
BACKGROUND SHEET 1

SETTING OUT

THE MEETING POINT:

Whether you were heading to Oregon, Texas, or California the starting place was the town of Independence in Missouri. Pioneers who wanted to go west first gathered at Independence where they would wait until there were enough wagons to form a “train.” There was safety in numbers and no one was foolish enough to set out alone. Wagon trains varied in size, but a typical one would have had about 60 families in it.

GETTING ORGANIZED:

Once they had formed a wagon train, the next piece of business was to elect a wagon master, also known as the captain. The wagon master was responsible for all the major decisions about the wagon train such as the route they will travel, the time for starting and halting each day, where they will stop and camp, the posting of the guards, and the rotation of the wagons. (This was important because no one wanted to be at the back where they would have to “eat” everyone’s dust!) The captain’s job was also to make important decisions such as what to do if a family’s wagon wheel broke or if a family’s flour had gotten wet and was now ruined.

Most wagon trains also set out with a trail guide. These were people who had usually made the trip before and knew the best places to cross the rivers and what dangers to avoid. Usually these men were fur trappers and traders who had been living out west for many years. Some of these guides even wrote books about how to travel west. The most famous guide was written by Dr. Marcus Whitman. He was known for his belief that it was possible to cross over the mountains leading to the coast instead of trying to go around them. In 1843 he led a wagon train of about 120 wagons over the mountains safely!

THE WAGON:

The key to a successful journey was a good wagon. It needed to be very strong in order to carry a load of about 2,000 pounds over very rough and mountainous territory. It also needed to be light enough not to strain the oxen that were carrying it! A good wagon could cost as much as \$110.00!

The typical wagon was about 10 feet by 4 feet. Bows made out of hickory wood were used to hold up the canvas cloth that covered the wagon. This cloth was rubbed with oil to make it waterproof. There were drawstrings in the front and the back so you could pull them tight to keep out the wind, rain, or dust. The wagon also had hooks hanging everywhere on the inside, and outside, and even underneath, to hang things such as buckets, extra wheels, milk cans, barrels, guns, and clothes.

Covered wagons were often called prairie schooners. A schooner is a boat that sails on the seas. The big white canvas cover on the wagon looked like a huge sail and oftentimes the grass was so high it hid the wagon wheels. The wagons would look like a big boat sailing across grassy green waves!

STOCKING UP:

Deciding what to pack in the wagon was crucial. The pioneers had to take food, supplies, tools, clothes, and weapons to last the entire journey. Depending on your luck, the journey could take 6 months or more!

For food, the guidebooks recommended 100 pounds of flour for each adult, 70 pounds of bacon, 30 pounds of hardtack (like crackers), beans, rice, coffee, sugar, yeast, potatoes, dried fruits (to keep from getting scurvy), baking soda, vinegar, and salt (for preserving meat). Eggs, china, and other fragile items were often packed in barrels of cornmeal! All pioneers also needed to take barrels of water.

Kitchen items such as pots, pans, silverware, cups, a cooking spider (a pan with “spider legs” to cook with over a fire), coffee grinder, and ladles were indispensable. Besides extra clothing, it was important to bring sewing supplies such as needles, thread, scissors, and cloth. Families usually took medicines, candles, soap, oil lamps, the family Bible, pen, ink, journals, and other treasures like family photographs. They even tried to fit in bits of furniture like a treasured rocking chair or grandfather clock!

Blankets, pillows, and featherbeds (like a large sized pillow) were wrapped up in canvas cloth. Tents, poles, ropes, axes, saws, hammers, nails, drag shoes, wagon jacks, chains, shovels, scythes, pickaxes, hoes, knives, flint & tinder (for starting fires), rifles, pistols, gunpowder and bullets were some of the tools that were carefully packed into the wagon. Oftentimes even a plow was strapped to the wagon’s side! Finally, as much money as possible was brought with them. They knew they would have to pay for ferry rides and supplies along the way.

Background Sheet 2

Chores and Daily Living

In a pioneer family, everyone had a job. Ma, Pa, and all of the children had chores to do that were vital to the success of the family. Beginning at the age of 6 years old, the children began their chores to help the family survive. As they grew older, the chores became more difficult and more important to the family's survival.

PA AND THE ART OF HUNTING:

As the traditional head of the family, Pa was in charge of leading the family as well as protecting it. Armed with a pistol and a rifle, Pa was prepared to handle any threat to his family. Using only vague and unclear maps, it was Pa's job to direct the wagon safely to the west. Pa was also responsible to fix the wagon if it was to break. Mending wheels and wagon tongues was all in a day's work.

