

Remember to annotate as you read.

Notes

The Oregon Trail

- 1 In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson purchased the Louisiana Territory from France. The Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of the United States, opening up the West for settlers. First, the region had to be mapped. So, in 1804, the Lewis and Clark Expedition was tasked with the job of surveying the region and charting its rivers.
- 2 The mission was a success, but their land route would prove too difficult for wagons. The passes across the Rocky Mountains could be traveled only on foot, or on horseback. So, beginning in 1810, fur trappers and traders began carving a new trail out west. With the new trail, people could travel west faster by land routes.



Historical Perspective

In 1804, the Lewis and Clark Expedition set off from Missouri to explore the American West, accompanied by their guide and interpreter, Sacajawea. In a letter to Lewis and Clark, President Thomas Jefferson wrote the following instructions:

The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri river, & such principal stream of it, as, by its course & communication with the water of the Pacific ocean may offer the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent, for the purposes of commerce.



The route West was first mapped by Lewis and Clark. The information they brought back helped map the future migration.

The Migration Begins

- 3 Of the lush green fields, abundant game, and the many rivers in the Louisiana Territory, William Clark wrote, "The Plains of this country are covered with a Leek Green Grass, well calculated for the sweetest and most nourishing hay . . . and nature appears to have exerted herself to beautify the scenery."
- 4 By the 1820s, land in the East was scarce, and what little was available for purchase was rocky and hard to farm. Word had spread that the land west of the Rocky Mountains in Oregon Territory was fertile and good for farming. Struggling farmers began to think about moving west, where the land was better and plentiful. So, the wave of settlers moving west began.
- 5 The people migrating west called themselves "emigrants" because they were leaving the states for unknown territories. Most of the people migrating kept diaries to record their journeys. One woman who wrote a daily account of her journey on the Oregon Trail was Narcissa Whitman.

Notes



Narcissa
Whitman

6 In 1836, Whitman and her husband, Marcus, led a small expedition from New York to Oregon to found a mission in Oregon Territory. She described their daily routines and mishaps in her diary and letters. She also wrote about the landscape, which was very

different from New York, where she had lived. She described the landscape in a letter to her brother and sister on June 3, 1836:

7 “The face of the country yesterday afternoon and today has been rolling sand bluffs, mostly barren, quite unlike what our eyes have been satiated [filled] with for weeks past. No timber nearer than the Platte, and the water tonight is very bad—got from a small ravine.”

8 Life on the trail was very different from life back East. Whitman writes, “Our fuel for cooking since we left timber . . . has been dried buffalo dung . . . similar to the kind of coal used in Pennsylvania.”

Emigrants traveled in wagon trains along the trail.



Bison was a major source of food along the trail.

9 On the trail, travelers quickly recognized the importance of the American bison that roamed the plains. The men would hunt the buffalo for meat. Whitman recounts,

10 “The present time in our journey is a very important one. The hunter brought us buffalo meat yesterday for the first time. . . . We have some for supper tonight. . . . I expect it will be very good.” However, the party had to eat buffalo meat so often that Whitman soon tired of it and longed for simple bread and butter. She writes that she has been “living on buffalo meat until I am cloyed [disgusted] with it.”

11 Whitman and her party made it to Oregon. Upon reaching where they would settle and build their mission, she wrote, “You can better imagine our feelings this morning than we can describe them. I could not realize that the end of our long journey was so near.” After traveling 3,200 kilometers (2,000 miles), the Whitmans had finally reached their new home in December 1836. Like many other emigrants, they were tired and weary, but happy and relieved to have made it.

Notes



This mural from the Oregon State Capitol shows Narcissa Whitman (left) greeting John McLoughlin, a prominent Oregon leader, after her journey west.

