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WAGON TRAIN EXPERIENCE

by Carol Hanson



Nineteen-eighty-six was the Sesquicentennial of Texas—a mouthful to be sure—but a year in which our State attempted in a variety of ways to celebrate, memorialize, discuss, and make all sorts of tributes to all our Texas ancestors and the history of all that’s “Texan.” One of the more unique events of the year was the Sesquicentennial Wagon Train that began on January 2 in Sulphur Springs and wandered around the entire state for six months until it pulled into the Fort Worth Stockyards on July 3 to celebrate the Fourth of July there. It was my privilege to have the experience of riding a few days on the Wagon Train in May of that year, along with two of my brothers—who thoroughly enjoyed it as well. This is my account of our short journey.

I had contacted the Wagon Train Association in mid-March of 1986 to inquire as to the possibility of our traveling with the train. Since we had no wagon, horses or other appropriate animals, we were at the mercy of whatever arrangements were available to the general public. But the Association wanted to involve as many citizens of Texas who wanted to be there, so they had a wagon set aside specifically for folks like ourselves who just wanted a chance to experience the ride for a short time. Our confirmation, post-marked “No Trees, Texas,” came about ten days later, saying that we could meet them in Tahoka.

Upon arriving, we quickly found there were basic rules for all participants, including taking care of the campsites, and having no firearms or alcoholic beverages. And those who had responsibilities for animals or wagons (which were a majority) also had to know this: “Be sure your teams can keep up. The Wagon Train will NOT be delayed by slow vehicles. . . . All teams must be shod and remain shod. . . . Wagons must carry water and provisions for their own team, teamsters, and occupants for the day. . . . Have

your equipment in shape . . . will not be delayed for breakdowns and equipment failure.”

The Wagon Train traveled at four miles per hour. No stallions were permitted. If a horse or mule kicked, its owners or caretakers were to put a red ribbon on its tail, to alert others in the animal's vicinity. “Wagons Ho!” was called around 7 A.M. There were water breaks about every two hours, but they were really for the animals, not the humans involved; it was well recognized that the journey's progress, in every way, depended on the animals and their health. More than one person told me that participants really had to love and understand animals, and most of those involved had nearly constant contact with the animals. After any animal was either unhitched or unsaddled, they still had to be watered, fed, cleaned, given first aid, and often shod—as well as making certain they did not get loose during the night!

The wagon in which we were to ride was called “Big Pop's Wagon” and was designed for passengers, with bench-box style seats along each long side of the wagon. Above the seats were open windows with plastic window-covers which could be snapped in place, if needed. The wagon was painted a pale blue, with a loading door on the right side and three ladder-type steps and one wooden step to get inside. There was a storage area partitioned off at the back with a wooden wall; there were provisions there that the teamsters may need, but passengers could store whatever they needed for the day there as well. Across the top was a white canvas top in a slightly curved fashion, reminiscent of the old Conestoga wagons but not as tall.

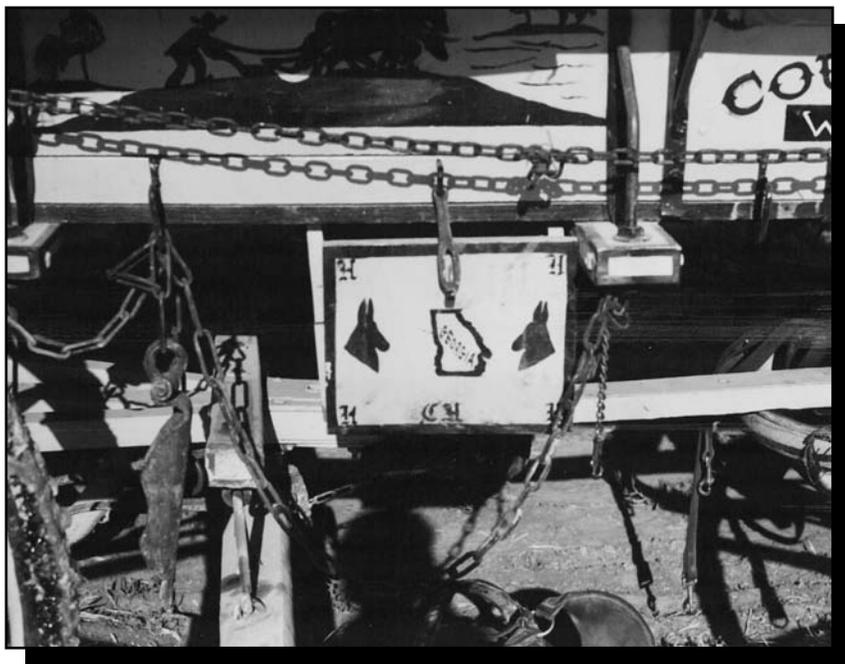
Big Pop's was normally driven by a young man named Apache Barrett (isn't that a great name?), who was short with a wiry build, dark hair, and tanned skin. He rather looked like he could actually be of American Indian descent; that is, until you noted the beard, which no Indian that I have ever seen had, either on television or in old photographs. He was married to Vicky, who on occasion would drive the wagon to relieve her husband. We eventually learned that they had met on the U.S. Bicentennial Wagon Train in