Hunting was probably the most important job on the trail. The sharpshooters, usually the men and older sons, were sent out each day by the wagonmaster to bring back food for the train. Early on the only game available were rabbits, prairie chickens, and quail. However, as they crossed the plains, larger game became available such as elk, antelope, bighorn sheep, and best of all, buffalo. The buffalo could provide the family with a large supply of meat and also provide hide that could be cured to provide robes and blankets for the family.

MA KEEPS CONTROL:

Ma was in charge of many responsibilities. Cleaning the children and the wagon, caring for the injured and ill, and mending torn clothing were just a few of her duties. The most important job that Ma had was to feed the family. Since there was no Safeway to shop in, Ma would have to cook with what was available. The wagon would supply the basics: flour, salt, spices, coffee, and dried meats. Other foods had to be gathered or hunted on the trail.

First, Ma would have to start a fire. Since there were not many trees on the prairie, Ma would have to use any materials available, usually gathered by the children. Once the fire was started, Ma would cook up pancakes, a pioneer favorite, or johnnycake, a type of bread made with cornmeal, salt, and water or milk. Other staples were bacon, beans, and coffee. Coffee was the main drink on the trail, served at every meal. Since the water was often dirty, polluted, and tasted disgusting (so bad that even the animals would not drink it), flavoring it with coffee was the only way to get it down, for both man and beast.

CHILDREN AT WORK:

Starting as young as 6 years old, the children had to help with the family's survival. The younger children would feed the animals and gather fruits, nuts, berries, flowers, and most importantly, fuel for the fire. As there were few trees on the prairie, the children gathered anything that would burn: twigs, dry grass, corncocks, flowers, and dried animal manure (which turned out to be the best and most available fuel). Buffalo manure was the best of all and was known as "buffalo chips."

The older children would care for their younger brothers and sisters, and help with feeding the animals. They also helped to gather food and fuel. They would also help Ma and Pa with the cooking and hunting. This was a long and hard road for a growing child, but it was a matter of survival that kept them going.

BACKGROUND SHEET 3

FAMOUS SITES

HOW YOU KNEW WHERE YOU WERE:

Out on the open prairie everything looked the same. Sometimes the pioneers used trees, water holes or rocks to help them know where they were. In some places along the trail there were trees that were bent in weird ways, or big rocks with strange shapes. Or water that tasted funny or looked unusual. Fur trappers and traders who had already gone west gave names to many of these unusual places or things. As the pioneers traveled, they looked for these unusual landmarks. If they saw one, they would know they were headed in the right direction. The pioneers could also figure out how far they had come by looking for specific landmarks.

CHIMNEY ROCK:

Chimney Rock was a tall column that sat on a bed of rock. It rose about 500 feet from the ground high up into the air. (500 feet is about as tall as a 40 story building.) You can probably guess how it got its name - it looked like a tall chimney. When the pioneers reached Chimney Rock they knew they had traveled about 550 miles from Independence, Missouri.

INDEPENDENCE ROCK:

Independence Rock may have gotten its name because early travelers came to this spot on July 4th and celebrated Independence Day there. It is a huge rock that is shaped like a turtle's back. The pioneers could see this great rock from very far away. This rock was a popular place to climb, and many pioneers carved or painted their names into the rock. If you visit there today, you can still see the names carved in the rock.

SODA SPRINGS:

Many children loved the landmark of Soda Springs because it had bubbling water that you could drink. Because the water tasted terrible during most of the trip west, this was an exciting place to camp. The pioneers sometimes put sugar in their tin cups and then added the bubbly water for a sweet, refreshing drink!

STEAMBOAT SPRINGS:

At Steamboat Springs water came rushing up two to three feet up into the air out of cracks in the rocks. The blowing and spraying of the water sounded like a steamboat.

DEVIL'S BACKBONE:

Devil's Backbone was a very scary landmark along the way. If you think about how narrow your backbone is, you will understand why this was a place you could never forget. Some spots on the Devil's Backbone were so narrow that only one wagon could fit along the trail and on each side of the trail there was a cliff about a mile down to the Snake River. Some pioneers also called this the "Elephant's Back."

40 MILE DESERT:

The 40 Mile Desert started after the Sink at Humboldt Dike. Here there were two main trails to take to California (the Carson or Truckee Route) but no matter which one you chose, you had to cross the 40 Mile Desert! The pioneers did not appreciate this desert so near the end of their journey, when they were dead tired and would need all their energy to cross the Sierra Mountains. The experience was so awful that even if you visit 40 Mile Desert today you can see the trail littered with animal skeletons, parts of wagons, broken chains, and abandoned treasures that the pioneers left behind. One pioneer, Eleazar Ingalls, said, "Dead stock line the roads, wagons, tents, clothes, everything but food may be found scattered on the road. The desert! You must feel it on an August day to realize it in all its horrors. Heaven save you from the experience!"

