

Catch Up! Catch Up!

Covered-Wagon Camping

BY L. B. SHARP

Executive Director, Life Camps and National Camp

ALL along the trails that led out from the "jumping off place" at Fort Leavenworth and from a number of other nearby points, during the forties, fifties, sixties and seventies of the last century could be heard the call of "Catch Up, Catch Up." It was the signal to get underway. It came from the leaders of the covered wagon caravans and immigrant trains headed for the far west to the land of hope and prosperity. We hear most about the Oregon trail, which was the longest, and of the Santa Fe which was the first of the great trans-continental trails. There were many others combining many short cuts and connecting lines.

It took a strong heart and a strong body to successfully cover these trails of courage and daring. These courageous and venturesome people loaded their conestoga wagons, pushed across the Missouri, and made a new boundary for our nation. Today the trails are gone, but neither they nor their makers are forgotten. R. L. Duffus, author of "The Santa Fe Trail," said, "The trail was but a single thread in that vast roaring loom on which was woven the fabric of modern America, yet there it still shines, if we had but to look, like a pattern of untarnishable gold."

Santa Fe Trail

The Santa Fe Trail started from Fort Leavenworth and Independence, headed through

central Kansas territory. The readers of the events of the pioneer days will recall the happenings at Council Grove, Pawnee Rock, Fort Larnard, Fort Dodge and the famous Cimarron, the place of great decisions, the parting of the ways, the parting of friends, some to meet again at Santa Fe, and others never.

The Oregon Trail

The Oregon Trail, the longest, some 2000 miles, and perhaps the most difficult, started from the usual "jumping off place," headed west, cut across the northeast corner of Kansas and the Big Blue River to Fort Kearney, the first safe stop. Some of the other places of historical note along the trail were Chimney Rock, the crossing at Laramie River, Fort Laramie, North Platte crossing, the famous Fort Bridger, Fort Hall, Fort Boise, the Grande Ronde, Fort Walla Walla, the Dalles, Fort Van Couver and at last Oregon and new homes.

Life on the Trails

As one reads the diaries of the numerous parties slowly wending their way across the trails, he realizes that "covered-wagon days" was a way of living. These people were at home on wheels wherever they were. Routine life proceeded without undue complaint or protest. Families stuck together, groups remained intact. There was interdependence of a high order. They lived together in joy, in sorrow,

in adventure, in thrills and in excitement. Their life and success depended upon their skills, their craftsmanship, their strength, and their courage. On they plodded regardless of weather, heat, cold, rain, thunder, lightning, wind, sand-storms, and floods.

The problem of feeding was difficult. Food had to be carefully selected, prepared, preserved and guarded. These pioneers were most successful as caterers. Many of their dishes cooked over their campfires would be a great addition to our present-day camp menus on our trails and at our outpost camping places. There were ways of pressing vegetables and drying the pulp so that they would keep in all kinds of weather.

Cooking on the trail was difficult and required skill and patience as it does on the camp trail of today. A pioneer woman in Ford's Party of 1844, kneaded her dough, built and kept a fire, and cooked a meal while holding an umbrella to keep out the rain.

There was self-government, the rule of the group, and a recognition of the "unwritten law," which was a tacit agreement that all grievances and misdemeanors should be settled in council.

There were deaths, births, marriages, religious meetings and social parties, celebrations at reaching certain points, gaiety, dancing, music, campfire entertainment, songs, jokes, and stunts. The children had their usual fun and presented the usual problems to their parents.

At a prayer meeting along the trail the minister of a party offered a prayer asking "God to remove the wild beasts and the savage men from our pathway." One of the boys whispered to his youthful companion, "I hope all of the prayer will not be heard as I want to kill a buffalo and would like to see a bear."

The pioneer was an expert craftsman. His work was in the main crude but effective and durable. It met the needs of the time. In a hurry a steer had to be sacrificed. His hide had to be made into rope in quick time and the rope used to lower supplies and equipment over steep cliffs. Making harness, repairing wagons, braiding, carving, shooting accurately, all were necessary skills that every competent trailman needed to know.

The veteran of many Indian raids and stampedes soon learned that the sturdy oxen were the most dependable. Mules and horses had their places but needed careful attention. "Coral" was a word that everyone on the trail knew and feared. Wagons, horses, and oxen must be formed in a close circle as the most efficient way to ward off attacks from the Indians.

The life of the pioneers was not tragic, at least they did not think so. It was a way of living to them and for the most part they were happy. H. S. Lyman, a pioneer himself, says that, "the journey was one of the pleasantest incidents of my life. It was a long picnic, changing scenes of the journey, animals of the

prairie, the Indians, the traders and trappers of the mountain country, progress of the seasons, all formed a sort of mental culture that the world has rarely offered. Almost all migration was carried on in circumstances of dangers and distress, although daring in the extreme, a summer jaunt."

In moderation and without the dangers and hazards, some of this pioneer life is open to our campers through the program of covered wagon camping.



Courtesy, Life's Summer Camps

Covered-Wagon Camping

The writer has greatly admired the spirit of the pioneers and had hoped for a long time to introduce in some way *covered-wagon camping* into the program. The plan was readily accepted by the staff and campers in both of Life's Summer Camps, and in a short time at the beginning of the 1934 season we were camping on wheels. The best of the traditions of the pioneers were woven into the camp program much as is done with Indian life and with the customs and traditions of various races.

