

# Pack Your Wagon

## An Oregon Trail lesson in group decision making, and what impacts our choices

### **For Teachers:**

This lesson can be done as part of the “Wagons Ho!” exhibit at the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, or it can be done in the classroom using only the attached materials. If done at the Interpretive Center, the full scale packable wagon can be used with large foam blocks labeled for each of the items on the packing list. This may require some pre-organization to assign groups.

### **Included in this Lesson Plan:**

- Background historical information
- Background primary source documents related to Oregon Trail pioneers and supplies they used
- A Pack Your Wagon activity list worksheet which can be used individually or for a group activity, and requires some math and discussion, and recording with a pencil
- Follow up discussion and brief essay work sheet

### **This activity will help develop:**

- critical thinking
- ability to develop and express reasoned decisions and competing arguments
- using dialog to develop and express a particular point of view
- understanding how technology, scarcity and emotions affect decisions
- comparing past to present, especially family life and technology
- analyzing purchases and supply choices, and the differences between needs and wants
- an understanding of co-operation versus conflict in solving a dilemma
- simple math skills in calculating, estimating and adjusting
- understanding primary sources in researching history

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More background historical information and suggested bibliographical sources are available on our website: **[oregontrail.blm.gov](http://oregontrail.blm.gov)**

# Background

**This activity is about choices that need to be made in planning a venture.**

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The venture here is the Oregon Trail Journey undertaken by pioneers in the 1840's through 1860's. They were migrating to the western part of the continent for many different reasons, but most wanted new opportunities and to change their lives for the better.

## Basics of Life on the Trail

- Thousands of people traveled each year from May to October going west about 15 miles per day.
- There were no hotels; they were camping the entire way.
- There were no grocery stores or supply stores – the Trail passed by a few trading posts, and there were a few opportunities to trade with Native Americans, but mostly you had to pack all your food and supplies for the family in a wagon. You might be able to do a little trading, hunting, or gathering along the way.
- The pioneers had to be outdoors in all kinds of weather.
- They were leaving old homes behind, and they would have to build new homes when they arrived in Oregon in the fall. Many knew they would never see friends and family ever again.
- Pioneers had to take care of health and safety themselves, although others in a wagon train might help.
- Pioneers did not know for certain if they would be able to buy tools and supplies for their new life when they arrived in Oregon.
- There was not much for entertainment – maybe reading, music, visiting with friends, games.
- Pioneers had to be creative and adaptable in finding solutions to their problems.

You are going to fill out a list of what to take, and what to leave. The list has several items to consider, but you are limited by how much you can take total.

*(See Activity, Page 5)*

# What to Take?

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Here are some writings about supplies that people used on the Oregon Trail. They are primary sources of information, as they were written by people who actually lived during that time, and experienced the Oregon Trail. These are printed as written by the pioneers, and you may notice the spelling and grammar is sometimes confusing!

*“Father built a large box in the home-made wagon and put in a lot of dried buffalo meat and pickled pork. He had made over a hundred pounds of maple sugar which we took along instead of loaf sugar. He also took along plenty of corn meal....He laid in a plentiful supply of home twist tobacco. Father chewed it and Mother smoked it...in an old corn-cob pipe.”*

Benjamin Bonney, who traveled the trail at age 7 in 1845, and wrote this memory of the trip years later when he had grown up.

*“June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1852... to day five men direct from oregon they gave us the privelage of writing home last night we had music and dancing it makes it seem quite like home to hear the Accordian which Cecelia plays most every evenings...”*

Diary of Parthenia Blank, pioneer to Oregon

*“through all the winter preceding the April morning when the final start was made, the fingers of the women and girls were busy providing additional stores of bedding and blankets, of stockings and sunbonnets, of hickory shirts and gingham aprons that the family might be equipped for the trip, and not left destitute in case of failure to reach the goal in season, or of opportunity to replenish the stores from the meager and high-priced stocks of a new country.”*

Catherine Scott Coburn who traveled the Oregon Trail at age 13 in 1852, and wrote this memory in 1890 when she was 51 years old.

