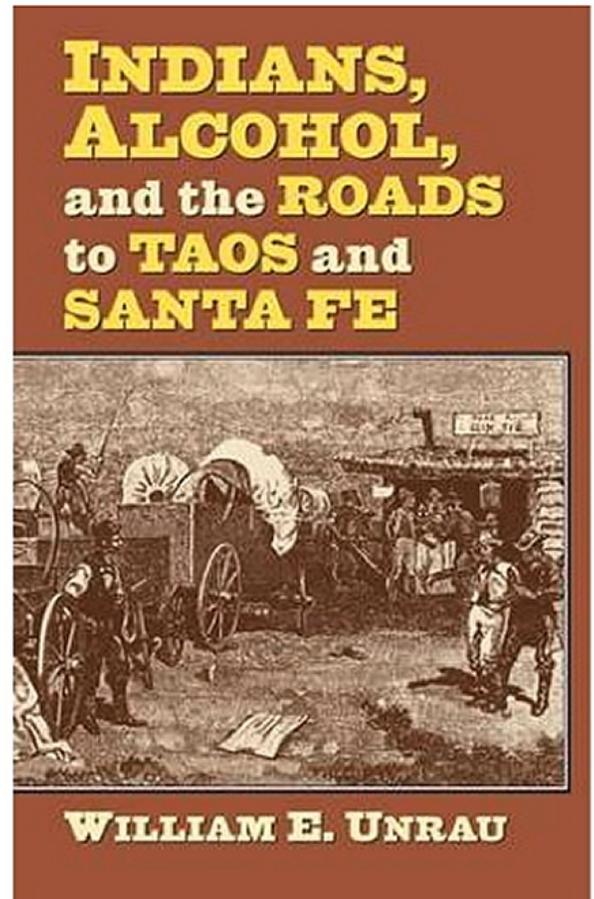


Book Reviews: "Indians, Alcohol, and the Roads to Taos and Santa Fe" by William E. Unrau

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Indians, Alcohol, and the Roads to Taos and Santa Fe by William E. Unrau, University of Kansas Press, 192 pages

In 1821, Mexico achieved independence from Spain. Spanish trade tariffs in the northern provinces were removed. On Sept. 1, William Becknell, having ventured from Missouri with equine stock to trade, was warmly welcomed by Gov. Facundo Melgares upon arrival in Santa Fe. Among other developments that year, Missouri became a state. One of its first elected U.S. senators was Thomas Hart Benton. Becknell's bold New Mexico trading initiative and Benton's powerful position in the Senate, from which he could champion his belief in national expansion through commerce, set the context for William E. Unrau's *Indians, Alcohol, and the Roads to Taos and Santa Fe*. The book explores the importance of the roles of trade, specifically trade in alcohol, and the western routes facilitating that trade. He specifically discusses "alcohol and its impact on Indians along the frontier trails threading through the so-called Indian Country between Missouri and Mexico."



Indians, Alcohol, and the Roads

Becknell, dubbed the father of the Santa Fe Trail, was a canny trader who had spearheaded trails in Kansas and Colorado. Traversing what was Indian Country during his first trip to Taos and Santa Fe, Becknell crossed the eastern half of the Louisiana Purchase, an area of the central Great Plains populated by Osage, Kansa, Southern Cheyenne, Arapahoe, Kiowa, and Comanche peoples, along with several tribes forcibly relocated from the East.

Benton, a frontier lawyer, Jeffersonian, and former aide-de-camp to Gen. Andrew Jackson, also edited the *Missouri Enquirer*. In the Senate, he became chairman of the Committee on Indian Affairs and a member of the Committee on Military Affairs. In the first year of his three-decade Senate tenure, he pushed for an amendment to abolish the government's network of Indian trading posts, enabling the fur trade to expand. Additionally, that amendment would underscore the need for a national road to Taos and Santa Fe.

Despite federal statutes incurring fines and imprisonment, distilled alcohol was widely available to the Native population. Unrau focuses on the period after Mexican independence and before the war with Mexico began in 1846. During this time alcohol was regarded as a reputable commodity for trade that yielded an enviable profit margin. Not surprisingly, Indians were induced to accept alcohol in exchange for bison robes.

Seldom portrayed, or alluded to, is 19th-century America's rampant alcoholism. Unrau brings that information to bear on the limits and loopholes in the various legislative efforts to deal with the prohibition of alcohol in Indian Country. "For God's sake, for the sake of humanity," one Indian agent protested, "Exert yourself to have [alcohol] stopped in this country." Despite occasional objections, the production, distribution, and sale of alcohol flourished. Government enforcement was lax. There were great distances between the sites of infractions and courts of law. Also, juries could be stacked. Because American Fur Company boatmen, traveling through Indian Country, drank so heavily, special permits were issued to allow whiskey for their consumption. Quantities were to be limited to the number of workers, of course, and none of the alcohol should be "sold, bartered, or given to Indians." These limits were not enforced. Arguing for a similar exception, traders in Santa Fe and Taos stated that their employees hauling freight on overland roads through Indian Country should also receive special permits. Supplying the demand were distilleries that proliferated in western Missouri and northern Mexico, as well as Northern New Mexico, with the aptly named "Taos Lightning" a popular commodity. Benton's campaign for a national overland route to Santa Fe, with a further view to a route to the Pacific Ocean for trade with the Far East, was freighted with his conviction that a national road through Indian Country would increase commerce, foster settlement, and provide Indians with a model for the "cheering progress in the art of civilization." Absent from Benton's seemingly noble premise was any consideration of the underlying impact of the European invasion upon the Native civilizations — "a genuine tragedy in the Western Hemisphere." The elasticity of the Indian Removal and Indian Trade and Intercourse acts, the vagaries of the national economy, and the inexorable impetus of Manifest Destiny further undermined the Missouri senator's ill-conceived notion. Additionally, Indian reservations were located along or near the national road where alcohol was readily available to travelers and to tribes that received annuities for removal from their traditional homelands. "The payment of so many dollars to so many displaced people, in an unfamiliar but concentrated area, was an alcohol trader's dream," Unrau writes. In sum, it was an "unstable dynamic."

Unrau has previously written about the hypocrisy of the efforts of Anglos to legislate against Indians having access to alcohol and about alcohol's repercussions on them legally, socially, and economically. He should be congratulated for this latest thorough investigation, with its specific contextual focus that clarifies an often misunderstood and misrepresented topic.