The Oregon Trail

1.
THE OREGON TRAIL
1843
The Great Migration, a party of one thousand pioneers, heads west from Independence, Missouri, on the Oregon Trail, guided by Dr. Marcus Whitman, who is returning to his mission on the Columbia River. Forming a train of more than one hundred wagons, and trailing a herd of 5,000 cattle, the pioneers travel along the south bank of the Platte, then cross north to Fort Laramie in Wyoming. Here they follow the North Platte to the Sweetwater, which leads up into South Pass. Once through the pass, they cross the Green River Valley to newly established Fort Bridger, then turn north to Fort Hall on the Snake River, which leads them to Whitman's Mission. Once in Oregon, they strike out along the Columbia for the fertile lands of the Willamette Valley, the endpoint to a journey of 2,000 miles. After the mass exodus of 1843, the migration to Oregon becomes an annual event, with thousands more making the trek every year.

Source: http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/events/1840_1850.htm#1843

2.
Click this link for an interactive map of the trail – click the dots on the trail to see photos of sites along the way.

http://www.octa-trails.org/learn/virtual_trail/cherokee_trail.php

3.
Click this link to read FAQs about the Oregon Trail.

http://www.octa-trails.org/learn/trail_facts.php#buffalochips
Overlanders on the Oregon Trail, in contrast, quickly learned that Conestoga wagons were too big for their needs: the huge, heavy wagons killed even the sturdiest oxen before the journey was two-thirds complete. Their answer to the problem was dubbed the "Prairie Schooner," a half-sized version of the Conestoga that typically measured 4' wide and 10' to 12' in length. With its tongue and neck yoke attached, its length doubled to about 23 feet. With the bonnet, a Prairie Schooner stood about 10' tall, and its wheelbase was over 5' wide. It weighed around 1300 pounds empty and could be easily dismantled for repairs en route. Teams of 4 to 6 oxen or 6 to 10 mules were sufficient to get the sturdy little wagons to Oregon. Manufactured by the Studebaker brothers or any of a dozen other wainwrights specializing in building wagons for the overland emigrants, a Prairie Schooner in good repair offered shelter almost as good as a house.

The wagon box, or bed, was made of hardwoods to resist shrinking in the dry air of the plains and deserts the emigrants had to cross. It was 2' to 3' deep, and with a bit of tar it could easily be rendered watertight and floated across slow-moving
rivers. The side boards were beveled outwards to keep rain from coming in under the edges of the bonnet and to help keep out river water. The box sat upon two sets of wheels of different sizes: the rear wheels were typically about 50" in diameter, while the front wheels were about 44" in diameter. The smaller front wheels allowed for a little extra play, letting the wagon take slightly sharper turns than it would otherwise have been able to negotiate without necessitating a great deal of extra carpentry work to keep the bed level. All four wheels had iron "tires" to protect the wooden rims, and they were likewise constructed of hardwoods to resist shrinkage. Nonetheless, many emigrants took to soaking their wagon wheels in rivers and springs overnight, as it was not unheard of for the dry air to shrink the wood so much that the iron tires would roll right off the wheels during the day.

Hardwood bows held up the heavy, brown bonnets (cloth that covered the contents of the wagon). The bows were soaked until the wood became pliable, bent into U-shapes, and allowed to dry. They would hold their shape if this was done properly, which was important to the emigrants: if the wagon bows were under too much tension, they could spring loose and tear the bonnet while the wagon was jostled and jounced over rough terrain. The bonnets themselves were usually homespun cotton doubled over to make them watertight. They were rarely painted (except for the occasional slogan such as "Pike's Peak or Bust" in later years) as this stiffened the fabric and caused it to split. The bonnet was always well-secured against the wind, and its edges overlapped in back to keep out rain and dust. On some wagons, it also angled outward at the front and back, as shown in the illustration above, to lend some additional protection to the wagon’s interior.

