

Primary Source Activity

networks

Manifest Destiny

Lesson 1 *The Oregon Country*

Life on the Trail

In the East, there was plenty of water and farmland and low, smooth mountains. Most people lived in houses made of wood or stone. To people living in the East, traveling west sounded like a great adventure. Once on the trail, however, they soon discovered how long and hard the journey really was.

Here are some passages from the writings of Catherine Sager Pringle who traveled west in a covered wagon with her family while still a young child. The events that she describes were common to the wagon trains on the Oregon Trail.

Directions After reading each passage, answer the questions.

Reading #1 The Beginning of the Journey

My father was one of the restless ones who are not content to remain in one place long at a time. Late in the fall of 1838 we emigrated from Ohio to Missouri. The healthful climate induced my mother to favor moving to Oregon. Immigration was the theme all winter, and we decided to start for Oregon.

We waited several days at the Missouri River. Many friends came that far to see the emigrants start on their long journey, and there was much sadness at the parting, and a sorrowful company crossed the Missouri that bright spring morning.

Soon everything went smooth and our [wagon] train made steady headway. The first encampments were a great pleasure to us children. The weather was fine and we enjoyed the journey pleasantly. There were several musical instruments among the emigrants, and these sounded clearly on the evening air when camp was made and merry talk and laughter resounded from almost every camp-fire.

1. Why did Catherine's family decide to move to Oregon?

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Reading #2 Along the Trail

Our cattle recrossed in the night and went back to their winter quarters. This caused delay in recovering them and a weary, forced march to rejoin the train. Soon after starting Indians raided our camp one night and drove off a number of cattle. They were pursued, but never recovered.

We had by this time got used to climbing in and out of the wagon when in motion. When performing this feat that afternoon my dress caught on an axle...and I was thrown under the wagon wheel, which passed over and badly crushed my limb before father could stop the team. He picked me up and saw the extent of the injury when the injured limb hung dangling in the air. In a broken voice he exclaimed: "My dear child, your leg is broken all to pieces!" The news soon spread along the train and a halt was called. A surgeon was found and the limb set. This accident confined me to the wagon the remainder of the long journey.

2. How did Catherine injure her leg?

Soon after this, both Catherine's parents died of a fever that had spread through the wagon train. She and her six brothers and sisters were left orphaned. Others in the wagon train watched over the children as they tried to get them to an adoptive home.

Reading #3 The End of the Journey

At Snake River they lay by [stopped] to make our wagon into a [two-wheeled] cart, as our team was wearing out. Into this was loaded what was necessary. Some things were sold and some left on the plains. One night the captain heard a child crying, and found my little sister had got out of the wagon and was perishing in the freezing air, for the nights were very cold. We had been out of flour and living on meat alone, so a few were sent in advance to get supplies. Through the Blue Mountains cattle were giving out and left lying in the road. We made but a few miles a day. Mrs. Shaw [the wagon captain's wife who had cared for them] took an affectionate leave of us all, and stood looking after us as long as we were in sight. Speaking of it in later years, she said she never saw a more pitiful sight than that cartful of orphans going to find a home among strangers.

3. Why were the children living on meat alone?