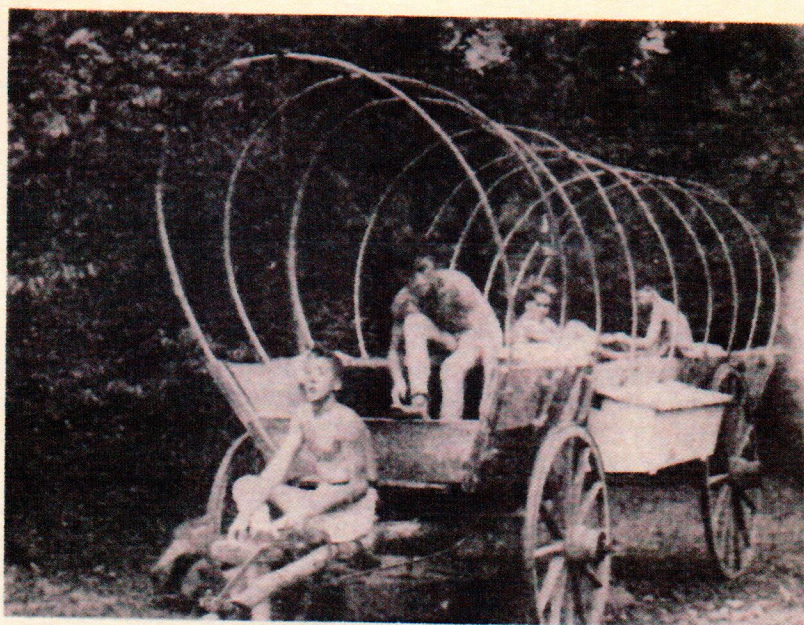
Soon the call of "Catch Up, Catch Up" was sounded and quickly became the key word in camp. Amid great cheering and shouting the entire camp turned out to give our young would-be pioneers a rousing send-off. Covered-wagon camping in Life's Summer Camps got off to a fine start in 1934 and plans for the coming season add much to last year's activities.

Construction of the Wagons

The ordinary farm wagon can be secured at little cost and quite easily converted into a covered wagon. A wagon-bed made 60 to 66 inches wide at the top and 14 to 16 feet in length can accommodate four campers and their equipment. A wagon-bed extended over the wheels will provide more space. It is best to have one solid piece of waterproofed canvas covering the top. The ribs or stays made of hickory or oak should be bent in approved shape. They should be sturdy enough, about two inches wide by one-half inch thick, to support the canvas in a wind and under the strains made upon them while in motion.

On either side and at the back end of the wagon, boxes should be placed for storing equipment. Our plan is to have one of these boxes in each unit contain a collection of good books for reading.

We find that a special wagon (chuck wagon) for food and supplies is desirable. A table can



Courtesy, Life's Summer Camps

be constructed in the center of the chuck wagon so that the entire unit can sit inside in case of bad weather and prepare and eat a meal in comfort.

Cots are built in so that they can be easily let down, making more space in the wagon during the daytime when needed. Each wagon should have its necessary equipment of shovel, pick, axe, hammer, pliers, rope, string, wire, extra canvas, lantern, and other essentials.

When packed for travel with all equipment it will not be a very heavy load and a team of farm horses can easily pull it.

It is best to explore the country near the established camp site using back roads and side roads. These trips should be for exploration purposes, although there is thrill enough in the mere routine of living in the covered wagons. All wagons need not be on the trail. Much of the values derived from covered-wagon camping can be had by setting up a unit in camp which does not move around.

More Pioneers

It is most interesting to find that the life of the campers to a certain extent is like that of the pioneers. A unit of seven campers, a counselor and an assistant, living, playing, working, cooking, and eating together brings forth cooperation and interdependence.

Group difficulties and problems are settled in council. Their activities for the day are planned together. They share fun, success, dif-

facilities and problems. The campfire is the place for their singing, playing of instruments, a harmonica, a banjo, and the strains of "Oh Suzannah" and many other Western tunes can be heard.

There is no need for regimentation, regularity, and a conformity to the general camp program. Theirs is a life unto themselves, bringing successes, pleasures, and adventures — *camping*.

A group of campers living in this manner must know how to cook, build, and keep a fire in the rain. They must be skilled in the various arts and crafts and in the use of tools. They learn to be resourceful as activity is purposeful. At the end of the day's activities all are settled for a restful night. It is not long until day breaks, and minus the proverbial bugle another day of pleasure and fun starts in a quiet way.

Again Dufus reminds us of the lure of the covered-wagon days: "Let us sit around the old campfires, before the ashes quite grow cold, and throw on such leaves and buffalo chips as we can still find. Perhaps, as our eyes strain

into the mist and dark, the fierce and glowing memories of the old trail will again flame into vivid reality. Again we shall sleep under the naked sky and again in the bright morning hear the stamping of many hoofs, the shouting and the cry that begins the day's march, "Catch Up! Catch Up!"

Little did the pioneers realize that their crude but sturdy moving homes on wheels would eventually become a model for a part of a great educational program of the present day, and that their way of living would become a method of camping.

The pioneers lived in covered wagons through necessity. Today our campers are living in them by choice, because they want to, not because they have to. We live for the most part, in a life of security, and eagerly seek adventure. The pioneers used adventure to seek security. We now emulate them as a way of education. Their way of living with certain adaptations and refinements, now becomes a way of good camping. The covered wagon is again on the trail.