The Paden and WPA references were the first indications I found that this might be the site of the second camp-

ground, the actual Elm Grove and distinct from Lone Elm. Additional encouragement came from Marc Simons's *Following the Santa Fe Trail: A Guide for Modern Travelers*: "On US 56 at one mile west of the junction with SR 7 is the Olathe city limits. Here on the right are two houses, the first a two-story red brick and the second a long white bungalow. Just past the bungalow on the right side of the highway is an open field leading down to a creek. This is the site of a major SFT campground, and before that an Indian campground. The trail wound along the foot of the slope that rises to the present highway. Across the creek and the bridge, trail ruts briefly parallel US 56, just inside a farm fence."²³

Later, another source from the 1930s (A. B. McDonald's "Tracing the Oregon Trail Through Kansas, A Hundred Years After Its Founding") provided more compelling evidence.²⁴ Following a general review of the history of the Oregon Trail (which is synonymous with the Santa Fe Trail through most of Johnson County), McDonald wrote: "I went out last week to see if any marks of the Oregon trail might yet be found from Independence out across Eastern Kansas. . . . The first tracks of the old trails that I could find were where they forded Cedar Creek. Just east of the concrete bridge on the new highway 50 where it crosses Cedar Creek, southwest of Olathe, you may see the old trails cut deep into the earth and grass grown where it leads off to the northwest and goes down to ford the creek."

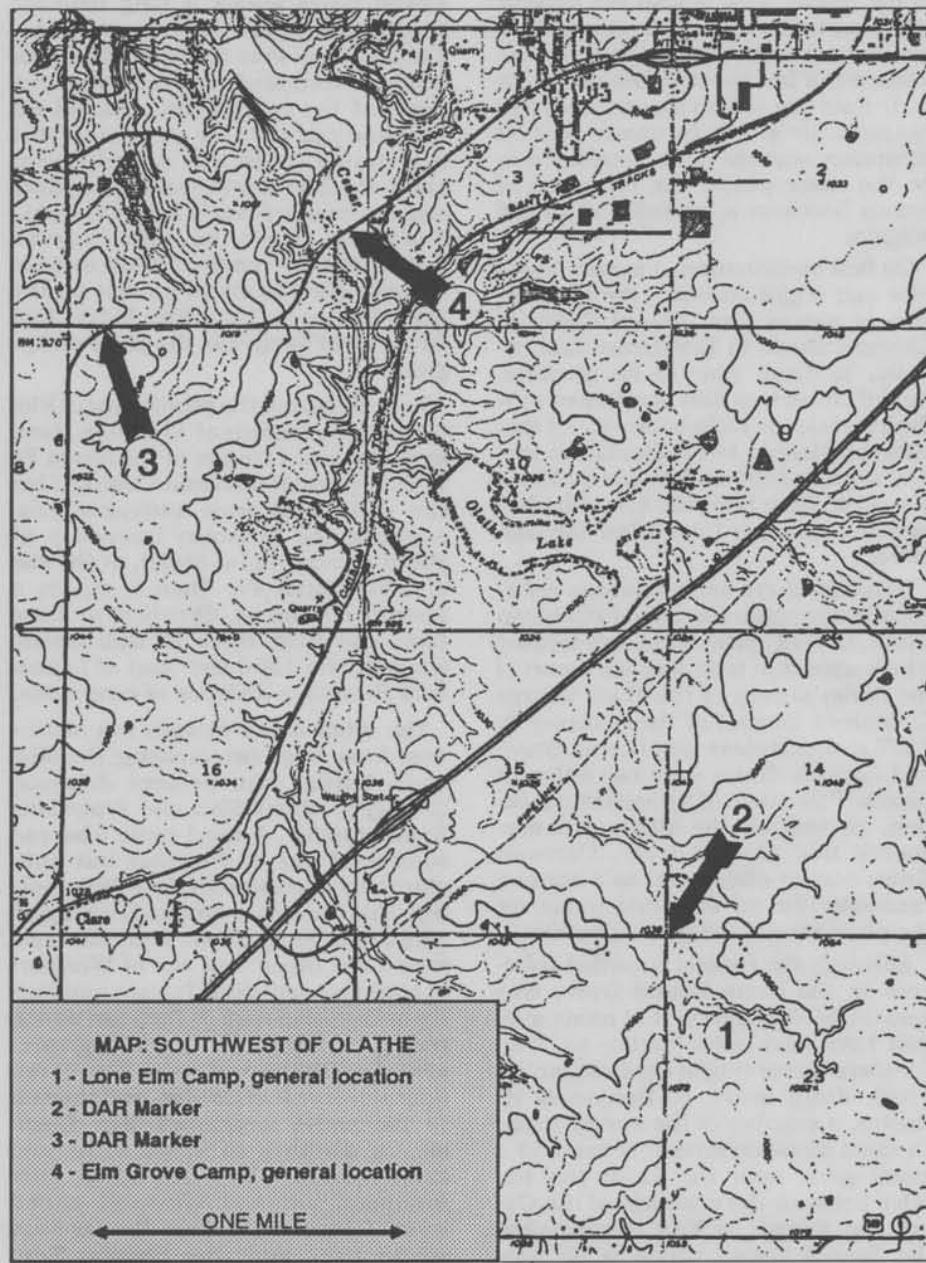
McDonald met R. P. Houghland, residing on the farm where he was born in 1858 near the crossing, who "remembers well the long covered wagon trains, sometimes 300 wagons in one caravan, that used to come over the horizon from the east and wind down to the creek [note the description of a descent] and the toil up the other bank. . . ." Although Houghland had farmed the land for many years, evidence of the trail across his property was still clearly seen in 1930. "West of the Houghland place," McDonald continued, "where the new highway tops the high ground, is a red granite monument with an inscription that marks the site of Lone Elm[?], where trains generally camped the first night out of Westport or Little Santa Fe."

