

GETTING PREPARED - PIONEER SURVIVAL KIT

SUMMARY: Students re-live the thoughts and emotions of early emigrants as they prepare for the great journey west to California. They decide what their family should bring in their own personal wagon. They join a "wagon train" and choose a wagon master. They must pare down their personal items for the good of the whole group placing varying degrees of importance on each item.

GOAL: To introduce students to the decision making process necessary to prepare for a journey across the country in a covered wagon and what supplies would be needed by the travelers

OBJECTIVES: Students will be able to (1) list twenty important items needed for the five to six month journey to California and (2) explain the importance of each item.

GRADE LEVEL: Fourth, Fifth and Seventh

TIME REQUIRED: One to two hours

LOCATION: Classroom

MATERIALS: Paper, pencils

SUBJECTS: History and Social Science, Language Arts, Group Dynamics, Home Economics

KEY WORDS: Emigrant, Survival, Decisions, Hardship

BACKGROUND: Read any of the following books to gain a better understanding of what life on the trail was like: Nobles' Emigrant Trail by Robert Amesbury, Covered Wagon Days by Lucy Rutledge Cooke, The Overland Migrations by the National Park Service (Handbook 105), Oregon Trail, The Story Behind The Scenery by Dan Murphy, and The California Trail by George R. Stewart.

If you or your students have any diaries of ancestors coming to California, these would add personal interest!

Most of the wagons used by emigrants were about ten feet long, four feet wide, and two feet deep. This box-like structure was covered by a curved canvas top that was tall enough for a person to stand upright in the center of the wagon. The goods were stacked about four feet high on either side of the wagon with a narrow path in the middle. Sometimes extra storage pockets were sewn in the canvas and an extra false bottom was added with foot deep storage compartments under the floor. Barrels and boxes were attached to the outside of the wagon to carry bulky items, water, extra tools, and wagon parts.

Emigrants who could afford it sent their large, valuable and/or breakable articles to California via ship around Cape Horn. This made packing their wagon much easier. For

many others this was not an option. They had to sell and leave behind many of their prized possessions. Either way, the essential items were about the same--non-perishable food, kitchen and cooking utensils, bedding, clothing, medicine, rope, tools, extra wagon parts, guns, ammunition, lamps or candles, and sewing needs. Optional items varied greatly and often included musical instruments, books, and a child's favorite doll.

The food eaten along the trail was very limited. Not only was the space to carry food on a five to six month journey small, but without refrigeration or preservatives only certain foods would keep. Naturally, the emigrants supplemented their stores with fresh meat such as buffalo, deer, rabbit, squirrel, or whatever they could hunt. Some of the emigrants or their scouts learned about edible plants from the Indians or previous explorers, however most of them did not have this knowledge. Food could sometimes be replenished at the few trading posts and forts along the way but that could be costly. Standard supplies in most wagons were salt port or bacon (packed in bran to try and keep it from going rancid, although it often still did), about 200 pounds per person of wheat flour, a bushel per person of dried apples, sugar, salt, a leavening such as saleratus, coffee, tea, and sometimes dried corn, dried beans, and rice. Because the last three items took a long time to cook, they were only cooked on layover days where abundant fuel was available. If a cow was brought along, fresh butter and milk were appreciated.

Due to hardships as the trip progressed (wagons breaking, too much weight in the wagon, bad roads, poor weather conditions, or family members dying), unnecessary items were often disposed of along the trail. Sometimes even whole wagons had to be left behind. The emigrants were faced with tough decisions the entire length of the trail and had to help each other.

INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE:

1. Brainstorm and list on the blackboard human needs for survival such as food, water, shelter, and warmth.
2. Discuss how the emigrants might have met these needs in their journey across the continent.
3. Tell students to imagine they are embarking on such a journey. Have each student list the items they would pack in their wagon being sure to meet their survival needs and being as specific as possible. For example, they cannot just list food. They must tell what kind of food and how much, what kind of clothing they would bring and how much, what cooking utensils they would need, etc. See the background section for more information.
4. Divide students into "families" of four. The four individual students have fifteen minutes to pool their lists together and make a new family list. They must remember that everything must fit in their wagon. If it does not, they might not make it to California. See background information for size. They must agree on what to take and what to leave.
5. Bring the "families" together into a "wagon train." Who is going to make the crucial decisions for the group? The "wagon train" must now pick a wagon master. Let them

decide how they will pick that person. After the wagon master is picked, have his/her supporters tell why they think that person will make a good leader for the wagon train.

6. As often happened along the Nobles Trail, disaster strikes your wagon train. Due to the lack of fodder for the oxen, excessive heat, and heavy loads, some of the oxen have died. There are not enough of them to pull all the wagons. One wagon will have to be left behind. Whose wagon will it be? (The teacher should pick a group.) What will the group do with all the supplies and people that were in that wagon? What will be left behind with the wagon? The "wagon train" must come to a satisfactory conclusion that is agreeable to the group as a whole.

7. Discuss the group dynamics that went with the decision making on the family level and on the group level. Is there more than one solution? How was the conclusion reached? Is it satisfactory to everyone? Would it have made a difference if it had been another family's wagon?

EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT: (1) Have each student, then "family" estimate the weight of their proposed wagon load. (2) Measure out the actual size of a wagon. Draw it on the pavement. Pack all the items necessary for a trip across the country in this space. You can estimate the size of some articles and use empty boxes. This will give an idea of how it all fits. (3) Build a small scale replica of a wagon. Fill it with small scale food, clothing, tools, household items, water, medicine, and whatever else you think you will need. Items can be made from cardboard, construction paper, doll toys, clay, etc. (4) Check your local museums and historical societies to see old wagons and articles that were brought out to California in wagons. (5) Read Patti Reed's Doll. Look in the school library for other books on emigration to California. (6) List the following on a blackboard--dried beans, salt pork or bacon, coffee, tea, flour, sugar, salt, dried apples, saleratus (leavening agent), milk, and butter. Have the students figure out how much a family of four would need to bring on a trip across the country? Brainstorm about what could be made from these ingredients. Have each student design a daily menu, complete with recipes. Given these ingredients, have each student make something at home and bring it to school for a "feast." Students could add one or two extra ingredients that might have been brought along in the wagons as treats or found along the trail such as cocoa or fresh blackberries, etc. These should be approved by the teacher. (7) Make an "emigrant" dinner at school using only ingredients that were available to the emigrants. Use cooking methods and kitchen utensils that were used at that time along the trail. Biscuits can be baked in a dutch oven which is put on hot coals with hot coals placed on its lid. (8) Have the students dry fruit or vegetables such as apples or pumpkin. (9) Grind wheat berries or corn in a hand or small electric flour mill. Make something with the home-ground flour. Once corn or wheat is ground it goes rancid more quickly. Some emigrants probably brought dried corn and wheat berries and ground them when needed. (10) Discuss ways to preserve meat for a long journey. (11) Make jerky. (12) Make butter by shaking cream in a jar. Emigrants made butter by attaching churns of cream to the wagons; the bouncing would make it into butter.

ASSESSMENT: List 20 of the most important items that were taken on a wagon trip by emigrants to California. Write one sentence on why each of these items was important to the emigrants.