

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN LEAMON

August 6, 1996 (draft #3 – edited 4/20/14 - Ross)
- after Mary's edits of 8/24/13)

Interviewer: Harold Smith

HS: I am interviewing John Leamon, who was one of the founders of the Trails Head chapter of OTCA (OCTA) and remembers some of that early time. We are talking about this. It's Tuesday, August 6th. Harold Smith is asking John about his recollections of that. John, just to get us started, tell us a little about yourself, your name, where you were born, your parents, where you grew up, that sort of thing.

JL: My name is John Leamon. I was born back in Indiana November 12th, 1924. I grew up in Tippecanoe County, lived there all my life until I went into military service. That was sort of typical back in those days. I got out of military service in 1947, fighter bombing, dive bombing, that sort of thing. Then the GI bill gave me the opportunity to go to college. Otherwise I never would have gone to college. I graduated in aeronautical engineering out of Purdue, a 172-hour course. Anyway, I pursued engineering practice. After I got out of college I ended up coming out working for Westinghouse for a period of time, six months in fact. Right after Christmas beginning in 1951 I was an aeronautical engineer with TWA. I worked with them until my retirement in 1987.

HS: Tell me about your family.

JL: Okay. I have a wife. She was born in the same year that I was. We have four children, two girls and two boys. They are all out and have their own families now. I don't know what to say about them. You could talk about your family all day, you know. Never get tired of it.

HS: When were you married?

JL: We were married in May of 1952. We had our first child in September of 1953, another in '56, '57 and '61. That's the way our family was born. I really loved my job. There were some real challenges, technical. That's what I liked. I loved it all my life. This latest thing with TWA, this bombing. I remember several accidents. I was involved in accidents quite often. I was a propulsion engineer. Back in the old days every time somebody had an accident or somebody heard an engine cough, therefore the engine people were always right in the middle. The new type airplanes, they don't have engine problems any more.

HS: So you have to look for some other cause.

JL: Yeah.

HS: How did your interest in the trails originate? What led you to your interest in that?

JL: Well, you know, kids don't take an interest in history. I didn't either. I was in military service. On the way back from Europe on an ocean liner, very boring. I got hold of a book called *Forever Amber*. It was kind of a sinful book back in those days. I took an interest in that. We would call it an historical novel. It was a novel that had a lot of history in it. But I didn't really get caught up in that. Later on I got caught up in Dr. Slaughter's books of Civil War stories. That was about the time of the Civil War Centennial. I got interested in the Civil War. After that I picked up a long book. I was interested in the Santa Fe Trail. You know, nobody knew anything about the Santa Fe Trail and I didn't either. All that was a pastime. You don't really sit down and study. You don't have time to study. You devote most of your time to your work.

I fiddled around with the Santa Fe Trail some, but I didn't really get caught up in it because I really could never find anything that would give me a hand hold on it. But then in 1983 or 1982, it was 1983, I heard of Greg Franzwa's book of maps, *Maps of the*

Oregon Trail. And I'm a map guy, I love maps and I collect maps. I study maps. So I got this book of maps. I was really intrigued with it because it told me where the trail was, the Oregon Trail. I found out he had written a book and I got a copy of that. I don't know why. I had occasion to write to him about something. He was real nice. He said, "They are organizing an Oregon-California Trail (Trails) Association." He encouraged me to join and be a charter member and all that stuff. The convention would be later on that year in August [1983]. So I joined and I was a charter member.

HS: You were there at the creation.

JL: I was there at the creation and that was really the creation of my interest in trails. I had a passing interest before that, but it wasn't until OCTA and the OCTA convention that I really took an active interest. Even then I didn't spend a lot of time at it. I was still working. My primary interest and allegiance was to my job. But then in 1987 I retired. Then I took a very active interest in the trails. I've done a lot of work. In full context, Trails Head has not been particularly as a unit. It has not really developed into the size of chapter I thought we would have.

HS: What led to the beginning of Trails Head?

JL: The thing that began Trails Head really was the fact that we had a national organization. There were some other chapters developed and being developed. And Barbara Magerl, to my knowledge, she's the one who was really behind Trails Head. She has a very active mind. She was in there developing a chapter. She called me a couple times. Yes, I thought it was a heck of a good idea. But I didn't really do anything to help her get it going. I know other people we could mention, Keith Connors [?]. But I don't think so. I think the person who really went out and started doing things and that was Barbara. She's the one you could say was the mother of Trails Head.

