



Travel

Horseback rendezvous

This annual wagon-train ride through the celebrated Methow Valley connects the past to the present. *By Rhonda Ostertag*



Many organizations hold fundraisers in air-conditioned convention centers. Add a slew of tired speeches, the requisite drawn-out dinner, and tedious small talk, and you're not exactly having the time of your life. The nonprofit Washington Outfitters and Guides Association (WOGA), on the other hand, knows how to have a good time.

Each May, WOGA raises money to cover the costs for operating, and to lobby for recreation and access to public lands, by saddling up and hitching up for a five-day wagon-train ride. Typically, 100 people sign on to this grand adventure, dubbed the Ride to Rendezvous. The 60- to 70-mile ride traces historic passages through north-central Washington's Methow Valley en route to the frontier village of Winthrop, where the association hosts its Packers' Rendezvous—a traditional gathering of packers and outfitters for sharing ideas, giving demonstrations, and testing skills. The ride's starting point changes, but the destination is always Winthrop. And for the past 23 years, the Rendezvous has paired with Winthrop's long-running '49ers Days celebration, a Mother's Day weekend mainstay. The town's Old West facades speak to a living spirit and a guiding creed that run to the core of the community.

**BALSAMROOT
FRAMES A WAGON
IN WASHINGTON'S
METHOW WILD-
LIFE AREA.**

At high noon on Friday, the wagon train passes through the streets of Winthrop. It's a triumphant, clopping procession and the official start to '49ers Days. Bells sound, and the Grand Marshal and Lady, the citizen dignitaries of '49ers Days, welcome you like a returning hero. But first you have to chew on trail dust for five days.

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The Ride to Rendezvous is the brainchild of retired outfitter Claude Miller, who took inspiration from the life of his father, George. When George Miller arrived in the Methow Valley in 1908, he was 4 years old and traveled by train from Seattle to Wenatchee, upriver by steamer from Wenatchee to Pateros, and then by stage into the Methow Valley. The stage leg of this unique trip caught Claude's imagination, and in the early 1980s he first completed a similar wagon ride, tracing the arrival of his father.

George Miller went on to become a packer with U.S. Forest Service and an area rancher. As a packer, he hauled building materials for fire lookouts, some of which still remain atop the surrounding mountains. Claude didn't fall far from the tree and purchased his own outfitting company, North Cascade Safaris.

“I had a knack for it,” he says.

When Claude dusted off the idea for an organized trail ride 13 years ago, his Ride to Rendezvous was a hit. Though sentimentality was a motivator, so was pride. The WOGA women were out fund-raising the men at the time, so Claude had to bring his A-game. The first Ride in 1999 included 50 guests and far too few crew.