ICE SLOUGH:

Imagine crossing the desert...you're hot, there's no shade in sight, you're so thirsty you are about to collapse! Suddenly you come upon big chunks of ice in the ground! (Remember, there is no electricity or refrigerators!) This bizarre place, called Ice Slough, was actually a bog that prevented the winter ice from melting. Many people thought this was just a tall tale, but this was one crazy story that was actually true!

BACKGROUND SHEET 4

TROUBLES ON THE WAY

WILY WEATHER:

The weather the pioneers encountered was unpredictable and caused many difficulties. Clouds would pile up suddenly, and before you knew it, you would be in the middle of a violent storm. Black skies would flare with lightning, and the pioneers would be soaked for weeks at a time from pouring rain. This rain sometimes soaked into barrels and bags and ruined the food supplies. Pioneers were sometimes even killed from large hailstones, lightning, and sudden fires caused by lightning strikes! At other times, the sun would blister everyone for weeks at a time, and the pioneers suffered from lack of water and sunstroke.

MUD, MUD, MUD:

When it rained for days upon days, mud became a big problem! The mud got so high that you could sink right up to your knees. And you weren't the only ones who would sink in the mud...the oxen, cows, and horses would too. If the rains stopped long enough, most of the mud would dry up. This could be good, but it could be bad if it meant your wagon was stuck deep inside the mud. In order to free the wagon, the children would gather long grasses. These were laid down in front of the wagon wheels. Then the oxen would pull from the front, and the people would push from behind. Slowly the wheels would come up on the grass and pull the wagon to safe land.

AND THEN THERE WAS DUST:

On the other hand, when the sun was out the pioneers experienced the opposite problem. There would be dust everywhere...so much dust that it would get in everyone's eyes, including the cattle. The dust would sometimes be so thick that you could hardly see your hand in front of your face. When that happened, the wagon train sometimes had to stop traveling because no one could even see the trail. Most of the time, though, the wagon train just kept going and hoped that they were going the right direction.

ROUGH GOING:

The pioneers traveled over rough prairies and rocky, mountainous terrain. There were no roads or bridges. All that hiking, pounding, shaking and grinding eventually took its toll on everyone. The people, who mostly walked, often got sprained ankles and had sore feet. Even the oxen hoofs became swollen and would crack and bleed. Pioneers made protective moccasins for the animal hoofs from extra leather they had brought along.

The wear and tear also caused the wagon wheels to break. A broken wheel was almost irreplaceable. If the family had spare parts they could mend the wheel. Sometimes it was just a matter of the wood shrinking or swelling because of hot or cold weather. If this happened, they had to take off the iron wheel rim and loosen it or tighten it so it would fit the wheel properly. If a completely new wheel needed to be made, the wagon was just abandoned on the trail.

NOT SAFE TO DRINK:

The water found along the way was often alkaline or full of chemical salts. Both people and cattle who drank the water sometimes got sick and even died. Pioneers left messages (often on buffalo skulls) for those to follow, warning about creeks and watering holes with "poison water." If the water was not poison, it was often muddy, filled with sand, or contained little bugs and "wigglers." This was why pioneers, even the children and animals, usually drank coffee instead of plain water on the trail.

SICKNESS:

The most common cause of death on the trail was sickness. People became very ill with high fevers and aches and pains. Some of the common diseases people got were measles, typhoid, scurvy, dysentery, and malaria. But the most dreaded disease of all was the deadly cholera. The pioneers caught this by drinking contaminated water but, unfortunately, no one knew what the cause was at the time. If they hadn't been drinking boiled coffee most of the time, even more pioneers would have died from this terrible disease! Although the pioneers brought medicine with them (quinine for malaria, laudanum for pain, castor oil for stomach problems), they had nothing that would defeat cholera. All along the trail, wooden crosses and tombstones marked the graves of the pioneers who had died from sickness.

BACKGROUND SHEET 5

DISASTERS ON THE TRAIL

RAGING RIVERS:

As thousands of travelers headed for the West Coast, they faced long stretches without seeing any water. When rains did finally arrive, they created a devastating problem for the pioneers. When they reached the bank of a river, they could find that it had grown into a raging rapid. A small stream could swell to a size of over 700 feet wide and have currents running at a rate that no oxen team could overcome. A disaster such as this could cause wagon trains to turn around and go home. Those that wanted to wait out the flood could be delayed weeks at a time and endanger the rest of their already long journey. Others decided to attempt to cross the racing river. It was a necessity to lighten the wagon to make for the safest possible crossing. For this reason, one could find a gold mine of supplies and personal items along the banks of these rivers. At this point, the pioneers realized the importance of rope on the trail. Wagons could be tied together and wagon masters would attempt to lead wagons to safety on the other side. While some trains did manage to cross the rivers, most drowned and were swept away, wagon, livestock and all, never to be seen or heard from again.

