

Oregon Trail — A Historical Phenomenon

by Peggy R. Baldwin

Wagon Train, a television program airing from 1957 to 1965, opened with an orderly line of wagons coming across a grassy knoll, under a spreading oak tree, clean people and large Conestoga wagons with matching, clean white covers and smiling wagon drivers who shook the reins over glossy matched sets of horses. The scouts would leave the train, frequently, and get involved in all kinds of trouble with people living in very established looking houses along the trail. Quite often this trouble would have nothing to do with helping the wagon train he was scouting for. Indians were one of their biggest problems, of course, and to protect themselves the pioneers would circle their wagons at night. One fan said, on a web site, that, “Wagon Train followed the trials and tribulations of pioneering families as they set out from the East to carve out a new life in the West soon after the American Civil War.”

It appears that the program was popular with people whose main criteria was something other than accuracy. The migratory deluge of the Oregon Trail was down to a trickle by the beginning of the Civil War, with most people traveling it between 1841 through 1860. Nearly 300,000 people traveled the trail, with over 75,000 wagons following rivers most of the way, and only moved away from water if necessary, or it offered a mile and time reducing shortcut. The route of the Oregon Trail started in Missouri, in St Joseph or Independence in the 1840s and by 1850 also from Westport (today’s Kansas City) and Kaneshville, Iowa (today’s Council Bluffs). It cut through Kansas prairies, northwest along the Little Blue to Nebraska’s Platte River and followed the Platte River, on the north side, if coming from Kaneshville, or the south side, if coming from Missouri, and the two paths joined at either Fort Laramie, Wyoming or near Caspar, Wyoming. It followed the North Platte in Nebraska, the Sweetwater River to the Rocky Mountain South Pass in Wyoming; continuing across the Green River Valley to Idaho’s Bear River Valley; up the Bear to the Snake River; along the Snake, cutting over to the Columbia River in Oregon; rafting down the Columbia River and down the Willamette River to Oregon City. Later travelers would take the Sam Barlow Road, through the mountains to Oregon City, avoiding the dangerous ride down the wild Columbia. It was the longest migratory trail in history – over 2000 miles, taking its travelers 4 1/2 to 5 months to complete, traveling 15

miles on an average day.¹

The path that would become the Oregon Trail was worn first by steps of animals, then by the steps of Native Americans, explorers, mountain men (fur traders), missionaries, and finally settlers; and would eventually become modern day highways and freeways. As one author put it, “The emigrants traveled. They settled into routines along the monotonous Platte River, jolted over the ‘black hills’ of the Laramie Mountains, soaked heat-cracked wheels in the Sweetwater River, axed a road through the Blue Mountains, rafted down the Columbia. When they reached the Willamette Valley in late October—Oregon at last!—They left a road marked for all comers.”² The trail did get easier to travel as the years went on, but there were many variations on the original, that sometimes shortened the trip and other times resulted in difficulties or even disaster. Two variations on the typical Oregon Trail route was the Sublette Cutoff, choosing a waterless trail straight across the Little Colorado Desert to the Green River, cutting off 100 miles, and the Applegate Trail, which brought people up the Willamette Valley from the south.³

Many people began their Oregon Trail travels in Independence, Missouri, which “...was no stranger to wagon trains—loads of cargo headed for Santa Fe trade, but 1843 brought a different kind of traveler – emigrants headed for Oregon.”⁴ Emigrants in the early 1840s set out in one train, hiring a guide, because the way was not well known. By the end of the decade, trains left daily from the last week in April through the month of May.⁵ The scene at Independence Landing was noisy and active, as emigrants purchased their last minute supplies and took a couple of days to find a train to join. Usually they had come to the jumping off place with a few family members and friends. They needed to join with others, getting just the right size traveling company. Sometimes companies split and joined with others, throughout the journey, for lots of reasons: the train was too large and slow, some members wanted to take a cutoff and others did not, etc.

As time went on, the way along the Oregon Trail became more developed. Forts were built to protect the emigrants – Fort Hall in Idaho, Fort Laramie in Wyoming. Trading posts popped up to provide supplies for the travelers. Ferries were established (run by Native American or Mormons mostly) at the most difficult,

dangerous river crossings, and even toll bridges in a number of places.⁶ One 1850 Oregon Trail immigrant commented, "Find a great many companies continually in sight. In fact it is one continued stream. As far as we can see, both in front and near the horizon is dotted with white wagon covers of emigrants, like a string of beads."⁷ The problems of isolation were replaced with problems of increased population, such as having to compete for forage for the stock, requiring them to drive their stock miles from the established trail to feed them. Disease was promoted by crowded conditions.

