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Chapter VI: THE SMOKY HILL TRAIL

One other western state, Colorado, was founded by people who used Kansas as a highway; but the blazing of the Smoky Hill Trail, as the way to Pike's Peak and Denver was called, differed from other trails in that it came after eastern Kansas had become the home of white men. In 1857, Delaware Indians discovered gold in the streams flowing east from the Rockies. They brought the precious nuggets back to their reservations in Kansas and traded them for goods at Leavenworth.

News of the gold strike brought thousands from the eastern states and from the Kansas settlements. As usual, the Missouri River was the starting point of the trail across the Plains, the chief termini being Kansas City, Leavenworth, Atchison, St. Joseph and Omaha. One party of gold seekers from Leecompton, Kansas, founded Denver, naming it in honor of the Kansas governor, James Denver.

Since Kansas is a prairie state with no mountains and few steep hills, it was possible to lay out a trail over almost any route, and several trails extended from the Missouri River to the Rockies. The most frequently used trail, however, was the Smoky Hill Trail, which followed the Smoky Hill River into Colorado. The stream and its timber afforded water for men and draft animals and wood for fuel at camping places.

As the Colorado towns grew, it became necessary to provide stage coaches and wagon trains. David A. Butterfield organized an important freight and express line in 1865 to transport goods from Atchison by way of the Smoky Hill Trail to Denver. The first train was drawn by 1,200 mules and carried 150,000 pounds of freight. It was a wonderful sight to see the Butterfield train enter Denver, the great freight wagons being drawn by teams of four and six mules, each team being driven by a weatherbeaten teamster mounted on the wagon box and flourishing his long whip lash as he shouted at the animals. Later Butterfield added a stage line.

Indian wars interfered with both freight and stage service and Butterfield lost so much money that he was eventually forced to sell out his business. Others, however, took it up and the mule trains remained on the Smoky Hill Trail until the building of the Union Pacific Railroad replaced the mule with the steam engine.