**Josiah Gregg Unit Lesson 5**

**Flora on the Plains: Grasses, Trees, and Agriculture**

**Grasses**

Within the landscape of the Plains, the most notable geographic feature is the presence of tall and short grasses. As winds blow across the flat lands, the grasses softly wave back and forth in perpetual motion. When trappers and traders crossed the Plains in the 1830s and 1840s, the condition of the grasses provided an indication of previous traffic as well as their future provisions. The area surrounding Bent’s Old Fort is classified as short-grass prairie where rainfall averages are approximately fifteen inches per year.

Josiah Gregg described the vastness and disorienting characteristics of the Plains in the following way: “This tract of country may truly be styled the grand prairie ocean; for not a single landmark is to be seen for more than forty miles-scarcely a visible eminence by which to direct one’s course. All is as level as the sea, and the compass was our surest, as well as principal guide” (59). To understand Josiah’s perspective, we have to imagine traveling hundreds of miles where there are no indications of location such as paved roads, highway signs, streetlights, houses, gas stations, and so forth. The compass, then, gave a measure of reassurance, amid the “sea” of grasses, especially under cloudy skies.

Traveling near the Raton Pass along the Colorado-New Mexico border, Gregg and his companions encountered Native American peoples, most likely from Apache or Comanche nations. He writes, “On inquiring by means of signs for the nearest water, they pointed in the direction we were traveling: and finally taking the lead, they led us by the shortest way to the valley of the long-sought Cimarron, which with its delightful green-grass glades and flowing torrent…had all the aspect of an Elysian vale” (68-69). “Elysian” is used to convey Gregg’s opinion of the area as heavenly. Not only was it a water source, but the water’s effects produced lush green vegetation.

As the seasons change and dry weather prevails, the grasses on the Plains lose their moisture which increasingly pose a fire threat. Gregg criticized his caravan for not taking precautions: “The old grass of the valley in which we were encamped had not been burned off, and one of our cooks having unwittingly kindled a fire in the midst of it, it spread at once with wonderful rapidity; and a brisk wind springing up at the time, the flames were carried over the valley in spite of every effort we could make to check them…but the accident itself was a forcible illustration of the danger that might be incurred by pitching a camp in the midst of dry grass” (193).

While some food provisions were hauled in wagons, supplies often ran low during the journey which made hunting necessary. Having lived many years in the region, Gregg notes the seasonal changes in buffalo migration patterns during this crossing. He attributes the absence of bison to the lack of available forage on grasses such as the blue grama and buffalo grass. He writes, “The buffalo are usually found much farther east early in the spring than during the rest of the year on account of the long grass, which shoots up earlier in the season than the short pasturage of the plains” (42). The flora which grows along the Great Plains is central to the animal species which thrive in the Borderlands as well as the markets and trade networks that depend on them.

**Trees/Wood**

In addition to a healthy network of prairie grasses, trees like the cottonwood became important living landmarks as well as sources of wood for wagon repair and kindling for fires. However, the number of trees that dotted the southern Plains landscape was minimal, making daily maintenance that much more difficult. Josiah states, “These immense bordering plains and even the hills with which they are interspersed are wholly destitute of timber, except a chance scattering tree upon the margins of the bluffs and ravines, which but scantily serves to variegate the landscape” (91).

Adapting to the lack of wood available along the Santa Fe Trail, caravans resorted to collecting buffalo scat for use as a heating source. Gregg writes, “On the night after the first buffalo scamper, we encamped upon a woodless ravine and were obliged to resort to buffalo chips (dry ordure) for fuel…In dry weather it is an excellent substitute for wood, than which it even makes a hotter fire” (189-190).

**Agriculture**

Having reached New Mexico, Josiah Gregg compares the agricultural practices of the locals to that of farmers with more advanced technology in the eastern United States. He remarks that “a great portion of the peasantry cultivate with the hoe alone” (142). Regarding the local diet, Gregg goes on to state, “The staple productions of the country are emphatically Indian corn and wheat. The former grain is most extensively employed for making *tortillas*-an article of food greatly in demand among the people.” (146). Red pepper, he notes “enters into nearly every dish at every meal” (147).

The Santa Fe Trail had limited access to markets which would provide fare including tortillas and red pepper; nevertheless, the long route across the dry Plains often contained alternative sources of food. Gregg comments, “The prickly pear is found in greatest abundance and of several varieties: and though neither very wholesome nor savory, it is nevertheless frequently eaten” (151).

Another Southwestern plant provided more than just nourishment. Gregg describes pine nuts from the pinyon tree as “a little nut about the size of a kidney bean, with a rich oily kernel in a thin shell, enclosed in a chestnut-like bur. It is of pleasant flavor and much eaten by the natives, and considerable quantities are exported annually to the southern cities. It is sometimes used for the manufacture of a certain kind of oil, said to be very good for lamps” (152). Natural resources that served multiple purposes, like pine nuts, were especially beneficial to those traders and travelers who trekked across the territory.