

# Great Plains

## A

- The first portion of the Oregon Trail stretched across several hundred miles of the Great Plains, a wide, rolling prairie of lush grasses and abundant wildflowers. Although not very new to the Westerners, Easterners were very impressed with the beauty of the plains. The Great Plains were so flat that one could see nothing but flatland in every direction, with no bushes or trees to punctuate the view. In 1846, Eastern traveler Francis Parkman described the scenery he beheld as an endless “carpet of fresh green grass.”
- Although the plains received less than twenty inches of rain a year, mostly in the summer months, the rain at times soaked this land, which was already abundant in streams, rivers, and springs. Hence, getting stuck in the mud was a byproduct of travel across the plains. Amelia Stewart Knight, in her diary of 1853, noted: *“Monday April 18<sup>th</sup>: Cold; breakfast the first thing; very disagreeable weather; wind east cold and rainy, no fire. We are on a very large prairie, no timber to be seen as far as the eye can reach. Evening—Have crossed several bad streams today, and more than once have been stuck in the mud.”* (Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey, p. 202)
- Knight also referred to the storms typical of the plains. Storms occurred frequently, and mostly at night, dampening efforts to cook and soaking clothes, tents, and bedding. Strong winds and fierce electrical displays often accompanied these storms. Knight wrote: *“Saturday April 23<sup>rd</sup>. Still in camp, it rained hard all night, and blew a hurricane almost. All the tents were blown down, and some wagons capsized. Evening—the boys have been hunting all day. Dreary times, wet and muddy, and crowded in the tent, cold and wet and uncomfortable in the wagon. No place for the poor children.”*
- During the day, caravans spread out on the prairie, traveling abreast. At night, though, they attached all the wagons front to back to form a tight corral. This was a strong barrier to the oxen, keeping the animals from roaming away. It also protected the group from Native Americans. Not only were they treading in Native American territory, but as they advanced on the Great Plains, the pioneers found themselves in an area where at least 15 million buffalo roamed. When herds of hundreds of thousands of buffalo passed along the prairie, immigrants could hear a sound like thunder and could see only a rampaging carpet of black in the distance. These immigrants had to learn how to hunt buffalo, and they used their hides to make shoes, tents, britches, and other garments. Buffalo fleeces made warm, durable “buffalo shoes,” and buffalo chips provided fuel for smokeless fires. Many of these endless herds of buffalo resided in the Platte River Valley.

# Platte River

## B

- The westward trail followed rivers most of the way, since travelers needed a water supply and because rivers often forged a level path though varied and otherwise insurmountable landscapes. Trekking along the Platte River was considered a relatively easy portion of the journey. The river itself was a sluggish, shallow one, often only a half-mile wide and two feet deep. It had low, sandy banks and many small islands. Too shallow for riverboats, the river was difficult to cross, especially due to its quicksand. Drowning sometimes occurred during river crossings, especially among women who were loaded down with heavy layers of clothing and long skirts.
- Ralph Moody sums up how the pioneers reacted to the increasingly dry, dusty, shadeless route along the Platte River: *“Here the diarist of the migration began the cracking of lips, the drying of nostrils, the transition from turf to bunch grass, the change of the earth’s colors from greens to browns and tans, the sighting of unfamiliar animals-bison, pronghorns, jackrabbits, prairie dogs, horned toads-and the dry clarity of light that made distances deceptive.”* (Trails West p.58)
- The dry heat tired people and animals, and caused wooden wheels to shrink. The scenery was so monotonous that in this area, tension, tempers and boredom fueled arguments that often led parties to break into factions. It was especially bad during the cholera years-1849, 1850 and 1853-when few teams made it past the Platte Valley without losing a member to sickness. Seeing graves along the riverbank frightened them.
- To cross the Loup fork of the Platte River, the emigrants came up with a few strategies:
  - First, they drove the animals over
  - Next, a man swam the river and, taking one end of a small line attached to a cable, pulled it across. The cable was attached to the trees on both sides of the river.
  - Then, the women, children, supplies, and wagon gear were crossed over,
  - Sometimes all 2,000 pounds of supplies would be unpacked, put on a raft, ferried over, and then reassembled on the other side.
- Though the travelers were treading across Native American territory, interaction between emigrants and Native Americans was peaceful in the 1840s’ and early 1850’s. Communication was usually limited to the Native Americans asking for sugar, coffee, or whiskey as payment for passage through their territories. Emigrants and Native Americans also bartered for various goods. Occasionally, Native Americans also snuck into encampments and stole livestock. It wasn’t

until after 1854, when it was clear that the influx of thousands of emigrants was not subsiding, that hostility and alienation increased on all sides.

- There were two noteworthy stops along the Platte River portion of the trip:

**Fort Laramie:** Between 1841 and 1866, approximately 350,000 travelers passed by this outpost. Many stopped there for respite, to mail letters, repair wagons, and stock up on provisions. After Fort Laramie the plains started turning into mountain country. Consequently, it was there that many emigrants lightened their loads, cutting supplies to the bare necessities. One chronicler wrote: *“July 17, 1849 The abandonment and destruction of property here is extraordinary; true a great deal is heavy, cumbersome, useless articles; a diving bell and all its apparatus, heavy anvils, iron and steel, forges, bellows, lead and c. Provisions- bacon in piles, many cords of it-good meat. Bags of bean, salt and c. Trunks, chests and tools.....”* (*The Gold Rush Trail and the Road to Oregon, p. 93*)

**Independence Rock:** Leaving the Platte Valley and following the Sweetwater river 838 miles into the trail, emigrants came upon a massive granite cliff 650 yards long. One observer likened it to an enormous whale in the distance.