HS: But Trails Head wasn't part of that first meeting, was it?

JL: No. Trails Head didn't develop until a couple years later, I don't think. I don't really remember the dates. I remember Barbara called me a couple of times. And I think on one occasion she wanted me to help her and I didn't help her much, services.

HS: Well, I have a note here in my notes that says Franzwa wrote a letter to Magerl on Nov. 21st, 1985. That would be a couple years after it started, in which he says, "Barbara has a Chapter 3 off the ground." I assume what he means by that is that there were a couple of other local groups and that probably Trails Head was the third one to form as a chapter.

JL: That could be. I don't know. We could probably call Greg and find out.

HS: Well, then here is another notation that Tom Hunt, who was president-elect of OCTA, wrote just about the same time in October of '85. In the letter he said, "I am delighted to hear that our OCTA members back in Missouri and Kansas are getting together to form a regional chapter."

JL: That was in '85?

HS: This was in the fall of '85.

JL: Okay. Trails Head was not originated or developed immediately after the '83 convention. It was a period of time.

HS: I went to the meeting in 1985 out at Scotts Bluff. (Scottsbluff, NB)

JL: Yes, I did too.

HS: It was my first experience and exciting to me.

JL: Yes, that was a good convention.

HS: Yes. They took us back to see some of the sights along the trail, past Chimney Rock and Court House (Courthouse) Rock and those things. It was a really good experience.

JL: That was your first?

HS: That was my first convention. So it was after that convention in the fall of '85 that Trails Head apparently got started. (yes)

JL: I think that's probably true. I don't have any way of identifying that for sure, but I think that's probably right.

HS: Apparently in the fall of '85 is when Trails Head got started.

JL: I think the procedural series of that probably started, the work started ahead of that (yes) because Barbara was working it out in her mind. The first real activity that I know about in concrete was we got a group together and we were out at the Plaza Library. That was a Saturday afternoon. I imagine that was with Ken in 1985. We were not a chapter then. We talked about becoming a chapter. Was there enough interest? Barbara had done her homework quite well. She called a lot of people and got a group there. I think in my notes I said 25 or 30 people. I think that's the right ball park.

HS: That would be a good turnout.

JL: Yes, it is better than the ones we have had since. Anyway, we had that and everybody there thought it was a good idea. We sort of had a free will offering. I took the money. I wrote down all the names of the people who made donations. Now, what's happened to that, I don't know. I kept that with my treasury records until I got out of the role as treasurer. I don't know whether that is still in existence or not.

HS: Of course that helps you to get a mailing list I'm sure.

JL: Right.

HS: How long were you treasurer?

JL: I don't know. Gee, I became "treasurer" of an organization that didn't exist to begin with. I don't remember the wheels and motions that took place after that. Again,

Barbara was the one who kept pushing on it and stimulating interest among other people.

The next meeting was in the spring. (2/27/86 – Cedar Roe Libr?)

HS: Yes.

JL: That was really the meeting where everyone said, “Yes, we will organize.”

HS: How many people were at that meeting? Do you have any recollection?

JL: I’m guessing around 20, 25, something like that. Barbara sort of ran that. Well, she did run that. How that became a nominating committee for the officers...Mike Duncan.

Mike wasn’t on the nominating committee. Then he ended up being president. I think he was two years president, if I remember right. And I think I was nominated for treasurer.

Barbara Bernaur was secretary and Rich Nolf was vice president. Then the third meeting I think was out in Roeland Park somewhere. The library out there, (Cedar Roe Libr) if I remember right.

HS: Yes.

JL: There were quite a number of people down from St. Joseph. Chris Mall (Rich Nolf) was president of the St. Joseph chapter. Jackie Lewin and her husband were down. We had a fair number of people coming in.

HS: At that time you didn’t have a chapter out there.

JL: No, they didn’t have a chapter. They were part of our chapter at that time.

HS: Yes.

JL: In fact, Rich Nolf lived in St. Joe. He heads the museum up there.

