

Derral & Sheila Sommerfeld – Classic Reproduction Wagon Works

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

As the sun sets over the pastoral Flint Hills, a remarkable scene comes into view: Across the hillside comes a set of covered wagons drawn by horses. Is this a sight from a century and a half ago? No, it is happening in modern times, where the Symphony in the Flint Hills featured covered wagons driven by a man with roots in rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Derral and Sheila Sommerfeld are the owners of Classic Reproduction Wagon Works. Their wagons have been part of the Symphony in the Flint Hills program and they still provide wagon rides at this annual event and elsewhere, plus building and restoring wagons of various kinds.

Derral Sommerfeld grew up near Newton. He has always worked with horses and wagons. His grandfather had a two-seated horsedrawn surrey. For years, his grandparents' family farmed with horses where they lived west of the rural community of Cassoday, population 127 people. Now, that's rural.

While Derral was in high school, his father got a team of Belgian horses. Derral has maintained a lifelong interest in horses and wagons. He met and married Sheila and eventually they moved to Tecumseh.

Derral got involved with the Flint Hills Overland Wagon Train. For 32 years, this wagon train offered authentic covered wagon rides through the Flint Hills of Kansas. Thanks to his skills in driving teams of horses, Derral helped with the wagon train for three years before becoming President of the organization for 25 years. Sheila helped cook meals for the wagon train.

"We enjoyed sharing with people from all over," Derral said. "We had people out there who had never seen the stars."

In 1997, a girl scout group was wanting wagons in which to sleep so Derral built some wagons for them. As demand grew for such items, he and Sheila created their own business known as Classic Reproduction Wagon Works. The business provides wagon rides and also does wagon building and restoration. For example, they built a covered wagon for the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve near Strong City, and restored a wagon and a sleigh for Old Prairie Town – Ward Meade Park in Topeka.

"Often what we get is in pieces," Sheila said. "Everything we can't get that's original, we make ourselves." That means lots of detailed handwork, such as creating something in a gas forge or painting and sanding on pieces of wood.

The Sommerfelds do lots of wagon rides for parades, weddings, or other special events. For example, the Penwell-Gable Funeral Home in Topeka frequently has the Sommerfelds pull a horse-drawn hearse on their behalf in neighborhood parades. For years, the Sommerfelds have provided wagon rides at the Symphony in the Flint Hills. "One day we gave 1700 people wagon rides at the Symphony," Derral said. Wow.

Their horses are gentle giants. The Sommerfelds have a team of white Percheron mares, a team of blonde sorrel Belgians, and a black-and-white half shire gelding.

Recently the Sommerfelds acquired a white vis a vis, which is a pretty carriage that many brides like for their wedding rides.

One of their restoration projects was a 1920s John Deere wagon. A woman had inherited the wagon and her husband wanted to have it restored as a surprise gift for her. They were moving from Texas to Maryland. The husband dropped it off to the Sommerfelds in Kansas.

When it came time to pick it up, the husband told his wife that they needed to take the truck and trailer to pick up a sportscar for him. But to his wife's surprise, it wasn't a sportscar that they picked up. Instead, it was the family wagon, beautifully restored in John Deere green. "That was the most thoughtful thing he'd ever done," the wife said.

For more information, go to www.classicwagonworks.com.

As the sun sets across the Flint Hills, a covered wagon train comes into view, featuring wagons restored and driven by Derral Sommerfeld of Classic Reproduction Wagon Works. We commend Derral and Sheila Sommerfeld for making a difference by preserving and restoring this part of our heritage, so that more generations can see the good guys ride into the sunset.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.