*“our outfit consisted of two yoke of oxen costing \$117.50, a wagon costing about \$80.00, our bedding consisting of buffalo robes and blankets, about 600 pounds of provisions, consisting of sacks of flour, one barrel of hardtack, a few boxes of Boston biscuit, some bacon, coffee, sugar, dried apples, etc. cooking utensils, two revolvers and a rifle.”*

William Smedley, a pioneer to Oregon in 1862 who traveled with companions David Culp and James Hall. James had made the trip across the plains about a decade earlier, and lived in California for many years. Smedley wrote this in 1911.

*Mr. Sawyer bought his wagon and two mules and some of the supplies which we would need on our long and tedious journey across the western plains, in Louisville. He bought two more mules, and the steamer stopped at his father's farm in Hancock county, Ky., to take these animals aboard. At St. Louis we changed on to a small Missouri-river steamboat, and came up that river to St. Joseph. Here it was necessary to lay in the remainder of our supplies, so Mr. Sawyer bought a single-horse carriage for my use and one more mule...*

*This is not the first trip for Mr. Sawyer. He was in the great California rush of '49, and went over with a large pack train. In this train was one wagon loaded with medicine, to be used in case of sickness. He drove this wagon all the way himself,... He knows just what we will need on this trip and has made his purchases accordingly.*

Diary of Francis Sawyer, 21 when she crossed the plains with her husband Thomas Sawyer. They started for Oregon, but changed their minds while on the trip and went to California.

*Mr. Editor; Subjoined you will find a list of the principle articles necessary for an outfit to Oregon or California, which may be useful to some of your readers. It has been carefully prepared from correct information derived from intelligent persons who have made the trip.*

*The wagons should be new, made of thoroughly seasoned timber, and well ironed and not too heavy; with good tight beds, strong bows, and large double sheets. There should be at least four yoke of good oxen to each wagon - one yoke to be considered as extra, and to be used only in cases of emergency. Every family should have at least two good milk cows, as milk is a great luxury on the road.*

*The amount of provisions should be as follows; to each person except infants:*

*200 pounds of bread stuff (flour and crackers)*

*100 pounds of bacon*

*12 pounds of coffee*

*12 pounds of sugar*

*Each family should also take the following articles in proportions to the number as follows:*

*From 1 to 5 pounds tea*

*From 10 to 50 pounds rice*

*From 1/2 to 2 bushels beans*

*From 1/2 to 2 bushels dried fruit*

*From 1/2 to 5 pounds saleratus*

*From 5 to 50 pounds soap*

*Cheese, dried pumpkins, onions and a small portion of corn meal may be taken by those who desire them. The latter article, however, does not keep well.*

*No furniture should be taken, and as few cooking utensils as are indispensably needed. Every family ought to have a sufficient supply of clothing for at least one year after their arrival, as everything of that kind is high in those countries. Some few cattle should be driven for beef, but much loose stock will be a great annoyance. Some medicines should also be found in every family, the kind and quantity may be determined by consulting the family physician.*

*I would suggest to each family the propriety of taking a small sheet-iron cooking stove with fixtures, as the wind and rain often times renders it almost impossible to cook without them, they are light and cost but little. All the foregoing articles may be purchased on good terms in this place.*

*Article in St. Joseph, Missouri Gazette, March 19, 1847.*

*April 7, 1852...Bade adiew to home and started amid snow and rain for the land of gold. Our outfit consists of two light strong wagons drawn by oxen and cows, one yoke of heavy oxen for wheelers and a lighter yoke for leaders, with one or two yokes of cows between. We have two saddle horses and a drove of twenty dairy cows, a good sized tent and a sheet iron camp stove which can be set up inside, making it warm and comfortable, no matter what the weather outside. We have a plentiful supply of provisions, including dried fruits and vegetables, also a quantity of light bread cut in slices and dried for use when it is not convenient to bake. Our stove is furnished with a reflector oven which bakes very nicely. Our clothing is light and durable. My sister and I wear short dresses and bloomers and our foot gear includes a pair of light calf-skin topboots for wading through mud and sand.*

*Diary of Eliza Ann McAuley, age 17, who crossed the plains in 1852 with her older brother and sister and two unrelated friends to meet up with their father who was in California.*