## Rocky Mountains

### C

- Approaching the foothills of the Rockies, following the swift Sweetwater River, the Oregon Trail became more rugged. Wagons lagged behind and pack animals were slowed to two to three miles per hour. To follow this route trees had to be cut, boulders pried and pushed aside, and detours made around deep gulches. Often wagons tipped over several times a day. For every creek crossing, the wagons had to be unloaded, disassembled, crossed and reloaded. Animals weakened from overwork, and the travelers hoped these foothills were as high as they would have to go.
- Reaching the Rocky Mountains, the largest mountain range in the United States, the immigrants found a sudden, dramatic change as snow-capped peaks over 3,000 feet high came into view. The Rockies posed an almost impassable natural barrier to westward travelers until a break in the range was discovered in southern Wyoming. This passageway was called the South Pass.

## South Pass

### D

- Crossing through the Rockies presented new and very difficult challenges. A dry, rocky terrain of the wild sagebrush and prickly pear, the South Pass ascent through the mountains was gradual. Nonetheless, it was a difficult climb for the wagons were emptied and a system of guide ropes and pulleys were attached to the wagons, the men clenched the ropes behind the wagon, letting it move slowly downward. Often, rivers had to be crossed several times in one day. During each crossing, the water softened the animals' hooves, allowing them to be easily worn down by the rocky terrain they followed.
- In addition, the unpredictable weather of the mountains also slowed travelers down. Particularly in the high passes, snowstorms impeded movement, as there was no grazing available to animals nor games to be hunted for food. In a few spots in the South Pass, at lower altitudes, the hardships subsided. At places such as the lush banks of the Green River, water and timber were plentiful.

## Great Basin

### E

- The Oregon trail only traversed the Great Basin region for a short distance. Leaving Fort Hall, a Hudson's Bay Company outpost on the Snake River, the trail continued along a break in the Rockies through the northmost portion of the Great Basin, an intermountain region between the Rockies and Cascade and Sierra Nevada mountains. This did not represent a massive descent for the travelers, as they were still on a plateau. The basin, though, was one of the driest parts of the country.
- The trail was a dusty, dreary one. Following the Snake River, the immigrants were confined to its steep banks and 500-foot-high scorched bluffs. Water was often unattainable, and impassable gorges and canyons broke the trail.
- When trying to cross the Snake River-in hopes of better grazing land on the other side-they were met with the challenges of crossing a deep, swift-moving river with rapids. They crossed on ferries made by connecting two wagon beds together, but many rafts capsized when they hit submerged boulders.

## Blue Mountains

### F

- The last major barrier to the Willamette Valley was the Blue Mountains. Although very steep, the travelers approached these with the comforting knowledge that they had surmounted other ranges and were only a relatively short distance from their destination. The climb through the Blue Mountains was a precipitous one through thick forests. To lift the wagons up, ropes, pulleys, winches, and chains were used. To descend the same system was used, which took even more strength to prevent the wagons from tumbling uncontrollably downward. After enduring these conditions, on the western slope of the Blue Mountains the emigrants came upon a spectacular view of the Umatilla Valley, a grassy, lush valley that led to the Columbia River.
- During this arduous trip, there were many health concerns. Traveling over varied landscapes, emigrants were weakened by exposure to hot sun, cold nights, rainstorms, hailstorms, dusty trails and snow in the mountains taxed travelers greatly. Relying on whatever water supply they could find, emigrants were susceptible to dysentery, and were exposed to cholera and measles. Mountain fevers, sores on unwashed bodies and stomach aches were afflictions to which they were all vulnerable. These maladies, along with heat and exhaustion, sometimes caused children to fall off wagons and get run over by wheels. Mosquitoes, gnats, bees, sand flies, and the stench of carrion pestered the travelers, while snakes, wolves, bears and buffalo posed additional risks.

## Columbia River

### G

- Following the south bank of the Columbia River, the trail led to the Dalles, the settlement where for many years the wagon trail ended. There wagons were sold or taken apart, and goods were transferred to bags to be transported by riverboats or rafts to the mouth of the Willamette River. Making it over the Cascade Mountains was considered too difficult, so the travelers went down to the treacherous Columbia River instead.

- The Columbia River was a very swift river with many rapids. While passengers rafted down the river, the animals plodded along the sheer, narrow footpath beside the river. Fall winds swept up the Columbia River Gorge at such speeds that, despite the powerful currents, rafts stood still on the water for days. Many pioneers died on the Columbia River.
- After 1846 a land route alternative, called the Barlow Road, was followed. This road climbed over the Cascade Mountains. The eastern slope was not too difficult to climb, but the western slope was heavily forested and swampy. Sometimes hills were so steep that wagons going down were slowed by ropes tied around trees. There are still tree stumps that show the lasting grooves made by the heavily weighted ropes. Amelia Knight Stewart bemoaned the terrain: *“Thursday September 8<sup>th</sup>. Traveled 14 miles over the worst road that was ever made up and down, very steep, rough and rocky hills, through mud holes, twisting and turning round stumps, logs and fallen trees.”*

As the travelers wound down the steep, craggy, forested roads, they were heartened, by the emerging view of the beautiful peak of Oregon’s Mount Hood.

## Willamette Valley

### H

- Once the emigrants arrived at the Willamette valley, they were struck by the view of a lush flat valley-the destination they had traveled 2,400 miles to reach. For those on the Barlow Road, the cliff walls of the Valley were too high to cross. Most ferried across the river, but if the toll was too steep for them, they usually convinced the Native Americans there to take their goods across in canoes. Most emigrants settled at the mouth of the Willamette River. Each year, more pioneers arrived, cleared farms, and populated the fertile valley.