

CHAPTER SIX

THE OREGON TRAIL

For nearly forty years after the Lewis and Clark Expedition, only traders and fur trappers crossed the Great Plains to the Rocky Mountains. No one settled the Great Plains because it was thought that it was too dry to farm there. That area was known as the "Great American Desert." People were also afraid of the Indians who lived on the Great Plains. However, the land where Lewis and Clark had spent the winter of 1805-1806, Oregon Country, was known to be good farmland. When settlers began to look west for new land, they went first to Oregon.

Vocabulary

oxen	granite	cholera
staples	emigrant	smallpox
foothills	tolls	
stock up	parallel (line of latitude)	

Locate the following on the map on the last page of this chapter.

Missouri	Platte R.	South Pass
Kansas	North Platte R.	Continental Divide
Nebraska	South Platte R.	Ft. Bridger
Wyoming	Sweetwater R.	Ft. Hall
Oregon	Independence, MO.	Snake R.
Washington	Ft. Laramie	Columbia R.
Idaho	Independence Rock	Ft. Walla Walla
California	49th parallel	Pacific Ocean

Oregon Fever

In the 1840's, a movement started in the United States called "Oregon Fever". More and more settlers wanted to leave their farms in the East and go to the new, uncrowded land in Oregon to farm. Stories were told about the wonderful climate, the richness of the soil, and the free land. Although not all of the stories were true, thousands of people decided to go to Oregon to start a new life.

Preparation for The Journey

The Oregon Trail began in the town of Independence, Missouri. The settlers would meet there and form large groups of wagons to travel together. Each family had its belongings in a covered wagon pulled by a team of oxen, which were more suited to the hardships of the long journey than mules or horses. The wagons held food staples

like flour, bacon, coffee, dried fruits, and sugar. Tools and household goods were also packed. Riding horses and perhaps a milk cow traveled with the wagons.

The Route

The mountain men who had trapped for furs in this country knew the best trails and mountain passes, and mapped out the route for the Oregon Trail. It took approximately six months to travel the 2,000 miles from Missouri to Oregon by covered wagon.

The Start of the Journey. The wagon train would start out from Independence, Missouri in the month of May. They needed to start this early so that they would be able to get over the mountains before the snow. Also in the spring there was plenty of water and green grass on the prairie for the horses and oxen.

Across the Great Plains to Ft. Laramie. At first, the land was flat as the wagons crossed the Great Plains following the Platte River through what is now Kansas and Nebraska. After reaching what is now Wyoming, the party would arrive at Fort Laramie, near the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Here they could repair their wagons and stock up on needed supplies.

Fort Laramie to South Pass. The trail then continued into the foothills along the Sweetwater River. Independence Rock, a large granite rock, was an important landmark along the way. The emigrants needed to arrive at Independence Rock by July 4th so that they would be able to make it to Oregon before the snow made travel over the mountains impossible. Many of the travelers carved or painted their names on Independence Rock, or left messages for people who would come after them.

The travelers next came to South Pass. This was a low spot in the mountains where the wagons could pass to the other side of the Continental Divide. This marked the halfway point in the journey from Missouri to Oregon.

South Pass to Fort Bridger. After South Pass came the hardest part of the trip. There were 123 miles of hot, arid ground, where there was little feed for the animals. The water had such a bad taste that people could hardly drink it. More oxen died, and more belongings had to be thrown away. When the wagons reached Fort Bridger, owned by Jim Bridger, they could rest and get needed supplies.

Fort Bridger to Fort Walla Walla. The Oregon Trail then headed northwest until it reached the Snake River at Fort Hall. It continued along the Snake River to the confluence of the Columbia River, at Fort Walla Walla. Here the settlers could either follow the Columbia River to Oregon, or they could turn southwest to California.

Difficulties and Dangers

Difficulties and hardships along the trail were many. One of the biggest problems was crossing the streams and rivers in spring and early summer, when the water was high. The travelers would have to float their wagons and swim the animals. Many times the wagons were washed away downstream, and animals and people drowned. Many died of diseases such as cholera and smallpox.

Horses and oxen died or became so exhausted that belongings had to be left along the side of the trail to lighten the wagons.

Indians sometimes stopped the wagon trains and demanded tolls or stole livestock, but relatively few pioneers were actually killed by Indians. The Indians became a serious problem only later on when they realized that more and more of their land was being taken from them.

Oregon Becomes Part of the United States

The first wagon train went to Oregon in 1843. At that time, Oregon Territory belonged to both the United States and England. In 1846 a treaty established the border between Canada and the United States at the 49th parallel latitude, extending the United States/Canadian boundary all the way from the Great Lakes to the Pacific Ocean. The land that would become the states of Oregon and Washington was now part of the United States.

Montana and the Oregon Trail

Few settlers arrived in Montana during the early years of the Oregon Trail. When gold was discovered in 1862, however, emigrants used the Oregon Trail to travel to the

Montana gold strikes. The two main roads into Montana began at Fort Laramie and Fort Hall on the Oregon Trail.

Trace the route of the Oregon Trail on the map.