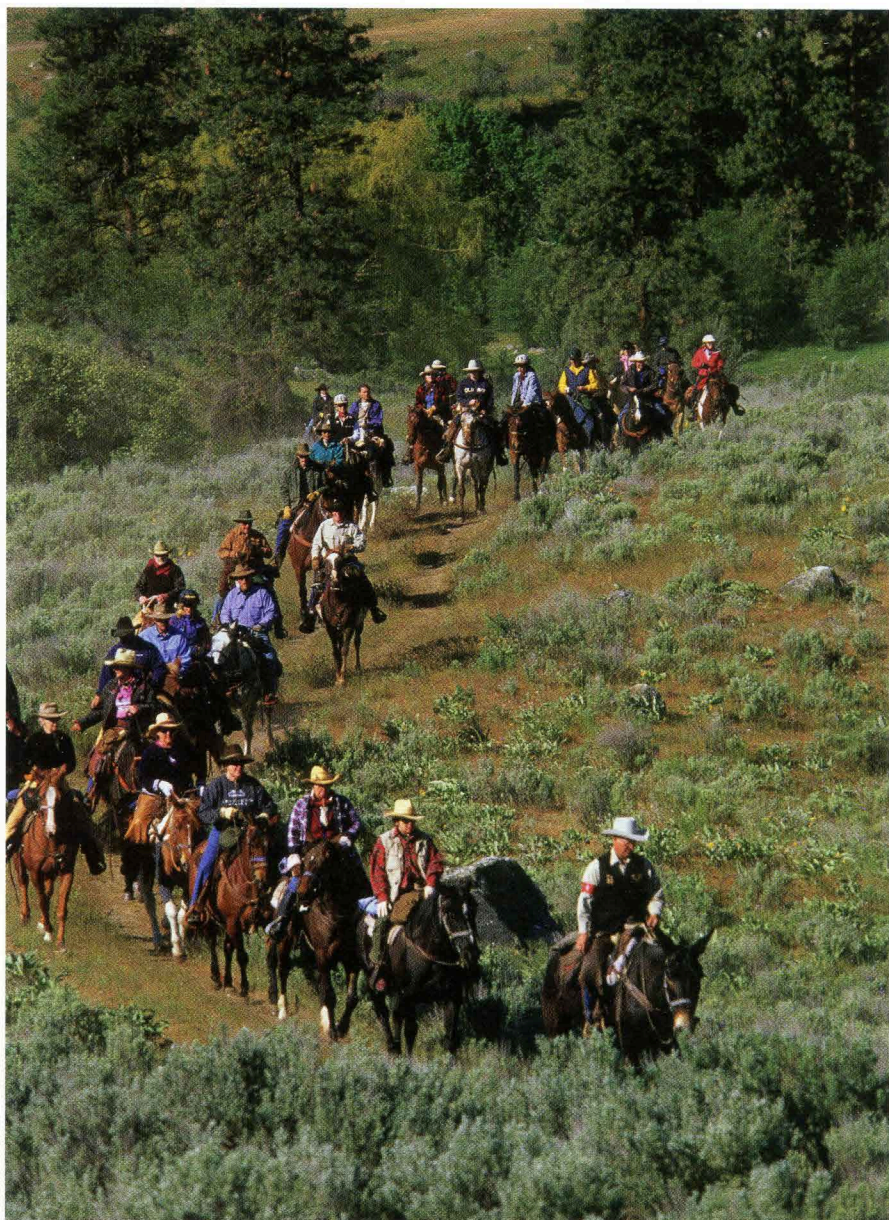
“That changed the next year,” says Marva Mountjoy, the association’s secretary (and one of the cooks), who has attended every ride since the start.

The caravan consists of single riders

on horses and mules (bring your own or arrange for a horse through WOGA) and teamsters driving buckboards and prairie wagons (wagon passages are also available). Some proud drivers sit atop personal upholstered buggies and finely painted carriages. In all, there are about 30 wagons, each attended by assistants or outriders.

“Most guests still prefer the saddle,” says Marva.

The route changes from year to year to keep the Ride interesting, but the format is set. The party forms in early May on the



A GRAND PROCESSION THROUGH OKANOGAN COUNTY, WASHINGTON.

Monday before Mother's Day and spends the first night together in order to hit the trail fresh on Tuesday. Because Claude likes history, the trip might travel along historic mail routes or visit a short-lived county seat from the area's mining heyday.

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The train rolls into Winthrop at noon on Friday, and in between, there's a whole lot of living, riding, and good eating. Each full day's ride covers 15 to 20 miles, and although the route designers try to avoid them, crossings over developed roads are inevitable.

"There are probably a hundred good stories a day," says Lauriann Mount-



OUTFITTER JESS DARWOOD LEADS A STRING OF MULES IN WINTHROP'S 49ERS DAY PARADE.

joy, a 12-year veteran of the Ride and Marva's daughter. "But, then again, they probably shouldn't see print."

In all the trail party can consist of 200 to 300 participants, some 100 guests, and 100 to 200 WOGA members and crew.

Riders range from teens to seniors, from the saddle-savvy to the novice, from locals to out-of-staters, and even the rare fledgling from a foreign land. You never know who will sidle up to you at dinner.

