



## Traveling the Emigrant Trails

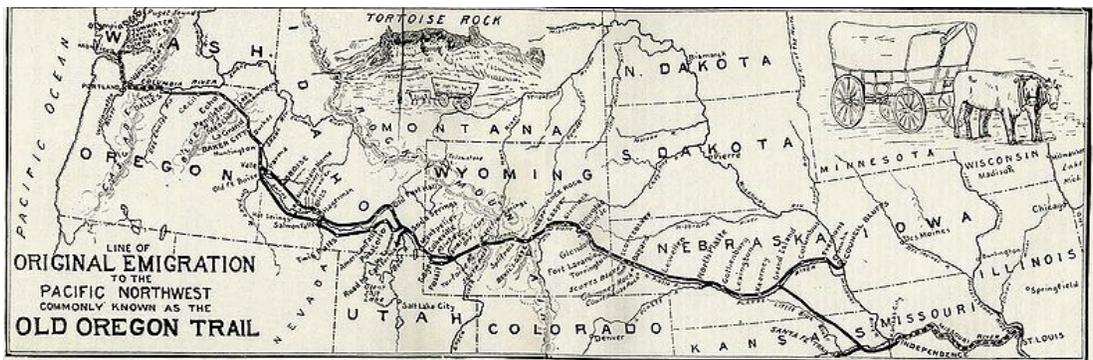


### A New Beginning

Emigrants needed to be in St. Joseph early in April to start their journey west by mid-April. Independence, Missouri was also an important town for wagon trains. Everything an emigrant needed could be found there: food, tools, wagons and animals were for sale. Even trail guides could be hired. Favorite pieces of furniture were left behind to make room for plows, seed, food, tools and other necessities. Before the wagon train left, they elected a captain to lead the way. Many emigrants said a fond farewell to their family for the last time.



### The Oregon Route



The wagon train needed to leave on time because the trails were full of dangers and setbacks, such as lack of grass for their livestock and mountain snows. From Independence, Missouri, the trail followed the Little Blue, Platte, Sweetwater, Snake and Columbia Rivers through Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho and Oregon. They traveled about 12 to 15 miles per day and it took 4 – 6 months to travel the 2,000 miles.

### A Typical Day

- Around 4:00 a.m.: the wagon leader sounded the trumpet or fired a rifle and everyone woke up.
- By 5:00 a.m.: breakfast was prepared, while the cattle were rounded up after grazing overnight.
- By 6:00 a.m.: the men and boys had hitched the wagons and everyone ate breakfast.
- At 7:00 a.m.: the bugle sounded, the wagon master shouted “Wagons Roll!” and they started off for the day.
- There was an hour lunch break, referred to as “nooning”.
- About 6:00 p.m.: they would circle their wagons. Circling the wagons wasn’t for protection against the Indians as much as it was to provide a corral for livestock, and security from cattle thieves, wild animals and weather. Immediately the campfires started burning and dinner was cooked.



### Supplies

In 1850, it cost roughly \$800 to \$1,200 to obtain a proper outfit and get by for a whole year without harvesting a crop. In today’s dollars, this would have been equivalent to \$22,100 to \$33,150. The *Emigrant’s Guide*, published in 1849 in St. Louis, suggested the following supplies for three people heading west on the Oregon Trail:

**Food:** Flour (1,080 lbs), bacon (600 lbs), coffee (100 lbs), tea (5 lbs), sugar (150 lbs), rice (75 lbs), dried fruit (50 lbs), salt/pepper (50 lbs), saleratus (10 lbs), and lard (50 lbs). Also, corn meal, hard-tack, dried beef, molasses, vinegar, eggs and beans

**Tools & Equipment:** Plow, shovel, rake, hoe, carpentry tools, saw, ax, mallet, plane, spade, whetstone, axles, kingbolt, ox/mule shoes, spokes, ropes and chains

