

History Bits & Westward Quotes on the Oregon Trail

This page contains a variety of stories, statistics, and quotes about people, places and events on the Oregon Trail and early-day Northwest.

During eight decades in the 1800s the Oregon Trail served as a natural corridor as the United States grew from the eastern half of the continent toward the west coast. The Oregon Trail ran approximately 2,000 miles west from Missouri toward the Rocky Mountains and ended in Oregon's Willamette Valley. The California Trail branched off in southern Idaho and brought miners to the gold fields of Sierra Nevada. The Mormon Trail paralleled much of the Oregon Trail, connecting Council Bluffs to Salt Lake City.

Financing the Trip

In the mid-1840s, settlers who traveled the Oregon Trail spent roughly \$800 to \$1200 to be properly outfitted. (Although there are many factors to consider, the cost of supplies would equate to roughly \$32,000 in 2014 dollars). Many of the pioneers raised their capital by selling their farms and possessions. Along the way they found inflated prices for scarce commodities at trading posts and ferries. Once arriving in Oregon, there were scarce supplies available for purchase, requiring more ability to work in exchange for goods and services, than cash for purchasing.

"Our miserable teams had nothing but water for dinner and we had crackers and milk. At this ranch, beef, potatoes, and squashes were for sale at the following outrageous prices... beef, 25 cents per lb., potatoes, 50 cents per lb., squashes, 2 dollars each and small at that... they intend to swindle and starve us emigrants. But we will not buy from them. We will keep our money straight and live on bacon yet awhile." Julius Merrill, September 14, 1864.

Death on the Trail

Emigrants on the Oregon Trail suffered tremendous hardships. Death was an ever-present companion. It is estimated that as many as 1 in 10 emigrants died on the trail—between 20,000 and 30,000 people.

The majority of deaths occurred because of diseases caused by poor sanitation. Cholera and typhoid fever were the biggest killers on the trail. Another major cause of death was falling off of a wagon and getting run over. This was not just the case for children; many adults also died from this type of accident.

The idea of crossing "the great American desert" and the perceived dangers caused many people who were not hunters or soldiers to purchase firearms, many for the first time, which they were not used to handling. Mishaps with firearms caused many injuries and deaths.

Other deaths on the trail are recorded in dairies as: stampeding livestock, attack by emigrants on other emigrants, lightning, gunpowder explosion, drowning at river crossings, and suicide. An estimate of 20,000 fatalities means an average of ten graves per mile.

The Oregon Trail was not only hard on people, but the livestock they brought with them suffered greatly as well. The bleached bones from years of dead livestock seemed to pave the road from Missouri to Oregon.

Emigrants became accustomed to being in the presence of death. The wagon train became a mobile community that suffered each loss together, quickly buried their dead, and pressed on in hopes of a better life ahead.

"Word was passed that a woman had been accidentally run over and killed instantly... The woman was getting down from the moving vehicle, her clothing caught on the break-rod and she was thrown forward beneath the wheel." Ellen James Bailey Lamborn, September 3, 1864.

"Passed six fresh graves!... Oh, 'tis a hard thing to die far from friends and home—to be buried in a hastily dug grave without shroud or coffin—the clods filled in and then deserted, perhaps to be food for wolves..." Esther McMillan Hanna, 1852.

"The great cause of diarrhea, which has proven to be so fatal on the road, has been occasioned in most instances by drinking water from holes dug in the river bank and long marshes. Emigrants should be very careful about this." Abigail Scott, June 8, 1852.

The Oregon Escort

Medorem Crawford is mentioned throughout the Interpretive Center exhibits with quotes from his journal of 1842 when he journeyed with Elijah White's wagon train to Oregon. Then a young man of 23, Crawford became one of Oregon's most prominent early citizens. While visiting the east coast in 1861, Crawford was given command of the "Oregon Escort"—a military convoy which was to accompany wagon trains across the Oregon Trail in 1862. Starting from Omaha on June 16, the company included 12 wagons each drawn by six mules, one ambulance drawn by four mules, and fifty mounted and armed men. Officers rode horses; the troops rode mules. Their ranks included a physician, as one of their duties was to provide medical assistance to emigrants, as well as providing food, mending wagons, moving baggage, and settling arguments. Upon arriving in Oregon City, the company disbanded and the equipment and animals were sold at public auction. Medorem Crawford wrote an official report, and recommended patrols in subsequent years to aid with maintaining the trail and locating grass and water for wagon parties. The following two years, volunteer state units again offered patrols along the Oregon Trail, while regular army units were involved in Civil War operations.

Attacks on Wagon Trains

Most Native Americans tolerated wagon trains passing through their territories. Many pioneers would not have made it if it had not been for trading with the tribes along the trail. There were conflicts between Native Americans and emigrants along the trail, but, when compared to the number of people traveling the Oregon Trail, deaths by Indians attacks were very rare.

It is estimated that between 1840 and 1860, Native Americans killed 362 emigrants, and emigrants killed 426 Indians. Most of these fatalities occurred west of South Pass.

"At Fort Hall General McCarver started out ahead of the train towards the Salmon Falls with a few packers, and on approaching them discovered some Indians and he saw a red flag hoisted. He formed his men for battle. They marched up towards the Indians believing they meant to fight. When he got near enough he discovered that the red flag was a salmon split open and spread out as a sign to the packers that they had salmon for sale. So they marched up and bought some salmon. They had a good deal of fun with McCarver..." Ninevah Ford, 1843.

The Bone Express

With more than 11,000 emigrants crossing on the Oregon Trail before the gold rush, traveling could be quite congested. Along the way, pioneers—like present day Americans—had the desire to communicate and developed their own type of information highway.

