

Oregon Trail

The Oregon Trail stretches for nearly 2,000 miles from east to west. It is estimated to have had between 200,000 and 500,000 travelers. Travel by wagon and horseback was rough and tedious. Young families would join groups called wagon trains to make the journey easier.

In the earlier years of the trail, families had to prepare all their supplies for the journey. Women spent many months weaving cloth and preparing enough food for six months. Men repaired wagons and carefully prepared items for packing. Later as the “jumping off” towns became more prominent preparations for travel became easier. Instead of the many months of preparation, families would buy travel supplies in these towns. Prairie schooners, a lightweight travel wagon, became available for sale, as well as wagon canvasses, tools, and dried or salted food supplies.

Amazingly, these wagon trains connected a route from the east to the west along the original Native American game trails. Trail information was passed along from the area natives to mountain men and explorers and eventually became the famous route known as the Oregon Trail. The trail closely followed river routes. Most importantly it passed through South Pass, a fairly level plain through the Rocky Mountain Range. Wagons could travel safely through this pass.

In 1832, Captain Benjamin Bonneville led the first wagon train over South Pass to the west. He was followed by the Applegate party in the Great Migration of 1843. Travel continued to grow until the completion of the railroad in 1869.

Several events encouraged families to immigrate to the Oregon territory. The first was the economic panic of 1837. Many families lost their farms and needed land. The second was the Donation Land Law of 1850. Families willing to settle in the Oregon territory were given 640 acres of **FREE** land. Many people saw this as an opportunity to make a better life. Also, the increased awareness of the term coined by John L. O’Sullivan in 1844, “Manifest Destiny” promoted travel to Oregon. Patriotic citizens believed it was their duty to move the development of the country westward. Others just wanted to experience the thrill of the travel and discover new places.