

# FAQ's About Kids on the Oregon Trail

## Kids on the Trail

What was life like for pioneer children on the Oregon Trail? Many children made the five month trek west with their families. **It's estimated that 40,000 of the emigrants were children.**

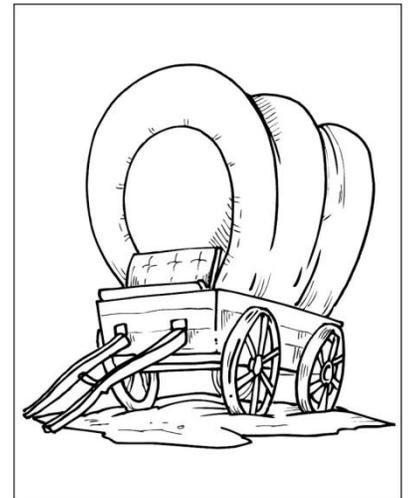
Many children were sad to leave home, and worried they would never see or hear from their grandparents, cousins, and friends again. They also had to leave behind most of their worldly possessions. Wagons could hold food and supplies for the trip, but there was little space for toys, books, and clothes.

### What would you put in your family's wagon?

**The trip took about five or six months, and was about 2000 miles long.** People only rode in the wagons when they were sick, or tired, or when the weather was bad so most of the kids walked. The wagons bounced and jostled and were not comfortable. Also, the extra weight of people made it hard on the ox teams pulling the heavy wagons.

Pioneers slept outside in the open air when weather was good, or in tents or under wagons when it rained. Dust was also a big problem as the pioneers walked along the trail, it would get in their eyes and make it hard to breathe.

Pioneer kids saw a lot of interesting things: great herds of buffalo, vast open grasslands, landmarks like Chimney Rock and Devil's Gate, and hot springs and waterfalls. For some the trip was a great adventure. Other kids faced great hardships such as sickness or death of parents, starvation, and accidents.

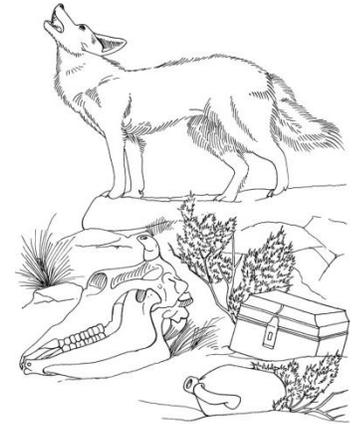


Pioneers took most of their own food and every day the meals were pretty much the same: usually bread, beans, bacon, ham, and dried fruit over and over again. Occasionally they had fresh fish or buffalo or antelope hunted along the way. Many of families took along a milk cow so they were able to have fresh milk.

**Children had regular chores while on the trail.** Many kids herded the animals, and both boys and girls sometimes drove the ox teams pulling their wagons. Kids also helped with cooking and washing dishes, and watched after younger children. An important job was fetching water, and gathering firewood and "buffalo chips," dried buffalo manure used for campfires when no wood could be found.

Occasionally there was time for playing, exploring, and visiting with friends. At night, there might be singing and dancing around the campfire. They played games such as London Bridge, leap frog, button-button, and other games.

Some children wrote letters and kept diaries, and many read from the family Bible to improve their reading skills. **They learned a lot from their adventures on the trail, but formal schooling waited until they were settled in Oregon.**



## Frequently Asked Questions from Kids

### **When did the Oregon Trail start?**

The first large wagon train of pioneers bound for Oregon was in 1843.

### **When was the last wagon train?**

The last wagon trains came in the 1880's, when other methods of transportation (such as railroads) were developed in the West.

### **Why did the pioneers use oxen to pull their wagons?**

Oxen were used because they could pull heavy loads. Oxen could survive on eating the grass along the way. Oxen didn't cost as much as mules.

### **What were "buffalo chips"?**

Buffalo chips were the hardened manure droppings of the buffaloes that the pioneers used for fuel.

### **Did the children on the wagon trains have to go to school?**

On some wagon trains an older person would go over lessons with the children when they stopped for lunch or dinner. On other wagon trains, children would study with their parents or older brothers or sisters. For most children, there was no school while traveling with the wagon train.

