

Oregon or Bust

The Oregon Trail

The Oregon Trail opened in 1841 with 35 men, 5 women, and 10 children using it to make the trek from Independence, Missouri, to Oregon City, Oregon. In 1842, 100 emigrants took that same westward trail. In 1843, the number of people traveling increased to 1000. During the late 1840s and early 1850s tens of thousands of settlers made the journey every year. From 1840 - 1860, approximately 300,000 to 600,000 emigrants traveled the Oregon Trail.

Getting Ready

The preparations for a journey west on the Oregon Trail took more than a year. Emigrants had to sell land, businesses, and property while gathering the supplies they would need on the journey.

A wagon built to withstand 2200 miles across plains, mountains, and desert was the most important piece of equipment. Wagons were 6 feet wide and about 12 feet long with a 3 feet high interior. The wagons had to be tall enough to cross through streams without completely submerging. Tar buckets hung from the sides so settlers could fill the cracks between the boards with tar to make the wagons waterproof when they crossed rivers. The canopy of the wagon was oiled to keep rain out. Water barrels hung from the back of the wagon and were filled with water from rain and streams. Other things that hung from the sides of the wagons included buckets of axle grease, extra wheels and axles to replace ones that broke, coils of rope to lower the wagons down steep hills, and extra leather harnesses for the animals.

The inside of the wagon was often crammed with the supplies needed to make the journey and for use once the settlers reached Oregon. Most families carried about 200 pounds of flour, 150 pounds of bacon, 20 pounds of sugar, 10 pounds of coffee, and 10 pounds of salt at a total cost of \$300 to \$600. They also carried rifles and ammunition that totaled about \$100. Their clothing had to be sturdy and well-made and each person needed strong boots or shoes for walking and to withstand the weather conditions along the trail.

A team of 8 to 12 oxen pulled each wagon. A wagon and oxen team cost each family about \$400 to \$600. The total weight of wagon's cargo pulled by the oxen was about 2500 pounds.

Life on the Trail

The geography of the land dictated the travel route from Independence, Missouri, to Oregon City, Oregon. The terrain and weather along the Oregon Trail influenced the events and conditions experienced during travel. It was critically important to embark at the appropriate time of year. If the settlers left too early in the spring, there would not yet be enough grass on the prairie to feed the livestock. If they left too late in the spring, they risked being trapped in winter snows in the Cascade Mountains near the end of the trip. Travelers usually left in May and hoped to reach Oregon by October. It took them 6 months to make the 2200-mile journey.

Each wagon train headed west from Independence, Missouri for 200 miles across the tall prairie grass of the Great Plains. In some places, the grass was so tall, men had to stand on the backs of horses or oxen to see ahead. This was the terrain until they came to Fort Kearney and the Platte River. Fort Kearney was the first of three trading posts on the trail. At Fort Kearney they could rest for a few days, get more supplies, and post letters. The Platte River guided them along their journey for the next 450 miles. It was a broad, brown river that

was too muddy for drinking or bathing. Along the Platte River, the tall prairie grass turned into short prairie grass. There were also fewer trees, so the settlers used buffalo dung for fuel in their fires.

At the 650 mile mark, the emigrants reached Fort Laramie and were ready to begin their climb into the Rocky Mountains where they would face hot summer days sprinkled with summer thunderstorms and hailstorms followed by cold mountain nights. During some of the thunderstorms, it was necessary to chain the wagons together so they wouldn't blow away. About 250 miles farther, they reached Independence Rock. People signed their names on the rock, and it became known as the "Great Register of the Oregon Trail." Independence Rock signaled a gradual, winding, gentle climb into the Rockies across South Pass.

After South Pass, the travelers headed northwest into the unrelenting sun of the dry, dusty desert country until reaching Fort Hall, which was the 1200-mile marker. They continued northwest along the rugged, rock ledges in the canyon of Snake River making a grueling climb over the Blue Mountains. At times the wall was so steep that wagons had to be taken apart and using chains and pulleys hauled up one side and then lowered inch by inch down the other side. The emigrants proceeded west along the Columbia River for 200 miles to a settlement called Dalles.

They now only had the final stretch of the journey left through the Cascade Mountains into Oregon City. This was a narrow trail lined with thick trees. The downhill parts were very difficult because they were so steep and slippery that keeping the wagons and oxen from sliding downhill off the path was a challenge. The settlers tied big logs on the back of the wagons to act as brakes. They also often encountered snow banks in the Cascade Mountains.

