

Mountain Bike

Back in Time

Pedal into the past
along seven historic wagon trails
perfect for mountain biking.

Story by Erin Fanning  Photos by Eric W. Valentine

THE JAGGED MOUNTAINS of the Eagle Cap Wilderness could not compete with the old wooden logs, hidden by tall grasses, that became the highlight of our mountain bike ride on the Tenderfoot Wagon Trail. No, I didn't tumble off my bike and hit my head. We were getting a firsthand glimpse into Oregon's past: the original logs, called "corduroy," installed by pioneers to make covered wagon crossings easier.

The Tenderfoot Wagon Trail is only one of many historic wagon trails open to mountain bikers. Scattered across Oregon, the trails listed here give outdoor enthusiasts of all ages an opportunity to experience Oregon's history on the modern day steed: the mountain bike.

Before you venture on the trails, keep in mind that some of the pathways have fragile sections such as old logs or ruts. According to Sarah LeCompte of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, there are different philosophies about whether people should walk, ride, or drive on historic ruts or corduroy. She said that riding on ruts or logs could damage an important cultural resource.

So walk your bike around old logs or ruts if you encounter them, preserving the trails for generations to come.

My first experience with historic mountain biking was on the Tenderfoot Wagon Trail, located about 18 miles southeast of Joseph. Leaving Wallowa Lake on a cloud-free July morning, my husband and I drove past the farm fields on Oregon 350 and turned right onto Forest Service Road 39. Parking at the Salt Creek Summit, we pedaled over a wooden bridge and past an historic marker commemorating the trail. The wide tracks of the old wagon road led us to a boggy area where my tire hit one of the old logs. Examining the corduroy, I imagined a wagon brimming with provisions and full of the hopes of pioneers starting a new life.

Pioneers found their way to the Wallowa Mountains by the mid-1800s, meeting the famous Wallowa Band of the Nez Perce Indians and their leader Chief Joseph. These early pioneers must have been in awe of their new surroundings. Soaring views of the Eagle Cap Wilderness and the Seven Devils Mountains greet you on almost every turn of the



Tenderfoot Wagon Trails.

Continuing on the path we passed trees reduced by a 1989 forest fire to ghosts of their former selves. Following the well-maintained Tenderfoot Trail for about 3 miles, we turned left onto the Big Sheep Cutoff Trail to make a loop back to the car using forest service roads. The terrain became progressively more difficult on the Big Sheep Cutoff; however, the Tenderfoot Trail continues for a few more miles making a pleasant out and back ride.

If the ride whets your appetite



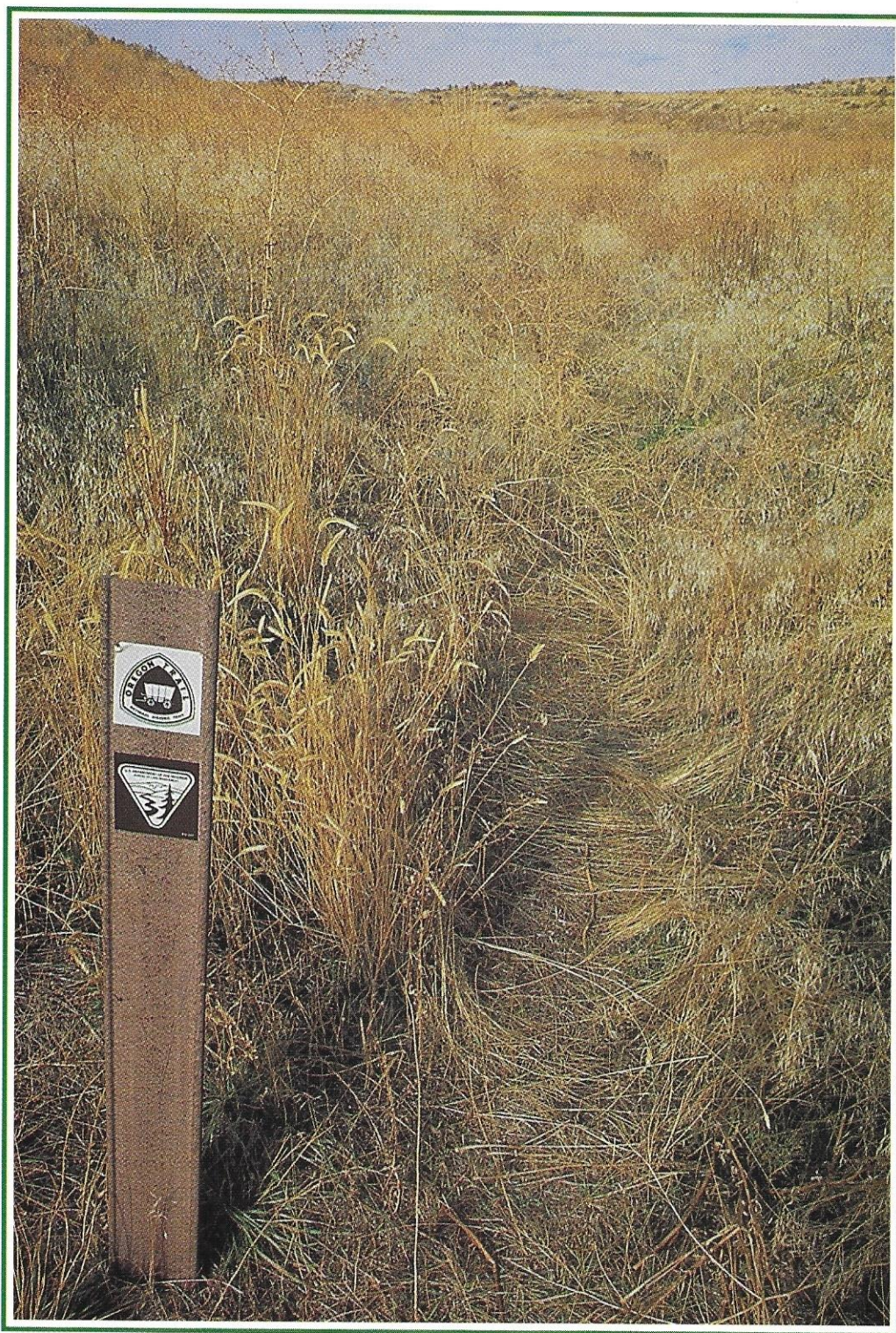
for more historical exploration, then check out the Old Barlow Toll Road built as an alternative to the Oregon Trail route. Arriving at The Dalles in 1845, Sam Barlow decided not to make the arduous raft trip down the Columbia—the route of most of the Oregon Trail pioneers—and vowed to find a way around Mt. Hood. He is reported to have said, “God never made a mountain but what He provided a place for man to go over or around it.” The Mt. Hood Toll Road was built in 1846 charging five dollars for each wagon and 10 cents a head for livestock.

