

Name: _____

The Prairie Schooner, AKA the Covered Wagon

A prairie schooner is simply a fancy name for a covered wagon. Covered wagons were known as *prairie schooners* because their white canvas tops reminded people of the sails on ships at sea. Prairie schooners and Conestoga wagons were not the same. The Conestoga wagon was much larger and heavier than a prairie schooner. A Conestoga wagon was pulled by six to eight horses or a dozen oxen, while a prairie schooner was much lighter and rarely needed more than four horses or oxen, and sometimes only two.



Most prairie schooners were ordinary farm wagons that were fitted with six to eight large wooden bows that arched over the wagon's bed. These bows were covered with a cloth called canvas. The canvas was rubbed with oil to make it waterproof. The bows rose up about four feet above the sides. A man could stand upright if he were standing in the center.

The top could be drawn in at both ends, leaving an oval opening to admit air and light to the inside. The canvas could be rolled up along the sides on very hot days so passengers could catch a breeze. Women and children usually slept and rode inside under the protection of the wagon's cover.

The body of the wagons could be smaller versions of a Conestoga or simply a wooden box that was nine or ten feet long and about four feet wide. The sides and ends were about two feet high. Sometimes the emigrants built a false floor twelve or fifteen inches from the bottom of the bed. This space was divided into compartments. It was used for storing extra supplies. With supplies out of the way, the false floor was used for ordinary living on the trail.

Mules, horses, and oxen were used to pull the wagons. Mules were harnessed to the wagon and driven by someone sitting in the driver's seat holding the reins. Oxen were driven by a man called a *teamster* or *drover*. He walked at the left side of the team and directed the oxen with verbal commands or a crack of his whip.

The wagon wheels measured between three to four feet in height and about fourteen feet in circumference. The front wheels were always smaller than the rear wheels. This made the wagon easier to maneuver.

There were many advantages of traveling by prairie schooner. It was a type of rolling home. It offered protection from the weather and from Indian attacks. There were also disadvantages. The running gear was the part of the wagon that was least reliable. There were many reports of broken running gears along the journey. Wheels got stuck in the mud. Tongues snapped on sharp turns, and axles broke. If a wheel broke, many times the wagon was abandoned if it could not be repaired.

Name: _____

The wagon had no springs or brakes. It was indeed a rough ride and many a pioneer chose to walk when the road was bumpy. Nevertheless, the covered wagon was more often than not the key to survival along the Oregon Trail. Some well-to-do families had several wagons while other families may have shared a wagon. A good wagon was the best investment a pioneer could make. Would you have enjoyed traveling in a prairie schooner?

The Prairie Schooner, AKA the Covered Wagon

Questions

_____ 1. What was the main difference between a Conestoga wagon and a prairie schooner?

- A. The Conestoga wagon was larger.
- B. The Conestoga wagon floated.
- C. The Conestoga wagon was smaller.
- D. The Conestoga wagon was not covered.

2. How many oxen, mules, or horses were needed to pull a prairie schooner?

_____ 3. What was the false floor used for?

- A. hiding in
- B. sleeping in
- C. dances
- D. storing supplies

4. Prairie schooners were covered with what kind of cloth?

_____ 5. What was a teamster?

- A. the wagon master
- B. a sharpshooter
- C. the person who rode at the end of the train
- D. the person who drove the team of oxen

6. For emigrants, the prairie schooner was like a _____.

Name: _____

Imagine you were traveling to Oregon with your family on a wagon train. If you were allowed to bring only one personal item that was important to you on your trip, what would it be? (Remember there were no electronic games at that time.) Explain why this item is so important to you.