This last statement of McDonald's is most intriguing, because it touches on another confusing aspect of the Lone Elm story, the missing inscription. Most DAR markers in Kansas did not have a location specifically inscribed but simply read "Santa Fe Trail 1822-1872. Marked by the Daughters of the

American Revolution and the State of Kansas. 1906." A number of writers, referring to the DAR marker at Lone Elm south of Olathe, have noted that there once was an inscription identifying this site as Lone Elm. Most then say this inscription either sunk below ground or was lost or stolen. They apparently draw their information from Margaret Long's 1954 guide to the Santa Fe Trail. Although the inscription was not there when Long saw the marker in 1952, she included a photograph (taken by J. G. Masters in the late 1920s) showing the words "Lone Elm Camp Ground, 1822-1872" inscribed in a white stone rectangle embedded in a masonry base supporting the regular DAR red granite marker. The only other photo of the marker with the inscription is in the

privately printed brochure that Newton Ainsworth had published about the Lone Elm Campground on his land.²⁵ Most likely this inscription was added to the base by Newton Ainsworth, who was a tireless promoter of himself and his land as the location of the historic campground.²⁶

The photo published by Long was taken about 1927, and then the inscription apparently vanished. If McDonald's narrative about the marker west of the bridge over Cedar Creek can be taken literally, perhaps somebody had moved the "Lone Elm" inscription to this monument by 1930 when he was there. Possibly that is why Irene Paden referred to the Cedar Creek site as Lone Elm when she was there in the 1930s. Sufficient evidence has not been found to resolve this



quandary.

Further hard evidence to support the theory of two separate campgrounds was found in the original county surveys, 1854-1856. These maps show the Trail in all its variants through the county, section by section, and pinpoint the crossing of Cedar Creek by the road from Westport at the location of the present highway bridge.

