

# Wagon Train veteran embraces history



Davey “Doc” Wisner and Denise Sloan Smart are veterans on the annual Wagon Train. Photo/Projections Photography

**By Denise Sloan Smart**

Who inspires you to do crazy things? Such as riding on an annual wagon train for 30 years.

First would be my 4-H teacher who gave me a love of sewing at the age of 9, plus an incredible high school history teacher. Then my dad, who allowed me to drive alone 45 minutes each way every Saturday for a year into San Francisco at the age of 16 to a fashion design college. Years later, a crazy guy named Davey “Doc” Wisner mentored me on re-living American history in authentic attire to honor our California heritage.

At an early age, I began collecting and re-creating vintage

clothing that ranges from the 1840s to the 1920s. Wearing any of the elaborate garments, you'll find me volunteering at living history events and demonstrations from Great Gatsby to Gold Rush Days to Wagon Trains. I also demonstrate the delicate art of silk ribbon embroidery that was used as adornment on pillows, clothing and accessories of all manners, a craft that was immensely popular from the early 1800s to the late 1920s. I make all of my authentic 1800s garments.

It was the Highway 50 Wagon Train that gave me "gold fever" 30 years ago, when I was an editor at the *Tahoe Daily Tribune*.

I was on assignment to write about the 37th annual Highway 50 Wagon Train. I rode with Wisner and never stopped.

For the first couple of years it was a work assignment that usually stopped about the time the train rolled into Strawberry Lodge's meadow for the halfway layover day, and I'd go back to work. By the third year I used my vacation days to ride the whole trip and the next thing I knew I volunteered to help the club with marketing and publicity.

I was honored as Highway 50 Wagon Train Queen in 1997.

A friend and former Highway 50 board member, Lynn Friesen, gave me an original 1850s dress that had some tiny stitching under the bustle. When I was in the process of constructing a pattern from the dress to make one for me, I did some searching and found there was a tiny pocket for a derringer hidden under the many layers of fabric. That was pretty exciting.

Getting involved in Highway 50 Wagon Train 30 years ago turned out to be a perfect combination of my love of history, historical clothing and sewing skills, and the desire to bring interesting, family friendly events to Lake Tahoe.

Those of us who possess a deep passion for Wagon Train keep this on the road for future generations so they will never

lose our pioneer heritage.

Many of the Highway 50 pioneers and mountain men inspired me to keep coming back, but none more than Wiser. I'm so blessed to have been mentored and trained by him. He taught me that this "moving living history event" deserved total respect from start to finish. Once we leave home for Wagon Train, until the day it's over we never change out of authentic attire, no matter what. You will never catch either of us in modern anything.

After riding together for so many decades, people ask, "Are Davey and Denise married?"

I always answer, "Of course, but not to each other." However, we did create "The Firm of Smart & Wiser".

Even though this is my 30th year on Highway 50 Wagon Train, it's not old hat. Every year is just as exciting as the first. It's not always pure fun, but it's always an adventure.

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**Notes:**

- More info about Wagon Train is available **online**.