Many pioneers claimed that the 150-mile toll road was the most difficult part of the Oregon Trail and that Laurel Hill with its steep cliffs was the most challenging section. Lowering wagons down the hill with ropes attached to trees, the emigrants also had to drag trees behind their wagons to keep their descent under control. In 1915 the toll road and its five tollgates closed, allowing the State of Oregon to take over operating expenses.

The last tollgate—about a mile east of Rhododendron—is the starting point for the popu-

lar Pioneer Bridle Trail. Cycle through the replica of the gate, built between two maple trees planted by the last gatekeeper in 1883, and pedal along the rocky, bumpy pathway rebuilt by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. The road parallels U.S. 26, occasionally becoming a singletrack path and winding through dense forest.

Four miles later the Pioneer Bridle Trail crosses U.S. 26 and narrows to a singletrack trail. As we climbed a series of steep switchbacks up Laurel Hill, the



Above: The Oregon Trail near Vale.

Preceding page: The Wallowa Mountains from the Tenderfoot Wagon Trail.

noise from U.S. 26 became a faint hum. Stopping at a clearing in the woods, I looked out over the highway and Mt. Hood National Forest. It was easy to imagine the terror with which the pioneers faced this stretch of the road. The trail meandered through the woods, past an old mine shaft, and under the original Mt. Hood Highway. Plank

remnants from the Barlow Toll Road are visible farther along the trail after two stream crossings.

Further explorations of the Barlow Road are possible from Barlow Pass off Oregon 35. Follow the sign to the Sno-Park and the Pacific Crest Trail where a large sign marks the Barlow Road, FS 3530. You can pedal along the old road or explore the trails that branch off from it, such as the Pioneer Women's Grave.

More long stretches of wagon road can be found at the Santiam Wagon Road where there are 19.5 miles of restored trail to explore. Unlike the Barlow Road, the Santiam Road built from 1866 to 1868 took settlers away from the Willamette Valley to the gold mines of Eastern Oregon and Idaho. The Santiam Road also has an important place in automotive history. In 1905 Dwight Huss drove the first car over the Santiam Road, astonishing the tollgate keeper near Sweet Home. In fact, vintage automobiles are still allowed on some portions of the old road.

Paralleling U.S. 20, the Santiam Wagon Road originally ran between Sweet Home and Camp Polk, a few miles north of Sisters. Today you can follow the wagon route from Mountain House just off of U.S. 20 to Fish Lake on Oregon 126. The most rugged section of the road is found along the South Santiam River about 23 miles east of Sweet Home near the Mountain House Restaurant.

Farther along the road near the Fish Lake Work Center you can visit an historic gravesite, dating back to 1875, where a mother and daughter were buried after an ill-fated winter crossing of Santiam Pass. This section of the road can be reached from the Hackleman Old Growth Trailhead off U.S. 20 and FS 2673.