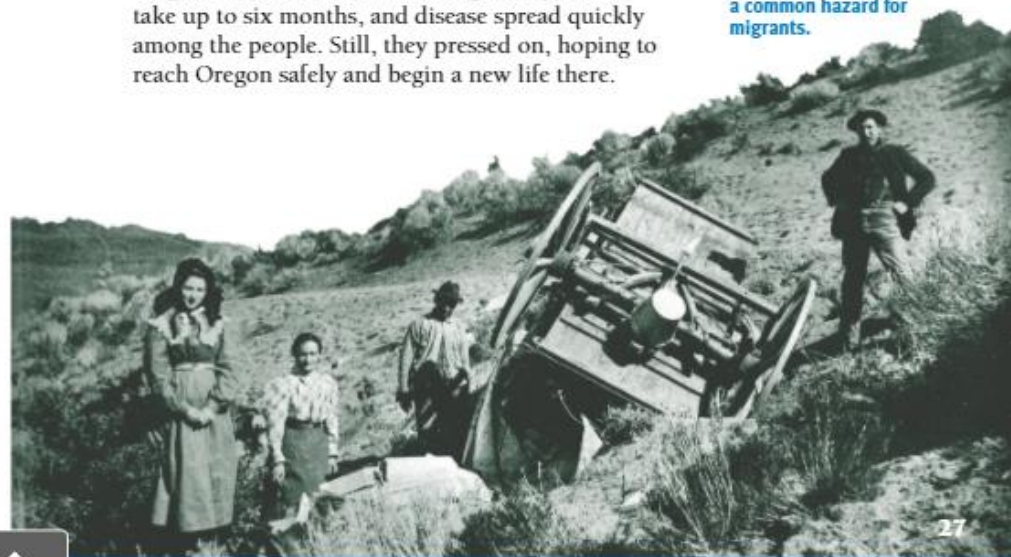
- 12 The Whitmans settled in the eastern part of what is now the state of Washington. They built a mission there. Here Narcissa describes the new land and home:
- 13 “It is indeed, a lovely situation. We are on a beautiful level—a peninsula formed by the branches of the Walla Walla river, upon the base of which our house stands, on the southeast corner, near the shore of the main river. To run a fence across to the opposite river, on the north from our house—this, with the river, would enclose 300 acres of good land for cultivation, all directly under the eye. The rivers are barely skirted with timber. This is all the woodland we can see; beyond them, as far as the eye can reach, plains and mountains appear.”
- 14 At first, the Whitmans worked well with the local Native Americans, the Cayuse. Over time, however, the differences between the two cultures grew. Tensions mounted when an outbreak of measles killed half the Cayuse tribe. Some Cayuse blamed the outbreak on Narcissa’s husband, who was a doctor and whose medicine seemed to cure only white children.

The Migration Explodes

- 15 Soon after Narcissa Whitman made her trek on the Oregon Trail, others began to migrate there, too. In 1842, a party of more than 100 people set off. Soon the numbers increased dramatically. So many people began to venture west that the migration was called “Oregon Fever.”
- 16 In 1843, around 1,000 men, women, and children left Elm Grove, Missouri, for the West. The emigrants formed a wagon train and embarked on the Oregon Trail. There were more than 100 covered wagons and a herd of about 5,000 oxen and cattle that set off on the 3,200-km (2,000-mile) journey. The travelers faced many hardships and dangers. Many believed Native American attacks posed the greatest threat, but crossing rivers was also treacherous, and the weather was unpredictable. Sudden downpours, snowstorms, and hailstorms could divert the wagon train. Wagons would break down. The journey could take up to six months, and disease spread quickly among the people. Still, they pressed on, hoping to reach Oregon safely and begin a new life there.

Notes

A wagon breaks down on the trail. This was a common hazard for migrants.



Notes

The Gold Rush

- 17 The migration on the Oregon Trail became an annual event. Thousands of emigrants began to join the wagon trains heading west. Then in 1848, gold was discovered in California. The lure of rich farmlands now changed to fields of gold. By 1850, more than 50,000 people traveled the Oregon Trail west. Instead of turning toward Oregon near the end of the trail, many turned to California. They hoped to find their fortune mining or panning for gold instead of farming.



Gold brought many people west after 1848.

The End of the Trail

- 18 By 1869, railroads connected California to the rest of the country and people moved west— using trains instead of wagons. The trail became a route for cattle drives, but by the 1900s most stopped using the trail and it became obsolete. With new means of transportation, it was no longer needed.



a wagon train heading west

- 19 However, many pioneers kept the tales of the Oregon Trail alive. In 1852, pioneer Ezra Meeker wrote *Ox-Team Days on the Oregon Trail*, a book about the many emigrants who traveled west to the trail's end:



Ezra Meeker on the trail

- 20 “At length, after we had endured five long months of soul-trying travel and had covered about eighteen hundred miles, counting from the crossing of the Missouri, we dragged ourselves on to the end. . . . The appearance of this crowd of emigrants beggars description. . . . Friendships, sincere and lasting, came as one of the sweet rewards of those days of common struggle and adversity.” [from chapter 9]
- 21 Meeker worked to make the Oregon Trail a historic landmark, and today, it is. In 1978, Congress made it a historic trail. People can now follow the route of the Oregon Trail. And with the many diaries from the time, people can read what life on the Oregon Trail was like, too.



Today the Oregon Trail is a historic landmark.

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