TRAVELING ADVICE

Guide books were published, mostly in the early 1840s and after, with advice; some good, some bad. Joseph E. Ware's *Emigrant's Guide to California*, which may have contained some helpful information, but gave the bad advice to rest on Sunday and said emigrants would get there 20 days earlier. That was not correct and the people and their animals would do better if they traveled almost every day, with infrequent layovers.⁸ Lanford W. Hastings' popular guide book included a route he had never seen. As Gregory Franzwa says, "George Donner bought a copy and swore by it..."⁹

Good advice came from other sources. Joel Palmer, who made the trip west in 1845 and 1846, wrote one of the best guides.¹⁰ Palmer told them, "Emigrants should endeavor to arrive at St. Joseph early in April, so as to be in readiness to take up the line of march by the middle of April. Companies however, have often started as late as the 10th of May; but in such cases they seldom arrive in Oregon until after the rainy season commences in the Cascade range of mountains."¹¹ T H Jefferson's 1849 map of the Emigrant Road could be summarized, "Travel light, travel resolutely, travel in small groups. Pioneers should use pack mules or wagons. Large parties afforded 'mutual protection from Indians' but increased risks of disease, dust, and dissension."¹² Dr. Marcus Whitman, who established a Presbyterian mission in Walla Walla in 1836, had this to say, "Travel, travel, TRAVEL, Nothing else will take you to the end of your journey; nothing is wise that does not help you along; nothing is good for you that causes a moment's delay."¹³

PREPARATIONS

Travelers would learn that the cumbersome Conestoga wagons used on the east coast, or even the large supply wagons used on the Santa Fe Trail, would not do well on the varied terrain of the Oregon Trail. Their

wagons would be much smaller wagons, called prairie schooners. They would also learn that horses were not the best animals to pull their wagons, but mules, and second best were oxen, which were a third the cost of mules. They would drive the oxen that most of them would use with a whip, not the reins used with horses, whacking the oxen as they walked alongside them. They would not be riding these wagons as they moved. For that matter, only the sick or lame would ride in their wagons, because there were no springs to cushion the jolts of the trail.¹⁴

They learned exactly what to take and how much. People who did not heed the advice of the guidebooks or listened to bad advice from others and who did not heed the advice to travel light left treasured items along the trail. It was especially difficult for the women to leave their family heirlooms; they were reminders of the family and friends they had left behind, and probably would never see again. "Along the banks of the North Platte to where the Sweetwater road turns off, the amount of valuable property thrown away is astonishing – iron, trunks, clothing, &c., lying strewn about to the value of at least fifty thousand dollars in about twenty miles."¹⁵

The pioneers would learn to vary their wagon train formation based on circumstances. In the places where we can still see deep ruts cut into the land, we know that the emigrants traveled the same ground, one after another, in a line. In other places, where the trail no longer is visible, they may have traveled in a train, one mile wide, and one wagon long, to avoid the dust of the other wagons. Where there was a great deal of dust and no way to spread out, people's eyes were red and dry.¹⁶ In places, where the terrain allowed it, the Oregon Trail might be as much as 10, or even 20, miles wide. At night they would form their wagons into a circle, not as a defense against the Indians, but to contain their cattle, to keep them from wandering off.

They would learn that they needed to travel from day break until dusk, 7 days out of 7, with an occasional day of rest. They had over 2,000 miles to travel, would need to average 15 miles per day.

ADVERSITY

The pioneers may have been the most worried about the "savage Indians," but soon discovered that there were more likely threats; disease, accidents, lame and dying oxen and stock, a lack of food and water, and Midwestern storms that would drench the emigrants and swell the water ways making for dangerous crossings.

The emigrants soon learned to prepare themselves to withstand these terrible storms and prevent the stampeding of their stock by placing their wagons in a circle, with the oxen on the inside, frequently chained to the wagon wheels by their heads. This method had the advantage not only of preventing loss of stock, but by concentrating in a small space all wagons offered more resistance to the wind and less surface to the storm. (From Velina Williams' diary)¹⁷

One source would comment, "The journey...is attended with some hardships and privation—nothing, however, but that can be overcome by those of stout heart and good constitution."¹⁸ But for some it was enough to end in abandoned dreams, and maybe even death.

