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Wagon Trains

When we think of the development of the United States, we can't help but think of those who traveled across the country to settle the great lands of the West. What were their travels like? What images come to your mind when you think of this great migration? The wagon train is probably one of those images.

What exactly was a **wagon train**? It was a group of covered wagons, usually around 100 of them. These carried people and their supplies to the West before there was a transcontinental railroad.



From 1837 to 1841, many people were in frustrating economic situations. Farmers, businessmen, and fur traders were looking for new opportunities. They hoped for a better climate, good crops, and better conditions. They decided to travel to the West. Missionaries wanted to convert American Indians to Christianity. They decided to head to the West. Why would these groups head out together? First of all, the amount of traveling was incredible. Much of the country they were traveling through was not settled and was difficult to travel. The trip could be confusing because of other trails made by Indians and buffalos. To get there safely, they went together. Second of all, there was a real danger that a wagon would be attacked by Native Americans. In order to have protection, it made sense to travel together.

Wagon trains were very organized. People signed up to join one. There was a contract that stated the goals of the group's trip, terms to join, rules, and the details for electing officers. A wagon train would choose one or two people to be in charge for military and civil purposes. There were aides who were elected. A guide who knew the trails was often hired as well. He would understand the best route based on the travels of the early frontiersmen. The wagon train was highly organized. There was a strict order for placement of the wagons on the trail and at the camp at night. Riding on the trails created a lot of dust. Changing the order of wagons helped people take turns bearing the worst of this choking dust.

At night, the wagons would make a circle with one opening. This allowed the group to guard against Native Americans. It also kept the animals from wandering from the group. There was often a musician who traveled with the wagon train to entertain the group at night.

When a family decided to join a wagon train, it often had to save money for three to five years before it could even begin the journey. The wagon cost around \$400. The cost of the trip with supplies could be as much as \$1,000. The classic overland trip from the Midwest to Oregon and California was lengthy and very difficult. It was approximately a 2,000 mile trip. In good weather, a wagon train would complete the journey in five months. However, heavy rains were known to make the typical trip last around six months.

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What kinds of wagons took part in the wagon train? Some used the Conestoga wagon because it was very efficient at carrying freight. Those traveling from the prairies often used the covered wagon, which was called the prairie schooner by some.

Either way, the wagon was made mostly of wood. Iron reinforced crucial points of the wagons, especially the four wheels, but iron was very heavy, so the pioneers only used as little as was absolutely necessary. The top was made of canvas that stretched over the hoop-shaped slats. The canvas top was waterproofed with linseed oil so it could protect the wagon's contents. The front wheels of the wagon were smaller than the back wheels.

What was carried inside each of the wagons? Each family or group needed food supplies, cooking equipment, and kegs of water. A shovel was also needed. A typical family of four needed 800 lbs. of flour, 700 lbs. of bacon, and enormous quantities of lard, beans, fruit, coffee, and salt. Most wagons could hold 2,500 lbs. but it was recommended that they carry less. There was usually only about five feet of enclosed space from the bed to the top for storage and shelter. Many started out with furniture but learned to abandon that as the travels became harsh.

Due to lack of space, only small children and senior citizens rode in the wagons themselves. The rest of the people walked, although some rode horses. The wagon train usually went 2 miles per hour, covering around 10 miles a day. That explains the incredible time the trip took. A few wagons had a roadometer that attached to the wheel and helped the guide determine how far the train had gone on the journey each day or in total.

The wagons were pulled by horses, oxen, or mules. Many people chose oxen because they were cheap, strong, less likely to be stolen, and good farm animals. They only needed vegetation to eat, but they could be restless if they got too thirsty.

Despite the planning and organization, being part of a wagon train was very difficult. There were many dangers. There were accidental shootings. There were many drownings as the wagon trains crossed water. It was difficult to go downhill because the wagons had no brakes. In 1840, a group arranged by John Bidwell formed a wagon train to travel from the Missouri River to California. Out of 62 in his group, only 32 people made it, even with lots of planning and a guide. In 1846, a group known as the Donner Party had 42 people and 2 guides die on the journey. In March 1857, Alexander Fancher and his wagon train were attacked. Fifty men, forty women, and fifty children were killed. Only seventeen babies lived. This was known as the Mountain Meadows Massacre.

However, people continued to migrate. They were motivated by the Homestead Act of 1862 to get free land to start a whole new life. The first third of the trip allowed the people in the wagon train to get into a routine, meet the others, and learn to take care of the food and water. The next third of the trip, people looked to replenish their supplies. There were fewer buffalo herds, which meant less food. Water and grass were less plentiful. This was almost always the point at which people gave up carrying any furniture. The last third was the most difficult, though. People were anxious to finish the journey before winter arrived.

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Wagon trains really developed to cross the Great Plains. They allowed thousands to migrate out West. What began as a crude network of trails allowed a great migration of people. It allowed a journey to a new life. Towns of the West became cities. Frame houses were built. Trails became magnificent roads. Wagon trains disappeared in the West by the late 19th century. Later, instead of wagon trains, people were able to travel by way of the transcontinental railroad, but those wagons had led the way!

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Questions

- _____ 1. Wagon trains were the main way to travel to the West in the 20th century.
 - A. true
 - B. false

- _____ 2. Which was an important reason to join a wagon train?
 - A. safety
 - B. finding the trail
 - C. neither a nor b
 - D. both a and b

- _____ 3. Why was it important to have a guide as part of a wagon train?
 - A. to entertain
 - B. to save money
 - C. for military defense
 - D. for his knowledge of trails

- _____ 4. A wagon train journeying from the Midwest to Oregon typically traveled _____ miles.
 - A. 2,000
 - B. 3,000
 - C. 1,000
 - D. 4,000

- _____ 5. Which animal was the most popular choice to pull the wagons in a wagon train?
 - A. horse
 - B. mule
 - C. ox
 - D. zebra

- _____ 6. In a successful six days, the typical wagon train would go _____ miles.
 - A. 10
 - B. 60
 - C. 1,000
 - D. 2

- _____ 7. By the last third of the journey, people often abandoned their furniture. Why?
 - A. They changed their minds about the style.
 - B. It didn't fit in their new home.
 - C. It was damaged.
 - D. It became too difficult to transport.