While wagons were minor marvels of Nineteenth Century engineering, they inevitably broke down or wore out from the difficulty and length of the journey. Equipment for making repairs en route was carried in a jockey box attached to one end or side of the wagon. It carried extra iron bolts, linch pins, skeins, nails, hoop iron, a variety of tools, and a jack. Also commonly found slung on the sides of emigrant wagons were water barrels, a butter churn, a shovel and axe, a tar bucket, a feed trough for the livestock, and a chicken coop. A fully outfitted wagon on the Oregon Trail must have been quite a sight, particularly with a coop full of clucking chickens raising a ruckus every time the wagon hit a rock.
There was only one set of springs on a Prairie Schooner, and they were underneath the rarely-used driver's seat. Without sprung axles, riding inside a wagon was uncomfortable at the best of times. Some stretches of the Trail were so rough that an overlander could fill his butter churn with fresh milk in the morning, and the wagon would bounce around enough to churn a small lump of butter for the evening meal. The simple leaf springs under the driver's seat made that perch tenable (possible to use), but not particularly comfortable. The illustration above does not show the driver's seat, and its placement of the brake lever is questionable. The brake lever was usually located so it could be pressed by the driver's foot or thrown by someone walking alongside the wagon, and it was ratcheted so the brake block would remain set against the wheel even after pressure was taken off the lever.

While Prairie Schooners were specifically built for overland travel, many emigrants instead braved the Oregon Trail in simple farm wagons retrofitted with bonnets. Farm wagons were typically slightly smaller than Prairie Schooners and not as well sheltered, as their bonnets usually were not cantilevered out at the front and back, but they were quite similar in most other respects.

Source: http://www.historicoregoncity.org/end-of-the-oregon-trail-history/oregon-trail-history/90-provisions-a-places

Provisions for the Trail

Crossing the continent to settle in Oregon was not a journey for the faint of heart, and neither was it a journey for the poor. It required a minimum of about $500 to outfit for the trip, and this could easily become $1000 or more if an emigrant needed to purchase a wagon and draft animals. The food and other provisions needed to sustain a family on the Oregon Trail for six months took up most of the room in their wagon -- though the overlanders' wagons were structurally capable of carrying as much as two tons when in good repair, the conventional wisdom at the time was not to carry more than 1600-1800 pounds of cargo. A typical emigrant wagon started out from Missouri loaded down with flour, sugar, bacon, coffee beans, lard, spices, dried fruit, beans, rice, and perhaps even a keg of pickles (a popular and tasty choice for warding off the dangers of malnutrition). Add to that the weight of cast iron pots and pans, a kettle or two, a Dutch oven, and even more food for large families, and you can see why some wealthier families brought two wagons... one for the food and one for everything else!

You want light wagons of the very best materials and workmanship, extra irons. The beds should be water tight. ... cover of good drilling, doubled. Tent of the same (single) of the Military or wall style. Tent poles
ironed. Tools: Ax, Hatchet, 1/2, 3/4, 1, and 1 1/2 inch augurs, Inch chisel, Drawing knife, handsaw, and a few wrought nails. ... you will want a spade and a long one inch rope, say one hundred feet. ...

- William N. Byers

Prices in the mid-1800s fluctuated from month to month and from town to town. The cost of manufactured or imported goods rose in step with the distance to the nearest steamboat landing, as hauling cargo over land by wagon was very expensive compared to shipping it by boat. Conversely, prices for farm produce were usually lower in the countryside than in towns and cities because it was costly for farmers to get their crops to market.

The prices listed below were gathered from a number of sources, including diaries, bills of lading, estate appraisals, and accounts from general stores back East. This price list is a broad generalization of the cost of outfitting for the Oregon Trail in the 1840s and early ‘50s; it should not be interpreted as representing the cost of food and goods in any particular town at any particular time. If you would like to estimate the cost of items not listed here, you can make a rough adjustment for 150 years of inflation by dividing the price by 20.

