

Oregon State University Extension Service

METRO CONNECTION

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Journeying Back in Time to Shape Lives for the Future



Each year since its inception in 1982, a group of unbelievably dedicated and generous 4-H volunteers has created an epic wagon train experience for youth and adults alike. Developed to help connect youth with elders and families in a diverse community, 4-H Wagon Train is a (traveling) residential summer camp that engages underserved and other youth and families in real-world learning opportunities. It is a powerful and unique experience for everyone involved, including those that bring their wagons, buggies, horses and mules. Digital devices are left at home to encourage interaction with fellow trekkers.

The experience combines outdoor learning, Oregon history, problem solving, planning, cooperation and collaboration within a community context. The volunteers organize 80- to 90-mile Wagon Train treks every summer. These eight-day wilderness experiences, combined with daily doses of problem-solving and group decision-making, provide the learning and growing opportunities of collaboration and cooperation. This year the wagon train hit the trails around Camp Sherman in Central Oregon.



Jenifer Halter, (*pictured left*) office specialist in our Washington County Extension office, signed up as a trekker and shared her experiences. "I highly recommend Wagon Train. Not because it was easy and always fun. There were fabulous moments of course, but it was also a growing experience, especially for an adult who sometimes struggles meshing with others. I was so impressed with the kids. They stepped up as leaders. Some kids initiated talking with me more than I did with them. They were great! And I was impressed with the adults. The atmosphere was positive and fun while emphasizing safety."

Outdoor living, problem solving, and leadership skills all rise to the surface while learning about Oregon history and gaining respect for our natural world. The impact of the experience increases with the formation of "family units," groups of 10-12 participants and volunteers who work, live, and support each other as they hike along the trail and at the campsites. "Families lunched together, slept in one area together, and served meals or shared dish duty together. I had some awesome 'family' members! I would not have had the same experience were I not 'assigned' to (no accident, I feel) this family."



Everyone quickly begins to appreciate the simple things. "The most memorable times were lying in my sleeping bag in the open air, gazing up at tall trees and stars, breathing in cool fresh air, then



waking to the same, exchanging the stars for remnants of sunrise color. And the vista and sweeping views from near our lunch site by Black Butte. Then there is the camp coffee. As a fellow trekker noted, you know you appreciate the simpler things when you start thinking about the coffee the evening before. Camp coffee is the best, in my opinion! You learn to appreciate basic things away from the comforts of home."



"A typical day started at 6 a.m. with a bugle or flute reverie. Breakfast at 7 a.m., then a report on our route for the day. Walkers loaded the gear trailer, helped pick up camp and did stretches while the wagon drivers and horses got ready. When the wagon master called 'Wagons Ho!' we were off – riders first, wagons next, then walkers. We moved until lunch, stopping somewhere on the trail where each 'family' ate together. The trail was sometimes dry and dusty, but there were people to chat with. Several days we were accompanied by throngs of butterflies which seemed fond of the horses ('It's the salt on them,' someone said). If anyone asked how many miles we had left, the lead walker or wagon master replied, 'Four more miles and it's all downhill,' the ongoing Wagon Train joke, apparently.



"Upon arriving at camp, Becky or Jerry (our excellent cooks) were there to hand the walkers an Otter Pop reward. Then maybe a nap, dinner, and campfire, which involved a lot of laughing, singing, and poking fun at each other. Lights out was 10 p.m., which was another Wagon Train benefit: I actually got more sleep on the trail than I do at home!"



Mid-way through the trek is layover day when family and friends are invited to join the group for the day, including participating in skill-building activities—knot tying, knife sharpening, rope making, axe wielding, working with a log dragging team of horses—and crafts.

As in most homes, the kitchen—or cook shack in 4-H Wagon Train parlance—is the center of the community. Each family unit helps set up, serve and cleanup the abundant meals. Planning for the dietary needs of 90 people is no small task! Volunteers are raising funds to replace the more than thirty- year-old meal wagon. Contacts to learn more or help the effort are 4hwagontrain@gmail.com or gbeamon@sharis.com.



"The daily journal I kept revealed things I learned about myself and observed in others. I would not possess these gifts had I not gone on Wagon Train. I learned that sometimes I should let things go and that it is okay to feel awkward. And hot water for showering and washing hair is a lovely thing!" Jenifer pondered the question: Would she do it again? She answered emphatically, "It's definitely worth doing again!"