

Frequently Asked Questions About the Oregon Trail

Where can I find the list of all the pioneers?

Migration over the Oregon Trail involved a huge number of people, moving to different locations for different reasons. In a free society, emigrants were not required to sign a roster to leave, or to present a passport at borders, or sign in anyplace upon arrival. There is no comprehensive list of all the pioneers. A few organized wagon trains had rosters of members, but frequently these only included adult males. Some locations along the trail, such as Fort Kearney, Fort Laramie, and Fort Henrietta, kept registers where some wagon train members voluntarily signed. Most of the available lists of pioneers have been compiled by historical societies and genealogical organizations by soliciting information from pioneer descendants, and combing historical documents such as journals, letters and pioneer society records for names. Names have been recorded from Independence Rock and other "register rock" locations along the trail route. Currently, the OCTA Census of Overland Emigrant Documents can run a name search through their database of over 48,000 names, and the Oregon Genealogical Society and Idaho Genealogical Society can locate names from their Pioneer Certificate programs.

How many people came over the Oregon Trail?

It's difficult to estimate the numbers due to the nature of the large scale emigration. People on the move, in sometimes large groups, with varying destinations are difficult to count. The emigration lasted over several decades. People were born and people died during the typical five month journey. Some historians have made estimates based on diary accounts, newspapers reports from the time, and from registers and wagon counts kept at Fort Laramie and Fort Kearney. Historian John Unruh estimated 296,000 traveled to Oregon, California, and Utah from 1840 to 1860. Merrill Mattes estimated 350,000 overland travelers from 1841 through 1866, and later expanded his estimate closer to 500,000 for all travelers on western trails during that time period.

Why did people come West?

A variety of incentives led people to attempt the 2,000 mile journey west. Many in the 1840s sought a new beginning following a widespread economic depression in the late 1830s. Some hoped to escape the political strife preceding and during the Civil War. A few settlers had patriotic motives, to ensure American possession of territory jointly claimed by the U.S. and Great Britain in the Northwest, or occupied by Mexico in the Southwest. Some religious groups wished to establish missions and communities. Some moved to join family members. Many emigrants made the trip seeking adventure and new opportunities. The majority of emigrants had as their main reason either land or gold. In Oregon, various land acts, most notably the Donation Land Act of 1850, provided free land, up to 320 or 640 acres, to settlers. The discovery of gold in California in 1848 lured nearly 150,000 people west over the trail in five years. New gold discoveries in Oregon, Idaho, Colorado, and other western states led continuing migrations of fortune seekers to all regions of western America.

How many pioneers died making the trip?

It's estimated perhaps 10% of the people making the trip died en route (about 20,000 - 30,000).

Cholera, a bacterial disease that causes severe diarrhea and vomiting, claimed a great many lives. Most victims died from the resulting dehydration within hours of contracting the disease. Large scale cholera epidemics swept the trail population in 1849, 1850, and 1852. The disease spread due to poor sanitation, and could have been avoided by boiling water, but discovery of the cause and prevention was years away, and emigrants unknowingly spread the disease by using polluted water at common campgrounds. A second leading cause of death was accidents with wagons, firearms, and drowning at river crossings. Many of the emigrants - inexperienced at handling wagons - met their fate falling under wheels or coping with runaway livestock. The trip required several treacherous river crossings and many emigrants drowned trying to maneuver wagons and livestock through swift currents. Nervous emigrants - fearful from stories about Indians and wild animals - were heavily armed, and carried loaded guns with no safety devices in jostling wagons. Accidental shootings were not uncommon. Inexperienced hunters shot wildly while pursuing antelope and buffalo, and weary guards sometimes mistakenly shot their comrades believing they saw a thief, a rustler, or a wild animal in the shadows around a wagon camp. Fatigued from the rigors of daily travel and poor nutrition, many emigrants succumbed to diseases such as typhoid, food poisoning, and "mountain fever" or circumstances such as childbirth that they might otherwise have survived. "Mountain fever" is believed to be tick fever, which causes flu-like symptoms.

Although popular culture raised the dramatic image of frequent deaths from homicide, fights, and altercations between Indians and emigrants at wagon camps, historical records indicate these were a minor contribution to emigrant fatalities - less than one percent of the total number of pioneers. Those that died during the journey were often buried in hastily made graves alongside the trail. Though some were buried in wagon boxes or other improvised caskets, a shortage of wood meant most had a shroud of a blanket or quilt, if anything at all. Frequently unmarked to thwart grave-robbers, the graves were sometimes made right in the path of the trail, where the passing of wagon wheels could pack down the soil and obliterate evidence of the burial to prevent digging by wild animals.

What's the difference between a Conestoga wagon and a Prairie Schooner?

