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Tradition and technology make for a successful family reunion

By Roger Rice For the Deseret News

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Water is being heated on an old wood stove. Those at the reunion had the opportunity to wash clothes using a tub, a washboard and lye soap.

While living at the homestead the family established a sawmill and several other successful businesses, including the well-known Whiting Brothers Service Stations and Motels throughout the southwest.

Edwin died in 1934. President George Albert Smith — then Elder Smith — spoke at his funeral. In his talk, Elder Smith gave the family this advice: "As long as she (Maria) lives, meet together once a year if you can. ... And if you do this, petty things will not come between you, but you will love one another and the joy that has filled your lives heretofore ... will come to you and be with you always."

For many years, the family met yearly. Eventually, they decided to gather every two years. The first official homestead reunion was held in 1948, and the family has continued meeting at the homestead ever since.

That's the brief history. But what exactly happens at these reunions to cause family members to travel all the way to the White Mountains of Arizona from as far as Alaska and Hawaii and spend three days camping in the wilderness (five miles off the highway on a dirt road with no landline or mobile phone service or texting)?



If you were naughty at the Whiting Reunion the sheriff would send you to jail. Edwin M. Whiting used his blacksmith skills to fashion shackles for the local sheriff's prisoners.



A very popular attraction at the Whiting Reunion was the Ice Cream Parlor, commemorating another Whiting business venture.

What would make more than 1,000 members of the same family gather together in a remote area of Arizona and camp for three days? The Whiting Reunion.

A brief history might help explain this phenomenon. The ancestors of this unusual family were Edwin Marion Whiting and Anna Maria Isaacson. Edwin and his older brothers were called by President Brigham Young in 1878 to live in the united order settlement of Brigham City, Ariz.

While there, he met Anna Maria. They became engaged and followed the honeymoon trail in 1881 to the St. George Temple, where they were married. When the settlement failed due to water issues, Edwin and Maria established a homestead in the White Mountains near Springerville, Ariz. That same homestead is still owned by the family. The Whitings had five sons and four daughters.

Well, this is probably unlike any reunion you have ever attended. We don't sit around and reminisce — it's much bigger than that.

Recreating the past

We begin Thursday evening and end Sunday at noon. We learn about our ancestors with hands-on activities. For example, we create a "Whiting Village" (think Colonial Williamsburg or This is the Place Monument, but on a smaller scale). The village is open for two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon, both Friday and Saturday.

In the 2008 reunion these were the attractions in the village:

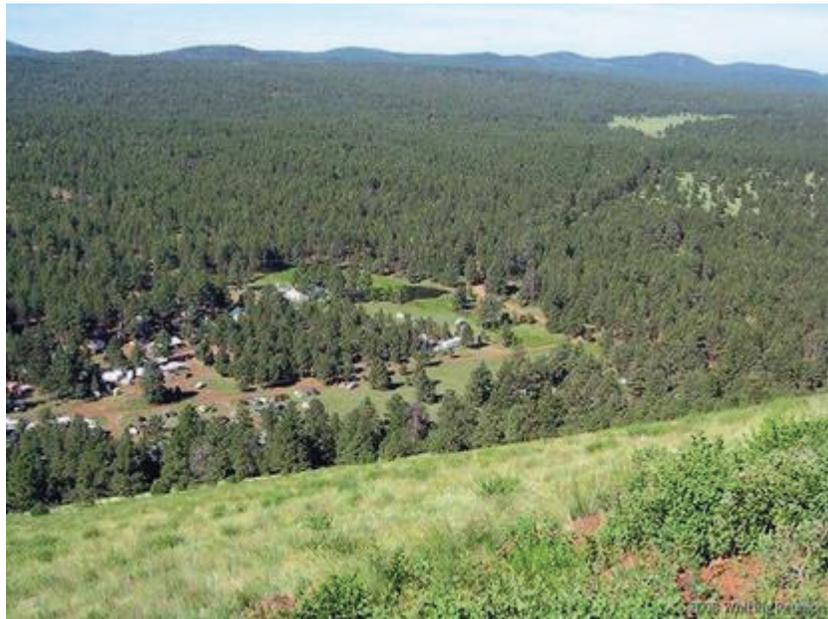
- Barber shop
- Beauty parlor
- Beekeeping*
- Bullwhip competition
- Calf roping*
- Cash store*
- Chair factory*
- Chicken coop*
- Cow milking*
- Family dramatics*
- Hat shop*
- Ice cream parlor*
- Jail*

- Laundry
- Log cabin construction
- Movie theatre*
- Museum
- Photo studio
- Post office*
- Quilting
- Rope making
- School*
- Storytelling
- Train*
- Treadle sewing machine
- Woolen goods*

Each of the above activities marked with an asterisk represents a family occupation or business. Photos taken at some of these attractions can be seen on the [Whiting Homestead website](#).

Volunteers run each of the attractions. Everyone in attendance has a "Passport to the Past" containing details about the various attractions and other activities. Each attraction has a number assigned, and as a person visits each attraction the corresponding number on their passport is checked off. Once you have so many numbers checked off, you get a prize. Many people, especially the children, attempt to get as many items checked off as possible.

One big advantage of the village is that it gives in-laws (like me) something useful to do, rather than just sit around and reminisce about the old times.