THE MOUNTAINS WIN AGAIN:

Rivers were not the only dangerous obstacles that the pioneers faced. Perhaps even more intimidating were the ominous and towering mountains. For a wagon train this was the ultimate test of strength, courage and skill. This was where only the strong and experienced survived. Upon entering the foothills of the mountains, many wagon trains turned around and headed back to the east, afraid to tackle the awesome power of these giants. Others took a deep breath and pushed forward, thinking of the promises that lay on the other side.

There were many pitfalls that could spell the end for a wagon train. The oxen, weak from lack of food and water, might not be able to haul the wagons over the steep mountain passes. Once over the peak, the steep trail downward could be too much for the oxen to resist, and a wagon could topple over or run out of control. In such a case, a wagon could run off a cliff or smash into the side of the mountain, injuring or killing those on board. Another danger of the high mountain peaks was the unpredictable weather. High winds, heavy snows, landslides and avalanches could mean the end of anyone trying to defeat the mighty mountain. A wagon train could be moving along in good weather and suddenly meet disaster. One such case is the famous Donner Party. Despite the name, this was anything but a party.

THE DONNER PARTY:

It was April 1846. A group of 87 settlers, led by the Donner family, prepared to make the strenuous journey to the west by wagon. Due to poor planning and preparation, the train did not get started until late May because members packed all of their fancy luxury items for the trip. Because of the late start, the wagon train chose to take a shortcut while in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. This shortcut could have cost the entire wagon train their lives.

In October the Donner Party hit the heavy snows of the Sierra and was stuck. As the snow continued to fall (reaching a depth of **37 feet**), the wagon train became hopelessly lost in the mountains. As December arrived, the food supplies began to get low. The snow was too deep to allow the men to hunt, and members of the wagon train began to starve. Several men finally decided to leave the camp on foot and struggle to find help for the dying members of their party. The members who were left behind were forced to eat their animals. They even ate the animal's fur, the leather harnesses, and even all their extra clothes! When everything else possible to eat was gone, the people finally resorted to eating their dead wagon mates in order to stay alive!!

Finally, one year after setting out, in May of 1847, help arrived from Sutter's Fort. The 47 remaining members of the Donner Party were rescued from what is now called Donner Lake. The moral of the story: take only what you need, stay on the trail, and move as fast as you can if you plan to survive the mighty Sierra Nevada Mountains!

BACKGROUND SHEET 6

INDIANS

HOW THE PIONEERS FELT ABOUT THE INDIANS:

The pioneers began the journey west full of fears about the Indians. Most pioneers knew almost nothing about Indians. Many did not even know that there were many different nations with many different languages and ways of life.

INDIAN TRIBES:

The tribes of the plains, such as the Cheyenne and Arapaho, were buffalo hunters. Those west of the Rocky Mountains, such as the Nez Perce and Salish, hunted small animals and gathered seeds. In the far south, they were farmers. In the northwest, tribes such as the Cayuse, Umatilla and Chinook were salmon fishers, gatherers and hunters.

INDIAN COUNTRY:

In the 1840s and early 1850s, the Indians showed very little interest in the pioneer travelers. Most of the time the Indians were just interested in a good trade. The pioneers wanted moccasins from the Indians. Moccasins are soft, strong shoes made of buffalo or deer skin. The Indians wanted metal fishing hooks, glass beads, red paint and cloth from the pioneers.

RELATIONS WORSEN:

After awhile, some Indian tribes began to be fearful that the pioneers were taking over their land and destroying their way of life. They started to realize that this "invasion" of people into their territory was permanent and never going to stop.

When the Indians grew hostile and were not friendly they tried to steal the pioneers' cattle and horses. The pioneers had guards stay awake at night to watch over the wagon train.

Sometimes a group of Indians would get angry with the pioneers for crossing their land. They would want to fight with the pioneers. When that situation would happen, all the wagon trains would form a circle and have the children lie down inside the wagons so they wouldn't get hurt during the fighting. Everyone else who knew how to use a gun would fight.

During most of the 1840's there was very little fighting. By the mid 1850s, the relationship between the Indians and the pioneers got worse. The main reasons were that the white hunters had nearly made the buffalo extinct with their new breech-loading rifles. Also, the white settlers were farming the land that had once been tribal land.