**DRAFT ANIMALS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Animal</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ox</td>
<td>$30-35</td>
<td>minimum of 4-6, but it would be wise to have more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>milk cow</td>
<td>$70-75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cattle</td>
<td>$8-20</td>
<td>priced by age (typically 1-3 years old)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mule</td>
<td>$10-15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pack horse</td>
<td>$25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>riding horse</td>
<td>up to $75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bridle &amp; blinders</td>
<td>$3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tack &amp; harness</td>
<td>$5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mule collar</td>
<td>$1.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>horse blanket</td>
<td>$2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whip</td>
<td>$1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pack saddle</td>
<td>$2.50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>saddle &amp; saddle bags</td>
<td>$5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**WAGONS**
covered wagon $70

there's no evidence that wagons made for the emigrant trade held up any better than ordinary farm wagons.

farm wagon $25-30

for converting a farm wagon to a covered wagon.

wagon bows $3/set

some emigrants bought heavy canvas sailcloth, while others wove their own linen wagon covers and waterproofed them with beeswax or linseed oil.

cloth cover up to $1/yard

before petroleum could be distilled, animal fats were used as lubricants; the tallow was usually mixed with pine resin, or sometimes beeswax thinned with turpentine.

grease potentially free

bucket $1

SUNDRIES & CAMP EQUIPMENT

woolen blanket $2.50

tent $5 - 15

prices varied with size

nails $0.07 per pound

soap $0.15 per pound

sheet iron stove $15 - 20

coffee mill $1.00

coffee pot $0.75

frying pan $1.50

stew kettle $0.50

bread pan $0.25

butcher knife $0.50

tin table settings $5

includes flatware, plates, and cups for a family of eight

candles $0.15 per pound
10-gallon wash tub $1.25
bucket $0.25
axe/shovel/hoe $1.25
hand tools $2.50
rope $2.50
tar buckets” for storing axle grease had tight-fitting tops to keep flies out and cost $1
such as augurs, planes, and saws
50’ - 75’ coil of 3/4” hemp rope

WEAPONS

rifle $15
double barreled rifles were sometimes seen on the frontier, as repeating rifles were not widely available until after the Civil War
there were also double barreled shotguns, as well as hybrids fitted with one rifled barrel and one smooth-bored shotgun barrel

shotgun or musket $10

Colt revolver $25

single-shot pistol $5

powder & shot $5
shot was generally sold by the pound

hunting knife $1

FOOD

flour $0.02 per pound
Recommended for each adult: 150 lbs. of flour, 20 lbs. of corn meal, 50 lbs. of bacon, 40 lbs. of sugar, 10 lbs. of coffee, 15 lbs. of dried fruit, 5 lbs. of salt, half a pound of saleratus (baking soda), 2 lbs. of tea, 5 lbs. of rice, and 15 lbs. of beans

corn meal $0.05 per pound

bacon $0.05 per pound

to the above may be added as many nicknacks as you see fit, always remembering that such things do not lose their good taste by being brought on the plains.
sugar $0.04 per pound

to the above may be added as many nicknacks as you see fit, always remembering that such things do not lose their good taste by being brought on the plains.
coffee $0.10 per pound
dried fruit $0.06 per pound
ON THE TRAIL

Some examples of expenses the emigrant encountered while en route...

Indian moccasins $0.50
many emigrants wore out several pairs of shoes on the road to Oregon

tanned buffalo hide $4.00
from $0.15 to $0.50 per wagon
prices for bridges and ferries were generally negotiable, and additional charges per head of livestock were common

crossing bridges

ferrying rivers

resupplying

PRICES IN OREGON (1852)

oxen and cows $50 - 100
the first herds of cattle in Oregon were Mexican longhorns driven up

wagon $100 - 200
bacon $0.25 per pound
from California, but the American settlers considered them to be an inferior breed and were willing to pay top dollar for cattle of known breeds which survived the journey to Oregon, while the longhorns went for as little as $9 a head
pork $0.125 per pound
beef $0.10 per pound
tallow $0.15 per pound
lard $0.25 per pound
butter $0.60 per pound
flour $0.06 per pound
coffee $0.20 per pound
sugar $0.10 - 0.16/lb
rice $0.06 per pound
dried peaches $0.12 per pound
apples $0.12 per pound
saleratus $0.25 per pound
salt $0.03 per pound
wheat $1.03 per bushel
oats $1.25 per bushel
onions $2.50 per bushel
potatoes $0.75 per bushel
beans and peas $1.50 per bushel
chickens $1
prices for chickens and turkeys are for whole, living birds
turkeys $2 - 2.50
6. Accidents & Illness
Perils for women and children on the Oregon Trail

