

The California Trail

Bureau of Land Management
Department of the Interior

California Trail Interpretive Center



This map of the California and Oregon Trails was created based on the accounts of emigrants who travelled these routes in the 1800s. Can you find your home on this map? Do you have family members that traveled or lived near the trail?

Traveling the Trail



"Wagon Trail" (1951) by Oscar Edmund Berninghaus

During the middle of the 1800s, hundreds of thousands of people traveled the California Trail. These **emigrants** (people who leave their homes to settle somewhere else) packed their lives into **covered wagons** and set out for the West. Most were looking for **fertile land, gold, religious freedom**, and the promise of a better future.

The journey was long (about 2,000 miles!) and took around six months. Most people travelled in large **wagon trains** made up of **25 to 40 covered wagons**. The wagons were packed tightly with food, tools, and personal belongings, with little room for passengers.

Because of this, **most people walked** alongside the wagons. While many aimed to walk **20 miles a day** and finish in **four months**, the journey often took **five to six months**, with daily progress closer to **10–15 miles**.

Look at when this painting was made. What story do you think the artist is trying to tell us about the California Trail?

Supplies for the Journey

When pioneers began the California Trail, they had to fit everything they would need over the next six months in their wagons. With limited space and weight, they had to think carefully about what to take. Some common items included:

- Food (simple ingredients that wouldn't spoil)
- Water
- Medicine
- Cooking tools (pans, stoves)
- Journals
- Guns (to hunt animals along the way)
- Tents and bedrolls
- Tools (for wagon repair or blacksmithing)
- Spare clothing and boots
- Fire starter

*What do you make sure to bring when you go on a trip?
What do you think pioneers left behind that they missed?*



Animals on the Trail



Beavers brought fur trappers to the West. These early explorers helped establish the route that became the California Trail.



Oxen and **mules** were both used to pull wagons. Mules were expensive and more stubborn than oxen, but faster and more agile.



Many travelers took their **livestock** with them, including cows, goats, pigs, and chickens. Some also brought their pets!



Emigrants traded for or hunted **bison** as a source of fresh meat. And bison chips (dung) were used as fuel for fires!

Life on the Trail



Food

Food had to last for months, so meals were simple and repetitive. Common staples included **bacon**, **hardtack** (a dry, cracker-like bread), and **beans and rice**. Pioneers also **hunted game** and **traded with Native Americans** for fresh food, which added much-needed variety to their diets.

What kinds of foods does your family eat? What foods do people bring on trips today?

Dangers

The California Trail was dangerous – about **1 in 10 travelers died** along the way. The biggest threats were:

- **Disease** – especially **cholera**, **dysentery**, and **measles**
- **Accidents** – including **river crossings**, **wagon mishaps**, and **gun injuries**

Despite the risks, many believed the rewards were worth the perils.



Children

Children didn't attend school on the trail. Instead, they helped with daily chores like gathering **buffalo chips for fuel**, caring for **younger siblings and animals**, fetching **water**, **cooking**, and **maintaining wagons**. But it wasn't all work—kids also found time to play. Popular games included **graces**, **marbles**, and playing with **rag dolls**.

Ask a family member how chores they did as kids compare to the chores you do now?

Native Americans

Contrary to popular myths, **violent encounters were rare**. Many Native American tribes **traded** with pioneers for things like **food** and **moccasins**, and provided **lifesaving help**. However, the arrival of settlers brought devastating consequences to tribes. **Diseases** like smallpox and measles spread rapidly, killing thousands. As more pioneers claimed land, **conflict and displacement** increased, forcing many Native communities onto **reservations**.

How do the perspectives of Native Americans add to the stories we tell about the California Trail and American history?