The Whiting Reunion is held at the original homestead in the White Mountains of Arizona. This is a view of a portion of the homestead taken from Sierra Trigo, a hill on the same property.

Modern-day activities



Some of the traditional activities at the Whiting Reunion is the "flipper contest." Some people practice for weeks in preparation for the sling shot competition.

In addition to the village there are many traditional activities for all ages, including a 3K run, flipper contest, horseshoe contest, evening plays and productions, children's talent show and family dancing.

There is a recreation hall at the homestead, but the family outgrew it years ago so a large outdoor stage was built. At the back of the stage sits a huge canvas screen, dubbed the W-Max. That screen was used at each of the last two reunions to show a family-produced movie. In 2008 it was about the [conversion and trek to Utah](#) for Edwin Marion's parents. In 2010 it was about the [conversion of Anna Maria's parents](#) and their trip from Denmark to Utah. Previews of both movies can be seen on YouTube.

Feeding and housing the masses

Feeding more than 1,000 campers isn't a simple task. We hire caterers, who arrive at the homestead with a huge refrigeration truck and cooking equipment. Meals are served outdoors on picnic tables built in 1948 and supplemented with modern folding tables and hand-built benches. For the 2008 reunion we spent more than \$30,000 to feed everyone nine meals each for the duration of the reunion.

At the homestead there are eight cabins — four built in 1948 with the other four built before 1960. Most of those attending the reunion sleep in tents, campers, trailers or motor homes.

We also have a “shower house” with three showers on the men’s side and three showers on the women’s side. Each side has four flush toilets. In addition to the shower house we order a dozen porta-potties — a *huge improvement* over the outhouses we previously used.

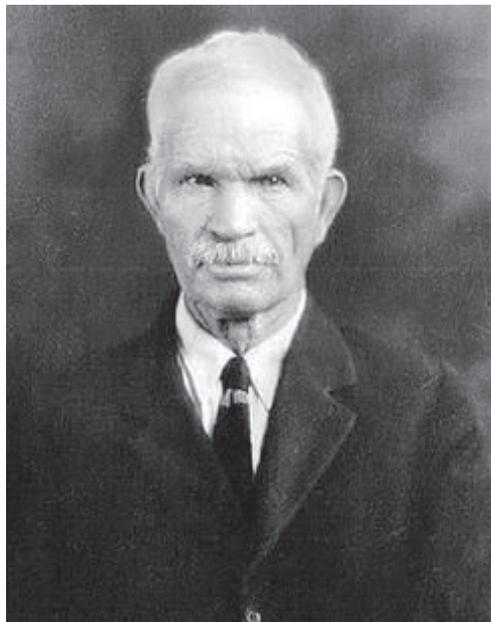
The cost to attend the reunion for three days and nine meals is \$60 for those over 18, \$50 for teens and \$30 for children.

Parents are only asked to pay for their four oldest children. Babies and toddlers are free. The catering bill for nine meals is \$45 for all ages. We subsidize the extra children and those who are unable to pay by asking for donations on the registration form from other members of the family.



A favorite tradition is the family dance for all ages, held both Friday and Saturday evening at the Whiting Reunion. Everyone dances ; with or without a partner

Planning through technology



Modern technology is useful in planning the reunion. To organize and inform more than 4,000 family members, we have a [website](#). It contains family stories, photos and contact information. We send out email notices of reunion details and family news. Family members can then register and pay for the reunion online. We also have a 435-page book of family history, nicknamed the "Red Whiting Book."

To keep everyone at the reunion informed, we set up a temporary FM radio station. We ask those who can to bring their own FM radio. We broadcast old-time music interspersed with announcements, like “Remember to bus your table after eating” or “The Whiting Village opens in 10 minutes” and “This is the Whiting Radio Network.”

The reunion ends Sunday morning with a church service. Everyone gets dressed up — or at least they're a little cleaner than usual — and they bring their own chairs or a picnic bench to the outdoor stage. We have a family choir, prayers and speakers, and then we adjourn for another two years. It's always a memorable experience.

Edwin Marion Whiting met Anna Maria Isaacson in the united order settlement of Brigham City, Arizona. They followed the honeymoon trail to the St. George Temple in 1881. They homesteaded the land where the Whiting Reunion is now held and are the progenitors of those attending the current Whiting Reunions in Arizona.

A family legacy

I am not a Whiting by birth, but I have come to love the spirit I find at the Whiting Reunion. I am looking forward to the next one this July, when the village will have new and exciting attractions and a family film festival will be shown on the W-Max screen.

This spirit of the Whiting Reunion is embodied in a quote by Edwin and Maria's great-grandson Rex E. Lee: "The mantle of primary responsibility for the various Whiting business activities has largely passed to the next generation. But the original Whiting Brothers are still in business. It is serious business. It is the business of maintaining and perpetuating within the E. M. Whiting family the bonds of family unity and loyalty which have been characteristic of this family from the beginning. No more lasting nor fitting tribute than this could be paid to the memory of E. M. and Maria Whiting."



A popular activity at the Whiting Reunion was cow milking. Some of the milk even hit the bucket.



One station at the Whiting Reunion was the chicken coop. Children could actually see, touch and hold live chickens. Anna Maria Whiting and her mother both earned extra cash by selling eggs.

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