The earlier Sibley survey references to Caravan Grove support the conclusion that what they called Caravan Grove was at the same location as what later was called Elm Grove. Mel Thurman was the first historian to theorize in print, based on Sibley's 1827 journal, that Caravan Grove was probably a separate grove on the same creek but to the north of the Lone Elm site directly south of Olathe.²⁷ Further substantiation came to light recently in the form of the unpublished words of George Sibley on June 27, 1827, printed here for the first time: "No. 67° E. 112 chs. to Caravan Creek, 30 Lks., bears north: here is a pretty Grove of Timber, good water, and good Pasture. The Round Grove is about 2 1/2 Miles above, or Southward on this same Creek."²⁸ The name Caravan Grove was not used by the traders because it remained hidden in the pages of the government survey report that was not published until Kate L. Gregg resurrected it in her *Road to Santa Fe* (1952).

Today the site of Elm Grove, near U.S. Highway 56 southwest of Olathe, remains in the Houghland family as it has since the late 1850s. When Mrs. H. F. Houghland graciously allowed me to inspect the "lay of the land" in the summer of 1990, I confirmed that this location matches the description, from so many of the diary excerpts, of a "little valley of the prairie" (the one physical attribute that was impossible to reconcile at the Lone Elm site). From any direction, the slope down to the creek crossing qualifies as a valley. Even the "precipitous declivity" of Richard Wilson's 1841 narrative is in evidence in several spots, particularly in a steep drop of 40 or 50 feet from bluffs facing the creek about a third of a mile north-northwest of the bridge or in the steep pull up the highway for a short distance immediately after crossing the bridge heading southwest.

Finally, consideration should be given to a very likely possibility. Much of the confusion of the diarists and journalists may have come from the fact that Elm Grove, given its heavy use, eventually gave way to just one tree (just like its counterpart), and likely an elm. It would be only natural for an observer, particularly a first-

time one, to assume that the first campground out of Westport at about the distance anticipated, and sporting a lone elm tree, "must be the place."

The overall evidence leads to these conclusions. (1) That the location currently known as Lone Elm, at 167th and Lone Elm Road, was originally called Round Grove and later came to be known as Lone Elm. It was never correctly Elm Grove or Caravan Grove. (2) Elm Grove was a separate major campground two and one-half miles northwest of Lone Elm on the same creek (Cedar Creek). It was also the location referred to in the Sibley survey as Caravan Grove.

Today the sites of Elm Grove and Lone Elm remain relatively undeveloped, but the city limits of Olathe are rapidly encroaching on them. Hopefully they can both remain this way and not fall prey to housing developers as the city expands. It is still possible, despite modern intrusions, to get a sense of "place," an uncanny sense of romance and high adventure on the old Santa Fe Trail, by walking in history's footsteps at both locations.

NOTES

1. This marker is located on the southeast corner of the intersection of 167th and Lone Elm Road. The purported site of the Lone Elm tree itself was at about the southeast corner of the northwest quarter of the northwest quarter of Section 23, Township 14S, Range 23E, thus located due south of Olathe, Kansas, in Johnson County. This site was on the property of Newton Ainsworth, who settled here in the late 1850's. Ainsworth and his brother-in-law, George Black, were both instrumental in getting the DAR marker placed at this location.
2. Hobart Stocking, *The Road to Santa Fe* 1971, 44.
3. Dale Morgan and Eleanor Towles Harris, eds., *The Rocky Mountain Journals of William Marshall Anderson*, 72.
4. Margaret Long, *The Santa Fe Trail* (1954), 260.
5. Merrill Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives* (1988), 120.
6. Ibid., 184.
7. Ibid., 145.
8. Ibid., 133.
9. Ibid., 152.
10. Dale Morgan, ed., *The Overland Diary of James A. Pritchard* (1959).
11. Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives*, 68.
12. Dr. F. A. Wislizenus, *Memoir of a Tour to Northern Mexico, Connected With Col. Doniphan's Expedition, in 1846 and 1847* (1848), 26. Wislizenus, recognized as a skilled and mindful observer, began his entry for May 23, 1846, as follows: "We started in the morning for 'Lone Elm-tree,' or 'Round Grove.' Wislizenus had been over this same stretch of the Trail before, in 1839, when the name "Lone Elm" was unknown but the name "Round Grove" was in use. Also, on May 24, 1846, he referred to the site again as just "Round Grove": "This morning we passed the road to Oregon, that leaves, about eight miles from Round Grove, the Santa Fe Road, and turns to the right toward the Kansas."
13. Stella M. Drumm, ed., *Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico: The Diary of Susan Shelby Magoffin, 1846-1847* (1926), 5.
14. Information taken from USGS Topo. Map for Ocheltree Quad., Section 23, T14S R23E.

