

The Bloody Benders

For reasons that likely have to do with desired ends, the Oregon Trail has a more wholesome reputation than its southern sidekick, the Santa Fe. The Oregon Trail once carried the hopes and dreams of whole families. The wagon trains leaving Missouri carried hundreds of thousands of little girls in sun bonnets and boys in bibs bobbing along beside the oxen, Mom holding the youngest up on the seat of the wagon.

The Santa Fe Trail was all about commerce and trade, about money. Its travelers were draymen, truckers who liked their steak chicken-fried, heavy on the gravy. Nothing particularly evil about Santa Fe, it simply wasn't as wholesome as that other one up north to Oregon.

That may be why the story of Bloody Benders seems more fittingly placed on the Santa Fe Trail. The Bloody Benders were a family that weren't. Pa and Ma Bender, both immigrants whose thick accents, people say, made communication impossible, weren't any more Pa and Ma than they were married. Back then, common-law wasn't at all uncommon.

It's likely their children weren't their children. Accounts of their bloody story make the claim that the children, who neither theirs nor brother and sister, were as charming and handsome as the parents were not. But then, none of the Benders were who they said they were.

Confusing? --yes. But the wild stuff is yet to come.

Wherever they came from, whoever they were, they homesteaded along the Santa Fe. When the Osage bought up cheap land in Indian Territory and determined to move north or else die a slow death in Kansas. That move opened Kansas land to white settlement, and the Bloody Benders went west.

This is a frightening story.

They got into murder on the frontier, their *modus operandi* finally exposed when a man named Loncher and his infant daughter were going east, back to Iowa, having thrown in the towel on a homestead. The two simply disappeared, and when a man named Dr. York set out to find them, he too simply vanished.

Now York's brothers were determined to find him; and when they didn't, they pressed the case right there where the Osage once roamed, drew the whole township together and got permission to look door-to-door for their brother.

That night, the Bloody Benders, who weren't Benders, vanished, leaving their two-room frontier abode behind, taking only food and clothing. The neighbors never saw them again.

I'm going to withhold the blood and the smell--it's beyond the pale. Suffice it to say that the Benders were perfectly methodical murderers because the Yorks found their brother and the bodies of seven others planted in the Benders' garden, which wasn't a garden at all either (neighbors claimed it seemed strange the place was always being plowed).

The Benders had opened their doors to Santa Fe Trail travelers, separated their one-room house with a single curtain, behind which they were claimed to have their living quarters. They'd set beloved guests in a big chair right in front of the curtain, start into the vittles, one of them--could've been any, really--would bash in the head of the victim from behind that curtain.

The Bloody Benders is a horror story, told elsewhere with far more blood and gore. And it ends in a way that'll have you clammy because it doesn't end at all. The Benders were never seen or heard from again. Mother, father, brother, sister--all of them, whoever they were, simply disappeared, not just from Kansas but from anywhere.

So they live on in the hearts and minds of those who know the story, frontier mass murderers, their horrific crimes forever unpunished.

All of this happened in 1875, so the Bloody Benders are long gone.

Or are they? Maybe. Gory stories like the Bloody Benders, no matter how old, will always be prime-time.