

Exhibits and the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center's Early Days

by Sherrie Kvamme

of the Hells Canyon Journal

While Dave and Joyce Hunsaker's contributions to the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center have been immeasurable, it's always worth remembering that it took hundreds of people working together to bring the project to fruition. In this installment Dave, who served as project manager during the center's planning and construction phases and was its first director, continues the story of center's earliest days focusing especially on the exhibits.

"When the design team had finished with some of the basic design, we went back to the community and made many trips to Portland with the plans and progress reports," Dave Hunsaker said. "At that point, we had enough information to go out and ask contractors to submit proposals to us. I don't recall just how many we received. It was somewhere in the area of 15 or 29 which we studied for several weeks and settled on the top three."

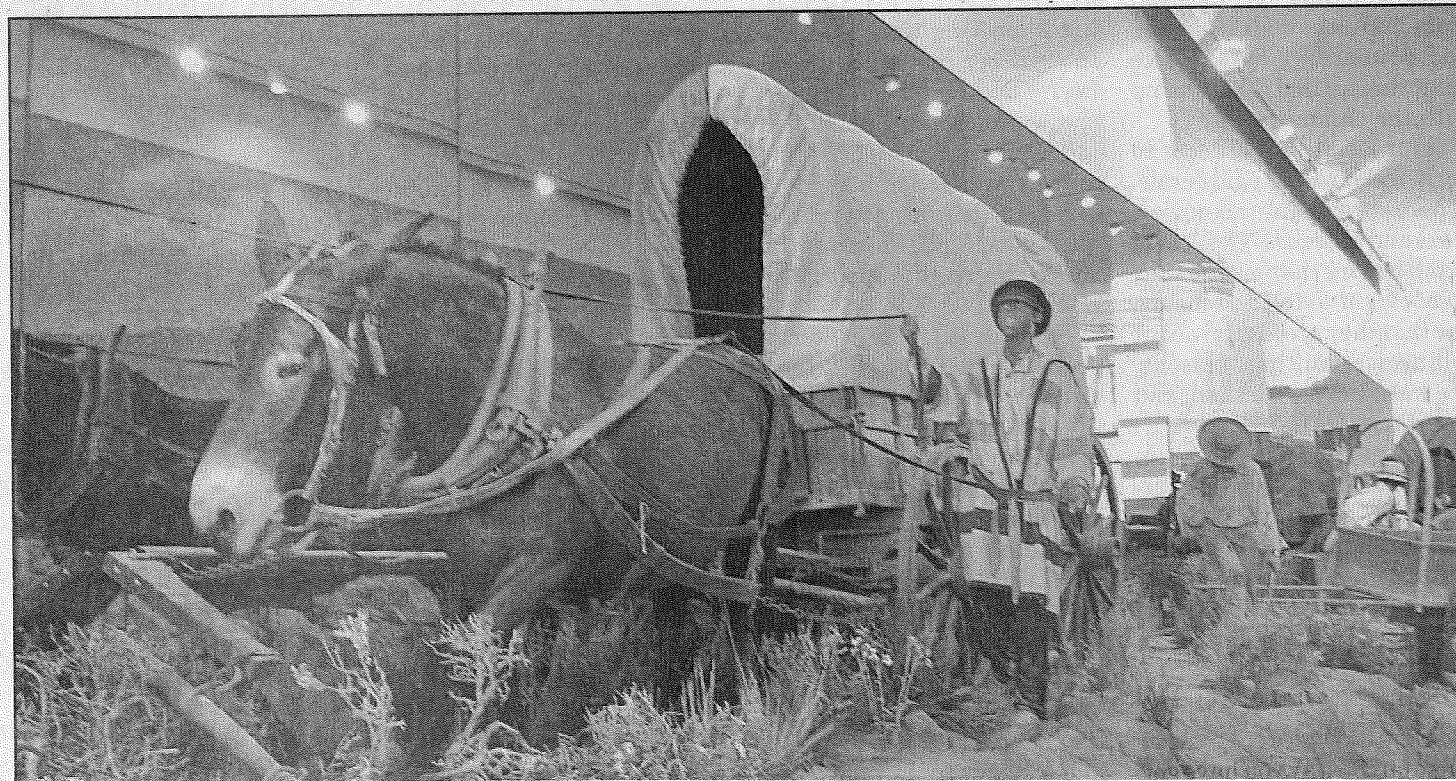
Those three contractors were asked to come to Baker County and make a complete presentation of the plan with their concept for the Interpretive Center's exhibitry. One of them would then be selected to eventually become the exhibit designer.