Big Pop's view from behind the Georgia wagon, when Train is on the move

1976 (which I had never heard of), and both are native Texans from Sulphur Springs. They married a year later, and rode in a Conestoga wagon from the wedding to the reception! They had three children with them on the Texas Wagon Train—two daughters under the age of four, plus a son, James, who was older and attended the Wagon Train School.

The number of wagons varied during the six months of the Wagon Train's journey, but during the four days we rode that May, there were usually thirty-six. Two wagons did join while we were participating; one was a stagecoach that only stayed about three days. There were wagons from many other states beyond Texas' borders, which sort of surprised me. Big Pop's place in line was between the Georgia wagon and the two green wagons from the South Dakota Boy's Ranch. The Georgia wagon was probably the prettiest wagon, because it was more "artsey" looking than any others that I saw.



The “artsey” wagon from Georgia

We met several folks from other wagons during our time with the train. One was the wagon from Arkansas driven by Mr. & Mrs. Williams, whom we talked with our first night in camp. They had really sacrificed a lot to be on this journey. They had lived on a small farm and had sold almost everything they had to be there, including their tractor. Then there was Albert and Alice Nicely from Goshen, Virginia. They shared one of their riding horses with us one day on the trip. The horse’s name was “W.T.” (for Wagon Train), and he was probably the largest horse on the train. Most everyone had to mount W.T. from something—he was that big. The Nicelys decided to sell their wagon at the end of the trail in Fort Worth on July 4. They had hoped to get several thousand dollars off that sale, because the wagon had also been on the Bicentennial Wagon Train, but it only brought them \$1900.

The oldest wagon was the Maryland wagon, which also had a sign attached which read, "Maryland: More than you can Imagine!" I was never sure whether that was an old Maryland travel slogan, or if it referred to their trip and experiences getting to Texas for the Wagon Train. The two Boys' Ranch wagons from South Dakota were both pulled by four large Belgian horses. The horses were rotated each day, so they actually had more than eight horses to care for, and the caretakers of those horses were the boys, who at each water break had to get buckets of water to take to their horses. Some of the other teamsters got rather peeved at how pushy the boys would be at the water tank, but when one of the boys told me that each horse required from four to six buckets of water at each break (and the breaks were no more than thirty minutes), I decided that it wasn't really too surprising that they might be a little pushy!

Depending on what the schedule dictated, each day's ride varied from ten to thirty-five miles per day. The schedule had been made earlier, taking into account the terrain of the area and, to some extent, the climate and expected crowds. The long days lasted from 7 A.M. till between 4:30 and 5:30 P.M.; short days might end around 2:00 or 3:00. Big Pop's Wagon used mules for pulling, and Apache explained rather early his primary directions for them: "Step up mules!" means "Let's go!" "Gee, mules" is "Go to the right," and "Haw, mules" is "Go to the left."