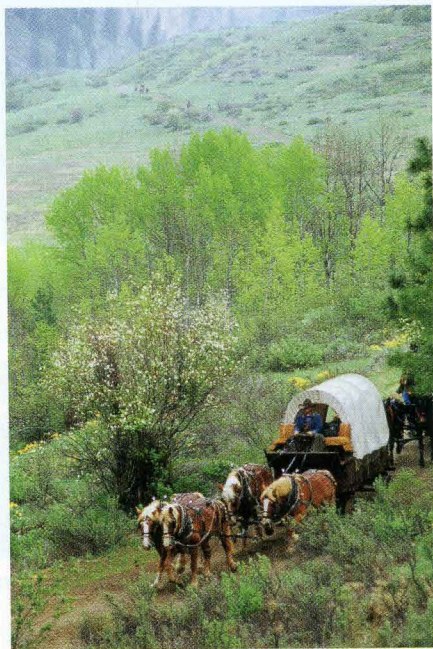
"After a week on the trail, they're bound

to be your friend,” says Marva. My husband, George, and I first hooked up with the Ride in 2006 while researching and taking photographs for our book, *Our Washington* (Voyageur Press, 2008). The Ride passes on valuable traditions that mean a lot to us.

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During our Ride, spring was in full celebration with newly leafed aspens and yellow-gold balsamroot blooms. The route designers make use of private as well as public lands, and the trail typically slips over grassy knolls, skirts pine-forested mountain slopes, and crosses greening prairie meadows and sagebrush expanses. My eyes brushed landscapes seldom seen. We rode by rock outcroppings, solitary ponderosa pines, and glassy pools and reveled in the flight of eagles. I loved watching the skylines and snaking through pinched canyons. Deer were common companions and outnumber people and horses in the Methow Valley.

Weather was the wild card. The Valley



DRAFT HORSES PULLING A HEAVY WAGON IN THE METHOW WILDLIFE AREA.

is 40 miles south of the Canadian border, and last year's Ride was hit by a snow-

storm. About one inch of precipitation can be expected in May, when the average high temperature is 71 degrees and the

average low is 39. The snow-capped North Cascade Mountains crowd the horizon and isolate the Valley from Seattle, and not just in miles. In ways tangible and intangible, the Valley sits back in time. The locals like it that way. So do I.

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Before the 1880s, the Methow Valley and the central-plateau were home to the Methow Indians. Gold brought settlers in 1893 and things changed dramatically. And even though the mining and ranching culture

that took hold thrived at first, the mineral wealth faded and shook out the pretenders. Only a fierce independence held the toughest settlers to the land. We rode with descendents of these people who stayed—people like Claude Miller, now in his 70s, and Tom Graves, another long-time outfitter.

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By 5 a.m. the rich aroma of coffee would mingle with campfire smoke to stir the sleeping camp. The breakfast tents, which open at 7 a.m., hummed with the preparation of scrambled eggs and pancakes. The cowboys would gulp their coffee, stomachs growling, and hustle off to ready



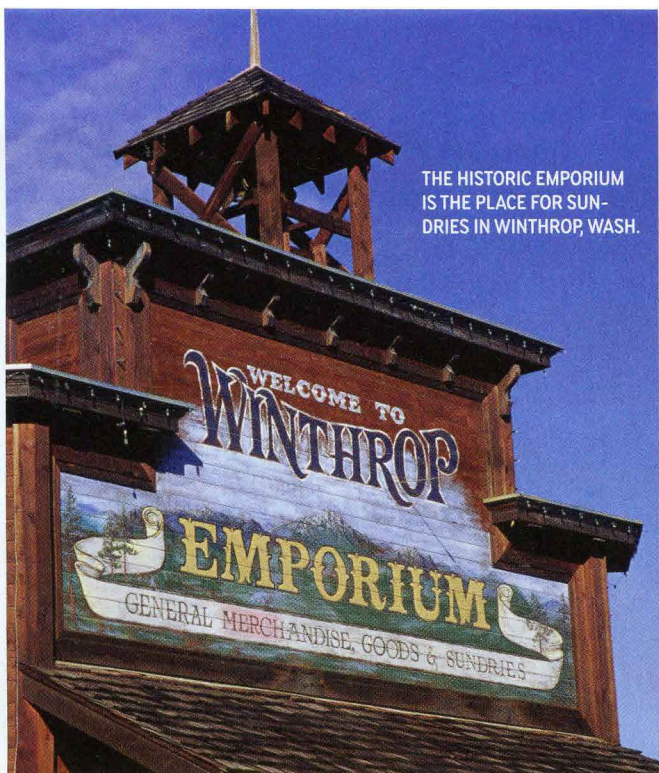
“WHAT YEAR IS THIS ANYWAY?” OKANOGAN COUNTY, WASHINGTON.

