

Meek's Cutoff

"Meek's Cutoff" is a spare and unsentimental, but convincing, depiction of a small wagon train lost in the wilds of the Oregon Territory in 1845. Desperate for water and food, we encounter three beleaguered families who have begun to suspect that their bumptious guide, Meek (Bruce Greenwood), hasn't a clue about their location.

Meek talks a rambling cornpone game but is very short on specifics. Quietly, one husband and wife, the Tetheros (played by Will Patton and Michelle Williams) press Meek for more information on their exact whereabouts. The group's members are then thrown for a loop when they encounter—then capture—a lone roaming Indian (Ron Rondeaux). The Tetheros conclude that the brave, as a native to the place, could lead them to water and survival, while another, younger couple (Paul Dano and Zoe Kazan), are panicked that the man could lead them into a massacre. Then, in another crushing blow, they lose one of their wagons.

As their agonies compound, sensible Emily (Williams) comes to trust the brave and stands up for him when the mercurial Meek wants him dead. He is, she feels, their only hope...

This is definitely *not* the "Wagon Train" you might remember from 1950's TV or from John Ford Westerns. Writer/director Kelly Reichardt (who directed "Wendy and Lucy," also starring Michelle Williams) aims to recreate a non-romantic, more authentic, westward experience, one that certainly many pioneers went through. She does it through showing an arresting, if harsh, landscape (who knew there was an Oregon desert!) and by shooting carefully wrought sequences that wordlessly portray the wagon train's struggle (an opening sequence showing the wagons crossing a stream in a steady mid-shot is a prime example).

Reichardt also elicits unflashy but excellent performances from her tight-knit cast. To be singled out are Williams, on a real roll as a versatile and subtle actress these days, and Greenwood, an actor who so often plays the smoothie but here is as crusty as three-day old bread left in that Oregon sun. You'll want to buy some soda *after* you see "Meek's Cutoff."

(The film is rated PG and runs 104 min.)

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