# Pack Your Wagon

**Supply List – You will look over the list and decide what YOU are going to take to Oregon on a five month wagon trip.**

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**Consider these questions as you choose:**

- 1) What would be the most important things you would take, and why do you consider them the most important?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2) Which of these would bother you the most? Why?
  - Being hungry
  - Being cold and wet
  - Not having favorite and meaningful personal belongings
  - Not feeling safe
  - Being stranded
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 3) Wagons usually carried supplies for 4 or more people. The wagons were pulled by mules or oxen, and if you loaded your wagon too heavily, it would injure or kill your animals. You can only load up to 2,400 pounds.
  - On the list, choose what you would include, up to 2,400 pounds total.
  - When you have your list, get in a group with others and debate until you all can agree what goes in the wagon. You may have to convince the others why to keep your favorites – so be ready with your reasons!

# Pack Your Wagon

Take no more than 2,400 lbs. with you, stacked no higher than the sides of the wagon

*you'll need this much food a family of four...*

## FOOD SUPPLY:

Item	Weight (in Lbs.)	Lbs. Packed
Apple Vinegar	25	_____
Bacon	400	_____
Beans	200	_____
Coffee	80	_____
Dried Apples	80	_____
Flour	500	_____
Hardtack	200	_____
Lard	200	_____
Salt	50	_____
Sugar	40	_____
Rice	200	_____
Water	100	_____
Whiskey	40	_____
<b>Subtotal:</b>		_____

## DRY GOODS AND SUNDRIES:

Item	Weight (in Lbs.)	Lbs. Packed
Bedroll	15	_____
Blacksmithing Tools	200	_____
Books	75	_____
Medicine	10	_____
Cast Iron Stove	300	_____
Chair	20	_____
Cookware & Eating Utensils	75	_____
Granny's Clock	15	_____
Gun Making Tools	200	_____
Keepsakes	40	_____
Lead Shot	25	_____
Mirror	15	_____
Gunpowder	80	_____
Tent & Gear	150	_____
Tools	50	_____
Toys	15	_____
<b>Subtotal:</b>		_____

**TOTAL WEIGHT OF YOUR PACKED WAGON:**

*(must be 2,400 lbs. or less)*

*If you packed all of these items in your wagon, it would weigh 3,400 pounds!  
Can you afford to take a second wagon?*

# **Pack Your Vehicle Today**

**After you've done the Pack Your Wagon Activity, consider  
how you might do things differently today.**

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If you and your friends, or family, plan a trip of two weeks or more in a car, how might these choices affect what you take along?

Will you be camping each night, or staying in a hotel or in a home? How does this affect what you take along?

Will you be eating in restaurants or take your own meals? What do you need to take along for these choices?

What do you know about where you are going? If you don't know anything, are you more likely to find out by researching or by asking others for their advice? How do you find the best information?

If someone tries to sell or give you something to take along on your trip, what is most likely to make you decide to take it along?

# Then and Now

**The Oregon Trail pioneers had to deal with very different circumstances than modern day travelers.**

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Which of the following do you think makes a big difference in planning a big venture such as a trip?

Put an **X** by the ones you think are a big difference, and an **O** by the ones your think are not so different. Make a note of what travelers today do differently that makes it easier or more difficult than the Oregon Trail pioneers.

\_\_\_ There were not good ways to preserve or refrigerate food, and few places to purchase food, so pioneers had to carry food that wouldn't spoil and always think about the next meal. *Why is this different today?*

\_\_\_ If the mules or oxen got injured or don't have enough to eat, the pioneers would have to stop and would be stranded. *What would you do if you are stranded while traveling?*

\_\_\_ There were not many doctors or medical services along the Oregon Trail, so if a pioneer or a member of their family got sick or injured, they would have to take care of it themselves. *What happens if you get sick while away from home?*

\_\_\_ The pioneers were a long way from anywhere, and about the only way to communicate long distances was to ask others to take a message back to the nearest fort, to the next wagon train, or to a town back east. *How do we communicate long distances today?*

\_\_\_ The pioneers' clothing, tools and wagons were mostly handmade and could be very expensive. If something was lost or damaged, it might be difficult to replace. *How do we repair items that are lost or broken now?*