

Going West

Children on the Oregon Trail

Schumacher, Stef

On the month of April 1844, my father got the Oregon fever and we started west. Matilda Sager wrote these words from her new home in Oregon. To get there, she traveled for six months in a covered wagon. With her parents, brothers and sisters, she crossed plains and mountains, deserts and rivers. They traveled along the route called the Oregon Trail. The trail stretched more than 2,000 miles from Independence, Missouri, all the way to the Pacific Ocean. The Sagers were pioneers, people who do something new and different. In those days, most Americans lived east of the Mississippi River. Traveling thousands of miles west to Oregon was a new idea. And

life in Oregon was very different from anything the pioneers had ever known before! Like many other pioneers, the Sagers traveled west in a long line of covered wagons. This was called a wagon train. The trip was a hard and dangerous one.

What was it like to travel west on the Oregon Trail in 1844? First of all, you had to get ready for a very long and difficult trip. It might take as long as a year to prepare. Families needed to bring everything necessary for months on the trail. Once you got going, it was a long, long walk. Only babies and toddlers rode in the wagons with their mothers. All other children and adults had to walk. There wasn't room in the wagon for everyone, and the load would have been too heavy for the oxen to pull.

There was a lot to keep you busy along the trail. Everyone had a job to do. Girls cared for younger

children. They helped their mothers cook over the campfire. They washed clothes in the rivers. They gathered woods for fires. And they milked the cows. Boys looked after the animals and got the oxen ready to pull the wagons every morning. They added to the food supply by hunting rabbits and squirrels with their fathers. When families had to cross wide rivers, boys and men had to unload the wagons and put everything into small boats. The oxen swam across the river, pulling the wagon. Then everything had to be put back in the wagons on the other side.

The trip wasn't all work, though. Late every afternoon, the wagon train stopped for the night. Usually, all the wagons pulled together into a circle. The animals were penned inside. Now it was time for games, stories, songs, and lessons. Sometimes adults would read aloud around the campfire, often from Bible. There were many dangers along the trail. In the

Great Plains, the grass was so tall that small children sometimes got lost in it. Playing near the rolling wagons was dangerous too. Pioneer Amelia Stewart wrote about one day: Chet had a very narrow escape from being run over... He escaped with only a bad scare. - Catherine

Sager wasn't so lucky, though. Her leg was badly broken under a wagon wheel. Illness was always a threat. Diseases like measles, mumps, cholera, malaria, and mountain fever took many lives. When fever struck the Sager's wagon train, both Mr. and Mrs. Sager died. Friendly families offered to divide the seven Sager children among the wagons. But the Sagers wanted to stay together. The youngest was only five months old. John, the oldest, was fourteen. With other families to help them, the brave Sager children made it all the way to Oregon.