An article on wagon trails would not be complete without the Oregon Trail. According to Diane Pritchard of the Bureau of Land Management's Vale District,

Trail Etiquette

Respect the trails and other users by following the trail etiquette suggested by the International Mountain Biking Association:

- Ride only on open trails. The trails listed here were open to mountain bikes when this article was written, but always confirm trail openings.
- Leave no trace. Walk your bike around log remnants and boggy areas. Riding singletrack trails after a heavy rain can result in serious damage to the trail.
- Control your bicycle.
- Always yield the trail to other users.
- Never spook animals.
- Plan ahead by bringing extra food, water, clothing, and bike repair gear.
- ALWAYS WEAR A HELMET! □

—E.F.

most of the Oregon Trail has been paved; but it is still possible to find some dirt road segments for mountain biking. Near Vale you can pedal the Alkali Springs section to Farewell Bend for about 20 miles roundtrip of dirt road. Alkali Springs, also called Sulfur Springs, was the lunch stop for the wagons as they left the Malheur River crossing at what is today Vale. Many of the pioneers and their livestock left this “nooning spot” needing another break after the sulfur in the water made them sick.

There are many other lesser-known trails to explore such as the Mt. Hebo Pioneer Trail, an old wagon road unearthed only about 20 years ago by a forest service employee. This moderately difficult mountain bike ride located in the Siuslaw National Forest was originally an Indian trail when settlers first began using it in the 1850s as a route to the Willamette Valley. It was abandoned in 1882 when a better wagon road was built. Located on FS 14 off Oregon 22, it is possible to do a loop ride by combining the Pioneer Trail with the Mt. Hebo Road.

The Minnehaha Trail located in the Rogue River National Forest allows you to cycle the same route used by miners in the 1860s traveling to the John Day valley gold mines. Located on FS 6530 off Oregon 230, this fairly easy 3-mile trail occasionally overlooks

Minnehaha Creek and winds through old-growth forest.

Trout Creek Trail, an 9-mile doubletrack trail, takes cyclists and hikers along the Deschutes River past Mecca Flat. A post office and railroad station were once located here, and the Madras-Warm Springs Agency wagon road

crossed the river at this point. The trailhead is found at the Trout Creek Recreation Area near Madras.

Of all the historic trails that I have explored, my mind keeps going back to the Tenderfoot Wagon Trail. It certainly doesn't have the name recognition of the 2000-mile Oregon Trail, but that makes it all the more personal to me. Bumping into that log made the 19th century feel closer, like I was the first person to discover the old trail. So the next time you take your mountain bike out for a spin, consider one of these trails or research another historic trail to explore. I guarantee that you will have a new appreciation for Oregon's history and the people that survived the wagon roads. □

Erin Fanning and her husband travel full time in their RV. Their travels have taken them from Sedona's red rocks to Lake Superior's rugged coast.

Eric W. Valentine of La Grande is a circuit judge for Union and Wallowa counties. He has served as a Boy Scout leader since 1982 and takes many of his photos on scout outings.

Finding the Trails

Tenderfoot Wagon Trail—from Joseph drive 8 miles east on Oregon 350. Turn right onto Forest Service Road 39 and continue for another 9.5 miles to Salt Creek Summit. Park here. Contact: Wallowa-Whitman National Forest (541-426-4978).

Pioneer Bridle Trail-Barlow Road—from Rhododendron drive east on U.S. 26 for about a mile. The parking area marked by an Oregon Trail sign is on the south side of U.S. 26. Contact: Mt. Hood National Forest (503-622-7674 headquarters or 1-800-622-4822 Mt. Hood Information Center).

Santiam Wagon Road—from Sweet Home drive east on U.S. 20 for about 23 miles. Parking is available near the Mountain House Restaurant. There are several other trailheads for the Santiam Road along U.S. 20. Contact: Willamette National Forest, Sweet Home Ranger District (541-367-5168).

Oregon Trail: Alkali Springs Section—from Vale drive north on U.S. 26 for about 5 miles. Turn right onto 5th Avenue East, the main gravel road, for approximately 5-1/2 miles to Alkali Springs marked by an interpretive sign. Park here. Contact: BLM-Vale District (541-473-3144)

Mt. Hebo Pioneer Trail—from Hebo drive east on Oregon 22 then almost immediately turn left onto FS 14. Continue for another 4.5 miles to the Hebo Lake Campground. Contact: Siuslaw National Forest (541-740-7000).

Minnehaha Trail—from Union Creek, drive north on Oregon 230 for 12 miles. Turn right onto FS 6530. After a mile turn right onto FS Road 800 and park at the trailhead. Contact: Rogue River National Forest (541-858-2200).

Trout Creek Trail—from Madras, drive north for 2.5 miles on U.S. 97. Turn left on Cora Lane and continue for another 4 miles, bearing left when the main road turns right. In Gateway turn right onto Clemens Drive. Continue another 4.9 miles to the trailhead. Contact: BLM-Prineville District (541-416-6700). □

—E.F.