HS: So he had a good drive every time he came to a Trails Head meeting.

JL: Right. That was unfortunate because our officer meetings they didn’t pan out to be worth having and he drove about 60 miles to go down to Mahaffie, of all places.

HS: Yes.

JL: St. Joe to Mahaffie is a long way. The Roeland Park meeting was what I recall as the official origin of Trails Head. We actually became an organized unit. We went away from that meeting being a unit. We came in without being a unit and we left having become a unit.

HS: Yes. John, you mentioned that, I think you said that Trails Head chapter really got a focus. In my recollection over the years is that we went on a number of treks.

JL: That probably has been the greatest activity we have had at Trails Head.

HS: Tell me about them. How did that get started? Whose idea was it?

JL: Well, I don't know. I was a backer of things but, again, Barbara Magerl probably is the one who said, "Let's do it." I might have mentioned it but she's a go-getter. I think she said, "Let's do it," and I said, "I'll be happy to help out." So Barbara and I took on the job of organizing the first and we didn't know what we were doing, but we did it anyway. It turned out to be a good thing. We started at the state line and went to Lawrence [yes – Trek #1]. It was really a good trek. It took a lot of preparation. Barbara and I made a dry run and we did it early. Then not long before the trek itself we decided we had better do it again. I'm glad we did because a lot of construction was taking place over near Gardner. We had to change our modus operandi, how to lead all these cars.

HS: How many people went on that? Do you remember?

JL: Oh my gosh, we had about 20 cars. We had a lot of people. I think we probably had around 40.

HS: So that was an idea that really grabbed people.

JL: It really did. People really liked that. I learned quite a lot on that first trek of the trail. Fortunately, I had enough, well I didn't really have the foresight. But after that you always think of restrooms.

HS: You spot those ahead of time. When would that first one have been?

JL: I think it was 1988. I'm sure it was. I think it was probably in September, if I remember right. I could look that up. Have you talked to Ross Marshall yet? Do you plan to?

Ross has a record of all the trail treks [yes, June 18].

HS: I gather that was a learning experience for you as far as getting an idea of how to do this.

JL: Oh, it was. Right. The original concept was to say we were going to have it and whoever shows up, fine, and whoever doesn't, fine. We went out with a big string of cars. That's how our first trail treks were. It wasn't until two or three years ago that we decided we would ride a bus. A bus is far superior from the standpoint from of being able to communicate.

HS: Talk as you go.

JL: Yes. We got to the point where we had trail treks and say we'd end up with three cars filled with people. We had walkie talkies to communicate with three cars. But you know, somebody's always eating dust. On a trail trek you are bound to be on a gravel road and the first car, like me. I was always in the lead car. I had no problem, but I kept thinking about all those people back there eating everyone else's dust.

HS: Yes. You do this on a Saturday, I suppose, and take the biggest part of the day.

JL: When I organize a trail trek, it is an all-day affair. In fact, I think I have organized all the trail treks, except one, I think. There is only one trail trek I haven't organized. I have been one of the organizers of all of them [true, up through '93]. It is a great experience.

HS: Did you develop an idea, well, we did the trail trek here last time, now let's do this one, and begin to lay out different possibilities?

JL: I always had that in my mind. I never laid down a plan. Someone would say, "Well, when are we going to have our next trail trek?" We would decide, "Well, we should have one this spring or next fall," something like that. "Well, where do you want to have it?"

I would say, “Well, I think we ought to try this or this one.” Then I’d work it. It’s a lot of work. I mean you don’t just have a trail trek emerge. You have to work it. I think practically every trail trek we’ve had, except one, I’ve gone out on a dry run.

HS: Yes.

JL: Even the ones where we went to Arrow Rock, Missouri, to make a trek of the Santa Fe Trail. The reason we went to Arrow Rock was because to go to Franklin and come up the river and then have to go clear back to Franklin and Boonville and back, that’s a lot of waste of time. Boy, you crowd a day. But we started at Arrow Rock and came back to Independence. That was a good trek. [puzzling – I have no record of this for Trails Head – sounds like an MRO trek, but I have no record] Elaine McNabney made a dry run on that. And it’s good because you know what your situation is, what roads are dirt, what roads are gravel, etc. So if you have rain come up, you know there is a certain way you can’t go.