teams and horses. Outfitters tend to the booked mounts. And while WOGA sees that hay is onsite for feeding all the animals, the private horses are the charge of their owners.

“One of the chief things I wanted to do

with the Ride is to show off the packers’ food,” says Claude about the imaginative, tasty, and belt-stretching fare. “It’s not just beans and chili, hardtack and jerky anymore.”

Breakfasts included omelets, biscuits



THE HISTORIC EMPORIUM IS THE PLACE FOR SUNDRIES IN WINTHROP, WASH.

Plan It: Winthrop

STAY HERE

- ▶ Relax in roomy chalets and cozy cabins and soak in private-deck hot tubs at Winthrop's River's Edge Resort on the Chewuch River. 800-937-6621, riversedgewinthrop.com
- ▶ The Twisp River Inn is a Western bed-and-breakfast in the Twisp River Recreation Area that offers horse boarding. 509-997-4011, twispriverinn.com

EAT HERE

- ▶ Three Fingered Jack's Saloon, "Jack's" locally, is the oldest legal saloon in Washington and offers family dining with Western flare. 509-996-2411, 3fingeredjacks.com
- ▶ The Arrowleaf Bistro serves locally inspired cuisine with Northwest wines. 509-996-3919, arrowleafbistro.com
- ▶ Hankering for a miniature carrot cake? Rocking Horse Bakery entices with freshly baked breads and delicacies and organic coffee, plus homemade soups and sandwiches. 509-996-4241

PLAY HERE

- ▶ Three hundred glaciers are spread across North Cascades National Park; great for road trips. 360-854-7200, nps.gov/noca
- ▶ One hour south, in the heart of apple country, tour Lake Chelan—55 miles long and the third deepest lake in the nation. 509-682-4584, ladyofthelake.com

If you go

When: May, Monday–Friday before Mother's Day weekend

Where: Methow Valley, Wash., four hours northeast of Seattle

Who: Open to all (children under 10 need outfitter sponsorship)

Contact: Washington Outfitters and Guides Association (WOGA), 509-997-1080, woga.org. \$400–\$600 per participant (WOGA-supplied horses extra).

and sausage gravy, and oatmeal and fruit concoctions that put coffeecake to shame. We also had French toast, bacon, yogurt, and more. For dinner, we enjoyed pot roasts, prime rib, glazed chops, goulash, spicy enchiladas, roast chicken, vegetarian offerings, vegetables, salads, as well as all

The nights were starry and the campfires hot. We'd sit around listening to cowboy serenades and stories true and stretched.

kinds of bread, potatoes, and rice.

"If you can cook it with a stove, I can cook it with my Dutch-oven," Marva says matter-of-factly. And she can. I was more than happy to overindulge in the desert brownies, especially,

The private camps would get broken down and packed up and the lunch sacks filled



COWBOY MUSIC AND POETRY IN THE METHOW VALLEY'S PEACOCK MEADOWS.

before the day's ride began at 9 a.m. Horseback riders would often leave first to outrace the dust. Other days, depending on the terrain, the horse-drawn wagons would take an alternate route. And in

a tightly choreographed game of leapfrog, we'd all leave behind our personal tents, bags, and gear to be vehicle-shuttled (with all the communal food and wash tents) to that night's camping spot. The wonderful

road crew would erase one camp and erect the next.

