

A PIECE OF LAROCQUE

by Tom
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In reference to history

This weekend will bring the return of Wagon Days, a celebration of Ketchum's historic past, rooted in the mining days of more than a century ago.

It was a different era, when you could strike a business deal by shaking a man's hand, slapping him on the back, and buying him a drink at the Pioneer Saloon. Unfortunately, as this practice caught on, the terms of business deals were routinely forgotten. Lawsuits proliferated. Soon local businessmen agreed to go "on the wagon" during daytime business hours. Hence the term, "Wagon Days."

Large, authentic-looking wooden wagons were built to lend character to the newly-named holidays. During the rest of the year, the wagons proved reasonably useful for hauling ore from the mines surrounding Ketchum.

Although lead, silver and zinc eventually prevailed, the first ore to be hauled in the wagons was molybdenum. Central Idaho became a major supplier of the nation's molybdenum. Ketchum itself soon boasted the world's largest stockpile of molybdenum. More and more molybdenum was accumulated daily until someone asked, "What's molybdenum?" Nobody knew, and much confusion followed. Miners decided to stop producing the stuff until someone could find a use for it. Today, Idaho is again a leader in molybdenum production, with the Cyprus-Thompson Creek mine operating near

Challis.

Each of the awesome wagons was driven by a team of horses and mules. A driver steered the animals with long leather straps. At first these were known as "long leather straps," but then someone decided they would be collectively known as "jerklines." Inevitably, wagon drivers came to be known as "jerks." It is unknown how many young men were dissuaded from taking up the profession by this unfortunate change in terminology.

Ketchum endured as a sleepy mining and sheep ranching town until the 1930s. At that time, Averell Harriman of the Union Pacific Railroad Company commissioned an Austrian count to locate a sleepy mining and sheep ranching town out West where the railroad could build a ski resort. The count tirelessly scouted locations in Utah, Oregon and California, but the news he wired back to Harriman was invariably discouraging: "No sheep"; not sleepy enough."

Finally the count discovered Ketchum, and the new resort was built. Celebrities flocked to Sun Valley to ski.

Men in those days spent a good deal of time leaning upon wet change in local saloons. Only recently have physicians theorized that this may have caused the outbreak of arthritic elbow that hit Ketchum in the 1940s. Men took to rubbing their elbows for relief. This apparently became a fashionable social activity. Ernest Hemingway

rubbed elbows with local cowboys, according to various historical accounts; Gary Cooper rubbed elbows with Basque shepherders.

Elbow-rubbing became the primary form of social intercourse between non-celebrities and the jet set, one famous film producer later recalled. "Other than that, we wanted no part of the local people," he said.

In the 1970s, an eccentric, hard-of-hearing confections magnate arrived in Ketchum early one September. The man seemed troubled. His company was coming out with a new line of ice cream, but he had no idea what to call it.

"What to call it, what to call it?" the old man muttered as he wandered the streets of Ketchum. As fate would have it, the Wagon Days parade was passing by. Someone heard him ask, "What to call it?" and replied, "Wagon Days."

"Haagen Daaz?"

But this is getting silly. I'll close this column by reminding readers that midnight tonight, Aug. 29, is the deadline for entries for the Official Hailey City Song Contest (see Aug. 15 column for details). So far the response has been underwhelming. At this point it appears that any serious entry will be a sure winner. But if Hailey residents are too apathetic to come up with their own official song, then they can bloody well do without one, as far as I'm concerned.