

# **The Oregon Trail Revisited**

## **The Plains Between**



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by

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

On May 2, 1992, I joined thirty other tour operators in St. Louis, Missouri, to begin an adventure which would re-trace the steps of the pioneers who marched westward 150 years ago. We slept on clean sheets every night, rode in air-conditioned comfort by day, and ate well (and frequently) from beginning to end. In twelve days we covered the 2,000 miles which our predecessors had needed nearly six months of harrowing and often tragic effort to traverse. But despite its contrasts, the trip gave us an appreciation of the historic journey - an appreciation far deeper than one would get from just reading about the journey in a comfortable armchair.

The purpose of the trip was to familiarize decision-makers in the group travel industry with the exciting tour possibilities of this historic migration, with the hope and expectation that we would in turn develop tour products to coincide with the trail's 150th anniversary in 1993.

Obligingly I returned to my office after twelve exhausting and adventure-filled days - during which I at times identified strongly with the dusty, physically-tested pioneers - and within two weeks I developed an itinerary, costed the tour, designed and printed a brochure and sent out a mailing of 500 pieces to tour operators around the world.

Flushed with a sense of accomplishment I sat back and surveyed the mountains of material I had accumulated in my research. I was now a self-proclaimed expert on the Oregon Trail, yet a nagging question remained to spoil my smugness.

Hundreds of books, articles and pamphlets have been written on this, the

greatest peacetime migration in the history of the world. But almost all of them focus on the ultimate goal: Oregon Country, the fertile Willamette Valley - and ignore what only later came to be recognized as some of the richest agricultural land on the continent.

During the migration itself, the plains between were only a vast, inhospitable land to be overcome - conquered and left behind.<sup>1</sup> *The Plains Across, Bound for the Promised Land, The Course of Empire* are titles articulating this single-minded goal.

Interestingly, the emigrants themselves were often complimentary of the area. Emigrant diaries eschewed the widely-believed phrase "Great American Desert" and used instead more accurate terms such as "plains" or "prairie", and even "the Garden of Eden" and "the garden of the world".<sup>2</sup>

For instance, 1844 emigrant Edwin Bryant in his diary entry for September 14, decried the lack of trees, but went on to add, "the country appears to be the most desirable, in an agricultural point of view, of any which I have ever seen."<sup>3</sup>

Why then, did the pioneers keep on moving instead of settling this apparent Shangri-La? I believed there was a story here and I decided to find out what it was.

But first some background on the Oregon Trail itself.

# The Oregon Trail

The exact beginning of what everybody at the time called a "road" is open to debate. The first wagons to complete the entire 2,000 mile expanse between Independence, Missouri, and Oregon City did so in the year 1843 - thus the 150th anniversary celebration in 1993. However, many had made the journey (with wagons at least part of the way) prior to that year.

Ironically, the very first white people to traverse the Oregon Trail did so from west to east. Astorian Robert Stuart and six companions returned to the East over this route (but without wagons) in 1812.<sup>4</sup> Mountain man William Sublette is credited with bringing the first wagons as far as the Wind River in present-day Wyoming when he led a party of 81 men, 10 wagons and 2 Dearborn carriages to the 1830 rendezvous from St. Louis.<sup>5</sup>

In 1832 this feat was matched and surpassed by Captain Benjamin Bonneville and a caravan of 110 men and 20 wagons - the first such party to use South Pass in central Wyoming to ease the way across the Continental Divide.<sup>6</sup>

All of these early sojourners were fur-traders, many of whom would eventually become scouts for the westering pioneers when the fur trade died out, but there were also sporadic settlers, most notably the Whitman missionaries, who very nearly made it with wagons in 1836 before the forbidding Blue Mountains of Oregon defeated them. (They eventually reached Walla Walla, but on foot and horseback.)<sup>7</sup>

Other tiny groups attempted the crossing in the ensuing decade with varying

degrees of success, but 1843 saw the first major wagon trains heading west to the tune of approximately 1,000 people.<sup>8</sup> Before the emigration was over, an estimated 250,000 to 350,000 American citizens and foreign-born immigrants would make the historic journey.