HS: Yes. Have you ever done any repeats on any of these?

JL: Yes. Let’s see how many times have I done...I think I’ve done the one between Topeka and Westmoreland about three times.

HS: There is a cost associated with this. How do you cover that cost?

JL: The cost is self-absorbed in most cases. When we rent the bus, we charge what we think it is going to cost us. We had some misgivings about that. Finally, someone said, “That’s what we have a chapter for. If we run out of money, we’ll take it out of the treasury.” We try to make it so it breaks even from donations. If it doesn’t, we take it out of the treasury. If we have a little left over, it goes into the treasury. It’s that simple. But one thing I’ve done from the first trail trek on is I’ve always, if there is a place I think we should give a donation to, we give a check for say \$25 or something like that.

Johnson County Library or Museum is a good case in point. The Westport Historical Society is another. They helped us in organizing part of it. We’ve done that. I always

figure around \$50, \$25 to this place and \$25 to another place. That's just part of the cost of a trail trek.

HS: Have you gotten publicity on these when you've had them?

JL: No, not really. We haven't really sought publicity. The trail treks have gotten to the point where we don't have a big clamor of demand to go on them like we originally did. So we get a 29-passenger bus and we have a good time. We always fill up a 29-passenger bus. And we have to turn down a few. If we've got a case where we don't fill it up, then we'll use the treasury to make up the difference.

HS: What other recollections do you have about the chapter? The treks have been the big thing that the chapter has done and that you have been a part of...

JL: I've been involved, yeah. Another thing that I was involved in back in '93, '92 maybe, Tom Hunt wanted [Tom was OCTA Pres. & he wanted this project of signage surveys to be done by all of OCTA] to be in the national organization. We were working with the National Park Service to come up with a survey of all the trail signs, not each and every little bit but trail signs that have some interpretive value. So they turned it over to the chapters to go out and take photographs, slightly different, so that you can see how the sign is in relation to the surrounding area. Usually it is best to have a person standing behind it and then a close up of the sign so that you can really read what it says. What they wanted was two of each. They wanted two in the distance and two close up and then a written narrative. They didn't have any format for the written narrative. So I decided we would do it. I got some guys like Rich (Nolf) and Lee [Kroh] and Henry Boppart [and me]. Those were the two who helped me the most. Then I also worked with Gateway Chapter on theirs. Trails Head took from Queen (Wayne) City Landing up to Blacksnake Creek in that area. And then from there on, Gateway took it on to the border. I was involved with Gateway. That was a very intense program. There is one whale of a

lot of signs and trying to identify where the signs are. etc. It wasn't too bad, but there is always one you're going to miss. Scads of them down around Platte City [really?].

One of the ground rules that I made personally was that, okay, you have the Santa Fe Trail and the Oregon Trail. They are identical really, talking about around Gardner. They are the same thing. Any trail sign, Santa Fe or Oregon, is Oregon alone (?). Most of them are that way. I dare say there are not more than three or four out of all the scattered signs that have any mention of Oregon are also Santa Fe [puzzling]. So we went out and photographed those and made write ups on them and identified them precisely. We put down the location by section, township, range, etc. We also put down local nomenclature like Indian Santa Fe Drive (where is this?).

HS: Anything that would help spot it to track it.

JL: Then we would print out on the piece exactly what the sign said so if you don't have the slide or the photograph, you would just have what it said. And that's basically what we did, a good, healthy job. That took several days. Thank goodness all of us were retired. We were pretty used to working around it. The one with Gateway, we did that in one day. I had already done the one down here. I knew what it took. We got a group of people who wanted to work on it, about five or six. My seven-passenger van was full. We did it from that. That was a good project. We were the only chapter who got anything in for about a year. We got ours in. [he must be talking about carsonite trail markers – if so, it is all Gateway Chapter, not Trails Head – we've never put any in]

HS: So you sort of took the lead.

JL: Oh, we did, yeah. We took the lead and I told Tom Hunt that I had originated a format. Here it is. If you want something else, you have to tell me what it is. He took exactly

what we put down as format, how you number them, the whole works. It worked real fine.

HS: I don't know how much else there is to say about Trails Head Chapter. You've described some of the significant things the chapter has done. Are there other things, other reactions or memories that you have of Trails Head?

