

Testing for Staging

By Dave M

Introduction The Oregon Trail was first written about by an American historian in 1849, while it was in active use by migrants, and it subsequently was the subject of thousands of books, articles, movies, plays, poems, and songs. The trail continues as the principal interest of a modern-day organization—the Oregon-California Trails Association—and of major museums in Oregon, Idaho, and Nebraska. The Oregon Trail has attracted such interest because it is the central feature of one of the largest mass migrations of people in American history. Between 1840 and 1860, from 300,000 to 400,000 travelers used the 2,000-mile overland route to reach Willamette Valley, Puget Sound, Utah, and California destinations. The journey took up to six months, with wagons making between ten and twenty miles per day of travel. The trail followed the Missouri and Platte Rivers west through present-day Nebraska to South Pass on the Continental Divide in Wyoming, then west along the Snake River to Fort Hall in eastern Idaho, where travelers typically chose to continue due west to Oregon or to head southwest to Utah and California. In Oregon, the trail passed through the Powder River and Grande Ronde Valleys, over the Blue Mountains, and down the Columbia River to The Dalles, where many rafted their wagons and belongings to the lower Columbia River Valley. After 1846, travelers could make their way overland on the Barlow Road from The Dalles, around Mount Hood, and directly to Oregon City on the Willamette River. Families and individuals on the trail typically traveled in companies that had twenty-five or more wagons, with one or more individuals providing general leadership. When smaller groups combined, leaders shared duties and the authority for keeping order. Travelers generally walked alongside wagons full of their belongings and foodstuffs. Most used farm wagons that had been modified for long-distance travel, including strengthened axle trees and wagon tongues and wooden bows that arched over the wagon box to support canvas or other heavy cloth covering.

Wagon Specs The wagons were ten to twelve feet long, four feet wide, and two to three feet deep, with fifty-inch diameter rear wheels and forty-four-inch front wheels made of oak with iron tire rims. The wagons weighed from 1,000 to 1,400 pounds and carried loads between 1,500 and 2,500 pounds. They had sturdy hardwood box frames that were made as watertight as possible to facilitate stream and river crossings. Most overlanders used two or four yoked oxen to pull their wagons, because they had more endurance and were less expensive than horses or mules and they were less likely to be stolen by Indians. Prudent travelers carried spare parts, grease for axle bearings, heavy rope, chains, and pulleys to keep wagons repaired and to aid in rescue from predicaments.

From the earliest decades of the Republic, groups of migrants headed west from the established states to stake out homesteads on the western periphery of institutional society. They traveled first across the Appalachian Mountains into the Old Northwest—today's states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan—then from the South to populate Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Missouri, and Iowa. By the 1820s, some politicians called for resettlement in the Oregon Country, a relatively un-resettled region over which the United States and Great Britain jointly claimed sovereignty by treaty in 1818. The penetration of the fur trade into the region during the 1820s and 1830s, especially on the Upper Missouri and the Columbia river basins, exposed both the natural wealth of the region and the presence of Native populations. During most of this westward movement, overland trails and river passages were essential conduits of people, trade, and institutional expansion. Long-distance wagon travel had long moved Americans west and south on such trails as the Great Wagon Road in the 1720s, the Wilderness Road in the 1770s, the Natchez Trace in the 1810s, and the Santa Fe Trail in the 1820s. But the Oregon Trail is foremost as the longest and most heavily used route in the nation's resettlement of western North America. The Oregon Trail developed from the discovery in 1812 of a wagon-safe route over the Continental Divide at South Pass in present-day Wyoming by Robert Stuart, a Pacific Fur Company man returning from Fort Astor. Stuart had gone east from the Columbia, traversing the Blue Mountains, ascending the Snake River in present-day Idaho, and veering south to South Pass and down the Platte River to the Missouri. His route meant, as the Missouri Gazette predicted in 1813, that "a journey to the

Western Sea will not be considered (within a few years) of much greater importance than a trip to New York.”

Background Fur trader William Sublette made one of the first widely reported wagon trips from South Pass to St. Louis in 1830, and missionaries trekked over western sections of the future Oregon Trail several years later on their way to the Columbia and Willamette Valleys. In the late 1830s, the Oregon Provisional Emigration Society, a Methodist group based in Massachusetts, promoted missionary expeditions to Oregon. Some missionaries, who had been sent west by the American Board of Foreign Missions, praised the Oregon Country’s climate and fertile landscape in letters published in eastern newspapers. Hall Kelley’s General Circular for prospective emigrants (1831), Thomas Farnham’s Travels in the Western Prairies (1843), poor economic conditions in the Mississippi Valley, and episodic outbreaks of disease prompted thousands to take a chance on emigration to Oregon. By the early 1840s, the willing and determined, captured by the idea of Oregon, decided to ignore the naysayers and embrace the adventure. They took the risks, as the saying went, “to see the elephant,” a nineteenth-century phrase that meant enduring hardships to experience the unbelievable. By the mid-1840s, emigrants could use trail guides to plan their journey and avoid common mistakes. Lansford Hastings’s Emigrant Guide to Oregon and California (1845), Overton Johnson’s Route Across the Rocky Mountains (1846), and Joel Palmer’s Journal of Travels (1847) were popular and widely distributed accounts of travel on the Oregon Trail.

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