WHAT WOULD LEAD TO THIS PHENOMENON?

What would cause people to travel the Oregon Trail, in spite of the dangers? It amounts to some really good advertising and the push-pull of migration. The former took decades to germinate, to work its magic on the population's psyche. The latter took just the right timing. If either of those things had been missing, who know how history would have played out?

ADVERTISING: BUILDING DEMAND

"Advertising" quite often came from local newspapers—announcements of talks given about the trail west, letters to the editors from emigrants who had made it. People who wanted to make the trip need to know: Was it worth the risk? Was the Oregon Territory as fruitful as they had heard? Could they transport everything they needed and make it safely to the Oregon Territory with their families? Would they be able to improve their economic position and lifestyle by making the expensive and time consuming trip to Oregon? As the years went by, from the purchase of the Louisiana Purchase until the 1840s and 1850s, when most people would travel the Oregon Trail, people who were hungry for information would get it and would know that the Oregon Trail was achievable by anyone of moderately good health; men, women, and children.

Timeline, showing the "pull" influences that led to massive migration on the Oregon Trail:

1803 – Louisiana Purchase, which made the land west of the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains the property of the United States. In 1805 Thomas Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark to explore the territory and report back to him what they found. The Oregon Territory was just on the other side of the Louisiana Purchase, starting in the Rocky Mountains, extending to the Pacific Ocean. Its southern border was the 42nd parallel (part of Mexico known as California) and its northern border was 54°40', at the edge of Russian Territory.¹⁹

1812 – Robert Stuart, an Astorian, traveled the Oregon Trail in reverse, following Indian trails. From an article in the Missouri Gazette (St. Louis), published on May 15, 1813: "By information received from these gentlemen, it appears that a journey across the continent of North America might be performed with a wagon..."²⁰ Wagon transportation was essential to mass emigration, in order to transport a family's personal possessions.

1821 – Thomas Hart Benton, one of Missouri's first Senators was seated in December 1821 and was a big proponent for the acquisition of the Oregon Territory.²¹

1836 – Marcus Whitman's pregnant wife Narcissa was the first woman to travel the Oregon Trail.²²

1837 – Sam Parker wrote one of the best guide books and, "That was the copy farmers wanted."²³

1838 – Lewis F. Linn introduced a territorial bill in Congress on Feb 7th.

1843 – first mass migration of settlers across the Oregon Trail – more than 1000 emigrants, 120 wagons, and several thousand head of cattle.²⁴

In the end, "The American press was in high gear. National stories appeared constantly. What really was electrifying, however, was when the guy from your own township sold out his farm, threw everything in a wagon and moved over the trail to Oregon or California. Neighbors were fascinated and envious. If he made it, why couldn't they? Then the letters to the home town paper started coming back; maybe three or four in one mail."²⁵

WAS IT INSANITY?

Referring to the first migration of 1843, Horace Greely, a young New York City reporter, clucked his

tongue and wrote, “This migration of more than a thousand persons in one body to Oregon wears an aspect of insanity.”²⁶

There is no doubt that it took courage to leave behind the life they had known and to face the adversities the Oregon Trail doled out, but the encouraging news they heard from others, and the fact that the Oregon Trail and the Oregon Territory was more and more known and more populated, made it a possibility for more people.

Any migration is a result of push forces at the place of origin and pull forces from the destination.

For a great many the place of origin was Missouri. Many of their fathers and grandfathers had emigrated from places south and east. “Missouri and Iowa farmers, comfortable and secure, their farms paid for, their ground all broken up and fertile, read these letters. The old thoughts welled up, the same thoughts that drove them to Iowa and Missouri in the first place. They had something to prove, and they proved it. The challenge was gone. Neighbors came in, working a section or two away from their farms. Maybe a fence dispute now and then. Howling north winds in January, working a half hour every morning to cut four inches of ice out of the creek for the stock.”²⁷ They were carrying on the tradition of the family that came before them, to move on when things got crowded. States such as Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri, on the edge of the west, had seen their population double or triple. One emigrant said he went “because the thing wasn’t fenced in and nobody dared to keep me off.”²⁸