Of all the difficulties and dangers that were part of traveling the road west, two were almost universally experienced by emigrant families - accidents and illness. Given the fact of travel by wagon train, it is, perhaps, not surprising that women and children particularly (and an occasional man) were involved in wagon accidents - usually being run over.

What is surprising, however, is the number of such accidents that did not result in serious injury. In 1853, Mrs. Maria Belshaw reported that "a child in company ahead of (us) fell out of a wagon was run over badly bruised no bones broken" and later, "Mrs. Coonts was getting into her wagon, slipped and fell under the wagon, two wheels passed over her, no bones broken."

Three years later, Twiss Bermingham recorded the even more startling incident of "... an old woman (who) was run over by one of the wagons. The front wheel went over her thighs and the back wheel over her shins, and singular to say, altho the wagon was laden with 32 cwt. of flour, not one of her bones was broken."

Not all were so fortunate. According to Virgil Pringle (1846), "Mr. Collins' son George, about six years old, fell from the wagon, and the wheels ran over his head
killing him instantly, the remainder of the day occupied in burying him." In like manner, William Newby (1843) noted the death of Joel Hembree:


All reasonably well-organized and equipped wagon trains carried various medicines and remedies, but the level of medical sophistication on the trail was not high. An entry in the 1847 diary of Mrs. Elizabeth Geer provides a case in point:

Passed through St. Joseph on the bank of the Missouri. Laid in our flour, cheese and crackers and medicine, for no one should travel this road without medicine, for they are almost sure to have the summer complaint. Each family should have a box of physicking (sic.) pills, a quart of castor oil, a quart of the best rum, and a large vial of peppermint essence.

Self-treatment of sickness, though an absolute necessity, carried its own brand of danger. In 1846, Lucy Henderson and her girlfriend sampled the medicine her mother had hung in a bag on the sideboard of their wagon. It tasted terrible, so the girls put it back - after refusing to let Lucy's younger sister, Salita Jane, also sample it.

Of course, as soon as the older girls left her unattended, Salita Jane retrieved the medicine from the bag, and drank it all.

Presently she came to the campfire where mother was cooking supper and said she felt awful sleepy. Mother told her to run away and not bother her, so she went to where the beds were spread and lay down. When Mother called her for supper she didn't come. Mother saw she was asleep, so she didn't disturb her. When Mother tried to awaken her later, she couldn't arouse her. Lettie had drunk the whole bottle of laudanum. It was too late to save her life.

There is an anguish that reaches across time in the simple conclusion of the diary entry, "Father took . . . walnut boards and made a coffin for Salita and we buried her there by the roadside in the desert."

Source: http://www.octa-trails.org/learn/people_places/stories_dr_todd_advice.php
Wagon trains often created their own **constitutions**. These documents included **rules and articles for the pioneers to live by** as they crossed the Oregon Trail. Imagine a four to six month journey through heat, dust, and in many cases disease. Emotions sometimes ran high on the trail as families lost loved ones to disease and accidents. They were also under a constant pressure to keep traveling west to make it over the mountains before the winter snows. They had to ration their food supply to be sure that they did not run out before making it to their destination. Imagine traveling in these circumstances. Such conditions often bring out the best in people, but sometimes they bring out the worst. Wagon train constitutions were created to spell out the expectations for the pioneers’ behavior and to give members of the wagon train some ability to punish those travelers who made bad choices.

Below is an **excerpt (part)** of the Tetherow wagon train’s constitution. The wagon train was part of the Savannah-Oregon Emigrating Society and it traveled the trail in 1845.

Art. 1st This Association shall be known by the name & style of the Savannah-Oregon Emigrating Society.