The end of the era is also in contention. Some historians place the close as early as 1859, but most agree the trail was still in use, albeit much reduced, through the civil war years, and petered out only when the completion of the transcontinental railroad made its purpose obsolete.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the rampant nationalism which produced Manifest Destiny - a dubious federal policy which generated jingoistic slogans such as "Go West, Young Man" from desk-bound eastern journalists - the real impetus behind the westward migration was the profit motive. Early pioneers wrote of their experiences, and particularly the verdant Willamette Valley, to relatives back East, and many of these letters were published and widely disseminated. Word spread rapidly of the "rich land, rivers teeming with fish, and endless forests... waiting for someone to claim them."<sup>10</sup>

Nearly as compelling as the escape to reasons were the escape from factors.<sup>11</sup> Frontier poverty in the now-depleted soils of the former Northwest Territory, overcrowding, and the debilitating illnesses of the Mississippi Valley became compelling reasons for many to turn their sights to the West.

Ironically one of the very things people were trying to escape - cholera - was also a major cause of death on the trail. Even so, the death rate on the trail was well below the one in every forty persons recorded in the cities, and the disease disappeared altogether after the higher elevations west of Fort Laramie were reached.<sup>12</sup>

Once the word got out, everyone it seemed, wanted to take advantage of the opportunities out West. The gold discovery in California in 1848 only added to the clamor. How one made the journey differed, depending very much on his point of origin. Easterners favored the "round the Horn" route by boat. Southerners usually took the isthmus route departing from New Orleans. The vast majority of Oregon Trail pioneers came from the midwest - Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio, with a disproportionate number coming from Missouri.<sup>13</sup>

The jumping off point shifted westward with the movement itself. The outfitting point for the Santa Fe Trail had originally been in Franklin, Missouri, but by 1827 with the re-channeling of the Missouri River, Independence was claiming that position and maintained it throughout the early Oregon Trail period. Kansas City, Westport and even St. Joseph would eventually become outfitting points as more knowledgeable emigrants weighed the advantages of staying on the relatively smooth river as long as possible before switching to the ceaselessly jolting, creaking, bone-jarring prairie schooners for the duration of the journey. In addition, the extra two days by steamer up-river from Independence to St. Joseph, saved later emigrants almost two weeks' travel.<sup>14</sup>

The Oregon Trail has been so glamorized in western literature and films that every American has a mental image of the doughty pioneer families trudging across the endless prairie, and bravely facing heart-stopping danger on a daily basis. Despite the hardships it must be acknowledged that the journey was often more boring than treacherous, and crossing the Great Plains was rarely the lonely experience that has so often been portrayed.

Traffic was so heavy along the trail that American ingenuity soon grasped the economic opportunities attendant with the mass migration. By 1852 scarcely a stream on the trail was without its own toll bridge or ferry service - for predictably exorbitant fees. Forts sprang up along the trail as emigrants demanded protection for their journey. By the mid-1850's emigrants no longer left civilization at the Missouri border.<sup>15</sup>

Always present but rarely mentioned in starry-eyed histories was the eastbound traffic along the trail. Hardships and the death of family members caused many to turn back. The fur traders who had blazed the trail as early as 1832 continued to use it to carry furs to market.<sup>16</sup> These "go-backers" formed a kind of prairie telegraph, carrying messages to wagon trains further east, and letters home to relatives anxious to hear from their departed dear ones. Hastily scribbled notes warning of poisoned water holes or hostile Indians were left on trees and the doorjambes of abandoned cabins.

The prairie was strewn with discarded clothing, furniture, and even food as the well-being of the oxen began to outweigh the seeming necessity of material items, and many of these were marked with notes to the finder to help himself.

Wagon trains often overtook other wagon trains, traveling side by side for miles, allowing an exchange of gossip, experiences and occasional sparking among the young folks. Besides wagon trains and fur trade caravans, other traffic on the trail included stagecoaches, dispatch riders, US Army troops, freight trains, and mail wagons.