There was a national panic in 1837, with the price of improved farm land down to \$5 an acre from \$25. It was followed by a depression in 1842 in which “... wheat had fallen to 15 cents a bushel and you couldn’t

give the corn away.” When adult children’s elderly parents died, they felt free to emigrate and many of them did. Those would be some of the factors that would supply the push.²⁹

The pull of the Oregon Territory was that they had heard the land of the Willamette Valley was very fertile, no blizzards, very little snow. The weather was mild, with lots of gentle rain; an ideal agrarian climate. If family and friends had moved there, why not join them? Some, especially single men, just went for the adventure. For the more practical minded, the economic incentive of gold in California in 1849 and free land in Oregon, with the Donation Land Act, was the final convincer.

Some will tell you that Manifest Destiny, the claiming of the Oregon Territory from the British for the United States, was a reason some immigrated. Not likely! Although, it may have made them feel a bit more holy about their venture.

In the end even Horace Greeley got on the bandwagon, when he finally came to say, “Go West Young Man, Go West!”

After the Civil War, Indian hostilities would increase, as they were forced onto reservations, and they began to see the end of their lifestyle. The first transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869. Mass wagon travel ended in 1878, when the cost of travel by rail was low enough in price to compete.³⁶

REWRITING *WAGON TRAIN*

A more accurate version of the *Wagon Train* television program would open with small prairie schooners crossing the dusty prairie, wagons spread out to each side to avoid each other’s dust; a crowd of people walking, including bullwhackers controlling their oxen from

Emigration to Oregon, California, 1849 – 1860³⁰

Year	Event	Oregon	California
1840		13	--
1841		24	34
1842	112 emigrants left Independence on May 14—8 wagons, plus horses, mules, and cattle	125	--
1843	First mass migration, 1,000 emigrants (including travelers to Utah), 120 wagons, principally the famed Jesse Applegate party ¹	875	38
1844	Fremont’s Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and California in the Years 1843-’44—set off a tidal wave of interest ²	1,475	53

Year	Event	Oregon	California
1845	President James Polk’s First Annual Message to Congress, pleads his case, “That it will ultimately be wise and proper to make liberal grants of land to the patriotic pioneers, who amidst privations and dangers lead the way through savage tribes inhabiting the vast wilderness intervening between our frontier settlements and Oregon, and who cultivate and are ever ready to defend the soil, I am fully satisfied. This is the best manner of securing national rights in Oregon. We have reached a period when Oregon must either be abandoned, or firmly maintained.” ³	2,500	260
1846	Northern boundary of Oregon established at 49th parallel by treaty with Great Britain. Emigration down probably due to the impending trouble with England and Mexico ⁴	1,200	1,500
1847	Mormon Trail est. offshoot of Oregon Trail, near Fort Bridger. Trouble with England and Mexico was over.	4,000	450
1848	Gold discovered in California. Oregon Territory established. Over 12,000 living in Oregon (1 in 4 people was from Missouri) ⁵	1,300	400
Pre-gold rush subtotals		11,512	2,735
1849		450	25,500
1850	Donation Land Act went into effect—government land to male U.S. citizens, 320 acres to single males, and additional 320 acres if they were married.	6,000	44,000
1851		3,600	1,100
1852		10,000	50,000
1853		7,500	20,000
1854		6,000	12,000
1855		500	1,500
1856		1,000	8,000
1857		1,500	4,000
1858		1,500	4,000
1859	Oregon became 33rd state of the United States	2,000	17,000
1860		1,500	9,000
1840 – 1860 Grand Totals		53,062	200,335

one side with their whips. In the beginning, some of the wagons are brightly painted, with contrasting trim, and the white covers might be painted with the name of the owner or phrases like “Oregon or Bust. A few people might be riding wagons with mules attached, others might be riding a horse, and others might even ride in a carriage. People would be too busy doing the work required by their travels west and too tired to stray off and get themselves into unrelated and random trouble. Some wagon trains would rarely encounter Indians and others would find them ready to trade, or would see them offer a ferry ride over a difficult river crossing for

a charge. They would see many other groups of Oregon Trail travelers, sometimes making it feel like a modern highway.³⁷ They would have to make decisions about what route to travel, because there was not just one Oregon Trail. They might fan out or stay in a single line, depending on the terrain. Every evening they would circle their wagons to make sure their cattle and horses were there in the morning. At the end of the Trail, the wagons would be bare, the paint long ago blasted by sand and weathered off. The covers would be dingy, wordless, and tattered. The emigrants would be lucky if they still had shoes.³⁸