Art. 2nd Any male over the age of sixteen may become a member of the Company by subscribing to the constitution & paying into the treasury the initiation fee of one dollar.

Art. 5th A majority of the members may expel anyone for good cause.

Art. 13th The funds of the Company shall be faithfully appropriated for **contingent** (necessary but possibly unanticipated) expenses in furthering the objects of the Association.

Art. 14th The necessary outfit shall consist of 150lbs. of bacon for every person in the company excepting infants.
Art. 16th The number of Loose Cattle shall never exceed 33 to one driver.

Art. 18th Each male over the age of sixteen shall furnish himself with a good and sufficient gun and 1.5lbs. of powder and 6lbs. of lead to be inspected & reported on as in other cases.

Additionally, wagon train members were expected to follow the rules below:

Anyone guilty of willful murder shall be punished by death and shall not be forced into trial before three days.
Anyone guilty of larceny shall be fined double the amount, and receive 39 lashes on his bare back.
Anyone guilty of indecent language shall be fined at the discretion of the Ex. Council.

Source: http://www.historicoregoncity.org/schools-groups-eot/68-pre-visit-materials/185-wagon-trail-constitution

8. Click on this link for more Oregon Trail FAQs.

http://www.historicoregoncity.org/end-of-the-oregon-trail-history/trailfaqs
9. Map of the landmarks along the Oregon Trail

Source: http://institute.lds.org/content/images/manuals/chft/26-13-th.gif
Ezra Meeker standing in front of Chimney Rock with an ox-drawn covered wagon. Meeker retraced his overland journey on the fiftieth anniversary of the Oregon Trail. Near North Platte, Nebraska

Source: [http://nebraskahistory.org/images/wtp/8763.JPG](http://nebraskahistory.org/images/wtp/8763.JPG)

11. Independence Rock, where many travelers on the trail left their names.
Another view of Independence Rock

Names were also inscribed further to the west on Independence Rock, named by William Sublette in 1830, when his freight wagons reached the rock on the Fourth of July. Over 5000 names are placed on the rock. Even by 1842, the Rock was noted for the numbers of names left.

To the west of Independence Rock, the wagons had to detour away from the Sweetwater where the river wends its way through a narrow gorge known as Devils Gate.

Source: [http://www.wyomingtalesandtrails.com/devilsgatecorral2.jpg](http://www.wyomingtalesandtrails.com/devilsgatecorral2.jpg)
Gelatin print, 11 x 14 cm.

View along the North Platte River on the Oregon Trail. Chimney Rock is visible in the distance.

Source: http://cdrh.unl.edu/diggingin/images/di.byu.0004.jpg
United States Geological Survey
The Platte River. Along this old stream the Oregon Trail wound its way for nearly five hundred miles.

Source: http://www.lanecountyhistoricalsociety.org/images/illus-045.jpg
Color drawing from the report of Major Osborne Cross to the Quarter Master General, August 29, 1849.
Old Fort Boise Historical Society

Source: [http://imnh.isu.edu/digitalatlas/geog/forts/images/boiIn17.jpg](http://imnh.isu.edu/digitalatlas/geog/forts/images/boiIn17.jpg)

17.

Where the Columbia cuts through the Cascades.

Source: [http://www.lanecountyhistoricalsociety.org/images/illus-045.jpg](http://www.lanecountyhistoricalsociety.org/images/illus-045.jpg)
18.
One of the Black Pioneers and Settlers

George Washington Bush

George Bush was a veteran of the War of 1812, a former employee of the Hudson's Bay Company who had been as far west as the Pacific Coast as early as the 1820s, and a wealthy farmer and rancher in western Missouri before becoming an Oregon Trail emigrant in 1844. Along with his friend, Michael Simmons, Bush headed west in a wagon train guided by Moses Harris. He hoped to put the racism of Missouri behind him.

Bush purchased six wagons for the journey, four of which were for other families. He and his Irish wife, Isabel, cared for children who were orphaned on the Trail. John Minto, an Englishman traveling with the Bush-Simmons Party, commented in his diary about a conversation he had with Bush. Minto wrote that Bush was concerned about how he would be treated in the Oregon Country, and he had resolved to move on if he was treated poorly.

