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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.** Jacqueline Williams. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993. xxvi+222 pp. Illustrations, foreword, preface, epilogue, notes, index. \$29.95 cloth (ISBN 0-7006-0609-2), \$14.95 paper (ISBN 0-7006-0619-6).

By the end of her wagon journey west, Phoebe Judson recalled, "all of the little delicacies we brought . . . from home were gone, . . . the thought of a 'baked kidney' or 'pink-eyed' potatoes caused the tears to roll down my face" (p. 2). For Judson and other emigrants, daily life on the Oregon Trail revolved around food; the journey often took six months and meant more than seven hundred meals cooked out or eaten cold, in all kinds of weather. Food historian Jacqueline Williams sees these meals as a vital part of the history of the overland travellers. Her *Wagon Wheel Kitchens* takes readers through stocking up; choosing wagons, utensils and storage containers; and preparing and cooking trailside meals. Williams makes a number of detours along the way, discussing such things as the origins of Herkimer Cheese; sagebrush as fragrance and fuel; and the history of Fourth of July feasting. But her emphasis throughout is on the journey and its foods, as far as Fort Hall in Idaho (west of there short supplies kept the cooking focused on survival, and meals were uninteresting, even to the emigrants).

Decisions made in the settlements determined culinary success along the trail. Opportunities to resupply were infrequent and expensive; though the emigrants hunted, fished, and harvested wild fruits, berries, and onions, they could not count on plentiful results, especially after thousands of foraging overlanders had passed before them. Improvisation was essential. Dried and condensed foods offered light-weight variations for trail menus; "portable soups," meat "biscuits," extract of lemon and peppermint, and even dried pumpkin went into wagon pantries. A few heavy canned goods were usually tucked away for special occasions. Inventive travellers brought fresh eggs (one man packed them in oats); used leavening substitutes from soda springs; and made ice cream in the mountain snowpacks, using sweetened condensed milk and, for flavoring, peppermint, "vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, peach, sassafras, gooseberry, and quince" (p. 177).

The emigrants' preoccupation with food was a necessity and a way of relieving monotony. It was also a reflection of their social values. The women usually were responsible for all aspects of the cooking, from fuel gathering to washing up. They were expected to produce tasty, varied menus day after day, with dwindling supplies, under extremely difficult conditions. Rest days and holidays offered no relief; they were celebrated with food.

Fourth of July, especially, called for elaborate dinners with several varieties of main dishes, relishes, pies and cakes. These feasts testified to cooperation and community strength as families pooled resources to make these picnics memorable.

*Wagon Wheel Kitchens* is based on firsthand accounts, original newspapers, and cookbooks, and is well-annotated with a good bibliography and index. Williams' side-trips make the book a little disjointed at times, and I would like more analysis of gender roles and the trailside kitchens. But these are minor matters. Jacqueline Williams fully meets her goal of enhancing our understanding of the emigrants and the culinary habits of their society. *Wagon Wheel Kitchens* is a fine little book and an essential ingredient in the study of the Oregon Trail. **Betsy Downey**, *History Department, Gonzaga University, Spokane, Washington.*