

The Oregon Trail

~ Traffic ~

Jesse Applegate, who led the 1843 wagon train out of Independence, Missouri, described how the "wagons form a line three quarters of a mile in length." Families alternated their places in line each day, with those at the end having to "eat dust." Teamsters drove their wagons or walked beside their teams. Mules or oxen were preferred over horses to pull the wagons. Women and children were usually on foot. The men were generally on horseback, herding cattle and other animals. Wagon trains averaged 12 to 15 miles a day. At night the wagons were grouped into a circle to corral the animals.

"As we pushed rapidly by the wagons, children's faces were thrust out from the white coverings to look at us; while the care-worn, thin-featured matron, or the buxom girl, seated in front, suspended the knitting on which most of them were engaged, to stare at us with wondering curiosity. By the side of each wagon stalked the proprietor, urging on his patient oxen, who shouldered heavily along, inch by inch, on their interminable journey. It was easy to see that fear and dissension prevailed among them; some of the men...looked wistfully upon us as we rode lightly and swiftly by...."

--Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail*.

Early emigrants found the Indians to be generally cordial and helpful. But as emigrant numbers multiplied, the friendly relationships became strained. Especially after 1860, there were hostilities.

Starting points: Independence, Westport, St. Joseph, and Fort Leavenworth. Alternate routes along the way included Sublette's Cutoff and the Lander Cutoff. After 1846, there was also a choice at The Dalles between rafting down the Columbia River or taking the new Barlow Road across the Cascades.

Today, modern tourists follow the route of the *Oregon Trail* through seven states in 2,170 miles: Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. These states, together with the National Park Service, the Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management protect the legacy. Congress designated the *Oregon National Historic Trail* in 1978. The trail corridor contains 300 miles of discernible ruts and 125 historic sites.

~ Landmarks ~

Fort Kearny, Ash Hollow, Courthouse Rock, Chimney Rock, Scotts Bluff, Register Cliff, Fort Laramie, Independence Rock, South Pass, Fort Bridger, Soda Springs and Steamboat Springs and Beer Spring, American Falls, Three Island Crossing, Flagstaff Hill, Whitman Mission, The Dalles, Fort Vancouver.

~ Features ~

The *Oregon Trail* extended from the Missouri River to the Willamette River and was used by nearly 400,000 people. It crossed nearly 2,000 miles of plains, deserts, canyons, and mountains, so unfamiliar and inhospitable that it was dangerous to pause, and unthinkable to settle. It was a six months' journey which had to begin in early May in order to avoid being trapped by mountain snowstorms.

In the 1840s, guidebooks in book or pamphlet form were available for emigrants. Some provided reliable information. All contributed to the "Oregon Fever" that swept the country. The most widely-read book about the Oregon Trail was that of the great American historian Francis Parkman. He rode from Independence to Fort Laramie, keeping a daily diary. Afterwards, he wrote his book, *The Oregon Trail*, with several subsequent editions. It was a brilliant recording of the sight and sound and feel of his 1846 journey.

Each part of the journey had its set of unique difficulties. During the first third of the journey across the plains, emigrants got used to the routine and work of travel. Then they set out on the steep ascent to the Continental Divide; water, fuel, grass for the livestock, fresh meat, and food staples became scarce. The final third was the most difficult part of the trail as they crossed both the Blue Mountains in eastern Oregon and the Cascades to the west. Until the *Barlow Road* across the Cascades was opened as a toll road in 1846, the only choice for the emigrants was to go down the Columbia from The Dalles on a raft or abandon their wagons and build boats.

Emigrants had three major fears—Indians, disease, and the weather. Indians proved to be the least dangerous. Accidents and rampant diseases (especially cholera) killed many more Oregon travelers than did Indians. It is estimated that 34,000 emigrants died along the trail—averaging 17 deaths per mile.

Upon arrival in the Willamette Valley, settlers spread out to establish farms and small towns. Once the United States and Great Britain agreed on an international boundary, Americans settled in present-day Washington as well.

A good wagon outfit could haul about a ton. Its wooden box was 4 feet wide by 10 to 12 feet long. A cover of double thickness canvas stretched over hickory bows. Wheels needed daily lubricating.

~ Timeline ~

- 1804 Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, sent by the American government to explore the Northwest, are the first whites to travel parts of what is to become the *Oregon Trail*. They take a northerly route across the continent, ending in the region of the Snake and Columbia rivers.
- 1811 Representatives of John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company arrive at the mouth of the Columbia River and establish Astoria, a fur-trading post and the first permanent settlement in the Oregon Country.
- 1812 Robert Stuart leads a party of seven eastward from Astoria to do the first blazing of the *Oregon Trail*. He discovers a pass across the Wind River Mountains (South Pass) which horses and wagons can surmount, the gateway for a westward migration to the Pacific.
- 1820s The *Oregon Trail* is a major highway for the 1820s mountain men, including Kit Carson, Henry Fraeb, James Bridger, and Tom Fitzpatrick.
- 1836 Missionaries led by Dr. Marcus Whitman leave from Liberty, Missouri, for the Oregon Country. Narcissa Whitman, wife of the leader, keeps a diary of her trip.
- 1843 This year marks the beginning of the mass movement of Americans to Oregon. In May, the first of the great wagon trains leave Independence, Missouri, with nearly 1000 men, women, and children, 120 wagons, and 5000 assorted head of cattle.
- 1846 This is the year of the best documented accounts of early western history. It is also the year of the fated Donner-Reed expedition. Snowbound, some eat the flesh of dead comrades to survive. Relief parties reach them in February and March of 1847. Only 45 of the original 87 survive.
- 1850 By this date, the register at Fort Laramie shows that 40,000 people and 9,000 wagons have passed through the fort on their way west.

The Oregon Trail

