

## *Historic ride could become yearly tourist event*

# Covered wagon train to travel Suwannee River route

**Susan K. Lamb, Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park**

**LIVE OAK, FL** - The wagon train of five handmade, covered wagons, each drawn by mules, will move slowly along its historic trip alongside the historic Suwannee River. It will attract attention every inch of the way as 10 riders on horseback accompany this unique wagon train from the headwaters of the Suwannee River in the Okefenokee Swamp at Griffis Fish Camp north of Fargo, Ga. to Suwannee, Fla., where the Suwannee River ends. It all begins Feb. 25.

"It will probably be the longest wagon train ride ever in this part of the country," said wagon master John Paul Schneider of Live Oak, Florida.

It's been a life long dream of Schneider's to make this trip. But, he had to wait until Suwannee River Water Management District (SRWMD) purchased enough land along the Suwannee to allow the wagon trail access to the greatest majority of its banks. The wagon train will take the river route when possible but will have to travel on many public highways some of the time.

"It's been kinda in my mind for the last 20 years," said Schneider, a retired feed store owner, well known horse, wagon and mule enthusiastic and veteran wagon master who participated in The Last Cattle Drive in 1995 that traveled 60 miles through Central Florida, winding its way across five major ranches. "The late George Murrah and Billy Summers and I would ride together and talk about this for years that one of these days we would get together and ride the long ride." As the years wore on, both Murrah and Summers passed away without realizing their part of the dream, but Schneider said he kept dreaming for himself and his friends. "After I retired, it was real strong in my mind...I told Jerry Scarborough (SRWMD director) that as soon as they had enough land along the river, I wanted to do it." That day will arrive Feb. 25 when the covered wagons, wagon masters, horses and mules will assemble at Griffis Fish Camp in the Okefenokee Swamp, the headwaters of the Suwannee River, and history will begin to unfold its unique story about the dreams of three men finally coming true after years of hoping and more than a year of planning.

Schneider and his mule, Mary, will lead the way with Schneider's one-mule wagon. "We'll have a special event that day for the opening ceremony, and then when we get mounted up and everyone is ready to go, we'll have a prayer and ask the Lord's safety for the wagon train," Schneider said. "We'll do that every morning and evening."

Although anyone can visit the wagon train during the trip, those who can't will not have to dream about it...they can see it on RFD-TV in the near future. Best of America by Horseback TV series

with Tom Seay is expected to be along for the ride, recording every aspect of this richly historic event on film for future generations and wagoneer wannabes.

Best of America by Horseback ([info@bestofamericabyhorseback.com](mailto:info@bestofamericabyhorseback.com)) and the Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park ([musicliveshere.com](http://musicliveshere.com)) in Live Oak, Fla., and RO Ranch Equestrian Park Inc. ([RMC@srwmd.org](mailto:RMC@srwmd.org)) in Mayo, Fla. are sponsoring the wagon train. Each sponsor is participating in various ways.

Why make such a grueling trip? "It's the challenge of it, plus remembering what our ancestors did and how much easier our job is than our ancestors," Schneider suggested.

Participation in the wagon train is by invitation only this year with no vacancies left. Next year, however, may be another story, Schneider said. If this first one is the success he and others believe it will be, anyone who would like to have this experience could become a paying participant for future rides. But, that's getting the horse, or rather the mule, before the wagon.

Evenings around the campfire for wagon train participants will be a time to relax, rest up from the hard days, eat a little grub cooked over a permitted fire, listen to some fiddling', mountain dulcimer by Betty Schneider and Peggy Raulerson and perhaps a few other instruments, the likes of which probably would have been on early wagon trains driven from South Carolina into the South Georgia and North Florida areas in the early 1800s as these areas began to be settled.

During the ride, Peggy Raulerson will be completing a song about the wagon train she started writing a while back. Participants will be asked along the way to help complete a verse or two to have the song wrapped up by the end of the trip.

The wagon train will travel about 18-20 miles per day, breaking camp early and hitting the road by around 9 a.m. each day. "We can average about 3.5 miles an hour, hopefully," Schneider suggests. "We will be as close to the river as we can be and will camp on the river every night," he said.

"The people have welcomed us into the campgrounds like Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park in White Springs, Florida; Hamilton County has really been nice, plus the law enforcement officers in all the counties where we need to cross bridges have been very nice," Schneider stated. He said the wagon train must pass through five Florida Agriculture Inspection Stations along the way and have all health permits needed for the animals.

The wagon train will stop at Stephen Foster State Park in Hamilton County, move into Suwannee County, spend a weekend at the Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park where Schneider said he's sure some of the wagon train people will be part of the pickin' and grinning' that goes on there. At this stop, the wagons will be on display for several days. Then, it's into Madison County at Ellaville, a night at the farm of Lyndon Fortner in Suwannee County, another night at historic Charles Springs in Suwannee County, then on to the RO Ranch in Lafayette County where there will be special festivities before a stop at Hart Springs, then various other stops along the way to Suwannee, where a celebration honoring the completion of the trip will be held.