“The crew’s job stretches from before daylight to after lights out,” says Scott Montgomery, WOGA President and a 10-year veteran of the road crew.

The pageantry of the Ride was inspiring—the seemingly endless chain of riders, outriders, drivers, and conveyances sashaying through lightly touched frontier. The gauzy haze from dust made it all the more magical. Organizers worked hard to keep everything moving, but time held little meaning in such moments. The beauty of the

Time held little meaning in such moments. The beauty of the adventure was being in the present.



A FRESHLY-PAINTED BUCKBOARD WAGON ON THE RIDE TO RENDEZVOUS.

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Passage varied from single-file to noisy posses of laughter, chatter, and song. True to cowboy tradition, there was little walking. My grandfather, himself an outfitter in Montana’s Great Bear—Bob Marshall

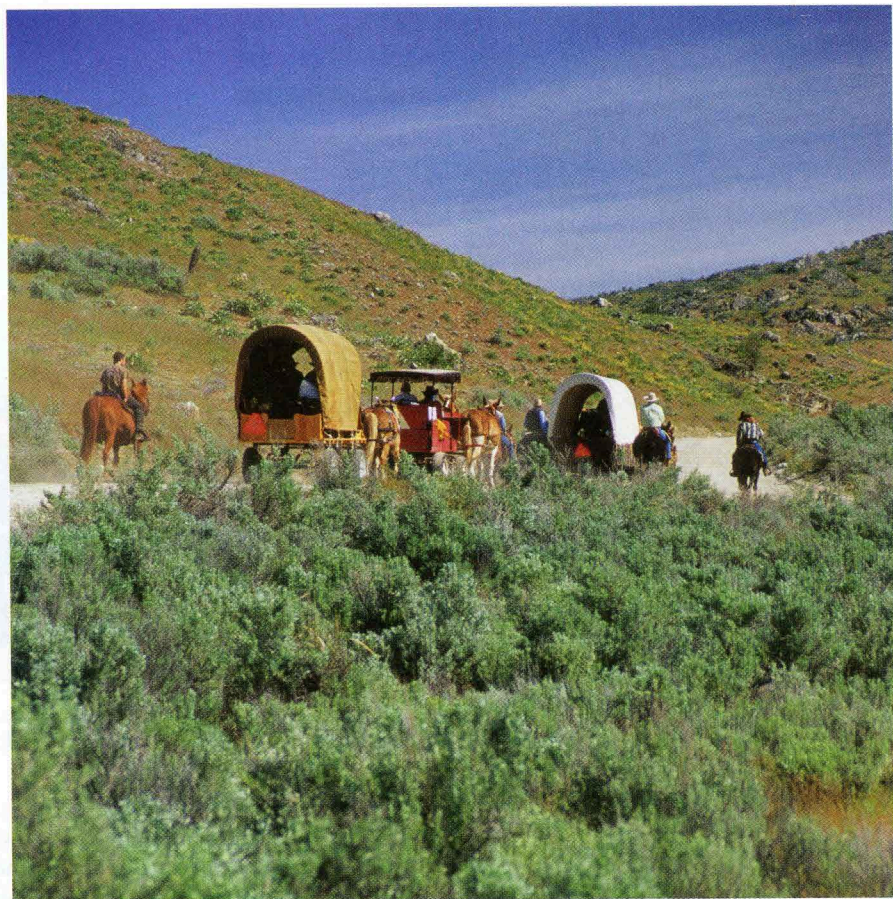
Wilderness Complex from the 1950s to the 1970s, was fond of saying, “I never mind walking as long as my horse is walking behind me.”

