

Wide Open Plains, Claustrophobic Campsites

Life on the Trail was a grueling experience, and constant exposure to unforgiving elements often led to impatience and short tempers. Wind, rain, mud, dust, drought and starvation brought out the full spectrum of human emotions.

Though many found moments of joy and friendship, emigrants also experienced exhaustion, malnutrition, ill health, sore muscles, and congested campsites. Personality conflicts abounded as people accustomed to isolated farm life shared trails and campsites with hundreds of strangers.

A wide array of conflicts could become fuel for discord in a wagon train, regardless of the size of the group. Matters that cause controversy today were known to split more than a few parties of emigrants -- politics, religion, morals, family disputes, speed of travel or treatment of animals caused tensions to rise. For these reasons, the most successful groups to cross the plains had a written constitution, code, resolutions, or by-laws to which the emigrants could refer when disagreements threatened to get out of hand. Almost all wagon trains had regulations of some sort, it was a rare group that didn't elect or otherwise appoint officers.

The regulations for a wagon train typically included rules for camping and marching, and restrictions on gambling and drinking. There were penalties for infractions, social security for the sick or bereaved, and provisions established for the disposition of shares of deceased members of a party. These were all necessary to keep the peace between the diverse groups of people who were living and working together for up to six months. Free time was scarce along the trail, but evenings presented the greatest opportunities to share enjoyable pastimes with traveling companions. Joel Palmer offers us a colorful description of the assembly of people that came together in an emigrant camp:

June fifteenth, 1847. An unoccupied spectator, who could have beheld our camp to-day, would think it a singular spectacle. The hunters returning with the spoil; some erecting scaffolds, and others drying the meat. Of the women, some were washing, some ironing, some baking. At two of the tents the fiddle was employed in uttering its unaccustomed voice among the solitudes of the Platte; at one tent I heard singing; at others the occupants were engaged in reading, some the Bible, others poring over novels.

While all this was going on, that nothing might be wanting to complete the harmony of the scene, a Campbellite preacher, named Foster, was reading a hymn, preparatory to religious worship. The fiddles were silenced, and those who had been occupied with that amusement, betook themselves to cards.

Such is but a miniature of the great world we had left behind us, when we crossed the line that separates civilized man from the wilderness. But even here the variety of occupation, the active exercise of body and mind, either in labor or pleasure, the commingling of evil and good, show that the likeness is a true one.

Sources: Oregon California Trail Association: http://octa-trails.org/learn/people_places/articles_life_death.php; http://archive.org/stream/palmersjournalof00palmrich/palmersjournalof00palmrich_djvu.txt