The Wagon Master was Gary France, a key factor to the functioning of the Wagon Train's routine. He was very experienced with animals and recognized as an excellent leader. My impression was that he carried the responsibility very well, helping where needed, but most importantly keeping the Wagon Train on schedule. It took me a while to understand the out-rider system, but each wagon had to have at least one out-rider. If the wagon was using a "four-up" team (four animals pulling) on the wagon, then there were two out-riders. They were to help the teamster with the animals in any way necessary during the day,

and let the teamster know if there were any problems that he couldn't see with the wagon as it was moving. Also, they were the primary communication system between the Wagon Master or his deputies, or another teamster. Plus, there were additional outriders designated by the deputies to assist the train as necessary and occasionally relieving some of the teamsters. During the final week of the journey, it was expected for the train to have 150 wagons and 300 teamsters!

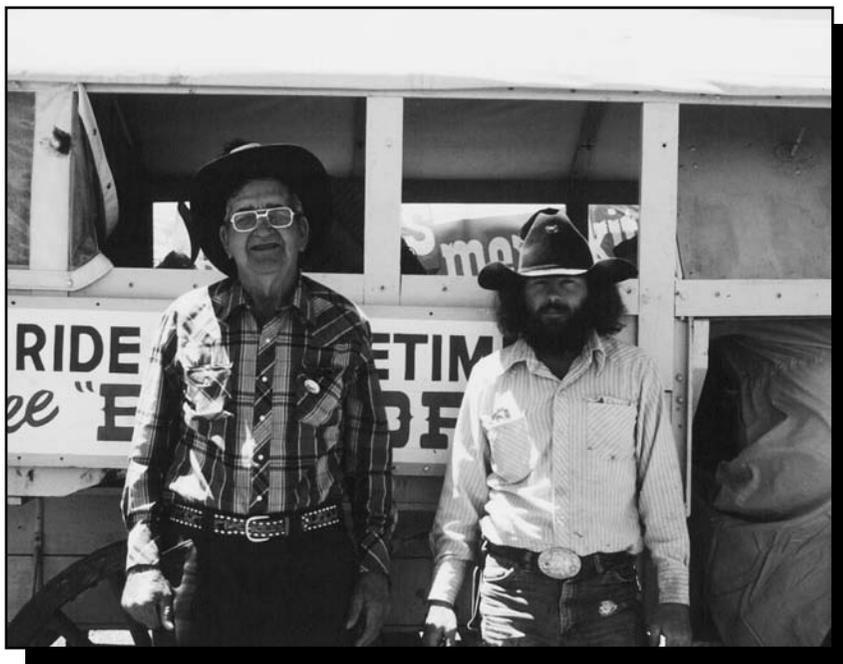
Lunches were relatively short—no more than forty-five minutes, if possible. Because every minute was valuable, there was a chuck wagon, but not the old-fashioned type you've seen on the old westerns. This was a modern one, motorized with a generator, and not even resembling a typical wagon. It was really more like a small snack bar that you might see at a sporting or concert event. It wasn't any larger than one of the big wagons, however. Its services were available to anyone who was hungry or thirsty, whether a participant or spectator. We usually tried to have our own lunches, but we took full advantage of the chuck wagon for breakfast and drinks! Its normal eating fare at lunch was sandwiches, burgers, hot dogs and the like, as well as lots of non-alcoholic beverages.

It didn't take long for us to realize that this was just one very long continuous parade. People came from *everywhere*, bringing their kids and grand-kids, just to watch and wave and take pictures. Of course, some of us (like my brother Phil and I) were taking pictures too, of the spectators! Some tried to ride along with us in their own vehicles. Others brought banners, saying: "Welcome Wagon Train!" or "Cooper/Levelland [town name] Welcomes the Wagon Train"—"Cooper/Big Spring Welcomes Y'all Folks!" The three of us enjoyed the heck out of it, and fairly soon became experts at waving and getting some of the children to wave back! My brother Phil is a bit of a ham, so he really loved that experience, but my brother David commented early that first day, "I've never waved so much in my life!"

Our second day's ride was probably the most exciting. For some reason, Apache had to use a pair of mules which belonged to the Wagon Master, but they had never worked together. Apache had only used one of the mules before. Also, one of the mules had only pulled the lead wagon, and so was not accustomed to being behind any other wagon. Plus, the train had a couple of false starts that morning. The first "Step up Mules!" called went fine, but the second time, one mule balked a little at starting. Then, when we stopped a few minutes later, we were on a hill, so when we started forward, that mule's hooves slipped a little (the pavement was probably wet with dew) and apparently that frightened him, because he bucked a couple of times and then both animals took off at a run! The Wagon Master yelled for Apache to go off the roadway onto the grass, so they could get their footing, which they did. Apache told us, "Hang ON!" because we would be going over a curb and it would be rather bumpy! And it was pretty rough for a bit. I was a little worried the mules would just get worse and perhaps upset the children on board, but I was really glad to be wrong when Apache got them under control after a short distance. After going just over the crest of the hill, we re-crossed the curb and returned to our place in line.