When the party arrived at The Dalles, Minto rode ahead to Fort Vancouver to obtain fresh supplies. When he returned to the wagon train, he told Bush of the “Lash Law” (see the next article for an explanation of the Lash Laws) recently enacted by the Provisional Government. Bush and some of the others decided to break off from the main body of the train and look for land north of the Columbia River. As the British were still nominally in control there, they hoped for better treatment from the Hudson's Bay Company. Most of the party crossed the river and wintered in Washougal before heading north in 1845. George Bush remained in The Dalles with the party's cattle, rejoining them in the spring when the cattle could be ferried across the river.

The story is also told that George Bush had trapped the Puget Sound area as an HBC employee in the 1820s, and he knew exactly where he was going from the moment he left Missouri.

Though the British were less than enthusiastic about permitting American settlers north of the Columbia, the Bush-Simmons Party was granted credit to resupply at Fort Vancouver before striking out in search of good land. Bush and Simmons worked off the debt by splitting shingles at the fort.

The group made their way north with the women driving the oxen and cattle and the men blazing the trail as they went. Progress was slow but steady all the way to Puget Sound. There, all thirty settlers in the party had to share a single cabin during the first winter. In 1846, two years after setting out from Missouri, they finally set about clearing their own land and building their own cabins.

The land settled by George Bush and his family came to be known as Bush Prairie. The family was well-liked in the area, and they had a reputation for being generous in times of need. The winter of 1852 was a particularly hard one, and grain supplies had run low. Bush had enjoyed a fine harvest that year and had plenty of grain in storage. When tempted to sell to a buyer offering an inflated price, Bush declined saying, "I'll just keep my grain to let my neighbors who have had failures have enough to live on and for seeding
their fields in the spring. They have no money to pay your fancy prices and I don't intend to see them want for anything in my power to provide them with."

The Bush-Simmons Party is credited by some historians as having been in large part responsible for bringing the land north of the Columbia River -- the present-day state of Washington -- into the United States. They established a presence that attracted other settlers and strengthened the American claim to the area in later debates between Great Britain and the United States over partitioning the Oregon Country.

The Bush family continued to influence Washington for at least one more generation: William Owen Bush, son of George and Isabel, was elected to Washington's first state legislature. There, he introduced the bill that established the institution now known as Washington State University in 1890.


19.

The Oregon Lash Laws

In the 1800s Oregon was a host to a variety of people looking for work and to settle on land claims in the [Oregon] territory. In the mid-1800s, before Oregon became a state, there were laws created to exclude blacks from living in the territory. The original exclusion law was the infamous "Lash Law" which subjected blacks found guilty of violating the law to whippings -- no less than 20 and no more than 39 strokes of the lash -- every six months "until he or she shall quit the territory." It was soon recognized that this punishment was far too severe, and the law was modified before it went into effect.

The new version, enacted in December 1844, replaced the whippings with forced labor. If a black person was tried and found guilty of being in the Oregon Country illegally, he or she was to be hired out publicly to whomever would employ them for the shortest amount of time. After the period of forced labor expired, the "employer" had six months to get the black individual out of Oregon. Failure to do so was punishable by a fine of $1000. This law was to go into effect in 1846, by which time those who wrote it doubtless hoped that most blacks would have left Oregon, but it was repealed in the 1845 session of the Provisional Legislature before it went into effect.

Other exclusion laws were written into the state constitution when Oregon became a state in the Union in 1859. Article I, Section 35, the exclusionary clause directly pertaining to "free negro(s) or mulatto(s)," was not amended until 1926.

Sources: [http://www.endoftheoregontrail.org/slavery.html](http://www.endoftheoregontrail.org/slavery.html)
[http://www.ccrh.org/center/posters/nepassage/history.htm](http://www.ccrh.org/center/posters/nepassage/history.htm)
20. One of the ends of the trail was at Oregon City

Source: http://www.historyglobe.com/ot/photos/oregoncitypainting.jpg