Large boat shaped Conestoga wagons were widely used for freighting, but were too long, heavy, and cumbersome to be practical for a long journey over the Oregon Trail. Emigrant wagons were smaller and lighter, and did not require as many draft animals. There was no single design for emigrant wagons - some were smaller, lighter versions of the boat shaped Conestogas, and some were custom designed and built with double decks or special storage features. Generally, the canvas topped "Prairie Schooners" had wagon boxes about four feet wide by nine to eleven feet long and two feet high, with rear axle clearance of about two feet. Boxes and running gear were made of well seasoned hardwoods, and reinforced with iron hardware. Wheel spokes and rims were made of Osage orange, hickory, oak, or

other very strong hardwoods, with iron tires. In early years, wheels were attached with linchpins, but by the 1850s, thimble skein axles and lug bolts were becoming the preferred method. Slightly smaller wheels in front provided greater turning capability. Wagons were sometimes brightly painted, sometimes in colors to coordinate and identify all members of a train traveling together. Wagon covers were made of cotton or linen canvas or osnaburg cloth, either made commercially or hand woven and sewn at home. Canvas was frequently waterproofed with oil base paint or linseed oil, and sometimes slogans were painted on the long white sides. When loaded, the wagons weighed up to 2,500 pounds, and required two to four yoke of oxen or pairs of mules. Some wagons had braking devices, but these were inadequate on steep declines, and chain locks, rough locks, shoe brakes, log drags and windlasses were employed on downhill grades. Uphill pulls required winches and double teaming. Lubricants made from animal fat and pine tar had to be frequently applied to axles, and wood shrinkage in dry, arid climates caused many problems with wheels.

What is an ox?

An ox (or oxen, the plural) is an adult, castrated male of any breed of cattle. These steers can live up to 16 years, working most of their lives. They are trained to pull vehicles and plows, and in North America they were the most widely used draft animal up to about the 1850s. There was great debate amongst emigrants as to whether it was better to use oxen or mules (a cross breed between a horse and a donkey) to pull their wagons. Both had their advantages and disadvantages. Oxen were slower, walking two to three miles per hour, but could pull great weight, survive on little feed, were patient, gentle, and easily trainable. They were less expensive and more widely available than mules - and, in a pinch, they could provide beef. Although horses could travel the fastest, they required more feed, could not pull as heavy loads, were susceptible to injury, and were a tempting target to thieves, rustlers, or Plains Indians. Mules traveled faster than oxen, and could pull heavy loads on little feed. However, well trained mules were a scarce commodity during emigration years, costing considerably more money, and many pioneers found the mules' unpredictable temperaments difficult to handle.

Oxen were hitched to wagons by means of a wooden yoke, and driven by a handler (called a teamster, or a bullwhacker for large freight teams) walking alongside giving voice commands or using a goad stick or whip. Many pioneer accounts record great affection and concern for their oxen - often giving them pet names. Oxen were shod to protect their feet from rocky terrain, and many remedies were suggested for common ailments such as drinking alkali water. Without their oxen, pioneers could not pull their wagon loads of supplies. Loss of their oxen was devastating, and to many pioneer families, the oxen were the unsung heroes of the westward migration story.

What kind of supplies did the pioneers take on their trip?

A variety of guidebooks, newspaper articles, and helpful tips in letters from friends or family who had already made the trip provided different lists about what and how much was essential to survive the five-month journey. The critical advice was to keep things as light as possible, and to take easily

preserved staple foods. Supplies in each wagon generally had to be kept below 2,000 pounds total weight, and as the journey progressed and draft animals grew tired, many pioneers had to discard excess food and baggage. Items taken by nearly all wagon parties included flour, hard tack or crackers, bacon, sugar, coffee and tea, beans, rice, dried fruit, salt, pepper, and saleratus (used for baking soda). Some also took whiskey or brandy, and medicines. Minimal cooking utensils included a cast iron skillet or spider, Dutch oven, reflector oven, coffee pot or tea kettle, and tin plates, cups, and knives, forks, spoons, matches, and crocks, canteens, buckets or water bags for liquids. A rifle, pistols, powder, lead, and shot were recommended for hunting game along the way, and for self-defense. Candles were used for lighting, as they were far less expensive and lighter than transporting oil, and several pounds of soap was included. Only two or three sets of practical, sturdy, and warm clothing of wool and linen had to last the wear and tear of the journey, and a small sewing kit for repairs was important. Basic tools such as a shovel, ax or hatchet, and tools to repair wagon equipment were essential. Bedding and tents completed the list of necessities. For most families, 1,600-1,800 pounds of their supplies would be food, leaving little space for other items. Although some people tried to include furniture, books, and treasured belongings, these were soon discarded. According to many accounts, the trail was littered with cast off trunks, bureaus, beds, clothing, excess food, and even cast iron stoves. Though prices and availability of goods varied from year to year, for most emigrants it cost a minimum of \$600 to \$800 to assemble a basic outfit of wagon, oxen, and supplies.

Where can I find Oregon Trail diaries?

