



Mule Shoes to Santa Fe

Jim L. Hickman

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Mule Shoes to Santa Fe is a sprightly, Christian-values-driven western.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the thousand-mile-long Santa Fe Trail was one of North America's main thoroughfares. In Jim L. Hickman's sprightly, Christian-values-driven western, *Mule Shoes to Santa Fe*, the trail becomes a stage for adventure.

Seventeen-year-old Ross Greenup, the novel's narrator, lives on a horse farm in Kentucky. He has always longed to accompany the older men in his family on their regular drives west to sell their Morgan horses. Now his opportunity has come.

The book opens with a literal bang as Ross's family is set upon by robbers, and unfolds as a series of Ross's adventures and experiences. Ross shoots and kills one of the robbers; the act has consequences down the road, but quickly recedes in the story, lost to the excitement of starting out on the horse drive. The first leg of the journey gets Ross to western Missouri, the jumping-off point for the trail.

Although the initial part of the trip is set in a settled and supposedly tame part of the country, the book establishes a swift pace that it maintains throughout. Rare are chapters without an adventure to keep the drama flowing.

On their first days out, the Greenups team up with the Clark family, who are also headed west. When their wayward cow panics and knocks the Clark parents into a swift, icy river, a water rescue ensues. This kind of small but well-imagined and well-described mishap gives the story a realistic feeling, with awareness that danger was ever-present on the trail.

In the wilderness west of the Mississippi, trails, like outpost towns, were crowded with people, a fact the book uses well to draw in a large cast of characters and capture a wide panorama of a country on the move. Characters are well defined throughout, especially Ross, who emerges as a mature, solid man-in-the-making who lives by Christian ethics, but who knows when quick action is called for.

At times the dialogue is too thick, but it generally works well, imparting the flavor of the Old West, as when a traveler complains of being "so hungry my belly's about to eat my backbone."

Historical elements blend well into the text. Because the story captures Ross's first trip out of his native Kentucky, descriptions and reflections conveyed from his point of view seem natural. Christian messages also come through Ross's strong and likable voice, keeping the novel from becoming preachy.

Mule Shoes to Santa Fe is an action-rich story with a reminder that the real heroes of the West weren't the gunslingers or rustlers, but the ordinary men and women who stood up to them.

SUSAN WAGGONER (January 2, 2018)

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