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OVERLAND JOURNEYS: TRAVELS IN THE WEST, 1800-1880



Western settlers created what we think of as the American West. Explorers came and went, soldiers came and went, miners and others came and went. But the settlers came to stay. For settlers, the ways of reaching a destination in the frontier country were either wretched ordeals or wondrous adventures. Fortunately, many of these men and women recorded daily events and their thoughts with such picturesque zest that some accounts of westward journeys have elements of great literature within them.

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Detailed Description:

Comprised of selections from the microfilm collections *Travels in the West and Southwest* and the *Plains & Rockies*, this digital collection provides a unique window on Western History. Selections are based on the bibliographies, *The Plains and Rockies: A Critical Bibliography of Exploration, Adventure, and Travel in the American West, 1800-1865*, and *The Trail West: A Bibliography-Index to Western American Trails, 1841-1869*.

Western settlers created what we think of as the American West. Explorers came and went, soldiers came and went, miners and others came went. But the settlers came to stay. To bring the lives of the settlers into focus, consider the Western land itself-the vastness, the boundless plain, and awesome mountain barriers. The Great Plains were a challenge to "Easterners" and European emigrants.

For settlers or "emigrants," the ways of reaching a destination in the frontier country were either wretched ordeals or wondrous adventures. Fortunately, many of these men and women recorded daily events and their thoughts with such picturesque zest that some accounts of westward journeys have elements of great literature within them. At first they travelled in covered wagons, then by steamboats and stagecoaches. The coming of railroads increased the speed of the journeys, but for the emigrant travelers there was little in the way of amenities.

Westward settlers following trails west typically left from one of three "jumping off" points on the Missouri: Independence, Missouri, Saint Joseph, Missouri, or Council Bluffs, Iowa. The trails from these cities converged in central Nebraska, following the Platte, North Platte, and Sweetwater rivers westward across Nebraska and Wyoming, crossing the continental divide south of the Wind River Range in southwestern Wyoming.

On the western side of the continental divide, the Mormon Trail split off from the Oregon and California Trails, southwestward to the valley of the Great Salt Lake into Utah. The main routes of the Oregon-California Trail went northwest into Idaho, to Fort Hall, a major resupply route along the trail near Pocatello. The main route of the California Trail branched from the Oregon Trail west of Fort Hall, going southwestward into Nevada, then down along the Humboldt River to the Sierra Nevada. The main route of the Oregon Trail crossed the Snake River Plain and the Blue Mountains before reaching the Willamette Valley. Although each trail had a main route, there were many cutoffs and alternative routes, some of them notoriously ill-chosen but others which resulted in a significant savings of time and effort. The Oregon Trail is the oldest component, having been pioneered in the early 1810s and used by the first wagon trail, led by Marcus Whitman, in 1843. Brigham Young led the first Mormons to Utah in 1847. The California Trail came into heavy use after the discovery of gold in 1848.

It is estimated by historians that up to half a million settlers crossed the West on these trails from the earliest wagon trains to the building of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. The journey across overland trails took settlers 2,000 miles and around seven months to complete. Most groups traveled at a pace of fifteen miles a day. Few traveled the overland trails alone; most settlers traveled with their families. Large groups of settlers joined together to form "trains." Groups were usually led by "pilots" who were fur trappers or mountain men that would guide them on the trails. The journey over the trails usually began in the spring to avoid traveling in the winter. The most common vehicle for Oregon and California-bound settlers was a crude farm wagon covered with a canopy and led by a team of oxen (which were greatly preferred over horses and mules). In later years, following the advice of Brigham Young, many Mormon settlers made the crossing to Utah with handcarts. For all settlers, the scarcity of water and fuel for fires was a common brutal challenge on the trip. In many treeless areas buffalo chips were the most common source of fuel. Up to a one-tenth of the settlers who attempted the crossing died during the trip, most from disease such as cholera. Hostile confrontations with Native Americans defending their homelands, although often feared by the wagon trains, were actually comparatively rare. Many made the journey to California and Oregon because they saw these new lands as a place of endless opportunity. Once the first transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869, the wagon train era ebbed because settlers could now journey to the west coast safely in a fraction of the time.

The western trails have become embedded in American folklore as one of the significant influences that have shaped the content and character of the nation. The remains of many trail ruts can be observed in scattered locations throughout arid parts of the American West.