JL: Oh, I don't know. I think it is pretty well covered, the main points. It's been fun. I mean the way Trails Head is run is basically by the officers. The officers are the executives. They are the ones who decide, "What are we going to do?" or "When are we going to have a trail trek?" Actually, the president is responsible for coming up with a nominating committee and when do we have the annual meeting. The annual meeting always takes place.

HS: Organizational matters.

JL: It's always in November. Actually, I would hope some day that we would be the type of organization where people would have so much to say that we would have to have meetings to give them a chance to say it. We don't seem to have that kind of a situation where...

HS: Program type people.

JL: You've got to have a good program. That's why I say we need to have people who are eager, who have something to say. And by golly, we are going to have a meeting to tell the rest of us what they know. We haven't done that. We've had some people do some things. Ross Marshall, for example, he gave a paper at the national convention about three years ago on river crossings [yes – 1990 in Omaha].

HS: Yeah.

JL: He had that written up and put into Overland Journal. That's a good one that we could refresh any time. We could say we are going to have a meeting and Ross Marshall is going to give us a study of river crossings.

HS: Now that's an interesting thing you mentioned because he gave that talk to the Kansas City Posse of the Westerners.

JL: Yeah, that's right.

HS: So there is that possibility for outreach into other organizations in the community, I would suppose.

JL: That's another thing. I don't know how many Trails Head members give talks. I do a couple pieces a year, not necessarily on the Oregon Trail, particularly on trails, basically on trails. I usually include the Santa Fe Trail because in Kansas City people think the Santa Fe Trail, there's some sort of mysterious aura about it. It's the prime trail. And in one context it was. It was [here] something like 60 [no-more like 40] years and it was honed right here in Kansas City about that length of time. Whereas the Oregon Trail it started out and moved out of here in about four or five year's time more like 15 years 1841-1855. It went to St. Joe [yes, but it continued to be shared by the two cities]. St. Joe passed a lot more people into Oregon than Kansas City ever did (?). Des Moines did a lot more than Kansas City [no way – zero – strange that John would say this - D.M. was not even on the trail}. The Oregon Trail was not as big a trail in the Kansas City area. The Oregon Trail was a big trail nationally though because you get out to California. [the California National Historic Trail is the same as the Oregon NHT clear out to western Wyoming – another strange statement by John] There are chapters out there and the people are very active. You have to keep in mind, that's their grandfathers and their great-grandfathers and their great-grandmothers came on the Oregon[-California] Trail. I mean, that's their heritage. They identify very closely with it. Me, John Leamon, I don't

have any identity at all, except my own curiosity. I was born and raised in Indiana. But I'm glad to have that group. It's very important.

It's an interesting point you make about Kansas City's identification with the Santa Fe Trail because in the Kansas City area I went to Askew Grade School.

HS: I was there last week.

JL: And as I recall, right next to the playground was a large stone and there was a marker that said, "Santa Fe Trail." To me...

HS: What year was that?

JL: That would have been in the 1930s.

HS: Do you remember what the sign looked like?

JL: My recollection is that it would be about 15 inches wide and nine inches tall. That would be my recollection. The thing was that steps [at the school] went up each side of this great big red stone.

HS: There is a big red stone there now. That marker was placed in '37. The original marker was lost (yes).

JL: It was there when I was going to school there in the early 1930s. I went to that school from 1929 to 1936. I remember it.

HS: Was that when you graduated from high school?

JL: No, I graduated from Askew School in 1936.

HS: Oh, that was not a high school.

JL: It was a grade school, grades one through seven. So I had a vague impression of the Santa Fe Trail.

HS: East out of Askew School at an angle there is another marker down there in the corner of that park. There is another Santa Fe Trail marker.

JL: But in those years we weren't aware of that because that was all brush land.

HS: Right.

JL: Undeveloped land in those years.

HS: I remember when I first came to Kansas City. But that is all cleared off now. They maintain it like a park.

JL: Yeah, Blue Valley Park.

HS: Well, John, you've given us a lot of information about Trails Head and your involvement in it. If you have more comments to make, I thank you very kindly for sharing all of this with us. There was a whole lot I wasn't aware of.

JL: Okay.