



Death and Danger Along the Trails



Dangers Along the Trail

The Oregon Trail is this nation's longest graveyard. Nearly one in ten emigrants who set off on the trail did not survive. The following is a list of the main causes of deaths along the Oregon/California Trail during 1841 to 1869:

- Disease
- Gun Shot Wounds
- Accidents
- Drowning
- River Crossings
- Weather

Disease

Emigrants feared death from a variety of causes along the trail: lack of food or water; Indian attacks; accidents or rattlesnake bites were a few. But the number one killer, by a wide margin, was disease. The most dangerous diseases were those spread by poor sanitary conditions and personal contact. Death from diseases usually came quickly and painfully.

It is estimated that 6-10% of all emigrants on the trails succumbed to some form of illness.

Of the estimated 350,000 who started the journey, disease may have claimed as many as 30,000 victims. Since the trail was 2,000 miles, this would indicate that there was an average of 10-15 deaths per mile. Of this large number, only a few known grave sites remain. Usually, there wasn't time or opportunity to observe the customary rites of home. Victims of epidemics and massacres were usually buried anonymously in mass graves. Single graves were often dug in the trail itself where the loose dirt could be compacted as the wagons rolled over it. Most graves were deliberately left unmarked to protect the deceased from robbers and vandals.



Illnesses and Their Treatments

Cholera: This disease resulted in more illness and death than all of the other maladies experienced by the emigrants. Cholera results from a waterborne bacteria that thrives in polluted stagnant water. It progresses rapidly and attacks the intestinal lining, producing severe diarrhea, vomiting, abdominal pain and cramps. The effects were so severe and rapid that victims often died within 12 hours of the first symptoms. Some of the medicines emigrants had to combat cholera were: camphor and laudanum. These were painkillers and cough suppressants and did little to cure cholera.

Dysentery: A common ailment that can strike any group exposed to changes in their living habits, especially if accompanied by unsanitary conditions. Although seldom fatal if treated, it can be very dangerous for the very young and elderly. Castor oil was used to treat dysentery and other bowel disorders.

Mountain fever: Usually not fatal, with symptoms such as intestinal discomfort, diarrhea, headache, skin rashes, respiratory distress and fever. The diseases that fit these symptoms are: Rocky Mountain spotted fever, typhus, typhoid fever and scarlet fever. Quinine water was used to treat Rocky Mountain fever, chills and malaria.

Measles: A viral disease that is more common among children, but can have a very severe effect upon adults.

Illnesses and Their Treatments (cont.)

Food poisoning: A problem with contaminated food, more likely among single men.

Scurvy: Weakens and deteriorates body conditions resulting from diets lacking in vitamin C. Citric acid was used to prevent and treat scurvy.

Smallpox: A viral disease that was very contagious causing high fever and dehydration.

Pneumonia: A respiratory ailment that is common among groups experiencing unsanitary conditions or exposure to drastic weather changes.

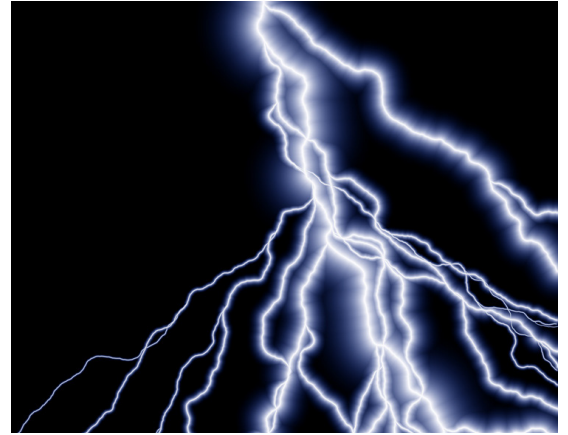
Headaches, coughs, muscle aches: Turpentine, vinegar and whiskey were some of the treatments for these ailments.

Gunshot Wounds

Most emigrants started on the journey with an intense but unfounded fear of the American Indian and every wagon train was a rolling arsenal. Accidental shootings were common, but murders were rare. Hunting was a popular pastime on wagon trains, not just for food, but for sport as well. As a result, hunting accidents were frequent. Many emigrants shot themselves with their own guns through careless and inept handling of firearms. Some were victims of cheaply made weapons that misfired or blew up.

Weather

Weather related dangers included thunderstorms, lethally large hailstones, lightning, tornadoes and high winds. The intense heat of the prairie caused wood to shrink, and wagon wheels had to be soaked in rivers at night to keep their iron rims from rolling off during the day. The dust on the trail itself could be two or three inches deep and as fine as flour. Emigrant's lips blistered and split in the dry air, and their only remedy was to rub axle grease on them.



Accidents

Accidents were caused by negligence, exhaustion, guns, animals and the weather. Shootings, drownings, being crushed by wagon wheels and injuries from handling domestic animals were the biggest accidental killers on the trail. Wagon accidents were the most common. Both children and adults sometimes fell off or under wagons and were crushed under the wheels. Others died by being kicked, thrown, or dragged by the wagon's draft animals (oxen, horses and mules).

Animals



Deaths due to wild animals did occur occasionally when someone unwisely wandered off alone. Probably the greatest animal danger, however, came from the enormous herds of buffalo that covered the Plains. Buffalo sometimes overran wagon trains causing havoc and injury.

The animal many people were frightened of was the rattlesnake. While some bites did occur, the danger was not as high as they anticipated.

American Indians

American Indians were usually among the least of the emigrants' problems. They were peaceful and actually helped the emigrants in their journey in a variety of ways. Mostly, the Indians traded with the emigrants. Fresher or different foods to vary their diet and moccasins to replace worn out shoes and boots were exchanged for articles of clothing and trade goods brought for just that purpose. Other help was more direct. Before white men set up ferries and bridges to cross treacherous rivers, Indians were making ferries out of canoes to take wagons and people across. Tales of hostile encounters far overshadowed actual incidents, and relations between emigrants and Indians were further complicated by trigger-happy emigrants who shot at Indians for target practice and out of unfounded fear.