Over 2,000 diaries, letters, and memoirs are held in archives, college and university libraries, historical societies, and public libraries throughout the U.S. Many are still in the treasured possession of pioneer descendants. Historian Merrill Mattes estimated that one out of every 250 travelers kept some sort of written record of their journey. However, through the years, many of these were lost or destroyed. Participants in the Oregon Trail story include Native Americans, who watched the flood of newcomers and grappled with the changes brought about by the mass migration. Their thoughts and feelings are recorded in speeches, interviews, and records of treaty negotiations. Military and official government expeditions also kept records and published reports related to Trail experiences and observations. Two good resources for locating a specific diary are the books *Platte River Road Narratives* compiled by Merrill Mattes (University of Illinois Press, 1988) and *The Trail West* compiled by John Townley (Jamison Station Press, 1988) which index primary source documents by year and author. Most state historical societies have indexes to primary source trail documents in their collections, and many state and local historical societies have published copies of pioneer journals available for sale. Many university and college libraries can provide copies of journals from their archives collections. The National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center at Flagstaff Hill has a reference library, and although the library is not open to the public, it can assist in providing information on locating and obtaining copies of specific diaries.

How many pioneers were killed by Indian attacks?

Contrary to popular myth, most encounters between Indians and emigrants were peaceful and mutually advantageous. Although popular fiction and movies long portrayed natives in a negative light as stereotypical savages mercilessly victimizing pioneers, historical record presents a different story. Indians of the time period belonged to complex societies, and maintained relationships with emigrants with both positive and negative aspects. Because Indian culture at the time did not record written accounts of their history, much of the information comes from records of white, Euro-American writers. Different tribes along the route of the Oregon Trail mentioned in pioneer diaries included Pawnee, Arikara, Cheyenne, Comanche, Sioux, Arapaho, Oto, Kansa, Bannock, Shoshone, Paiute, Nez Perce, Cayuse, Umatilla, Walla Walla, and Wasco. Though some of these cultures had sub-groups, they were frequently assigned some common name in emigrant writings. Variations in languages and customs further confused emigrants as they encountered different tribes along the 2,000 mile journey.

Paranoia regarding Indians was rampant. However, most emigrants soon found that Indians were more interested in peaceful trading than violence. Food was often the primary impetus, with Indians supplying emigrants with much needed supplies. Indians sought clothing, firearms, and small items such as mirrors, tin cups, fish hooks, or metal tools. Emigrants often employed Indians to herd livestock, act as guides, or assist in river crossings. On the eastern half of the trail, some Indians operated toll bridges and ferries. On the western half of the journey, emigrants came to look forward to trading for salmon in Southern Idaho, and buying fresh produce from Cayuse in the Grande Ronde Valley and Umatilla River region.

A study included in John Unruh's book *The Plains Across* estimates 362 emigrants and 426 Indians were killed as a result of altercations on the Trail between 1840 and 1860. Most violence and fatalities came from small skirmishes due to paranoia, retaliation, or theft. Indians did not attack full speed at circled wagons or large wagon trains as frequently scripted in Hollywood productions. As accomplished military strategists, natives realized they would be at a disadvantage in such an encounter. Violent attacks on small, isolated trains or individuals did see a rise after the 1850s, as native hostility grew towards whites. The dramatic rise in white settlers caused consternation. Indiscriminate killing of unsuspecting Indians by nervous or retaliatory pioneers caused resentment and suspicion. Growing mortality from new diseases introduced by settlers caused fear. And settlers' disrespect of sacred grounds and customs caused anger. Sensational incidents such as the Whitman Massacre in 1847, the 1854 attack on the Ward wagon train, and the 1860 Otter-Van Orman attack received wide publicity. Dramatic battles between settlers, natives, and the U.S. military increased after the 1860s and gained legendary status in American culture.

The brutal aspects of Indian-emigrant relations and the cultural clash as settlers moved into native lands has wider notoriety than the peaceful, undramatic trading and visiting that records show was common. During the time of the Oregon Trail migrations, Indian tribes were involved with inter-tribal trading and

warfare, and economic and technological changes, as well as the social and political friction that resulted from the rapid population increase of new settlers. The story of individual tribe's efforts to maintain their culture and lifestyle during these decades of drastic change is far more complex than can be portrayed by circled wagons and whooping warriors. Most emigrants completed their journey without any such incident, finding that respect, kindness, and caution generally elicited a similar response from natives, while violence and disrespect would be returned.

What books would you recommend on the Oregon Trail?

The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West

John Unruh. University of Illinois Press. 1979.

A comprehensive study of the Overland Trail experience based on extensive research of primary source documents. Covers most major subjects, and is a reliable, accurate, and well-balanced presentation on history of the Oregon and California Trails. Considered by most Oregon Trail scholars to be the premier work on this subject.

The Great Platte River Road: The Covered Wagon Mainline Via Fort Kearney to Fort Laramie

Merrill J. Mattes. University of Nebraska Press. 1969.

Focuses on the stretch of trail which followed the Platte River through Nebraska, but includes detailed information about emigrant experiences, significant trail events and dates, and trail landmarks.

The Overland Migrations Handbook 105, Division of Publications, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington D.C. 1979. Text written by David Lavender.
Provides a brief overview of events, people and places associated with the Oregon, California, and Mormon Trails. A good introductory book.