



## Wagons on the Emigrant Trails



### Minivan of the Emigrant Trails

Between 250,000 and 500,000 people made their way west from 1841 to 1869. The covered wagon was one of the main methods of transportation, often drawn by oxen or mules. Wagons in the nineteenth century varied widely depending on what they were used for. The wagons utilized by the emigrants heading west also varied. They came from numerous locations and manufacturers. This makes it difficult to ascribe a generic label to an emigrant wagon; however, enough similarities existed to make comparisons. Among the manufacturers, two stood out from the crowd, Murphy and Studebaker.

### Murphy Wagon

Joseph Murphy began producing wagons for the traders headed west from Missouri to Santa Fe and later for the overland emigration. His wagons became the best known on the western trails.

Murphy's wagons consisted of wheels, running gear, a box and a cover. They were usually nine feet high with a twelve foot long bed. The bed of a Murphy wagon had a straight box, unlike its more famous counterpart, the Conestoga, which had a curved box. A Murphy could comfortably haul between 1,800 to 2,200 pounds. Straying too far from these specifications risked serious problems.

Oxen were most often used for pulling this type of wagon. It required at least two yoke of oxen, a yoke consisting of two oxen. A third yoke often trailed behind so the livestock could be rotated and rested.

For those who preferred mules, an equivalent number of yoke could have been used in place of oxen. Horses were rarely, if ever, used. They lacked the strength and endurance needed to pull a wagon 2,000 miles. They also required costly supplemental feed.

The Murphy wagon at Scotts Bluff was purchased from the Dewitts Buggy Works Company in 1979 and donated to the Monument by the Oregon Trail Museum Association.



### Studebaker Wagon

The Studebaker brothers began their enterprise in South Bend, Indiana. The Studebaker name was as recognizable as Murphy on the trail. As blacksmiths, they provided the hardware for many of the early wagon manufacturers. Nearly every wagon making the journey westward had their components and spare parts. They would later expand into manufacturing wagons for emigrants and freighting companies.

The influence of the family and their adaptive skills would extend into the modern era with the design and production of the Studebaker automobile.

The Studebaker wagon at Scotts Bluff was purchased by the Monument in 2009.



## Conestoga Wagon

The Conestoga wagon is probably the most familiar pioneer wagon to modern people as it is often used in films and media. This vehicle was the primary choice for freighting companies shipping goods to the western frontier. Sleek and angular with graceful curves, it was attractive to the eye. Sometimes a medium sized variation of the Conestoga would be used by families traveling the Oregon Trail.

The name Conestoga came from the Conestoga River Valley in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. A Conestoga's average size was 17 feet long and 11 feet high, reflecting the freighter's need for space in hauling. In addition to a longer bed, it had a curved box much like that on a boat. This kept freight from moving and shifting, thus keeping the cargo in the center during transit.



This wagon required a double cover. The cover was usually made of canvas, cotton sailcloth or homespun hemp. It angled out slightly more than that of a typical emigrant wagon to help protect the cargo from the weather.

The front and rear gates angled up higher to help prevent freight from sliding out the back on steep inclines. A Conestoga could likely haul loads of up to three tons. A load this size would have required eight yoke or more of oxen.

Historic artist and photographer, William Henry Jackson, first came west in 1866. He found employment as a bullwhacker. Jackson painted many images depicting the westward migration and often with Conestoga wagons in the foreground. You can view a variety of Jackson's work in the Jackson Room at Scotts Bluff National Monument.

The Oregon Trail Museum Association purchased and donated this Conestoga wagon to the Monument. This is an exact replica of the one on display at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C., and was purchased in 1973 from the Ozark Craftsman at Silver Dollar City, Missouri.

## Oxen



Even though six-mule teams were preferred for their speed, six out of every ten wagons were pulled by oxen. Mules were strong, quick and tolerated the heat better; but oxen on the other hand were good tempered, strong, could eat native grasses and were a lot cheaper.

This team of life-size fiberglass oxen was purchased to represent a likeness to the actual animals used during the migration along the Oregon Trail in the middle to late 1800's.

The team of oxen is facing west to illustrate the westward migration through Mitchell Pass.

## Mormon Handcart

If one couldn't afford a wagon, there was the option of a handcart. As the name implies, it was not powered by an animal, but was pushed or pulled by people. The design of the handcart was most likely based on carts used by street sweepers or luggage trolleys used by railroad porters. It was considered an economical means of bringing impoverished Mormon converts west to Salt Lake City.

A typical handcart was three feet wide by four feet long. It had a shallow box about nine inches high, wheels four feet tall and could carry an approximate load of several hundred pounds. Most converts were limited in what they could carry because of weight restrictions set by the Mormon Church and the capacity of the handcart.



Across the front of the cart was a cross bar that allowed the cart to be pushed or pulled. Some carts also sported a canvas top resembling miniature covered wagons. Since carts were often made entirely of wood, they were often noisy and subject to frequent breakdowns. During a four year period from 1856 to 1860, over ten different handcart companies aided approximately 3,000 Mormons to Salt Lake City.

## The End of the Trail

From 1841 to 1869, approximately 500,000 people made the emigration west to Oregon, California, Utah and other destinations. Some were seeking rich farmland in the Willamette Valley of Oregon, while others sought their fortunes in the gold fields of California. Entrepreneurs formed freighting companies to meet the growing demands along the trail.

The emigrants believed they were fulfilling their country's manifest destiny and they would become a lasting symbol of the west and western migration. Their stories are echoed in places like Fort Laramie National Historic Site, Scotts Bluff National Monument, and other park sites stretching across the trail.