During this entire episode, my brother Phil was at the front by the driver's seat, near the brake lever. Because Apache had his hands full with the reins and the whip, he asked Phil to help with the brake. Phil was happy to oblige by pushing the brake on and then off; that really made him feel a part of the wagon driving experience!

After lunch, Apache told us the troublesome mule's name was Frank, which Apache decided fit his outlaw ways, and that his full name must be Frank James. When the train started again, Frank was lying back and not pulling, making the other mule, named Lady Bird, pull extra hard. During the afternoon break, Apache asked Willie (his out-rider) and another rider to bring one of his mules to exchange for Frank. Unfortunately, they had to make the



Apache Barrett, the driver of Big Pop's wagon, with Mr. Truelock, one of our fellow passengers

change just after the break ended, and we had to pull over and watch the train pull off, leaving us behind for a bit. But it didn't take them long to make the change, and sure enough, Elvira (Apache's little red mule) pitched right in and gave Lady Bird a break. Lady Bird lay back for a while, but soon picked back up. The trade-out of mules put Big Pop's at the very end of the train, in the middle of the out-riders, and that made the rest of the day rather interesting and fun!

Every day was a little different. Our third day provided a rotating group of fellow passengers aboard Big Pop's, because the town of Levelland, which we were leaving from that day, had held a drawing for tickets to ride Big Pop's for a day. Since it had been decided to stretch the experience to several people, between two to three new people would get aboard at the end of each break.



Willie Hazelwood, outrider for Big Pop's wagon

We met Mr. Truelock, who was eighty-four years old; he had been raised west of Springlake, but had lived in Levelland for a long time. His son had won the ride, but wanted his father to ride instead. He told us he'd driven teams with both horses and mules; Apache asked which he preferred driving and Mr. Truelock responded, "That depends on what I'm doin'." Apache seemed to really appreciate that answer, and they both agreed that mules can usually last longer in a wagon's traces. Later, a young mother and her two children, Bonnie and Nick, rode with us. Poor Nick had a bit of an identity crisis, however. When he was asked his name at first, it didn't come out very clear, and Apache claimed he said "Heck" instead of "Nick," so for the remainder of his ride, Apache called him "ol' Heck." Nick would just sit there with a little grin and turn red every time Apache used the new nickname.

Bonnie was older and we enjoyed a good conversation. There was also something different about the wagon's team on the third day—Big Pop's was using a "four-up" team which, of course, helped distribute the wagon's weight better. The two animals nearest the wagon were the larger pair—Lady Bird (from the second day) and Belle Starr received most of the wagon's weight, while the front two (which included Apache's Elvira), were smaller and helped to keep up the pace for the ride. Apparently, it made things work better, because Apache did not have to use the whip at all that day.

I should tell a little about Willie, Apache's out-rider. Everyone liked him—he was a wonderful character. Apache enjoyed teasing Willie about riding at the end of the train, visiting the female out-riders. One evening, I ate with Willie and asked him about his old job in the oil-drilling business. He told me the places he had gone, including California, New Mexico, and several northern states. I



The Texas Wagon Train School, Gainesville, Texas

asked him if he'd ever gone to Alaska, and he said he'd had several opportunities to go, but had always turned them down—"Just didn't care to be that cold!" he said. He'd worked in the Dakotas . . . and that was as far north as he'd care to go. My brother Phil kept in touch with him for a few years after the train ride.

Apache was a very cheerful sort who enjoyed telling stories at any opportunity, which he had plenty of while he was driving passengers who had only time to listen. He was not one to withhold criticism, when he believed it was deserved, though he was equally generous with praise for those who'd earned his respect. Apache never seemed to mind explaining the details of the Wagon Train's routines or other information, although I'm sure our questions were probably ones he had answered dozens, if not hundreds of times in the previous four months before we rode. He obviously



The author, during a water break, beside the Big Pop wagon



The author's brother, Phil Stanglin, checks out the blacksmith's wagon

enjoyed his work, and he did what he could to make the ride pleasant for the passengers.

