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The Santa Fe Trail (Sandy Carlson, editor)

Doug Hansen, Hansen Wheel And Wagon Shop

Doug Hansen

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Santa Fe Trail (wagons and wall with storm approaching)

Tod Seelie

DOUG HANSEN, HANSEN WHEEL AND WAGON SHOP

“This niche business of building and restoring horse-drawn vehicles has taken us on an incredible journey around the world and back in time.”

Doug Hansen

What started 40 years ago as a hobby and fascination with an old-world craft thrives today as Hansen Wheel and Wagon Shop. Rooted in the history-rich western South Dakota grasslands, and inspired by the Santa Fe Trail, wagon master Doug Hansen and his team of skilled artisans custom build and restore horse-drawn wagons and coaches, with a dedication to historic detail. Owner Doug, a craftsman and horseman with a background in blacksmithing, wheelwrighting and wainwrighting, details his wheeled-history passion.

Describe your business. What do you do? Where are you located?

Hansen Wheel and Wagon Shop, our family-owned and -operated carriage and wagon manufacturing business, was established in 1978. Our location on the western Dakota plains gives us an appreciation for the pioneers and cowboys who developed the region and their old-time ways. This area’s historic resources help us authentically reproduce the wagons in which we specialize.

What services does your business provide?

We custom build horse-drawn vehicles and wheels of the Old West style, specializing in the construction and/or restoration of western and heavy vehicles, including covered wagons, chuck

wagons, buckboards, stagecoaches and draft horse show wagons. Hansen Wheel and Wagon Shop also custom builds all types of wheels and is equipped to handle all wood-hub and roller-bearing style wheels. Besides construction, we do repairs, restorations, appraisals, presentations, museum services and movie props.

What spurred your fascination with wagon-making/restoration and its historical roots?

I think it was the mystique, the unknown, the lost art that spurred me on. I was not satisfied not knowing the answer. It was also the essence of turning raw materials (wood and iron) into a vehicle and the self-sufficiency of it.

In particular, did the Santa Fe Trail influence your passion?

I think a big influence is the Santa Fe Trail's many historic sites, preserved with accuracy and authenticity, along with the recognition that wheeled vehicles made the ruts defining the trail. I have exhibited and spoken at several events along the trail, at Mahaffie Stagecoach Stop, Fort Larned, Bent's Fort and other sites.

How has your work impacted the preservation and historical significance of the Santa Fe Trail?

I hope my exhibits and historical presentations have helped bring an awareness of the vehicles that traveled the trail, as well as their features and the technology and styles of the era.

Tell about your efforts to keep your work historically correct.

We fortunately have had the privilege to restore many historic vehicles and, while restoring, have investigated and noted the many technical features of these vehicles and how they were constructed. As I often say, I have studied under the old mates, and this is my classroom.

What is your training? How did you become a Master Craftsman?

In my quest for knowledge, I first visited local blacksmiths and museums to gather tools and tricks of the trade. Once I had some basic skills, I started to study the work of the old masters, paying attention to the finest details, from a scribe mark to a hammer blow. I asked why and began to understand the reasons behind the construction features, not only how they were built, but how they look and the aesthetics of the design.

Describe a typical day.

My day starts out with a review with my craftsmen of the projects on the shop floor. Then I get to work on day duties, followed by gathering details and researching for the projects at hand.

Which segment of your job do you most enjoy?

I think the part I like best is the variety of work – no two jobs are the same – and the variety of mediums we work with, such as wood, iron, pigments, leathers and textiles plus the associated skills for each. Also, I enjoy the constant discoveries I make as we work through the projects.

What are your biggest challenges?

Our biggest challenges are on the supply chain side. Finding materials to support a lost trade is very challenging, but we have become quite self-sufficient.

Where might your wagons be found? And, what projects are you most proud of?

We have wagons around the world in museum exhibits, as well as theme parks, horse shows and corporate branding. I think some of the projects we are most proud of are the early trail exhibits, because those vehicles required the most intense amount of research to maintain accuracy.

What would people find surprising about your work?

When I talk with visitors, I think they are most impressed with the large amount of time it takes to produce a vehicle – some over 1,500 hours. Also surprising is the attention to detail that mimics the original craftsman traits; for example, a router does not produce the same outcome as a spoke shave.

What is your staff size? What role does your family play in the business?

My wife Holly and I, and now my daughter Leah, have assembled a team of 12 dedicated employees. Production is set up much like an 1850s wagon shop with the various traditional trades, including a craftsman, wheelwright, wainwright, coach maker, blacksmith, painter and trimmer. Also, a big part of our business is supporting the trade through our retail department by selling wagon research material, parts, wheels and other supplies on hansenwheel.com.

How important is passing on your knowledge? What would you like your legacy to be?

I have spent a lifetime uncovering lost knowledge and am happy to share it with anyone who can keep our wheeled history alive.