Called the "Bone Express," a system was created for posting messages along the trail by writing on cloth, wood, and especially bones. With this method, westbound emigrants and "go-backs" (those who were eastbound) could leave messages, advertisements, directions and warnings to fellow pioneers. In one instance, the desire to communicate was inspired by love. John Johnson and Jane Jones, two young pioneers who were attracted to one another but separated by their disapproving parents, developed a system of writing to each other on buffalo skulls with the code name "Laurie." While some emigrants tampered with existing messages to insert their own opinions or humor, most remained untouched. One woman traveling in 1852 came across penciled messages from 1849.

Native American Trade Fairs

Great Intertribal meetings took place at The Dalles on the Columbia River which were important events in the lives of the Plateau Indians. In the spring, before the salmon run, the Nez Perce often journeyed down the Snake and Columbia rivers to the rapids at Celilo Falls and The Dalles.

This was the home territory of the Wishrams, Wascos and other native peoples, and was the most important point of contact between the Coast and Plateau cultures. It was the cosmopolitan center of Northwest Indian life and the site of great month-long trade fairs.

Trading, dancing, games, gambling, ceremonial displays, and even marriages took place at these fairs. Often several thousand visiting Native Americans came to trade dried salmon meal, bison robes, and slaves from the interior for canoes, marine shells and shell beads, and fish oil from the Pacific coast. These trade goods have been found as far away as Alaska, southern California and Missouri.

"We arrived at Grande Rond. We had a feast from the Cayuse Indians. We had some nice elk meat and boiled it with dried huckleberries and plenty of flour. We had a royal meal as we thought." John Burch McClane, 1843.

More Diary Quotes

The Oregon Trail migrations in the mid-1800s coincided with a popular American trend of keeping a diary or journal. Many of the journals kept by pioneers as they traveled survived the years and are not kept in libraries and archives around the country. Diary quotes give us a first person look at the observations, thoughts, feelings, and experiences of everyday people on an extraordinary journey.

"The road to-day was very hilly and rough. At night we encamped within one mile of Fort Hall. Mosquitoes were as thick as flakes in a snow-storm. The poor horses whinnied all night, from their bites, and in the morning the blood was streaming down their sides." -Margaret A. Frink, July 11, 1850

"We have good roads comparatively. We mean good roads if the sloughs are not belly deep and the hills not right straight up and down and not rock enough to turn the wagon over." -Henry Allyn, August 11, 1852

"Started at half past 4, after being up with team nearly all night. Came on to the good camp at spring. On our way here at Powder River we killed a noble salmon, taking breakfast out of him, and a fine dish it was." -David Maynard, September 1, 1850

"There is some of the largest rattle snakes in this region I ever saw, being from 8 to 12 ft. long, and about as large as a man's leg about the knee. This is no fiction at all." -Amelia Hadley, July 19, 1851

"Raining all day...and the boys are all soaking wet and look sad and comfortless. The little ones and myself are shut up in the wagons from the rain. Still it will find its way in and many things are wet; and take us all together we are a poor looking set, and all this for Oregon...I am thinking as I write, 'Oh Oregon, you must be a wonderful country'" -Amelia Stewart Knight, June 1, 1853

"After passing this morning through the valley in which we encamped last evening, the road brought us to the top of a high ridge, giving us a beautiful view of the mountains, running east and west, and parallel to the ridge over which we were passing. The sight was very fine, as these mountains were the first we had seen covered with pine since leaving Soda springs. This range is high and rugged, with its base well wooded; those to the left were equally as much so, while the Blue mountains to the northwest reared their peaks in dark blue masses high above the rest, and are covered with a growth of as beautiful timber as can be found between here and the Pacific ocean.." -Osborne Cross, September 6, 1849

"I will say that this part of Oregon is the most fertile for rocks and sagebrush of any part of the world that I have ever seen." -Charlotte Stearns Pengra, August 22, 1853

"One wagon just passing...with the motto, 'Root, little hog or die'...on both sides...and on another cover is written, 'Bound for Origen.'" -E.W.Conyers, May 25, 1852

"Left camp at 6 & traveled 9 miles when we laid by on the Little Blue to give the boys an opportunity to hunt Buffalo as they have been almost wild with excitement since they came into the Buffalo country. About 10 A.M. they started off with a good supply of powder shot & ball & great anticipations but poor fellows their feathers looked sadly drooping as they came straggling into camp near night fall foot sore & weary & having secured among them all one small Antelope." -Louisa Cook, June 13, 1862

"We have been traveling among the hills and the monotony has been relieved by the ever varying beauty of the scenery and the pleasantness of the weather. Today we traveled till noon, and then stopped to get a fourth of July dinner and to celebrate our nation's birthday. While making the preparation, and reflecting at the same time of what the people of Morton and Peoria were doing, and contrasting my situation with what it was this day last year, a storm arose, blew over all the tents but two, capsized our stove with it delicious viands, set one wagon on fire, and for a while produced not a little confusion in the camp. No serious injury, however, was done." -Elizabeth Wood, July 4, 1851

"we are in the Powder river country and begin to see forests of Pine & Fir. Came down the mountain into Grand Ronde vally - a perfect gem - an oasis in a desert. The descent was made with difficulty - the wagons being chained & let down with ropes much of the way...Thousands of horses - many of them curiously spotted feed upon the mountain side. Hundreds of Indians of the Nez Percies tribe, are camped here..." -Harriet Talcott Buckingham, Sept. 8, 1851