Lauriann Mountjoy confessed to me at one point that she might walk right past

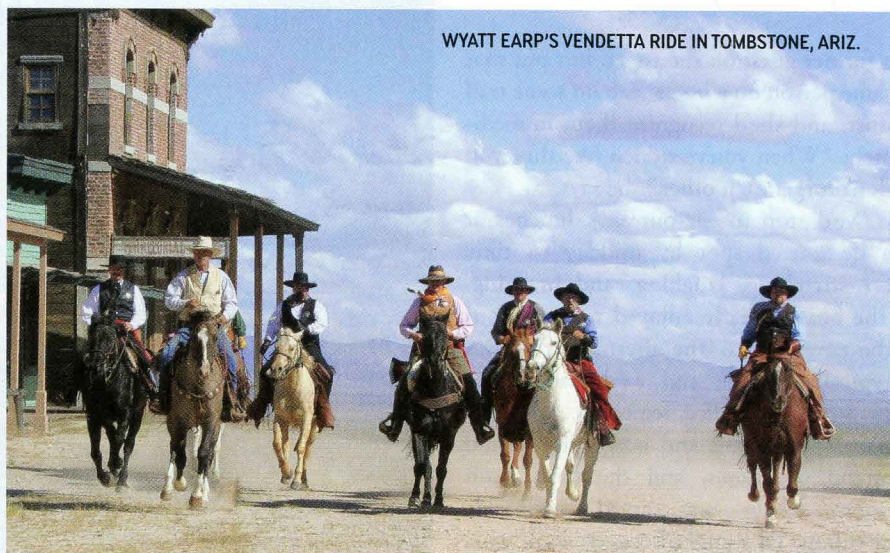
a former guest on the street, but put that same person on a horse, dab on some trail dust, and she'd recognize them immediately. "When you've ridden like this, you don't forget each other," she says.

We'd stop to eat our sack lunches at a designated spot by midday—a time for stretching, laughing, and bragging. The horses clearly enjoyed nosing about the new grasses. The afternoon ride was typically shorter, and we'd reach camp by 3 p.m. for coffee, lemonade, and hors d'oeuvres. Guests and hosts alike would attend to chores, and the day's main event—dinner—was served buffet-style at 6 p.m. I'd wander between cook tents just to smell the delights.

The nights were starry and the campfires hot. We'd sit around listening to cowboy serenades, strumming guitars, and stories true and stretched. There was even some Texas two-stepping going on. Sometimes landowners or rangers would share our fires and recount bits of local



METHOW VALLEY TRAIL DUST AND TRAFFIC JAMS—THE GOOD KIND.



WYATT EARP'S VENDETTA RIDE IN TOMBSTONE, ARIZ.

More wagon trains and trail rides

1. DEATH VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

Each November, as part of the Death Valley '49ers Encampment, the nonprofit Equestrian Trails, Inc. leads a trail ride (and a separate wagon train event) open to 75 riders along the historic 20-Mule Team Trail between Ridgecrest, Calif., and Furnace Creek. The ride covers 125 miles in six days. 909-595-9548, etinational.com/Death-ValleyRide.html

2. FEARFUL CROSSING, NEVADA

Each year after Labor Day, the Fearful Crossing Desert Wagon Train traverses Forty Mile Desert from Lovelock to Fallon on the Old California Trail. The ride covers 70 miles in three and a half days. 775-867-2147 or 775-741-5125, fearfulcrossing.com

3. PENDLETON ROUNDUP WAGON TRAIN, OREGON

During the last full week in June, the Pendleton Roundup Wagon Train travels routes through the Blue Mountains passing along parts of the Oregon Trail. The train brings together 12 to 20 wagons and up to 130 riders and covers 12–14 miles a day. 541-377-0833, pendletonroundupwagontrain.com

4. CULBERTSON SADDLE CLUB RIDE, MONTANA

Each September, the Culbertson Saddle Club hosts its Labor Day Wagon Train/Trail Ride, now in its 44th year. Some 20–30 wagons and as many as 400 riders participate and come from all corners for this two-day ride in Northeast Montana. 406-790-0600, culbertsonmt.com