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT FOR THE REST OF THEIR LIVES

People may have come in a little worse for the wear, but most of them, especially the ones who did not face the more grueling effects of the trail, would think of this as the adventure of their lives. They would have a story to tell that would never grow old, at least for the tellers. "There was a time in the 20th century, when it was a misfortune to be a grandchild of persons who went west in covered wagons. The conditioned response was to hightail it when granddad was seen wobbling your way with a nostalgic glint in his eye, ready to narrate his tale of hardship and privation on the Oregon Trail for the umpteenth time."³⁹

The Oregon Trail travelers would test themselves, sometimes to the limit, and have experiences and see things that only the Oregon Trail could offer.

The emigrant never before had experienced a western sunset, never before experienced a western thunderstorm, never before had seen a mountain, nor desert, nor any Indian in his native habitat. Few had seen waterfalls. None had seen infinite prairies. Few had traveled for more than two or three days at a time; none certainly had traveled four or five months without respite. None had faced death on a day to day basis, with such studied nonchalance or such determined fatalism. Few of those rugged individualists ever thought they would willingly subject themselves to the military discipline and sometimes despotism that had to prevail in the ranks of the wagon trains.⁴⁰

They would forever be changed by the Oregon Trail, knowing that they had made it through the boredom of the endless miles and the challenge of the more rigorous sections. They would make friends who would last through the years, because they had relied on each other for the five-month Oregon Trail test. The Oregon Trail emigrants had been tested and found a strength within that would carry them through the rest of their lives.

(Endnotes)

1 Bill and Jan Moeller, *The Oregon Trail: a Photographic Journey* (Wilsonville, Oregon: Beautiful America Publishing Co., 1985), 14 – 15.

2 "Wagon Maps for the Great Migration," *Historic Atlas of the United States: Centennial Edition*, Wilbur E. Garrett, editor (Washington, D.C. National Geographical Society, 1998), p. 194-5.

3 Moeller, *The Oregon Trail*, 14. William E. Hill, *The Oregon Trail: Yesterday and Today: a Brief History and Pictorial Journey Along the Wagon Tracks of Pioneers* (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1992), 20.

4 "Wagon Maps for the Great Migration," 194-5.

5 Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited* (St Louis: Patrice Press, 1972), 37.

6 William E. Hill, *The Oregon Trail*, xxviii.

7 *Ibid.*, xxiv.

8 Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, 28.

9 *Ibid.*, 23.

10 *Ibid.*, 29.

11 *Ibid.*, 34.

12 "Wagon Maps for the Great Migration," 194-5.

13 *Ibid.*, 194-5.

14 Moeller, *The Oregon Trail*, 15.

15 William E. Hill, *The Oregon Trail*, xxvii.

16 Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, 40.

17 William E. Hill, *The Oregon Trail*, 53.

18 "Wagon Maps for the Great Migration," p. 194-5.

19 Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, 1.

20 *Ibid.*, 3.

21 *Ibid.*, 7.

22 William E. Hill, *The Oregon Trail*, 13

23 Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, 17.

24 Joyce Badgley Hunsaker, *Seeing the Elephant: The Many Voices from the Oregon Trail* (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 2003), 2.

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26 "Wagon Maps for the Great Migration," p. 194-5.

27 Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, 21-22.

28 *Ibid.*, 7.

29 Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, 6.

30 John D. Unruh, *The Plains Across: the Overland Emigrants and Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 119-20.

31 Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, 23.

32 Klausmeyer, *Oregon Trail Stories*, ix.

33 Joyce Badgley Hunsaker, *Seeing the Elephant*, 3.

34 Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, 23.

35 *Ibid.*, 24.

36 Joyce Badgley Hunsaker, *Seeing the Elephant*, 3 - 4.

37 William E. Hill, *The Oregon Trail*, xxiv.

38 Moeller, *The Oregon Trail*, 15.

39 Gregory M. Franzwa, *The Oregon Trail Revisited*, 54.

40 *Ibid.*, 45.