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Go Your Own Way

On a steeply canted stretch of trail near the Continental Divide their 'Trail Pup' disintegrates, a victim of dry rot in the spokes and hub.



Rinker and Nick Buck on U.S. 36 in Marysville, Kan. *PHOTO: AUTHORS COLLECTION*

By **GREGORY CROUCH**

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Stretching across the waist of the continent, over windblown plains, searing deserts, rocky ridges and mountain passes from the banks of the Missouri River to the fertile valleys and rich gold fields of the Pacific Coast, the Oregon and California Trail network was, for decades, the most important land route in North America. It facilitated what

historians still consider the largest voluntary land migration in human history—the westering of the American people.

From obscure beginnings as linked geographic corridors exploited by fur traders and mountain men in the 1820s and 1830s, the trail boomed with the Oregon Fever of the 1840s, the Mormon exodus to Utah, and the California Gold Rush. In the ensuing decades, the trail grew into an intricate overland network that knit the pullulating states and territories of the Far West into the established Eastern nation, but as railroads and automobiles replaced wagons and stagecoaches, the wagon ruts of the trail system fell into disuse. The last documented wagon crossing of the Oregon Trail happened more than a century ago, in 1909.

Flash forward 100 years, to when journalist Rinker Buck discovered himself in danger of becoming “that familiar subspecies of the North American male, the divorced boozehound with a bad driving record and emerging symptoms of low self-esteem.” To redeem himself, Mr. Buck writes in his new book, he decided on “the completely lunatic notion” of traveling the entire 2,000-mile length of the Oregon Trail, from Missouri to Oregon—in a covered wagon. Much of the old trail has been paved into modern highways, but hundreds of miles of “original ruts” still exist, and Mr. Buck combined them into a complete crossing of the trail. Mr. Buck takes us for the long ride in his enchanting account of the odyssey, “The Oregon Trail: An American Journey.”

THE OREGON TRAIL

By Rinker Buck

Simon & Schuster, 450 pages, \$28

Joining him for the adventure was his younger brother. It’s hard to imagine a more mismatched pair than Rinker, the control-freak college boy, and Nick, a disorganized New England jack-of-all trades handyman “born out of century” who holds the opinion that “a college education ruins people.”

Yet, as Mr. Buck explains, “two brothers uprooting themselves to seek adventure or a better life together was a pretty typical Oregon Trail pairing.” Completing their overland party were Nick’s Jack Russell terrier, Olive Oyl, and Bute, Jake, and Bete—a trio of Missouri Mules.

Across the Missouri River, the mules plod westward, hauling brothers Nick and Rinker and the wagon through Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Idaho and Oregon. Together with their mule team, the Buck brothers roll up some of 19th-century America’s most famous geography: the Big Blue, Little Blue, and North Platte rivers, Farewell Bend, Ash Hollow, Nebraska’s California Hill, Chimney Rock, Laramie Peak, Independence Rock, Split Rock, Devil’s Gate, Rocky Ridge. The Buck brothers brave thunderstorms, perilous

grades, wind and dust storms, plagues of RV travelers and epic breakdowns.

On a steeply canted stretch of trail just west of Wyoming's South Pass—the Continental Divide separating the Mississippi drainage from the Great Basin and the Pacific Slope—the downslope wheel of their “Trail Pup,” the two-wheeled logistical support cart they've been towing behind their wagon, disintegrates, victim of dry rot in the spokes and hub. The Trail Pup flips and the last of the water their mules need gushes into the dust. Forty miles from help and beyond cellphone coverage, they cut the Trail Pup loose and race for crude shelter, chased by a thunderstorm that threatened to panic their mule team. Refitting at Big Sandy Station in Farson, Wyoming, Mr. Buck finds “the soul of my country” in the “trail family” of locals that lent them helping hands.

Interspersed with the story of his westward journey, Mr. Buck entertains and enlightens with discourses on American history and culture, wagons and especially mules. In hoary Western movies and novels, horses garner the glory, but in the harsh arid reality of the frontier, mules supplied most of the muscle. Born of a female horse bred to a male “jack” donkey, “fully grown mules tend to have the height and musculature of their mother, while inheriting the leaner physique and more nimble legs of their jack father . . . giving the finished mule an extraordinary strength-to-weight ratio.” Out West mules were “infinitely more desirable for covered wagon travelers” than horses—more intelligent, tougher, lighter, better able to withstand summer heat and long working days without water. The millions of “Missouri mules” that did the work that won the West were descendants of “Mammoth Jack” donkeys that George Washington had imported from Spain and France after the Revolution.

If at times Mr. Buck gets carried away with enthusiasms—describing the significance of two World War II battles in which Missouri mules played a role and exaggerating the effects of altitude—he can be forgiven, for he has delivered us a book filled with so much love—for mules, for his brother, for America itself.

In August 2011, as the Bucks approach the last 8-mile stretch into Oregon, some 14 weeks after setting out, Nick steps out of the wagon to spend a day in town, allowing his brother to drive. Calling the mule team from the wagon seat, Rinker Buck finally crosses into the state that had been his goal for nearly four months. “I was in Oregon now, alone with my mules on the road toward Keeney Pass, and I didn't think that I would ever again enjoy such a perfect day.” Nor may anyone else—even though, long before Oregon, Rinker Buck has convinced us that the best way to see America is from the seat of a covered wagon.

—*Mr. Crouch is the author of “China’s Wings” and “Enduring Patagonia.”*

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