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Teams find the lighter side of hardship at Oregon Trail Live

*By Joce DeWitt
Statesman Journal*

Those at the Willamette Heritage Center on Saturday were brought back to a time when surviving meant hunting for game, building a sturdy wagon and avoiding dysentery.

Thirteen teams of four took part in the second annual Oregon Trail Live event, meeting a host of challenges that gave them a taste of the trials and hardships that pioneers had to overcome as they trekked from Missouri to Oregon.

The event is loosely based on the Oregon Trail computer game that captured the hearts of children — now in their 20s and 30s. For some adults, the event provided an opportunity to escape back to their childhoods.

“It is more of a 20- and 30-something event,” said event organizer Kelly Williams Brown, although some teams were composed of families and young children. “Someone last year described it as adult summer camp.”

Williams Brown, in full pioneer attire, said she was pleased with Saturday’s turnout. Several things organizers learned from the first event made this year’s a little better.

“We have different partners, we swapped up some challenges, made more effort with the live music,” Williams Brown said. “It went a lot smoother this year.”

Event contributors included the Willamette Heritage Center at the Mill and the Statesman Journal. Other partners were Culture Shock Community Project, Courthouse Fitness, Willamette University, Salem Summit Co., the Cherry City Derby Girls and Franklin’s Bottle Shop.

One challenge, back by popular demand, was “Bury the Dead,” in which “Reverend” Chuck Magee, representing f/Stop Fitzgerald’s Public House, oversaw the “burial” of imaginary team members who were lost to disease on the trail.

A group called Dysentery Delight with members from Salem mourned the loss of “Donald” and buried him in the patch of dirt.

Dysentery Delight received a gold star and prizes at many of the challenges for their enthusiasm.

“We’ve been having a lot of fun, shooting some possum, making our boat,” said Dysentery Delight member Rick Saffeele. “All in all it’s been a jolly good day.”

A team from Portland called Hunt or Die wore matching T-shirts printed with the symbol F8 — the keyboard command for “hunt” in the Oregon Trail computer game. They heard about the event last year and decided to try it.

“I played the game as a kid,” said Hunt or Die team member Kean Backus, who remembered having to wait in line at the library as a kid to play the computer game. “It brought back nostalgia.”

After completing challenges, teams rafted through a river — a straight shot through a bunch of pool

noodle-wielding derby girls — and asked trivia questions (answers were posted around the heritage center).

The Willamette Heritage Center hosts many family events, but Oregon Trail Live is Kathleen Schulte's favorite.

In spite of its goofy challenges and silly prizes, Oregon Trail Live promotes the state's history, which is one of the heritage center's priorities, said Schulte, the center's education coordinator.

"The Oregon Trail is part of Oregon's story," she said. "People had to meet those challenges."