"The first presentation was generalized and very nicely done," said Dave. "There was a lot of the outside incorporated, and we thought it was nice. The second one was very dramatic. Its centerpiece and most of the money on the exhibit side would have gone into that. It was an exhibit of lowering the wagons and oxen over a precipice and down onto the trail which a lot of them did in several locations along the way. They would use ropes and pulleys to facilitate the action and it was very dramatic. The oxen would have its legs spread out



Photos courtesy of Bureau of Land Management

WAGONS ON THE OREGON TRAIL – one of the life-size exhibits at the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center.



on a big hoist to demonstrate how they looked when being lowered over a ledge.

"However, it was third group who really took the experiential piece where we wanted it to go and where it is now. They included a video program that provided continuity as you moved through the balance of the exhibits. They used static exhibits that told you what the exhibit was with lots of quotes from diaries as you sit on the side and watch. It even started with you having to load your own wagon. That particular video is about making decisions of what you could take and what you had to leave behind – outfitting your wagons in Missouri, electing a captain and starting out on the trail. The next exhibitry

THE SAME WAGONS as seen above viewed from the front. The reins in the drover's hands were realigned after an elderly visitor to the NHOTIC, who had a lifetime of experience working with mules, explained the finer points of reining mules.

is one of the challenges on the trail, which was crossing a river. Those travelers did that many times during their journey and often the same river which was captured in that part of the video."

Dave said the actual filming for the river crossing scenes was done in Idaho, where the travelers actually did make crossings. The third piece was a wrap-up going down into what became Oregon City and making the decision to either take the wheels off your wagon, build a raft and go down the Columbia, or go



AN EXHIBIT DEPICTING ONE OF THE MANY GRAVES along the Oregon Trail. It is estimated that over 20,000 people died while traveling on the trail.

up over the toll road at The Dalles, where your wagon got beaten up on the rocks. It was a long and arduous trip. Their presentation told a story.

The sensitivity in the use of animals in the exhibitry was more than what Dave or anyone else had realized it would be.

"PETA [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, the largest animal rights organization in the world] showed up at the center just a couple of days before our grand opening," said Dave. "And they were threatening.

"They are very visible in expressing their views and they were very aggressive when they came into the center. They wanted to confront me right there in the main entrance of the building, and we were not even open yet. There were people everywhere. They were not yelling, but they were quite loud and very aggressive. Their intent was to shut the place down, and they were clearly not going to let it open. They told me there were more of them coming to the center from Boise, Portland, Seattle and additional places, to be heard and to demonstrate.

They were bringing in television cameras and a lot more people and it was going to be ugly. They told me that first we mistreat the animals and then we put them on display."

Dave told them it was their right to demonstrate, as they were on federal property.

"I told them that we would set up a place for them to demonstrate, but before they did that I asked them to come with me and let me tell them what our protocols were before they took it to that level.

"They were pretty surprised. They had never had that kind of response and had expected some pushback. I took them back to my office. I dragged out all of the design criteria for the animal exhibitry. We had three ring binders virtually packed tight with written documents and letters from the meat processors and down the line. I put all of it on the table and not only told them, but showed them what we had done and how the design team would contact private contractors – what animals we needed in the exhibit that would approximate the animals back in the 1850s. We needed sheep that had huge

horns and we needed huge oxen. We wanted a variety of animal families and a variety of color. We wanted bison and horses of all sizes and ages. We wanted goats, mules, oxen, birds, squirrels and beavers; we wanted everything.

"The PETA people were listening, and then I explained to them that we only wanted to buy the hides. We did not want them to put the animals down for the exhibit. We want to purchase them on the open market after they had been processed for food or had been salvaged after they have been hit by vehicles, for example, but not purposefully put down for our exhibits. That is exactly what we did."

Opening the three-ring binders, Dave showed the leaders of the PETA contingent pictures of all of the animals that the committee design team were looking at. He explained they were already on the open market, already scheduled for slaughter.

"All we did was purchase the hides," said Dave. "That took the air right out of them and they went away. They did not come back. They did not

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support what we were doing or how we did it, but they didn't oppose it and they did not come back. Their arrival was a big surprise – right before the grand opening. That would have presented a real difficult situation."

During the project from start to finish, suggestions were welcome and considered.

"There was a guy who suggested that we have a 'smell experience,'" said Dave. "He thought that would be a good idea to include with, and enhance, the exhibits. He had a list with him and said he thought we should have barnyard smells and oxen smell and things like that. The letters and the diaries did talk about the horrible smells of rotting and decaying. We had considered the possibility even before his letter came. We had sight, sound, and we were going to provide feel, but in the end, backed away from the idea."

While walking out in the main gallery one day with some visitors, Dave noticed an older man who looked every bit like he must be 100 years old. He had two canes and was quite bent over as he stood alone by the big wagon on the right-hand side at the end of the hall by the big mirrors. He was studying the two mules. In that exhibit the drover is walking behind the mules, and he has the reins.

