

We Would Carry Us: Walking the Prairie on a Wagon Train

I had made this journey before, but the circumstances were different. My daughter had coaxed me to take another trip on what we term the 'North Dakota wagon train.' Twelve horse drawn wagons, each with ten to twelve passengers dressed in bonnets and bloomers or straw hats and suspenders, make their way through the North Dakota prairie for one week each summer. Young and old, people come from all 50 states and some Canadian Provinces to travel on the wagon train and relive history.

We had survived the wagon train three times. More than survive, my daughter and I actually enjoy the challenges and simplicity of the adventure. I, however, was not so certain about a fourth time. I felt we were pushing our luck. We had always enjoyed good weather, interesting people, and despite numerous wood ticks, we never yet had to remove one with a tweezer. I realized these were largely silly reasons for not taking the trip again and I eventually concluded that if I have a teenage daughter who wants to spend a whole week with me, I better go. There may be a time in life when I get too old for adventure but this was not going to be that time.

My daughter and I had already mastered the wagon train life. We knew how to manage without showers and flush toilets and how to deal with insects, sun, dust and almost constant wind. We mastered the art of setting up and striking camp each day, cooking, cleaning, and fire building. Thus, we decided to make this journey slightly different and we made a plan to walk the 67 mile wagon trail in six days.

We were both runners, so we were aware of the physical and mental training we would need. We had seen a few other wagon trainers walk the whole way. None of them looked to be in any better condition than we were. Still, we made a plan, not a pledge. We remained cautious of the journey while we gathered supplies 'just in case' we made the full commitment to walk the distance.

Packing for the physical part of this journey was fairly easy. We knew we needed wool hiking socks, high protein snacks, and large enough water bottles to sustain us

through each water break. Sunscreen, tick repellent, jackets and mittens for cold mornings were placed in our day packs. Band aids, mole skin and extra socks and shoes for the evening were important to manage blisters. I did make sure I had my insurance card. Just in case.

Most other things were provided by the wagon train masters: regular meals, soap, a pit toilet and access to water at five stops each day. We didn't need to plan those necessities. As repeat wagon trainers, we already knew to leave behind any electronics, including phones. Everyone lives simply this week. Our evening gear would be transported for us, so we only had to pack for our daily needs while walking on the actual trail.

I always knew that physical challenges require emotional and mental support. Any athlete, or in my case, long-term runner, knows this. I have always been my own mental support and never needed much assurance or coaxing from others to motivate me through physical challenges. I thought this trip would be the same, just me and the challenge. I learned fairly quickly this was not the case.

There ended up being four women walking - a grandmother, two middle-aged moms and a teen. My companions proved to be a necessary item to have, and we were all fortunate to find friendship and support on the trail. Finding nurturing friends is both a blessing to have and a responsibility to carry. We carried each other through heat, rain, missed turns, sore muscles and long days. There was an afternoon I thought I was done walking. I felt light headed and weak. My daughter portaged me through. She assured me a rest in the tent and a good meal at night would heal all. I'm sure that helped, but more than anything, the support, encouragement and belief she had in me got me through a rough spot.

The second to last day of our journey, the skies were grey. After our lunch stop, the teamsters took their time mounting up the horses. The cooks and clean-up crew had never taken so long to get everything put away. The clouds grew darker. The afternoon mileage was only three miles, and us walkers thought if we would just leave soon we might beat the rain to the campsite. We wanted to leave, but we had to wait. There had been record rainfall the previous weeks in the Dakotas, and some roads and bridges were

flooded. If the horses couldn't get through the high waters, we would have to take detours. Walkers had to stay near the wagons so we wouldn't get separated from the train.

Of course it didn't rain; it poured. The skies were almost black. For the first time on our journey, I wished I had a waterproof rain jacket. I was too cheap to purchase one before we left thinking any rain could be easily warded off by my light rain slicker. Naive. The afternoon walk was so incredibly wet and humid. It was warm. So warm, that one of my companions who did have a waterproof jacket took it off in favor of becoming soaked. She was that hot. Maybe my mistake to not bring the rain jacket wasn't so bad.

