

## ***Teacher Resource Information:***

### **Life on the Trail**

Between 1841 and 1869, nearly half a million Americans traveled west in wagon trains. These travelers called themselves emigrants because they were leaving the United States to go to the territories of Oregon, California, or Utah. People came west for many reasons. Some wanted gold, adventure, or a warmer climate. Many went West to claim land for farming and ranching. Others, such as the Mormons, wanted a place to practice their religion in peace.

There were several trails west, and most families followed the northern routes called the Oregon, California, and Mormon Trails. The journey covered approximately two thousand miles and took over six months to complete. Those people traveling West often used guidebooks written by previous travelers. These books had maps and trail advice, but unfortunately they were not always accurate or helpful.

Most families sold almost everything they owned before leaving because the wagon had limited room for supplies and everything they would need had to fit in the wagon. Clothes, quilts, and barrels of food filled the inside of the wagon; tools were hung on the outside of the wagon bed. Children had to part with toys, books, and extra clothing and were only allowed to bring a few small items with them like a doll, diary, and a pocketknife.

#### **Beginning the Journey**

Families would then go to a “jumping-off” place, which were near towns located at the beginning of the trail. Emigrants bought supplies, some built wagons, and they joined up with a wagon train and elected a leader. Boys as young as 14 could vote but girls did not get to vote.

Most pioneers used oxen to pull their wagons because they were strong and would eat grass along the trail since there was no way to carry feed for them. Children had to be careful not to get crushed by the oxen’s heavy feet. Some of the Mormon families who could not afford wagons used handcarts to cross the 1,400-mile trek from Illinois to Utah. Even young children helped push the handcarts up mountains and across rivers.

Though the children were excited to leave, it was still very hard to say good-bye and leave their friends and relatives behind. The wagon trains typically left in April or May. It was important to leave at the right time, because if the wagon train left too early there would not be enough grass to feed the animals, but if they left too late they could be caught in a snowstorm.

#### **Along the Trail**

Pioneers generally walked 10 to 20 miles each day because they did not want to add extra weight in the already packed wagon, plus the wagons were uncomfortable to ride in. One boy remembered how his mother’s feet swelled terribly from walking. To keep them

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from bleeding she wrapped them in cloth. The easiest part of the journey was the flat stretch of the Great Plains. Here the prairie grasses grew so tall that children could get lost in them.

Children of all ages had work to do. They would care for the animals, milk the cows, and drove the animals along the trail. They gathered wood and fuel for the fire, helped find food, such as berries, and helped prepare food for every meal. Boys carried guns and hunted. Families ate beans, bread, and dried meat from their hunting.

Each day on the trail followed a pattern. Everyone woke up early and began their chores. They watered the oxen, made breakfast, and packed their wagons. By seven o'clock they were on the trail. At noon, they stopped for a lunch and a short rest. This was a welcome break for tired feet. The pioneers then traveled until it was time to camp for the night. Pioneers parked their wagons in a circle for safety and for a place to keep the animals. Most families slept in tents or under their wagons.

### **Hardships on the Trail**

Crossing the mountains was one of the hardest parts of the journey. Some trails were so steep that the emigrants had to pull their wagons up with ropes. Going down was just as hard because wagons could break apart or race out of control. Sometimes wagon trains traveled less than a mile a day.

The weather also caused problems. Sudden rainstorms would leave the pioneers surrounded in mud. At other times, the weather was so dry that clouds of dust hung in the air like fog. Dirt covered everything including their food.

Many children were afraid of the Indians. Few Indians harmed the travelers, and many helped with directions and river crossings. As more wagon trains traveled west, however, some Indians became less friendly because the emigrants brought new diseases, killed buffalo, and demanded more and more land. Small conflicts grew into wars that drove the native people from their land.

About one out of every ten emigrants, including many children, died on the trail. Some were crushed by wagon wheels or drowned while crossing rivers. Most died from illnesses such as cholera, influenza, diphtheria, infections, blood poisoning, and dehydration

### **Fun**

Although life on the trail was very hard, the pioneers did have fun. At night they sang and danced to fiddle music, and children told stories, wrote letters, and played games.

**Source:** American West Heritage Center Volunteer Manual, Research Files