



News from: The Oakland Public Library

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Covered Wagon Replica, a Symbol of African American Pioneers, on Display at African American Museum & Library

Oakland, CA – Sacramento State Professor Shirley Moore’s research on African Americans who took part in the overland migration of 1841-1869 has inspired a group of people to create a living example of that time – a handmade, full-size replica of a covered wagon.

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The project, **Sweet Freedom’s Plains: African Americans on the Overland Trails 1841-1869**, was requested by the National Park Service. Moore says not much was known about this group of pioneers, and she’s reached out to their descendents to learn more about them. “I uncovered so many wonderful stories about who they were and why they came west,” Moore says.

One of those stories involves Hiram Young, a freed slave who owned and operated a renowned wagon-making company in Independence, Mo., prior to the Civil War. Young employed slaves and freemen, paying all of them the same wage and allowing the slaves to buy their freedom. His family also operated a farm that grew the foodstuffs the pioneers would need on their trip.

“Young cornered the market in Independence on producing wagons,” Moore says. “One of his contemporaries said that you could look out over the prairie, and as far as the eye could see you saw Hiram Young wagons going west.”

Moore’s project was an inspiration to her husband, Joe. “In reading the kind of material she was coming across, I was amazed at the stories she was telling,” he says. “I wanted to do something visual. Something to tie people to the project.”

So he decided to build a full-size covered wagon, enlisting the help of William Pettis, a horse breeder and founder of the 10th Cavalry Buffalo Soldiers reenactors.

“We didn’t have any blueprints for this thing,” Pettis says. “We had sketches of what they looked like, so a lot of it was like, ‘Well, let’s try this and see how it works.’”

Smaller than a Conestoga wagon, the bright orange and green replica is basically a large, covered farm wagon, 12 feet by 5½ feet, which was more typically used by pioneers.

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African American
Pioneers, on Display at
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Museum & Library

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Page Two

The undercarriage is authentic, made in the 1800s by P. Schuttler's Chicago Wagons and found through the Hansen Wheel and Wagon Shop in South Dakota. The wagon's bed – the base, side boards, frame for the canvas top, and various storage boxes – was handmade.

Moore and Pettis were helped in their yearlong effort by several students from Sacramento State's Woodson College, volunteers from the Center for Sacramento History, and Al Holland, a lecturer in Sacramento State's History Department.

Vanessa Beals, a Health Science major at Sacramento State, was one of the volunteers, helping wherever she could, whether painting or hammering nails into place. She got involved in the effort through the Cooper-Woodson College Enhancement Program, and has enjoyed learning the history behind the project. "After learning about the journey the pioneers took, I want to know more about it," she says.

More support came from about 20 local and state organizations, including Sacramento State's Center for California Studies, Los Rios College Federation of Teachers, the *Sacramento Observer*, Wells Fargo and the California State Parks Foundation.

The Sacramento chapter of the Teamsters National Black Caucus has assumed the duty of transporting the wagon to various display locations the next few months. The wagon is currently at the African American Museum and Library in Oakland, will return to Sacramento for Gold Rush Days over Labor Day weekend, and in October will go on permanent display at Marshall Gold Discovery Park in Coloma.

Shirley Moore hopes the displays will generate more information on the African-American westward migration. People who are descendants of these pioneers, have information or materials about them, or items such as letters, diaries, journals or artifacts are invited to contact the Black Overland Trails Wagon Project at (916) 278-5363 or www.csus.edu/cooper.

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