All afternoon the teamsters and other wagon riders asked us if we wanted to climb in a wagon. "Just during the rain," they would say. "We'll still let you count the afternoon as if you walked the whole way." Absolutely not! We had crossed a creek earlier in the week that went up to our knees. We didn't ride. On the first day, we walked through a muddy field where one walker had both shoes stuck in the mud and had to walk that afternoon in muddy socks. No riding. Keep walking. Those wagons were not going to carry us. We were going to carry us. We were going to portage each other through.

I could not see much through the rain that was pooled on my glasses and cheeks. Rain was dripping from every inch of my body. Bonnets were not very useful at this point. Our feet were sloshing in the water that had collected in our shoes. Even if we had waterproof shoes, the rain would get into the tops and slowly seep down. There was no escape from the absolute wetness. Companions carry each other. Soon we four women were giving thanks for everything we didn't have to worry about. We didn't have to worry about our make-up running because we hadn't worn any all week. We didn't have to worry about the smell of sweat, because that had all washed away. We didn't have to worry about running out of water. We didn't have to worry about a sunburn. We did not have to worry about getting wet in the rain. We were wet already, and there was no use worrying about it.

It was during the downpour when I realized everything I had left behind on my journey. I left behind the baggage I did not need, the things that slow a person down. I left behind the 'I can't' attitude. I left behind the 'what ifs' kind of worrying. What if it rains? What if I'm hungry? What if I can't manage blisters, insects and heat? I did get hungry and thirsty, and even the afternoon I did not feel well, I ate to my stomach's content every meal. I did get blisters. Bad ones. So bad I will not describe. I should have brought better shoes. I learned how to drain and bandage a blister, and despite some moments of discomfort, or pain, I survived. It did rain; I got wet. Worry, and self doubt did not have any business on this journey, and I am glad I left it behind. Sometimes it's the things you don't take on your journey that help you the most.

As the wagons hauled in the baggage that afternoon, we kept our gear dry under a tarp while my daughter and I talked through our plan of attack for the tent. We were determined to keep as much gear as possible dry, especially sleeping bags and the inside of the tent. Three minutes is all it took for us to execute the plan. A tent was pitched, gear inside. We saw others still struggling, so we lent a hand to get tents up and gear properly stored. We thought of ourselves as real pioneer women at that point. Our bodies had survived 57 miles of walking so far. Sure, we were wet, sore and tired, but not defeated. We were quick and hardy and helpful. We had confidence, friendship and character. The old pioneer ghosts were probably smiling.

The last day was tough for my daughter. We learned the planned milage had been increased from eight to ten miles due to flooding. Our walking shoes were not completely dry. My daughter has had a few ankle injuries from years of soccer, and the ankles hurt. She was tired. Slow. So I walked slower. Our companions walked slower. We kept up a light conversation so the ten miles didn't drag out any longer. No longer a plan anymore, we had an obligation to ourselves to finish. We committed. We had a journey to complete. We were awesome. We were strong. With these thoughts, we carried my daughter that day.

It was a long drive home from the prairie. My daughter and I drove in silence for a time, but we both knew we had just completed a journey that was larger than our

expectations and soon our thoughts and reflections poured forth. We were careful not to let ourselves become self-inflated. It wasn't so much that we had accomplished this insurmountable task. It was more that we didn't let the task become impossible. We found ways to carry each other through the tough spots, to be each other's strength at times. The grand epiphany was to share this experience with others. We talked about inviting friends and family to come on the next wagon train. We would be their guides and porters on a journey. We wanted to share with others a glimpse of life only our ancestors really knew. A way of life that required daily strength and courage. We may not walk the entire trail next time, but I still plan to bring better shoes, and maybe a waterproof raincoat.