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TWENTIETH CENTURY PIONEERS FOLLOW GREAT WESTERN CATTLE TRAIL

by
Donita Shields



Modern day "pioneers" retrace the path followed by cattle herders generations before.

Anyone with a hankering to spend a week's vacation doing something a bit out of the ordinary might join up with the Ridge Runners Trail Drive which takes place annually in May.

Seven years ago Leon Parker of Carter and Sam Vickery of Lone Wolf decided that they would become twentieth-century trail riders. The two men can be described as part-time cowboys and part-time history buffs who hold down fulltime jobs in the workaday world. Their dream is to follow the Great Western Cattle Trail from its origin in Bandero, Texas, to its destination at Dodge City, Kansas.

Today, Great Western Trail has been forgotten by most people and is obliterated by plowing and erosion except for a few deep cuts in pastures and creek banks. During their spare moments, Parker and Vickery studied the old trail map compiled in 1933 by the Oklahoma State Highway Commission.

Then they began re-blazing the 1866-1885 trail over which drovers herded more than six million Longhorns. Sam and Leon found so much enjoyment in the adventure that their families and friends joined them. A large group traveling in covered wagons and on horseback now follow the

original trail annually.

The First Annual Ridge Runners Trail Drive was held in 1977. In 1983 the trail drive started at Old Doan's Crossing near Frederick and ended in Lone Wolf. This year the 1984 wagon train rolled out of Lone Wolf at 11:00 A.M., Saturday, May 19th for a six-day journey that ended at an Ellis County lake on May 25th.

On the first morning of the drive, 15 families hitched up and boarded their covered wagons which they had previously filled with provisions and bedding. At least two horses, mules, or Shetlands pulled each of the attractive, white-topped replicas of prairie schooners and covered wagons. In keeping with the pioneer way, more than 30 cowboys and girls of all ages rode point, flank, and drag to symbolically protect and assist-but realistically to visit with friends and family and to enjoy the springtime beauty of the countryside.

The oldest Ridge Runner was W. L. "Bill" Allen of Granite. Participating in his third modern trail drive, Allen was rated as the most trailworthy and wise. Two-year-old Derrick Parker, grandson of the Leon Parkers, was the youngest Ridge Runner. One

compact, attractive wagon pulled by two tiny gray mules was manned by a dark-haired 14-year-old beauty named Misty.

Ben Benson, a professional trail driver from Cache, provided service with his 1890 ten-passenger stagecoach. Benson, who appeared in two movies, *MOONBEAM DRIVER* and *CHARGE OF THE MODEL T*, was also featured in an NBC television documentary "Life of Quannah Parker" filmed at Lawton.

"Doc" Ray Vickery took his position at the rear of the wagon train in his antique buggy which he had painstakingly restored. "Doc" agreed with other members of the group by having more faith in the Ridge Runner association's CB radios and first-aid kits for emergencies rather than his own expertise.

Having participated in previous drives, the Ridge Runners have learned how to make trail life more comfortable for themselves and their animals. One wagoneer furnished his iron-wheeler wagon with bucket seats. Others have made their antique spring seats more comfortable by padding them with fleece, foam, and carpeting. Beneath the gleaming white canvas coverings of each prairie schooner was a camouflaged sheeting of waterproofing in case of rain showers or cold winds.

Each family wagon contained ice chests, thermos bottles for coffee and juices, and a day's supply of water for themselves and their horses. Small mattresses, light-weight lawn chairs, and bedrolls provided comfortable sleeping facilities. Each wagon also carried full larders of chuck, dishes, cooking utensils, and a portable camp stove.

Several families shared a large four-burner cooking unit on wheels. While on the dusty trail, the burners were carefully wrapped and stored within the wagon. However, the unit's oven was welded intact to the stove base. During the entire drive, this mobile kitchen appliance was pulled behind one of the covered wagons.

Numerous cars, pickup trucks, stock and implement trailers follow behind or ahead of the actual Ridge Runner wagon train. Each participant is responsible for his own hay and grain for his horses. An unusual equipment trailer belonging to the organization contains a bright red sanitary facility and a 300-gallon water tank furnishing livestock water. This tank is filled daily by one of the wagon masters, but is not suitable for human consumption.

Following Charles Goodnight's rules of the range cattle era, the Ridge Runners prohibit alcoholic beverages, gambling, and stallions. The trail drive is organized for family outings and clean family fun. The organization's goal is to travel 16 to 20 miles

daily along quiet, peaceful country roads and then bed down for an early start the next morning.

The Ridge Runners avoid hard surface highways and fast traffic. Even though the wagon train route may parallel an asphalt farm-to-market road just a mile away, the group prefers well-graded dirt roads. However, they dread sandy spots and rickety wooden bridges.

When the group left Lone Wolf for their 1984 adventure, the wagon train set up its first night camp in Lawton Cothran's pasture located on Trail Elk Creek one mile west of Old Port School near Sentinel. The second night found them under the huge cottonwood trees in Canute's city park. The Ridge Runners reached M Bar T Ranch headquarters north of Elk City for their third night camp. They spent the fourth night at Cheyenne's rodeo grounds.

When leaving Cheyenne, they traveled northwest to Black Kettle Lake where they bedded down the fifth night. After making the low-water crossing one mile west of Packsaddle Bridge on the South Canadian River, they spent their last night at Lake Vincent south of Arnett. The final day of each Ridge Runners Great Western Trail Drive is always spent returning home in pickup trucks and cars that are used to haul or tow wagons and animals.

Wagon Master Sam Vickery and Leon Parker, president of the Ridge Runners, are already making plans for next year's larger and longer trail drive. They hope to commemorate the Range Cattle Industry era and the closing of the Great Western Cattle Trail that ended forever 100 years ago. During the 1985 Trail Drive, they anticipate a two-week trek that will begin at Old Doan's Crossing and end at Dodge City, Kansas--a 250-mile journey of fun and adventure.



Trail blazers of all ages participated in the Ridge Runners Trail Drive.