During the RO Ranch stopover, there will be a dedication March 8 of the new buildings at that facility off SR 51 in Cook's Hammock. The public is invited to attend this event.

The public will be invited to stop by wherever the wagon train spends nights and weekends, ask questions, take a look around and be a part of this history-making trek.

Schneider's longtime friend and ride devotee, Bob Raulerson, also of Suwannee County, Fla., will be along on this ride as he has for the past 10 years. A retired state game and wildlife officer, Raulerson is living the good life these days, enjoying his dreams also. "I was always just as busy as could be being a possum' cop, so I never did this before I moved here," he said quietly. Now, he and his wife, Peggy, go along with Schneider on many rides with their Missouri Fox Trotter Walking Horses. "There hasn't been a ride like this since at least the early 1800s," Raulerson said, noting he can find no record of any ride of this nature along the Suwannee River. "We know people who were here in the 1900s, and they don't know of anyone who did it." Raulerson said.

"What will be unique about all this is that other than nobody else having done it, it will show our love for our animals and the nature part of it...the wildlife...and we will be out there in their territory," Schneider pointed out. "We will be out there among them...we do that all the time," he said. "It's a family-oriented thing, our children and grandchildren have grown up riding mules, horses and wagons with us. Hopefully, my 15-year-old grandson Jake Jerkins will be right there beside me, riding on a horse," Schneider said of the trip.

Schneider, Raulerson and others who will be taking this dream trip have been getting their mules ready since early January. "We have worked all of January and most of February to get them in shape," Schneider advised. The wagoners have been "testing the waters" during this time as they have driven most of the proposed route in preparation for the big day. "Bob and I have been out on about every foot of it so far," Schneider said as Raulerson nodded in agreement.

When asked about the cost of such a trip, Schneider and Raulerson both prefer not to be accountable. "This is our hobby, we don't put a price tag on the hobby," Schneider said. "It's unbelievable the amount of expense...\$50,000 for a truck plus \$50,000 for a trailer...it's a labor of love more than anything else," Raulerson said.

Schneider said the cost would skyrocket if their time was figured into it. But, they're not about to put a price tag on dreams, and besides, Schneider points out, there are more than 72,000 people in Florida involved in the equestrian business so you could figure the wagon train as an economic booster.

For more information about the wagon train, contact the Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park at 386-364-1683.



**Riding is their life:** John Paul Schneider, left, grandson Jake Jerkins, center, and former RO Ranch owner Frank Schulte on a previous trail ride. These veteran trail riders will all be part of the Suwannee River Wagon Train as it makes its historic trek from the headwaters of the Suwannee River to the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico where the Suwannee River ends. - Photo: Submitted



**Preparation is the key:** Wagon master John Paul Schneider of Live Oak, Fla. and his two mules, Mary, pulling the wagon, and Beth, his riding mule, have been a team for many years. They're getting in shape for the beginning Feb. 25 of a historic covered wagon train trip from the Okefenokee Swamp in South Georgia to the Gulf of Mexico as they follow the entire length of the fabled Suwannee River. - Photo: Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park

#### Wagon Train schedule

**Feb. 24 - Stage at Griffis Fish Camp north of Fargo, Ga at the headwaters of the Suwannee River at the Okefenokee Swamp**

**Feb. 25 - Day 1 - Griffis Fish Camp to Fargo, Ga. 18 miles - Camp at Fortner Hunt Camp**

**Feb. 26 - Day 2 - Fargo, Ga. To Turner Bridge 15-16 miles - Camp at Turner Bridge**

**Feb. 27 - Day 3 - Turner Bridge to Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park/ White Springs, Fla.**

**Feb. 28 - Day 4 - Stephen Foster to Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park 25 miles - Camp at Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park, Live Oak, Fla.**

**Feb. 28-March 2-Day 5-7 - Rest Days**

**March 3 - Day 8 - Spirit of the Suwannee to Gibson Park**

**March 4-Day 9 - Gibson Park to Suwannee River State Park/Twin Rivers State Forest, Ellaville, Fla.**

**March 5 - Day 10 - Suwannee River State Park/Twin River State Forest to Fortner Farm, Live Oak, Fla.**

**March 6 - Day 11 - Fortner Farm - Hal Adams Bridge, Mayo, Fla.**

**March 7 - Day 12 - Hal Adams Bridge to RO Ranch, Mayo, Fla.**

**March 8- Day 13 - Groundbreaking public event at RO Ranch, Mayo, Fla.**

**March 8 - Day 11-16 - Ride at RO Ranch and surrounding area**

**March 12 - Day 17 - Shuttle from RO Ranch to Hart Springs, Bell, Fla.**

**March 13 - Day 18 - Hart Springs to Yellow Jacket campground near Suwannee, Fla., 20 miles**

**March 14 - Day 19 - Rest Day**

**March 15 - Day 20 - Last day of historic trip - Yellow Jacket to Suwannee, Fla. 16 miles - end of trip celebration**