**Cooking Utensils:** Oven, skillet, kettle, coffee grinder, teapot, knife, ladle, tin tableware, water keg and matches

## Supplies cont.

**Seed:** Corn, wheat and other crops

**Weapons:** Rifle, shotgun, pistols, knife, hatchet, powder, lead, bullet mold, powder horn, bullet pouch and holster

**Clothing:** Wool coats, rubber coats, cotton dresses, buckskin pants, duck trousers, cotton shirts, woolen undershirts, cotton drawers, flannel shirts, cotton socks, boots, shoes, ponchos, felt hats and sunbonnet

**Bedding & Tents:** Blankets, ground cloths, pillows, tent, poles, stakes, ropes

**Luxuries:** Canned goods, plant cuttings, books, musical instruments, dolls & toys, family albums, jewelry, china, silverware, fine linens, iron stoves and furniture

**Miscellaneous Articles:** Surgical instruments, liniments, bandages, camp stool, chamber pot, wash-bowl, lanterns, candle molds, tallow, spyglasses, scissors, needles, pins, thread, toothbrushes, soap, comb, brush and towels

## Wagon Teams

Mule teams were the preferred mode of travel, but oxen teams were more often used. Which would you prefer?

### Mules:

- Faster
- Needed expensive harness
- Bad tempered
- Tended to stray
- Cost around \$100 each
- Must be fed grain
- Tolerated heat better

### Oxen:

- Slower
- Needed only a yoke, bow & chain
- Good tempered
- Stronger, tougher
- Cost around \$25 to \$65 per pair
- Native grass sufficient
- Less desirable to Indians



## Wagons

To outlast the rugged trails, wagons needed to be constructed of seasoned hardwood, such as maple, hickory or oak, and carry up to 2,500 pounds. The 3 main parts of the wagon were the bed, undercarriage and cover. They were approximately 10 feet long and 4 feet wide. Wheels had to be extremely tough and were usually made of osage, orangewood or white oak. The average wagon cost approximately \$85 and the cover around \$100. *For more information, ask a ranger for the Site Bulletin: Wagons of the Overland Trails.*

## What They Ate

The pioneers had flour, beans, bacon, potatoes, biscuits, dried fruit, jerky, and coffee. Meat included deer, buffalo, cattle and wild birds if hunting was successful. Leftover meat made stew for the next day. Fat drippings from the meat were mixed with flour to make gravy. In desperate times, pioneers cooked snakes or prairie dogs. If they had a cow they could churn butter by taking advantage of the swaying wagon. If wood was not available on the plains, fires were often fueled with “buffalo chips”.

## Dangers

The pioneers faced many dangers along the trail, such as: rough and muddy trails, rain, hail, snow storms, fording rivers, sickness and disease, accidents, Indians, shootings, heat and broken wagons. Although disease, especially cholera, claimed more emigrant lives than any other danger, fording rivers was one of their most dangerous undertakings. *For more information, ask a ranger for the Site Bulletin: Death and Disease Along the Oregon Trail.*



## Leisure Time



Rarely did the pioneers take time off to celebrate. However, people did get married, have babies, and celebrate birthdays. The 4th of July was a holiday most emigrants celebrated along the trail. In the evenings, the emigrants played cards, chess, checkers and other light weight games. They also mended clothes, wrote letters and fixed wagons. Children played *button, button* or *drop the handkerchief*. Some brought violins or other musical instruments to play.

## Buying Supplies

No matter how prepared the emigrants were at the start of their journey, they were always in need of new supplies. A lot of these supplies came from frontier forts that were along the trail. Forts and trading posts were set up to help supply wagon trains and to help protect them along their journey. The forts would supply the emigrants, at an often high price, with wagon parts, tools, food, clothes and other essential supplies. The forts were also a good place for the emigrants to sell any excess supplies. However, if the fort traders were not buying, many supplies had to be discarded. The forts also provided a safe place to relax.

## Trail's End

With little money or supplies left, the pioneers cleared rocks and cut trees to build their new homes. The first winter was difficult for the new settlers. Once spring arrived, they found that their hard work and journey west was worthwhile. Oregon had forests, rich soil and wild game. California had warm weather and good growing climates for crops. Soon, the western settlements were becoming towns. Businesses were started as more emigrants arrived. Most began to enjoy the comforts they had missed.