A typical travel day began at 4 a.m. with the men on sentry duty firing a wake-up shot. The march began by 7 a.m. Very rarely did anyone ride inside of the wagon. Most people walked the entire trail, while some rode horses. The emigrants rested for an hour in the middle of the day eating cold lunches. In late afternoon, they stopped and set up camp for the evening. They looked for a campsite near fresh water and grass for the livestock. By 8 p.m., most people were in bed. The caravan traveled 12-15 miles a day.

Name _____ Period _____

**Assessment Worksheet
Oregon or Bust**

Read the article entitled *Oregon or Bust*, and then circle the best answer for the following questions.

1. What effect did the rivers have on emigrant travel along the Oregon Trail?
 - a. Emigrants used ropes to pull the wagons across the rivers.
 - b. Emigrants used oil to weather proof the canopy of the wagon.
 - c. Emigrants brought extra wheels to replace ones that broke.
 - d. Emigrants used tar to fill the cracks in the boards of the wagons.

2. What caused the emigrants to need sturdy clothes and strong shoes?
 - a. There would be little opportunity to replace them along the trail.
 - b. They would be primarily walking the 2200-mile journey.
 - c. They would be exposed to varying weather conditions.
 - d. All of the above

3. How did the date of departure along the Oregon Trail influence the journey?
 - a. If they left too late in the spring, there could be snow in the Rocky Mountains.
 - b. If they left too late in the spring, there could be snow in the Cascade Mountains near the end of the trip.
 - c. If they left too early in the spring, there would be too much grass on the prairie for the livestock.
 - d. It was critically important to embark at the appropriate time.

4. Why was it necessary to chain the wagons together at times along the Oregon Trail?
 - a. The terrain of the Rocky Mountains was too tough.
 - b. The South Pass was so narrow that it kept the wagons together.
 - c. The wind and hailstorms were so strong.
 - d. It was difficult to see in the snowstorms.

5. How did the emigrants solve their problems of getting the wagons over steep mountains?
 - a. They took the wagons apart and used chains and pulleys to move them over the mountains.
 - b. They tied big logs on the back of the wagons to act as weights.
 - c. They traveled single file down the narrow trails.
 - d. They chained the wagons together.

Using the data from the article entitled “Oregon or Bust”, solve the following word problems.

To solve them, remember a percentage can also be written as a decimal. Look at the following example.

A wagon on the Oregon Trail would weigh about 2500 pounds. Of this weight, about 15% was food. How much of the wagon’s weight was food?

To solve this, multiply the weight of the wagon (2500 pounds) by the percentage of food converted into a decimal (.15). 2500 pounds X .15 = 365.00 pounds

6. The total cost of preparing for the trip was about \$1300. Of this cost, about 46% were the oxen and the wagon. How much did the oxen and wagon cost?

- a. \$702.00
- b. \$545.00
- c. \$605.00
- d. \$598.00

7. The emigrants traveled a total distance of 2200 miles. Of this travel, 32% was done in the first 4 months. How much travel was left in the remaining 2 months?

- a. 654 miles
- b. 704 miles
- c. 714 miles
- d. 694 miles

8. The emigrants traveled a total distance of 2200 miles. Of this travel, 9% was across the Great Plains. How many miles did they travel across the Great Plains?

- a. 104 miles
- b. 58 miles
- c. 198 miles
- d. 1980 miles

9. The emigrants traveled a total distance traveled of 2200 miles. Of this travel, 20% was along the Platte River. How many miles were **not** along the Platte River?

- a. 1760 miles
- b. 1670 miles
- c. 1548 miles
- d. 1903 miles

10. Using the formula $V = \text{length} \times \text{width} \times \text{height}$ and the figures from the reading, calculate the volume of the average wagon crossing the Oregon Trail.

- a. 216 cubic feet
- b. 234 cubic feet
- c. 47 cubic feet
- d. 127 cubic feet

Answer Key
Oregon or Bust

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4. Why was it necessary to chain the wagons together at times along the Oregon Trail?
 - d. The terrain of the Rocky Mountains was too tough.
 - e. The South Pass was so narrow that it kept the wagons together.
 - f. **The wind and hail during summer storms was strong.**
 - g. It was difficult to see in the snowstorms.

5. How did the emigrants solve their problems of getting the wagons over steep mountains?
 - a. **They took the wagons apart and used chains and pulleys to move them over the mountains.**
 - b. They tied big logs on the back of the wagons to act as weights.
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