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Review of *Wagon Wheel Kitchens: Food on the Oregon Trail* By Jacqueline Williams

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Wagon Wheel Kitchens: Food on the Oregon Trail. By Jacqueline Williams. Foreword by Sam'l P. Arnold. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993. Foreword, preface, maps, photographs, epilogue, notes, further reading, index. xxvi + 222 pp. \$29.95 cloth; \$14.95 paper.

Wagon Wheel Kitchens is one of those marvelous combinations: a book that is both a valuable piece of scholarship and a delight for the casual reader. Chapters include typical inventories of supplies and equipment for those crossing the continent by wagon, food gathered along the route, and methods of preparing food within the narrow confines of time, supplies, and equipment. Organizationally, I first thought the final chapter, devoted to cookery on the Fourth of July, was a curious focus, but I wound up convinced that the festival atmosphere of the day, the important context of that date for the Trail (about half way through the trip, spent at Independence Rock in central Wyoming, if hopes were realized, and, well into the supplies inventory), and generous sources (the date and location drew an entry from even the least enthusiastic diarists) demand special attention.

Williams uses original texts liberally—diaries, letters, contemporary published accounts, cookbooks—and a method I appreciate: voices from the past, rather than a modern voice telling us what voices from the past said. The book's illustrations and photos significantly add to the reader's understanding and appreciation of the severe demands of cookery on the Trail.

This book is not without its problems. The breadth of some of Williams's conclusions is tenuous since almost all of her sources are from those who were travelling the Trail by wagon. We cannot conclude that for those who crossed on horseback or with handcarts, for example, "Baking bread was a necessary daily activity." Indeed, "baking" bread almost inevitably became too demanding a prospect even for those travelling by wagon; ovens were often the first pieces of baggage discarded as fuel became scarce and weight a crucial

consideration. (Fresh bread was then fried in the much lighter, far more versatile frying pan or “spider.”) Some travellers, as a matter of fact, never prepared bread, baked or fried, relying instead on more convenient, if less palatable, hardtack biscuits purchased at a point of departure—usually Kansas City or St. Louis.

Such minor reservations, however, do not distract from the overall excellence of this important resource and thoroughly enjoyable book. The only major complaint I have about *Wagon Wheel Kitchens*, in fact, is that I wish I had written it.

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