

## Survival and Loss

Health care in the frontier was an imperfect science in the mid-19th century, and mortality rates were lamentably high. Many children arrived at the end of the trail with fewer parents or siblings than they left home with. Abigail Jane Scott Duniway was seventeen when she came across the Oregon Trail with her family in 1852. She writes in her journal of the loss of her mother just a few days beyond Fort Laramie:

June 20th, Sabbath Day. How mysterious are the works of an all wise and overruling Providence! We little thought when last Sabbath's pleasant sun shed upon us his congenial rays that when the next should come it would find us mourning over the sickness and death of our beloved Mother!

But it has been even so; our mother was taken about two o'clock this morning with a violent diarrhea attended with cramping. She however aroused no one until daylight when everything was done which we possibly could to save her life; but her constitution long impaired by disease was unable to withstand the attack and this afternoon between four and five o'clock her wearied spirit took its flight and then we realized that we were bereaved indeed.

For the survivors who made it to Oregon --in particular the mothers -- their grieving for a lost child continued or was perhaps even amplified as they reached their final destination and had time to reflect upon what might have been...Kate L. Robbins, an early settler in Central Oregon, captured this particular grief poetically

I am all alone in my chamber now,  
And the midnight hour is near,  
And the fagot's crack and the clock's dull tick  
Are the only sounds I hear.  
And over my soul in it's solitude  
Sweet feelings of sadness glide,  
For my heart and my eyes are full when I think  
Of the little boy that died

I went one night to my father's house --  
Went home to the dear ones all --  
And softly I opened the garden gate,  
And softly the door of the hall.  
My mother came out to meet her son --  
And kissed me and then she sighed,  
And her head fell on my neck and she wept  
For the little boy that died.

And when I gazed on his innocent face,  
As still and cold he lay,  
And thought what a lively child he had been,  
And how soon he must decay --  
"O Death. Thou lovest the beautiful!"  
In the woe of my spirit I cried,  
For sparkled the eyes and the forehead was fair  
Of the little boy that died!

Source: Personal Diary of Abigail Jane Scott Duniway- Covered wagon Women, Vol 5, P. 71 ; Poem: Pioneer letters: the letter as literature by Witte, John, c.1981 Northwest Review Books