Even the hardships suffered by the Oregon Trail pioneers have taken on the luster of mythology. Although cholera was a very real killer, more people died of accidents (often caused by the carelessness of sheer boredom) than from the dread disease they brought with them West. And for most of the Oregon Trail period, Indians

tolerantly accepted the trespassers with the knowledge that they were merely passing through and not staying. It was not until the migratory habits of the buffalo were seriously disrupted by the thousands of pioneers, and then the prospect of actual settlement that the natives began to pose a threat.

The challenges and very real dangers encountered on the trail have been well-documented, but it must be remembered that to most Oregon Trail pioneers, the six month journey was the adventure of a lifetime. John D. Unruh in his epic, *The Plains Across*, summarizes the impressions of dozens of diarists:

"the scenery was the grandest..., the trees the tallest, the natural roads the finest, the water the best, the grass the most luxuriant, the wind the strongest, the rainstorms the heaviest, the hailstones the largest, the rainbows the most brilliant, the mountains the most spectacular, the grasshoppers the biggest, the meat of the buffalo and mountain sheep the juiciest, the Indians the handsomest, the rapid temperature changes the most phenomenal."<sup>17</sup>

I repeat: Why did the pioneers keep on going? For most of the emigrant period vast stretches of the trail were well within Indian Territory. While these didn't deter pioneers from trespassing, the dearth of military forts, especially in the early years, did discourage them from challenging the native sovereignty by settling permanently.<sup>18</sup>

More importantly, the plows of these early emigrants simply couldn't break the wind-hardened prairie sod. It wasn't until 1868 when James Oliver developed the chilled steel plow that farming the plains could even be considered.<sup>19</sup>

Beyond these there were many related factors preventing settlement of this inhospitable land. The "advance of civilization" seemed poised, waiting for new inventions which would solve or alleviate the problems of transportation (railroad),

fencing (barbed wire), housing (sod house), water (windmill), and farming (steel plow, drill, and other advancements in farm machine technology).<sup>20</sup>

In 1854 the Kansas-Nebraska Act extinguished Indian rights to the land, eliminating one of the previous deterrents to settlement, but by allowing the new territories to vote individually on the slavery question, it created another. Northerners fearful of living in a slave region were discouraged from settling the area.<sup>21</sup>

As with many societal developments, the reasons for delayed settlement of the plains were part fact and part myth. In addition to the above physical reasons was the widespread belief in the Great American Desert, which

"moved thousands of Americans until after the Civil War...They thus left behind the hospitable plains of the midwest on their unknowing way to more arid regions. The Great Plains became a barrier to be crossed with all possible speed, perhaps delaying settlement of the fertile midwest by several decades."<sup>22</sup>

Oregon Trail pioneers, composed mostly of mid-western farmers, were accustomed to humid, forested land and were understandably intimidated by what David Lavender characterized as a "featureless immensity" in his book, *Westward Vision*. Mountain man, Jim Clyman concurred:

"No place in the world looks more lonesome and discouraging than the wide Prairies of this region. Neither tree, bush, shrub, rock nor water to cherish or shelter him and such a perfect sameness..."<sup>23</sup>

The reluctance of farmers to brave the challenges of a harsh plains environment provided an opportunity for another group of westerners - the cattlemen. Just as the railroads were pushing westward across the plains, overcrowded cattle ranges in Texas suggested the joining of these two market forces.

In 1867 the first 35,000 Texas steers were loaded onto the Kansas-Pacific in Abilene for shipment east.<sup>24</sup> But the days of the great cattle drives were numbered. Problems with weight-loss on the trail and the opposition of land-owners through whose land the trails criss-crossed soon led to the grazing of herds in closer proximity to the westward-expanding railheads.

Cattle adapted more readily to the semi-arid climate than did most crops. Besides shipment to eastern markets, new plains herds supplied the isolated mining towns and even passing wagon trains.<sup>25</sup> Cattle was king until the harsh winter of 1886-1887 put an end to the "open range", but even before that the enormous ranches were obliged to share space with sheepherders encroaching from the west and pioneer farmers making tentative inroads on the eastern edge of the frontier.<sup>26</sup>

The first settlement occurred shortly after the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. Eastern Kansas and then its counterpart in Nebraska, (where the climate was more familiar) developed first, but by 1860 there were still only a few thousand inhabitants in both territories.<sup>27</sup> Major settlement didn't occur until the 1870's when wide availability of the technological developments cited earlier made the forbidding prairie less so.<sup>28</sup>