15. Thomas J. Farnham, *Travels In The Great Western Prairies* (1841); also, Farnham letter from LeRoy and Ann Hafen, eds., *Far West and Rockies*, Vol. 3.

16. Richard L. Wilson, *Short Ramblings From a Long Yarn, or Camp March Sketches of the Santa Fe Trail From the Notes of Richard Wilson*, ed. by Benjamin Taylor (1936), 11-12.

17. Louise Barry, *The Beginning of the West* (1872), 294.

18. Kate L. Gregg, ed., *The Road to Santa Fe: The Journal and Diaries of George Champlin Sibley* (1852), 189, 190.

19. Ibid., 173.

20. Ibid., 57, 184.

21. See Irene Paden, *The Wake of the Prairie Schooner* (1943), 19-26.

22. Federal Writers Project, *WPA Guide to Kansas* (1939, reprint 1984), 373.

23. Marc Simmons, *Following the Santa Fe Trail, a Guide for Modern Travelers*, second edition (1986), 65.

24. *Kansas City Star*, April 9, 1930.

25. *Lone Elm Marker: Lone Elm Camp Ground, Santa Fe Trail Monument, Erected 1906* (souvenir pamphlet, n.d.), includes a speech given by Ainsworth at the marker dedication ceremony.

26. As early as 1874 Newton Ainsworth was claiming that the Lone Elm site was on his land. The *Johnson County Atlas* (1874) referred to his land as "Lone Elm Farm."

27. Melburn D. Thurman, "Lone Elm, Kansas: The History of a Trail Campground," *The Overland Journal* (Fall 1986).

28. George C. Sibley, *Field Notes of Resurvey*, 1827, MS. Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis. In using Kate Gregg's excellent book of the Sibley survey, *The Road to Santa Fe*, I assumed she had printed all the pertinent survey papers, particularly those on the 1827 resurvey. A careful review of her bibliography, page 273, hinted that at least one set of papers might exist that was not included in the book: "Field notes of Resurvey, 1827. Five pages. Lindenwood College Collection." The papers were no longer at Lindenwood College, but they directed me to the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis. There were found the five pages on the resurvey that Gregg referred to and another set of field notes 23 pages long of which Gregg made no mention. The second set ran from 6/1/1827 through 7/5/1827.

CLAPSADDLE WRITES TRAIL ARTICLES

by Carl Immenschuh

THE summer 1991 issue of *Kansas History*, quarterly journal of the Kansas State Historical Society, will include an article by Dr. David Clapsaddle, SFTA member from Larned, Kansas, on the marking of the Fort Hays/Fort Dodge Road. Marking this branch of the Santa Fe Trail took the better part of the years 1988 to 1990. Many volunteers took part in the marking of the road, with the high point being the rededication of Duncan's Crossing in Hodgeman County near Hanston, Kansas.

Scheduled for the summer 1992 issue will be an article on the Wet and Dry routes of the Santa Fe Trail that traverses the plain between Larned and Fort Dodge. Both articles will bring much-needed attention to the history of the Trail and the need to preserve it for future generations.