

Children of the Oregon Trail

What was life like for pioneer children on the Oregon Trail?

Many children made the five-six month trek west with their families. It's estimated that 40,000 of the emigrants were children. Many children were hesitant to go. They were sad to leave home, and worried they would never see or hear from their friends again. Some had to leave grandparents and cousins. 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.

The trip took about five or six months, and was about 2000 miles long. Most of the kids walked. People only rode in the wagons when sick, or tired, or when the weather was bad. 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.

There were many hot days and cold nights. Pioneers slept outside in the open air when weather was good, or in tents or under wagons when it rained. Sometimes there were terrific thunderstorms which scared children and animals, and blew tents down. Dust was a big problem as the pioneers walked along the trail. The dust would get in their eyes and choke their breathing.

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. A lot of families took along a milk cow, so kids were able to have fresh milk. Butter could be made by putting the cream in a pail and hooking it under the wagon. The jostling of the wagon all day long would churn the cream into butter by supertime.

Children had regular chores while on the trail. Many kids herded animals and milked cows. Both boys and girls sometimes drove the ox teams that pulled

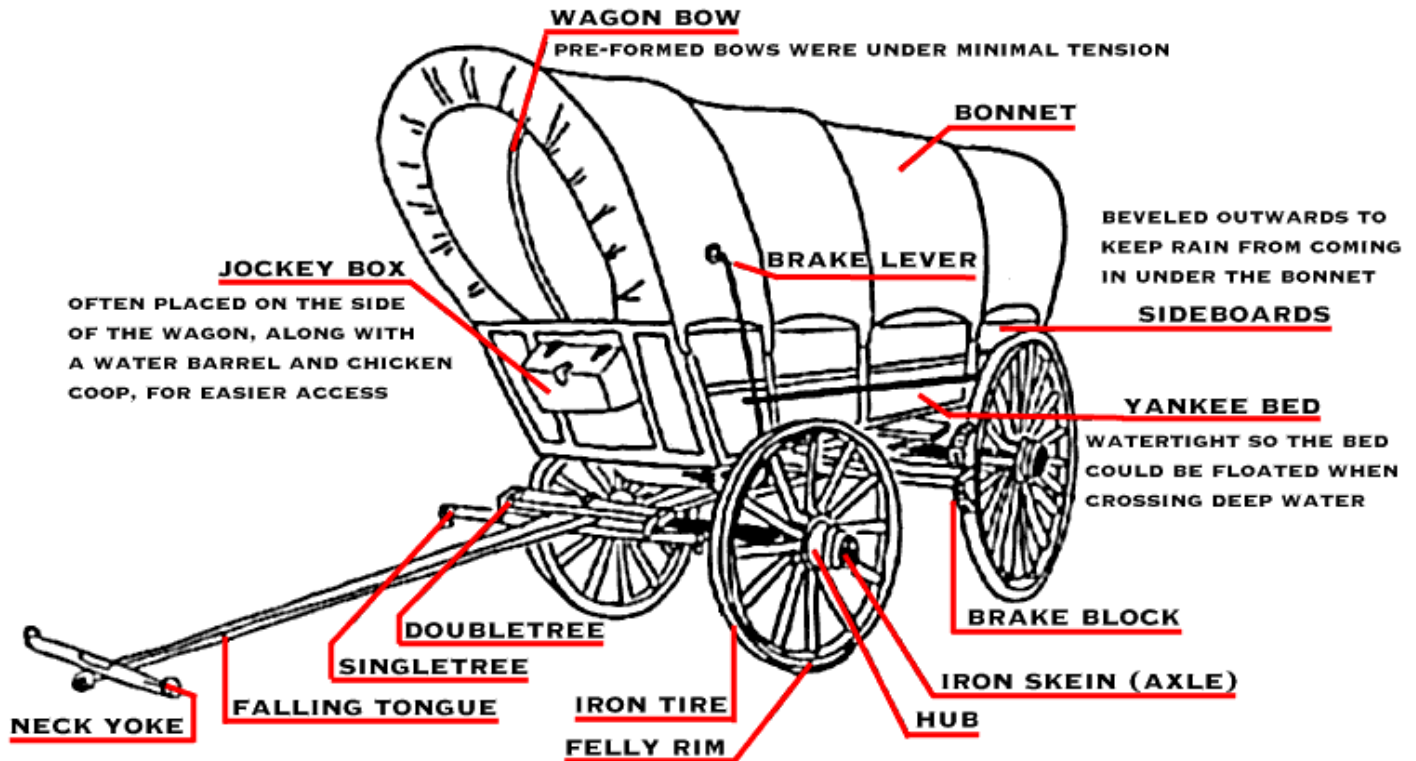
their wagons. Kids also helped with cooking and washing dishes, and watched after younger children. An important job was fetching water, and gathering firewood and "buffalo chips," dried buffalo manure used for campfires when no wood could be found. There was time for playing and exploring, and visiting with friends.



At night, there was singing and dancing around the campfire. They played games such as London Bridge, leap frog, button-button, prisoner's base, Flying Dutchman, etc. Picking flowers and playing with animals were other typical ways kids had fun.

Most kids were so busy with chores and travel that school was set aside during the journey. Some 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.

Kids were fascinated with Indians, and liked to pretend-play about being Indians. When pioneer wagon trains met Indians along the trail, they usually did some trading for food and clothes, or got directions for traveling and crossing rivers. Sometimes, Indians became angry with pioneers crossing their land, and there was fighting. Many pioneer kids were scared of Indians, and worried about meeting them while traveling. They were afraid of being kidnapped or hurt. Most of the time the kids found out the Indians were only interested in trading or visiting, and were very friendly.



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."

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'."

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."