Trail Tales

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TRAIL TALES

"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."

Robert Duffus, "The Santa Fe Trail," 1930

"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

Seeking Warmth
Mary Gordon McFall

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 supprise [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."

excerpt from Mark L. Gardner, "Wagons for Santa Fe Trade"

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 freighters trading in Santa Fe. More Murphy freight wagons were used on the plains than either the legendary Studebaker or Espensheid brands.

Throughout the American West, they were truly giants on wheels. Evolving from the early Conestoga freighters traversing so much of the eastern U.S., these pioneering behemoths did more than carry ore, goods, and supplies. They helped open, grow, and sustain the American frontier while broadening the footprint and foundation of an emerging nation. With imposing physical statures, these commercial Goliaths dominated the western landscape. Many measured fourteen to sixteen feet in length with individual hauling capacities of 4 to 8 tons. Standing empty, they could easily weigh in at 3 ½ tons. It's a statistic comparable with a full-size, heavy duty pickup truck but with at least 3 to 4 times more payload capacity.

The rear wheels of these wood-carved creations could stand well over a man's head while the metal tires were often doubled in thickness to minimize worries of wear while also helping reinforce the overall structure of the wheel. Tire widths could range considerably and generally fell anywhere between 2 to 8 inches. However, most promotional literature from noted wagon makers from 1870 through the 1890s generally offer tire widths for freight wagons in the two- to four-inch categories. Western freight wagons such as the legendary "20 Mule Team" borax wagons are known to have employed eight-inch tires for the softer terrain they traveled. It was a factor typically determined more by the terrain and ground condition than anything else. The mammoth frameworks were built by an almost countless parade of makers, many positioned near the Mississippi and Missouri rivers since these areas were pivotal transportation centers helping feed and grow virtually all parts west. All in all, this was a transportation empire like no other and competition within it was not for the faint of heart nor light in financial backing.

The search for early freighting survivors of the West .... It's a mission full of prospects to preserve a legacy that's as large as the making of America. For roughly three quarters of a century, 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.

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 he worked out his freedom price and that of his wife, Mathilda, by whittling and selling ox yokes.

The Youngs moved to Independence, Missouri, around 1850. Taking advantage of his location near the beginning of the Santa Fe, Oregon and other major trails, Hiram built wagons for western emigrants, area farmers and the U.S. government.

By 1860 he was turning out thousands of yokes and between 800 and 900

Promise and Purpose, the Ancestors' Dream
Kirsten Furlong

wagons a year. He 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.

blackpast.org

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.

Historian Leo E. Oliva, Ph.D.

Horses, mules, and oxen alike set their heads to return to the settlements. They miss 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.

excerpt from Stanley Vestal, "The Old Santa Fe Trail"

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."

"Adventure on the Santa Fe Trail," edited by Leo E. Oliva, Ph.D.