

## Lifestyles of the Oregon Trail Livestock

Traveling the Oregon and California trail was no easier for animals than it was for any man or woman. Wagons were most often pulled by teams of oxen or mules, but thousands of heads of cattle and horses all made the trek across the plains, plodding or trudging along through the dust and mud, over rocks and ridges as best they could. The strain of hauling a home's worth of goods and food would leave its toll on even the heartiest of stock.

In 1845 seven-year-old Benjamin Franklin Bonney and his family turned south at Fort Hall, heading towards California in a group of about twelve families, after crossing the plains in a wagon train of almost 3,000 people. The act of creating a new trail was painful to all members of the wagon train, regardless of their hoofs or heels. Benjamin describes the sheer pain of that section of the journey:

After two weeks traveling we struck a desert of sand and sagebrush. Breaking the way through the heavy sagebrush was so hard on the lead team of oxen that their legs were soon bruised and bleeding, so each wagon had to take its turn at the head of the train for half a day, then drop to the rear. On this sagebrush plain we found lots of prickly pear. We children were barefooted, and I can remember yet how we limped across that desert from piercing the soles of our feet with the sharp spines of this cactus. The prickly pear also made the oxen lame, as the spines would work in between their hoofs.

Any bovine or four-legged animal traveling across the Oregon Trail surely must have longed for the green pastures of their former home throughout the journey. During his journey of 1852, Edward Jay Allen took note of the poor creatures:

Dead cattle, by the roadside, are becoming very frequent here – they fail completely- and we have passed scores with feet almost worn off, left behind.

Oxen would die of exhaustion or malnutrition; livestock could die from poisonous weeds, bad water, rattlesnake bites, scorpion stings, or tick-borne illness. By July and August, when wagon trains were passing through the dust-ridden, scorching hot Snake River region, travelers were overwhelmed by the smells and sights of death that pursued the emigrants throughout their journey.

Counted 150 dead oxen. It is difficult to find a camping ground destitute of carcasses. (J.G. Bruff, 1849)

Looked starvation in the face. I have seen men on passing an animal that has starved to death on the plains, stop and cut out a steak, roast and eat it and call it delicious. (Clark Thompson, 1850)

Sources: [http://www.octa-trails.org/learn/people\\_places/articles\\_life\\_death.php](http://www.octa-trails.org/learn/people_places/articles_life_death.php) (accessed 5/10/13); Edward Jay Allen on the Trail 1852 (excerpts from OCTA Journal Fall 2012)