

Hot, dusty trail calling his name

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He was an Illinois farmer and horse trainer in '96 when he up and joined the wagon train headed west.

He never meant to go all the way with that ragtag group, but a year later he rode into Salt Lake City with hundreds of others, crying like the rest of them.

A lot has changed for Danny Van Fleet since he set out on the trail a dozen years ago as part of a re-enactment of the Mormon pioneer trek for the sesquicentennial (150 years) celebration. A self-described "hell-raising, beer-drinking woman-chaser," he sold his family farm and moved to Utah, married his longtime girlfriend, joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, got homesick, moved back to Illinois, lost the girl, hired himself out for day help, trained a few horses on the side and pined to hit the trail and head west again, on a horse, of course.

There aren't many things Van Fleet likes better than to sit on a good horse or to ride in a wagon behind a team of them on the trail. Now, at 58, he is organizing another wagon train to travel from Illinois to Utah. He's got about 75 commitments so far from people who want to join him, and he's trying to round up more.

It beats some why a guy wants to ride in a kidney-jarring wagon behind a team of stinking, slow horses and take the back roads all the way across the plains, when there are freeways and cars that will get you there a lot faster and more comfortably. Every hour spent in a car is one week on a horse, Van Fleet reckons, and he would know.

But others get it, this need to do something simpler and slower. There's something lost and something gained in progress. You don't really see or feel the country when you're traveling 80 miles per hour in a car. You don't feel the heat coming off the desert, or the breeze in your face, don't hear the birds or smell the wildflowers, or, for that matter, the manure.

"You really get a look at the landscape when you're settin' on a horse," says Van Fleet. "You don't get to feel what the pioneers experienced if you're in a car."

A lot of people wouldn't want to, but others think it's good for the soul. Every year members of the LDS Church buses thousands of teenagers to the hot, dusty plains of Wyoming to push handcarts for a couple of days. "Trek," they call it. They hate parts of the experience, and later, when they're reunited with their Xboxes and air conditioners, realize they loved it.

Van Fleet was in an Illinois restaurant a dozen years ago when he got wind of the pioneer wagon-train re-enactment. He signed up within the hour, thinking he would ride a couple of days with the group before returning to his farm. A couple of days turned into 3 1/2 months.

Others were in it for religious reasons; he was there for the horses and scenery. He got all of the above. He proved useful for the many novice horsemen in the company, helping them to ferry rivers and doctoring sick animals. The wagon master begged him to stay and, truth is, Van Fleet didn't take much convincing. They traveled across Iowa in '96, and the following spring they went from Winter Quarters to Salt Lake City. Now Van Fleet wants to do it all over again, beginning May 31 (for more information, see www.vanfleetwagontrain.com). "I want others to have the opportunity to experience what we did 10 years ago," he says. "We all had such a warm feeling." He still gets choked up when he recalls those days. Along the trail, friendships were forged, even marriages were made, and to this day many of the travelers gather for annual reunions.

A couple of years ago, Van Fleet was asked to serve as a pallbearer for a man he befriended on the trail. After the funeral, which was in Farmington, he was walking to his car when he noticed a historical marker for the Van

Fleet Hotel. After some research, he learned that the hotel had been owned by Hyrum Smith Van Fleet, who was the son of Elijah Van Fleet, who, he discovered, was a member of Brigham Young's second wagon train to Salt Lake City.

"I can tell you more about the background of my stud horses than my own ancestry," says Van Fleet. "But I'm going to find out if we're related."

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