Although the Wagon Train's spectators, or short-term participants like us, didn't realize or appreciate this, the Wagon Train Association's participants considered the Wagon Train School an essential element. That was because of the need and desire to involve as diverse a group of people as possible. Without the school, the train would have only consisted of older folk, or those without children. Certainly they were welcome as well, but it was felt to be very important for such an historical event that people of all ages should be included. And since it would last six months, to include families with school-age children was an absolute necessity. Unfortunately, I didn't have the opportunity to meet the teacher

or go inside the school wagon, but I was told they had computers aboard, as well as old-fashioned McGuffey Readers to work with. What a contrast!

Altogether, our journey was a rather surreal experience, albeit a rather peaceful one. Since we were primarily traveling in the north-west portion of Texas, there were times as we rode across the terrain that, except for the occasional fence-line or telephone pole, you could look out on the land and imagine how it might have appeared to those real pioneers of a hundred-plus years ago. We saw flat prairie as far as the eye could see, and since we were riding at the approximate pace of those distant ancestors, it provided the unique perspective of the land appearing to stretch on forever. Of course, we were riding on modern built road-ways, and even highways, and probably made much better time than they could. They would have probably been lucky to travel thirty to thirty-five miles in one day.

My brothers and I had a great time being involved in a never-to-be-forgotten experience that we will always treasure. What really impressed me about the entire experience were the people who were a real part of the train. Among those we visited, there was a definite attitude of neighborliness and team-work to accomplish whatever was needed that day. Whether it was loaning someone else a mule, offering a ride to the nearest store, or helping to repair someone's wagon or other equipment, they were all (as far as I could tell) ready and willing to do those things and more, if needed. And I believe that camaraderie alone was an appropriate memorial to the spirit of those original pioneers of our great state, and indeed, of our country. Besides that quintessential attitude, most of the "core group" of the Wagon Train folk were truly *committed* to making this idea work—for the train to function smoothly and for it to truly reflect, as much as possible, the spirit of those hardy ancestors who traveled west to Texas, through Texas, and for some, who traveled beyond Texas, to find and make a home for themselves.

Certainly, there were some modern conveniences permitted in this contemporary version of a wagon train. But surely our ancestors would have taken advantage of anything they could have used, depending on what they could afford, to make life easier on the trail, had it been possible. The trip was hard on both the original pioneers and those of the modern Texas Wagon Train's participants: sacrifices were made by both groups to be involved in the journey. Of course, loss of life or that looming possibility were not such a threat to this modern-day version of the wagon train, thankfully. But many folks put their routine life on hold for the entire six-month period; others could only make a part of the trip. And there were those who began a new life as a result of the modern Wagon Train: there were three marriages during the last month on the trail. In addition, in the animal world, there were two colts born near the end of the journey.

Everyone on the Wagon Train was there because they *wanted* to be, and would do it again, as several did, in smaller versions. Special friendships were formed while sharing the same feelings and similar activities as our state's ancestors. Some of those feelings included:

- RESPECT for the land traveled over (even if this trail was a paved one).
- EXCITEMENT of being on this unique journey, and the eventual BOREDOM of the routine drudgery and exhaustion after each long, rough day.
- FRUSTRATIONS caused by uncooperative animals and/or people and the RELIEF at the end of the long, rough days in bad weather, whether it was cold, hot, windy or wet.
- A TEAM SPIRIT, previously mentioned, to help each other make it to the end of the trail.
- A need for ADVICE/WARNINGS from someone who knew what was ahead or was needed, such as the Wagon Master or his Deputies. (In the old days, of course, that may have included Indian scouts and the like.)

The *modus operandi* was this: “*If the wagons are scheduled to move, they will—no matter what. If you can’t come with us now, join us later when you can!*” There were many who rolled along on all 3,000+ miles of the journey: from Sulphur Springs south to the King Ranch, west to El Paso, north to Lubbock/Amarillo, and back east to Fort Worth, which *of course* is WHERE THE WEST BEGINS!



The author doing field research