### **Who led (guided) the wagon trains?**

Some wagon trains were led by a trail guide that was hired to show the way. Often these guides had been fur trappers and traders for many years and had traveled the Oregon Trail many times. In some wagon trains, all the members voted to have one person be the captain or leader.

### **Why did people go to the Oregon Territory?**

Many people went to the Oregon Territory to get free farm land. Some went hoping to find better health or better living conditions. Some went to escape problems. Others went for adventure and to seek new experiences.

### **Where did the pioneers sleep?**

Pioneers slept in or under their wagons. Some slept in a tent and some slept just out under the stars.

### **How did they cook?**

They built a campfire and cooked their food in iron pots and skillets. Many times they cooked only in the evening, and ate cold leftovers for breakfast and the noon meal.

### **What did they eat?**

They took food that would not spoil along the way. Beans and rice, dried meat and salted bacon, dried fruit, hardtack or crackers (hard dried bread which had to be softened in water to eat). They took flour and sugar and sometimes baked bread, biscuits, or pies. They drank coffee and tea, and sometimes took lemon extract to make lemonade. Many families took along a milk cow to have fresh milk and butter along the way. As they traveled, they would hunt and fish along the way for antelope, buffalo, deer, elk, rabbit, birds, and trout. Many wagon trains traded with Indians for salmon and vegetables.

### **What was it like to ride in a covered wagon?**

Bumpy! The sturdy wagons had no springs, and the roads were not smooth paved roads but were full of potholes and rocks. Every time the big wheels rolled over a bump, everything in the wagon got bounced and jostled. The dirt roads were muddy when it rained, and dusty when it didn't rain. Most of the people walked, and only rode in the wagon when tired or sick.

### **Can we still see the Oregon Trail?**

There are many places where we can still see ruts from the Oregon Trail, but most of the trail has disappeared where farms and towns have been built over the years.

### **How many wagons were in the wagons trains?**

Some wagon trains were very large. The 1843 migration had 120 wagons. Others were very small, with only three to five wagons. The size of the wagon train usually depended on how fast the group of people wanted to travel and how well they got along with each other. Sometimes groups formed large

wagon trains when they wanted security and help from others to get past a difficult part of the trail, and then they'd split up later.

Some kids were afraid of Indians, but fighting was rare between Pioneers and Indians. Most of the time the kids found out the Indians were only interested in trading or visiting, and were very friendly.

## **Kids Diaries**

Some kids kept diaries and wrote letters while they were traveling. The letters could be sent from military posts along the trail, and given to someone traveling eastward to be mailed. Other people wrote about their time on the trail after they had grown-up. Here are a few writings from kids who traveled the Oregon Trail:

### **Martha Gay Masterson (13 years old when she traveled west):**

*"One pleasant evening some Indian boys wanted to display their skill with bow and arrow. When we gave them a biscuit they would set it up, step off some distance and pierce it with an arrow. Father got a pan of biscuits and he would measure off a distance, set up one and tell them to shoot at it. The one who struck it first got it for his own. They had considerable sport over the biscuits."*

*"We never needed to stop the wagon to let us in or out. The teams were very gentle, and we could get out and walk a while, then get into the wagon again and not trouble the teamster."*

### **Jesse Applegate (7 years old when he made the trip):**

*"I remember one afternoon, when the teams were tired and some of the oxen limping with sore feet, I was looking far away in the direction we were traveling, across a dreary sage plain, to all appearances extending to the end of the earth, and I got to wondering where we were trying to get to, and asked the question, when someone said, 'To Oregon'."*

### **Emeline Trimble (13 years old when she traveled west):**

*"...most of us wore for convenience the costume called Bloomers and did not have many changes."*

### **Sallie Hester (14 years old):**

*"When we camp at night, we form a corral with our wagons and pitch our tents on the outside, and inside of this corral we drive our cattle, with guards stationed on the outside of tents. We have a cooking stove made of sheet iron, a portable table, tin plates and cups, cheap knives and forks, camp stools, etc. ...We live on bacon, ham, rice, dried fruits, molasses, packed butter, bread, coffee, tea and milk as we have our own cows."*

*"Passed Independence Rock. This rock is covered with names. With great difficulty I found a place to cut mine."*