Trail Tales

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“The Trail had never the rigidity of a railroad or a modern automobile highway. It was a living thing, which changed and wandered and grew. It was not names upon a map, it was people; people traveling, singing, swearing, sweating, fearing, fighting, going in clouds of dust by day, plowing through quicksand and mud, sitting around great fires at night, hunters, trappers, traders, soldiers, emigrants, of all degrees of intelligence, virtue, and vice, of most races, bound together only by a common hardihood and a common exposure to the vastness and desolation and beauty of the trans Missouri wilderness. It was a fabulous procession. When we point to a signpost and read the faded inscription, we see letters that burned into men’s memories like unquenchable flame.”


“The Santa Fe Trail was in many ways a microcosm of westward expansion, and a study of its history is a study of much of the early frontier West.”

Jack Rittenhouse, “Trail of Commerce and Conquest: A Brief History of the Road to Santa Fe”

In 1858 and 1860, two important articles were published by Missouri newspapers that provide us with the best contemporary descriptions of freight wagons used on the Santa Fe Trail on the eve of the Civil War. The first article appeared in the Kansas City “Western Journal of Commerce,” May 22, 1858. The paper stated emphatically that the wagons used to traverse the plains and mountains “are not ‘double wagons,’ or ‘lumber wagons,’ or ‘farm wagons,’ or ‘Chicago wagons,’ or ‘Concord wagons,’ — they are ‘prairie wagons,’ or ‘schooners,’ as the boys call them, and as novel a sight to an Eastern man, as any Yankee institution is to a frontiersman.” The “Journal” then proceeded to give the specifications for these freighters:

“A wagon weighs about four thousand pounds, the pole, or tongue, is thirteen feet long, and with all the ‘fixings’ is as heavy as a light buggy. One of the hind wheels weighs three hundred pounds, and is sixty-four inches in diameter — the tire is four inches wide, the hub is twelve inches through and eighteen inches deep, and the spokes are as large as a middle-sized bed post. Anyone can conceive what an axletree for such a wheel must be. The body is three feet eight inches wide, thirteen feet long at the bottom and eighteen feet long at the top; with bows extending above the bed three feet high, and also extending fore and aft of the bed two feet and a half, so that the top of the wagons, measuring over the bows, is eighteen feet long — height of wagon from bottom of wheels to top of bows is ten feet. These bows are covered with three wagon sheets, made of the best quality of duck, and cost about $30.”

This wagon, according to the “Journal,” “always carries from fifty-five to sixty hundred pounds of freight.”

Two years later, the “Westport Border Star” published its take on the “prairie schooner,” “A regular wagon of the first magnitude, capable of carrying 6,500 pounds is what we here call a ‘Santa Fe wagon,’ from the fact that so many trains of these wagons are continually leaving Westport and Kansas City for Santa Fe, New Mexico.” Although the
“Border Star’s” description of the “Santa Fe wagon” is not quite as thorough as that found in the “Western Journal of Commerce,” it is just as valuable: “Some of the dimensions of these wagons would surprise [sic] an Eastern man. The diameter of the larger wheel is five feet two inches, and the tire weighs 105 pounds. The reach is eleven feet and the bed forty-six inches deep, twelve feet long on the bottom and fifteen feet on the top, and will carry 6,500 pounds across the plains and through the mountain passes.”


When it comes to traffic on the Santa Fe Trail, the Murphy name plays a dominant role. An excessive tax on freight wagons hauling goods into New Mexico resulted in Mr. Murphy building even more massively proportioned wagons. The intent was deliberately aimed at increasing the amount of goods per load and thus helping reduce the oppressive tax burden on freighting traders on Santa Fe. More Murphy freight wagons were used on the plains than either the legendary Murphy freight wagons were used on major trails, Hiram built wagons for of his location near the beginning Missouri, around 1850. Taking advantage of his freedom price and that he worked out his freedom price and that he obtained freedom in 1847. It is said that he’s a reminder of not only an undaunted pioneering spirit but the vision of a free people to embrace real opportunity and pursue their greatest dreams. David Sneed, “Santa Fe Freighters, the Search for Survivors,” Wagon Tracks, May 2012, reprinted with permission from the Santa Fe Trail Association.

Typhoid fever, a very serious disease, was a common affliction of those traveling the Santa Fe Trail. This disease usually results from drinking contaminated water. The travelers on the trail were forced to get their drinking water where they could find it. It was common practice to camp around a spring. The springs and water holes were often at the bottom of a declivity, allowing human wastes to drain into them.

Typhoid fever took its toll from the many thousands who traveled over the trail. For the typhoid sick, there was no medicine, and they could only lie in lumbering wagons until they died or recovered.

excerpt from Thomas B. Hall, “Medicine on the Santa Fe Trail”

Slave Hiram Young whittled and crafted his way to freedom and prominence as a wagon builder along the overland trails. Born around 1812 in Tennessee, Hiram entered Missouri as a slave and obtained freedom in 1847. It is said that these massive western machines tackled some of the most torturous terrain and historical pursuits ever attempted on four wheels. Regrettably, the vehicles today are sometimes viewed as insignificant relics tied to an irrelevant past. But, up close, their daunting size, intricate construction, and individual history take on a power and presence worthy of notice. Stirring awe and imagination, they’re a reminder of not only an undaunted pioneering spirit but the vision of a free people to embrace real opportunity and pursue their greatest dreams.


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Hiram employed about 20 men, and his factory was one of the largest businesses in Jackson County, Missouri. Hiram branded his work “Hiram Young and Company,” along with the purchaser’s initials. His wagons could haul nearly 6,000 pounds and were pulled by up to 12 oxen. He described himself as “a colored man of means.”

As Civil War tensions mounted between pro- and anti-Union supporters along the Kansas-Missouri border, Hiram and his family fled to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where slavery was illegal. He continued his wagon business from Fort Leavenworth and, after the war, returned to Independence, where he became a founding member of Saint Paul’s African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Charlotte Green, slave of the Bent brothers, may have been the first woman from the United States to travel the Santa Fe Trail. She likely traveled to Bent’s Fort, Colorado, as early as 1832 or 1833, although the exact date of her travel is unknown.

Charlotte was reportedly married to another Bent slave, Dick Green. They, with Dick’s brother, traveled the trail as far as Bent’s Fort, where for more than a decade she was a famous cook and entertainer. All three were freed after Dick Green joined the fight against the Taos Revolt of 1847 that had resulted in the murder of Charles Bent, and Dick was wounded. Charlotte returned to Missouri and was still living when the 1880 census was taken.

Horses, mules, and oxen alike set their heads to return to the settlements. They missed their grain, they missed their stables, their comfortable fenced pastures, their easy labor of good roads. Mosquitoes, horseflies, and buffalo gnats kept them twitching and itching, stamping, rolling, and tossing their heads day and night, so that men had to drape spare articles of clothing over the wretched creatures, in order to give them enough peace of mind to graze a little.”

Some travelers carried mosquito nets to sleep under — and then found no sticks on which to prop them! Others wore green veils over their heads, running the risk of not being able to see where they were going, and so colliding with the business end of a mule! Buffalo chips proved to be good for keeping mosquitoes away. Wet, a chip fire was only a stinking smoke, into which a man was glad to stick his head at night, in the vain hope of snatching a few hours of rest from the torment of the mosquitoes.

The dust was one of the major complaints on all the overland trails. H.M.T. Powell, who traversed the Santa Fe and Gila trails in 1849, wrote, “We eat dust, drink dust, breathe dust, and sleep in dust. I never was so worn out with dust in my life. It is a serious misery. What this God-forsaken country was made for, I am at a loss to discover.”