The exhibit is set with the reins from the first mule to the second mule all the way back to the wagon and in the hands of the drover. Dave said he walked over to the gentleman and asked him where he was from and what did he think?

"He told me he was from Idaho and he had come over here to look at this. He said he had heard all about it and commented that it was pretty fine. He said it was nice, but that he would tell me something if I wanted to hear it. I said, 'You bet I do.' He said, 'You see those reins and the way you have got



MANNEQUINS USED IN THE EXHIBITS at the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center have features whose appearance was borrowed from actual members of the design team and their families. Molds were made using their heads, hands and feet that were then used to create the mannequins.

noticed like the beautiful 12 by 12 timber that was used in the walkway coming up the path to the building. Unfortunately, they were put in the wrong way, running lengthwise instead of side to side. They had been very carefully installed with spaces between boards one-quarter to three-eighths of an inch wide, no wheel on a wheelchair could drop or get caught. The extreme variability in temperatures, along with high winds, rain, snow and extreme heat and cold caused the wood to shrink. Dave's office had a big window that overlooked the walkway into the main doors and he happened to be there one day and saw a wheelchair drop one of its wheels in that section.

"A gentleman was pitched out. I was mortified," said Dave. "I ran out there and we helped. We could never let something like that happen again. We tore that whole walkway apart and initially



ANIMALS IN THE EXHIBITS were created using hides from real animals that had already been slaughtered or were scheduled for slaughter. According to Dave Hunsaker, no animals were killed to create the Interpretive Center's exhibits.

prayer. Their participation was wonderful.

that rig set up there? And the way that drover is handling those reins?" I said yes. He said, 'Well the way you have it set up if he pulls on them, he's going to have a wreck! I have run mules all of my life and I am telling you he will have a big wreck.' I said, 'Okay, but can you tell me what to do?' He said, 'Yeah.' So, I climbed up in the exhibitry, and he told me what to do. After I followed his instructions, he lifted his cane and pointed at it and said, 'Now you have got it!' Then off he went to look at the rest of the exhibitry. I was really grateful. It was this guy's thing, and he not only noticed it but he told me about it."

All of the mannequins in the exhibitry were formed on real people who allowed themselves to be used molds and have their faces and hands and feet modeled. The project was part of the work of the contract design team. The mannequin designer went to different people within the contract and asked people if they would be willing to help. There were families whose children helped out, too, in addition to men and women. They stood still while the liquid solidified, and when it was 'cracked off' everyone who modeled, was amazed when they looked at the finished product to find that it felt like they were looking right at themselves.

The design team felt a tactile experience would be important to visitors, and areas where those experiences could happen were always being considered. Visitors in wheelchairs, for example, experience the added impact of the bumpy trail passing through the main gallery. People with disabilities—whether mobility or visions related—who came to evaluate the center's accessibility were very helpful in identifying those issues. While they couldn't always get the full or same sense of walking or seeing, with the mannequins or wagons or animals, when they rolled or walked over that trail, it provided them with a sense of what it was like. They could get an idea.

The build included authentic detail that is not always

we replaced it with the same wood but this time, side to side. Over the next year or so, we did a lot of research, and I contacted some visitor-type facilities in the northern tier who have extreme weather like we do. There is a decking called Trex that is highly impenetrable. They used it at the San Diego Zoo and highly recommended its durability. We obtained funding and got that replaced."

Throughout the entire process, particularly regarding anything related to the Native American contacts, coordination with the tribes was a priority.

"We had meetings with the tribes both informal and formal. We had them review language and made sure they had every opportunity to be involved," said Dave. "However, we were also careful not to steal the thunder of the Tamástslíkt Interpretive Center in Pendleton. That is their interpretive center, and how they interpret the same experiences but from their perspective ... and we can't speak to that," noted Dave, "and we shouldn't try."

"But what we did say was we wanted them to be comfortable with the result that I think we were able to procure from their support. They played a major role in the grand opening here, including offering a dedication

With the potential revamping and refreshing of exhibits there is an opportunity there to expand the Native American piece. I think that would be wonderful if the tribes could participate in that to a great extent, particularly now that Tamástslíkt has done it and has a track record of many years. Together I think they could make an excellent public exhibit at the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center off of that perspective. And I hope they do so."

To be continued...

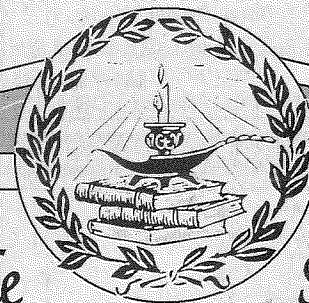
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