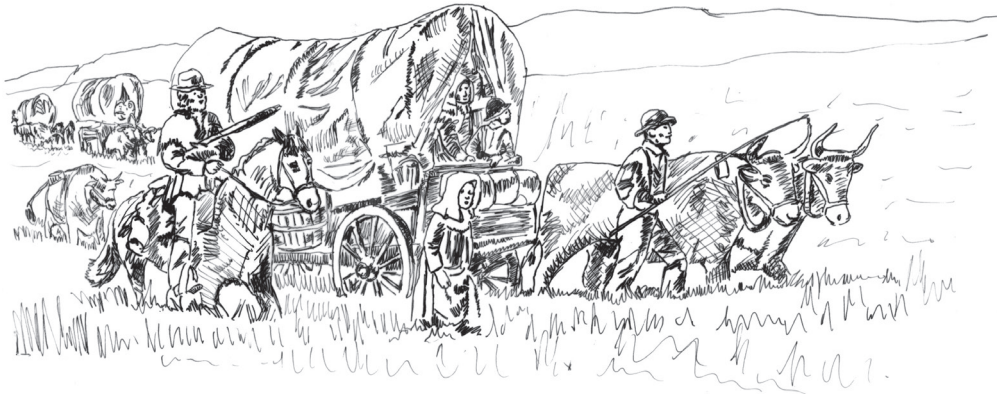


The Oregon Trail

The Dangers of Traveling West in the 1850s



The Oregon Trail was a pathway across the United States that led from east to west. The untamed west offered the promise of new opportunities, the American Dream. People living in the east wanted the chance to start big farms and find their fortunes. Whole families emigrated, or moved, from east to west following the Oregon Trail. They piled all their belongings into a wagon and started their 2,000-mile journey. They were known as pioneers.

Pioneers are the first people to move into and settle a region. Most of the pioneers walked the entire way across the Oregon Trail, often barefoot. Their wagons were too heavy for horses to pull so they used strong oxen or cattle. The going was slow and rough.

Sometimes, groups of wagons traveled together. These were called wagon trains. The wagons followed each other along the Oregon Trail. Some wagon trains were reported to be 5 miles long. They could include hundreds of people.

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Traveling the Oregon Trail was very dangerous. Nothing was more dangerous to the pioneers than cholera (KAWL-er-uh). Not baseball-sized hail or freezing in bad weather. Not getting crushed by the wheels of a wagon. Not even by drowning on overloaded ferries at river crossings.

Cholera killed more emigrants than anything else along the Oregon Trail. During bad outbreaks, cholera killed two-thirds of entire wagon trains.

Pioneers got cholera from consuming contaminated water or food. On the Oregon Trail, they didn't have running water or toilets. They drank water from nearby streams and rivers. They dug holes in the ground for toilets. Many emigrants probably didn't wash their hands afterward. Rain washed the contents of the holes into the streams or rivers. This contaminated the water. Handling food without washing their hands contaminated the food.

Cholera is a bad way to go. Once infected, the bacteria get into your gut. Cholera can cause vomiting and muscle cramps. But it almost always causes horrible, watery diarrhea. This can severely dehydrate you very quickly. When your body dries out, it begins to shut down. A pioneer could go from healthy to dead in just a few hours.

