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The Oregon Trail

Today we're going to talk about the Oregon Trail...in just a minute.

In the 1800s, many Americans embraced Manifest Destiny, the belief that it was the United States' divine right to expand its territory west to the Pacific Ocean.

The Oregon Trail was a 2,170-mile route from Missouri to Oregon. At first, it was only passable by horse and foot. But as use increased, people started building forts on the route to resupply travelers. Soon it was clear enough for large wagons to pass through.

In the mid-1800s, about 400,000 people traveled the Oregon Trail. Most were large groups of families traveling in covered wagons pulled by oxen or mules. Pioneers had several reasons for making the six-month trip: a fresh start, cheap farmland, religious freedom, and the promise of gold in California.

The Oregon Trail led to new opportunities for many Americans, but at the same time, it was a dangerous journey. About one in ten travelers died from diseases, accidents, and harsh weather. What's more, in their quest for westward expansion, White settlers displaced, mistreated, and killed many of the Indigenous people who already lived on the land.

When the Transcontinental Railroad was completed in 1869, use of the trail diminished. People could now cross the country in a week instead of six months. The Oregon Trail became a piece of history—and a cool computer game. Which is also historic, since it's older than me.

How did the Oregon Trail change American society?