

History: Wagons had many uses in Tahoe

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It is a relic, a commemoration of life lived in an earlier time. It sits today, unused, too old to fulfill its original purpose yet admired by all. It is weathered and broken but it has survived, a descendant of centuries of carriage technology. And, if we observe it carefully, it can tell us many things about life in the Sierras (sic) in the 19th century.



Wagons mounted on axels or platforms that connected the wheels, have been a part of western culture since 1500 B.C. Freight or farm wagons, many built on designs brought to this country by immigrants, were essential to the American economy in the 18th and 19th century. Open or covered, drawn by teams of horses or oxen, they could carry tons of produce, building materials or equipment. Early in the 19th century brake levers and elliptical springs for the seats were introduced. Both aided transportation on rugged western roads.

There were many types and refinements of wheeled vehicles in the 19th century; freight, farm, platform and spring wagons, buckboards, surreys, stagecoaches, conestogas and many styles of buggies. The wagon that sits today outside our Museum was a part of the summer dairy operations at the Celio Ranch in Meyers. It carried butter, hay, milk, feed, lumber, fence posts and more. As a working vehicle it was not built for comfort, though it does have a brake and springs for its seat. It has standard steel-banded wheels, 12-spoked, 44 inches in diameter in the front, 14-spoked and 54 inches in the rear.

When its usefulness was over, it was purchased by Marjorie Springmeyer and loaned to the museum for preservation and display. We are fortunate to have such a reminder of the early days at Tahoe.

Though built neither for beauty nor for speed, our wagon has become an object of our admiration and wonder. It has its own patina of artless distinction, simple and basic, and beauty that has grown out of its history and utility.