5. TEXAS STAR TRAIL, FREDERICKSBURG, TEXAS

This annual week-long wagon ride in March draws 300 people and travels 112 miles through the state's picturesque Hill Country, utilizing pioneer paths and stringing through 20 ranches, including the LBJ Ranch. This route is more cified than the others listed. 512-791-2503 or 830-875-6121, texasstartrail.com

6. WYATT EARP'S VENDETTA RIDE, TOMBSTONE, ARIZONA

Great American Adventures hosts this ride in mid Oct. and traces Earp's "bloody trail of retribution" to avenge his brothers' killing and crippling injuries. Ride through the Chiricahua, Dragoon, and Whetstone mountains to the sites where Wyatt and his posse caught up with the bad guys. 505-286-4585 great-american-adventures.com

history. We'd learn about the winter pithouses and foraging and hunting practices of the Methow Indians, or they'd tell us about the struggles of the early miners and ranchers and how roads were slow to come to these parts. The North Cascades Highway, for example, wasn't extended this way until 1972. These parties could linger late, but after such big days, sleep was never far off.

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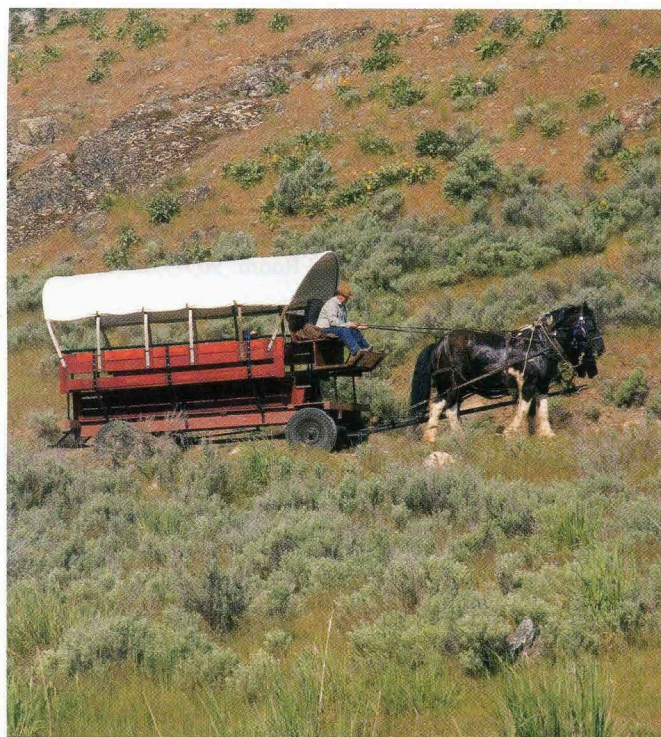
Friday's grand entry into Winthrop ended the Ride and marked the return to laptops, cell phones, and news blasts about trillion-dollar deficits. But the '49ers Celebration and Packers' Rendezvous eased the pain. The WOGA outfitters hung out and

The celebration wrapped up with a race to pack gear, load up pack animals, and get from point A to point B, gracefully or not.

chatted, put on demonstrations in packing and Dutch-oven cooking, and drank the free-flowing coffee—familiar touchstones from the past five days. A parade, a Western steak feed, country music, cowboy storytelling and poetry, a breakfast for moms, and an auction filled out the weekend's docket. And the celebration wrapped up with a good-natured “outfitters competition”—a race to pack gear, load up pack animals, and get from point A to point B, gracefully or not.

When asked, “Why outfitting?” most WOGA outfitters will shuffle their feet, then smirk, and reply, “Well, it isn't for riches.” But there is richness—of spirit and adventure. The annual Ride to Ren-

dezvous is a great way to experience that life, and while the prestige of a convention in an air-conditioned hotel may be attractive to some (*Cedar Rapids*, anyone?), let me break bread on the trail with cowboys I respect. ✪



TRAVERSING ACRES OF SAGE BRUSH IN THE METHOW VALLEY.