

Name _____ Date _____

The Oregon Trail

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. The Oregon Trail was the route between Independence, Missouri, and Oregon City, Oregon. Hundreds of thousands of pioneers took this trail from the 1840s to the 1860s. Westward migration really got going with the Great Emigration of 1843. The pioneers had several reasons for moving west. Missionaries wanted to spread their religion to Native Americans living in western territories. Mormons wanted to escape religious persecution. Some people were tempted by the promise of gold in California. Others wanted to take advantage of cheap, fertile farmland out west. Many Americans embraced Manifest Destiny. This was the belief that it was the United States’ divine right to extend its territory west to the Pacific Ocean.

Notes

2. Most of the travelers on the Oregon Trail were families, including women and children. Following the trail usually took four to six months. Planning for the journey could take a year or more. Families had to save money and crops. They had to buy a covered wagon and oxen or mules to pull the wagon. Including food and supplies, the journey could cost up to \$1,000 for a single family. That’s over \$32,000 in today’s money.

Notes

The main food supplies taken by most families were flour, crackers, bacon, sugar, coffee, rice, beans, dried fruit, salt and pepper. Other supplies included a cast iron skillet, coffee pot, buckets, candles, soap and weapons for defense. Each family member packed two or three sets of warm clothes for the entire six-month journey. It was important to pack enough, but not so much that the wagon would be too heavy for the oxen to pull.

3. Travelers had to leave Missouri in April or May if they hoped to reach Oregon before the cold, snowy winter. They could travel about 15 miles per day. Leaving in spring ensured there would be plenty of grass for the oxen to eat along the way. Even with this precaution, the journey was difficult. For one thing, the Oregon Trail was never officially defined. It changed with the effects of weather and use, so travelers had to be flexible. They also dealt with bad weather with only a canvas tent for cover. Many pioneers died from diseases like dysentery, cholera, smallpox and flu. Some drowned at river crossings or were run over by wagon wheels. All in all, about one in 10 people who traveled the Oregon Trail died along the way.

Notes

4. Natural and manmade landmarks were essential for travelers to gauge their progress on the Oregon Trail. Travelers usually crossed the Great Plains until they reached the first trading post at Fort Kearney. Then they followed the Platte River for over 600 miles to Fort Laramie. Next, they began climbing the Rocky Mountains. Independence Rock, a huge granite rock, marked the halfway point of the journey. Travelers hoped to reach Independence Rock by July 4 because it meant they were on schedule to reach Oregon before winter. Many people carved their names into the rock as they passed. After leaving Independence Rock, travelers continued to climb the Rocky Mountains to the South Pass. Then they crossed the desert to Fort Hall, the second trading post. Next, they crossed Snake River Canyon, climbed the steep Blue Mountains, and traveled along the Columbia River. Finally, they reached Oregon City.

Notes

5. As white pioneers traveled and settled along the Oregon Trail, they often met Native Americans who were living in the western territories. The pioneers sometimes traded peacefully with the Native Americans as they passed through. Other times, they attacked and killed the Native Americans. As more and more settlers arrived, some Native Americans, including members of the Cayuse tribe, became resentful. Many Cayuse died in a measles epidemic in Washington in 1847. They blamed Marcus Whitman, a missionary, for bringing the disease to them. Cayuse tribesmen killed Whitman, his wife and 12 other settlers. This conflict led to a seven-year war between the Cayuse and the federal government. Eventually the Cayuse's tribal lands were taken away, and they were placed on a reservation. Many other Native Americans were displaced as westward expansion continued.

Notes