In 1862 a pair of pivotal events combined to settle the plains between. The first, the chartering of the Union Pacific Railway, made necessary the second: the Homestead Act. The development of the railroads and their importance to the settlement of the West has been well-documented, but even the railroads did not see their mission clearly in the beginning. The Union Pacific Charter described its purpose as a "bridge across" the plains rather than a "link" to them.<sup>29</sup> The railroads had been offered thousands of acres of land along the right-of-way by the United States

government as inducements to expand into the West. But the sale of these lands turned out to be a far smaller profit-center than the permanent market created by farmers settled on these lands.

It was no accident that the westward expansion of the railroads and settlement of the plains coincided. California miners (and later miners throughout the West) felt isolated and vulnerable. Their increasing demands for communication coupled with the feared results of a lawless society on America's western frontier prompted Washington to act. Painfully aware that the required transportation arteries couldn't be built without substantial government aid, Congress passed a "series of subsidies between the mid-1850's and 1871 to express companies, stagecoach lines, telegraph corporations, and railroads. Federal aid not only gave the West needed economic outlets but opened vast portions of the continent to settlement."<sup>30</sup>

In the two decades following the Civil War, "more new US terrain was brought under cultivation than in the previous two and a half centuries."<sup>31</sup>

Despite its glorious promise of free land to all comers, the Homestead Act in practice resulted in eight acres going to the railroad and land speculators for every one acre that went to small farmers.<sup>32</sup> The lush, green years of the late '70's and early '80's proved to be unique on the plains rather than proving the wishful and widely-held belief that rain follows the plow.<sup>33</sup>

The inevitable drought cycle returned and many sodbusters retreated in defeat. But by then the plains had been pretty well settled, and if not conquered, they were accepted and even loved by some. Their descendants people the plains today, and much of that hardy, pioneer spirit also remains. This is the land of the sagebrush

rebellion, a stubborn independence which causes voters to habitually split their ballots and defy easterners to just try to dump their garbage on our hard-won prairie!

Those of us who still live here find it easy to identify with that pioneer spirit. The great migrations represent a passage in American history which led to the settling of the plains and changed the way of life of its original inhabitants forever. This obvious downside to the story must not be ignored, but by celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Oregon Trail we have an opportunity to share the adventure and perhaps engender a deeper understanding of what it took to claim a continent.

## ENDNOTES

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2. John D. Unruh. *The Plains Across*. (Chicago, 1979. p. 400.
3. *Ibid.* p. 399.
4. Wyoming Recreation Commission. *Wyoming. A Guide to Historic Sites*. (Basin, WY, 1976) p. 80.
5. *Ibid.* p. 92.
6. *Op. Cit.* p. 80.
7. Gregory M. Franzwa. *The Oregon Trail Revisited*. (St. Louis, 1972) p. 18.
8. *Ibid.* p. 23.
9. Kraenzel. p. 98.
10. Margaret L. Coit. *The Sweep Westward*. (Alexandria, VA, 1963) p. 87.
11. Aubrey L. Haines. *Historic Sites Along the Oregon Trail*. (Gerald, MO, 1981) p. 5.
12. Western Writers of America. *Pioneer Trails West*. (Caldwell, ID, 1985) p. 133.
13. Unruh. pp. 403-405.
14. William E. Hill. *The Oregon Trail: Yesterday and Today*. (Caldwell, ID, 1989) p. 1
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16. Wyoming Recreation Commission. pp. 92-93.
17. Unruh. p. 397.
18. Kraenzel. p. 125.  
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19. Don Worcester, Editor. *Pioneer Trails West*. (Caldwell, ID. 1985) p. 133.
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21. Huston Horn. The Pioneers. p. 189.
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23. David Lavender. Westward Vision. The Story of the Oregon Trail. (New York, 1963) p. 374.
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26. Billington. pp. 688-689.
27. Creigh. p. 56.
28. Kraenzel. p. 138.
29. Boorstin. p. 231.
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32. Billington. p. 703.
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