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# THE USE OF PLACE IN LITERATURE: AN ENTICEMENT TO TRAVEL THE OREGON TRAIL

Dee Story

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I am a firm believer in electric fans and air conditioning. I believe in creature comforts. Whenever it gets hot or very humid, I get cranky. I have developed a mantra that explains my sentiments about being overheated, sticky, and sweaty. During the summer months, I am likely to whine to anyone who will listen, "I never would have made a good pioneer heading west in a covered wagon. My husband would have dumped me after the first two weeks and told me to hope that a train would one day come west and I would be able to get out of there." After listening to this for years, a friend sent me the middle-level book, *Daily Life in a Covered Wagon*, a forty-eight page overview of emigrants heading west. The pictures in this slim volume were invaluable. After reading this book, I wanted to know more about these people who gave up their homes and their settled lives to head west into an unknown world.

My first real introduction to the notion of a wagon train and the westward migration of people in the United States during the time of the Oregon Trail was a television show called "Wagon Train." As a child, I thought that wagon trains were orderly, their leader was sensible, fair, and stern when he needed to be, and that the wagons crossed the country in a solitary line. I thought pioneers square danced into the dawn to celebrate a day's travel. I also worried about the pioneers' safety inasmuch as the bloodthirsty Indians were after these helpless people who only wanted to go somewhere for a

better future. The more I read about the Oregon Trail, the more I understood that my vision was completely incorrect. My understanding of history was completely Eurocentric. It had never dawned on me as a child that when a mass migration into a settled territory happens, someone has to lose, someone has to die. The more I altered my vision of the Oregon Trail travelers of the mid 1800s, the more I wanted to see where these people lived. I wanted to see the famous landmarks. I wanted to see the terrain that made life on the trail arduous. Living in Michigan, I wanted to see the prairies and the mountains. I wanted to see the places that would have caused exhausted people to continue even if lives were lost.

For three weeks in August 1999, I traveled the approximate route of the Oregon Trail in an air-conditioned car with a CD player, a cassette player, and three boxes of books about the Oregon Trail. My colleague, the one who sent me the book that caused my need to travel, brought along a laptop computer. We viewed panoramic vistas, river beds without water, endless prairies, and desolate stretches of grazing land. Personally, I wondered why southern Wyoming was part of the United States. We traveled on concrete highways, two-lane roads, dirt roads, and paths through farmers' properties. We were jostled, we didn't always find a rest area when we needed one, and although we followed the approximate route of the Oregon Trail, most of the Oregon Trail was on private property, and most

of the ruts were long gone having been plowed under, eroded by wind or rain, or covered with concrete. Although we did not have the same experiences as the emigrants, we did see some of the places and things that would have brought them sorrows.

After visiting information centers, tourist traps, historical monuments, forts, museums, geographical landmarks, and farms, I became rather annoyed that a lot of people still believe the seriously distorted 1950s sense of the westward movement. As an adult, I know that the American view of history is Euro-American, and it did not take long to understand that this vision of the westward movement is still being perpetuated by the U.S. government, teachers, trade literature, and textbooks. All along the route, there were signs and monuments for Caucasian explorers, cartographers, trappers, missionaries, military men, and pioneers. (There was even one monument for a dog belonging to a Caucasian and one monument for a horse belonging to a Caucasian soldier.) There weren't monuments for the Native American peoples. When we would inquire about the whereabouts of these monuments, we were frequently told to check the various reservations to see if the tribes had their own monuments. There was little information about Africans and African Americans who made the trip west during the time of legalized slavery in the United States. There was little information about other multicultural groups who made the journey. There was little information about the women who trekked the rugged landscape.

I learned that wagon trains did not all follow a single line across the continent. They would travel spread out so the others wouldn't have to "eat dust." A series of wagons would go through an area. Cattle, oxen, and horses belonging to the emigrants would eat the grass or trample it, making it impossible for the immediate environment to support the buffalo the Native Americans lived on or the next set of pioneers. The emigrants would destroy the land with their wagons and litter the scenery with heavy furniture, refuse, and bodily waste. Eventually, other wagon trains would carve out other parallel paths and the destruction would continue.

At some points along the trail, a 100-mile wide path was devastated by the wagon trains. It was almost surreal to look out over a prairie and imagine all the disfigurement of the land brought about when people who wanted a better place to live had destroyed their route.

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**As we drove the 2,000 miles, it was almost as though we were driving through a landscape of souls: souls of the people, souls of the land.**

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As we drove the 2,000 miles, it was almost as though we were driving through a landscape of souls: souls of the people, souls of the land. We sat in ruts that seemed deep to us, but were much deeper in the days of the Oregon Trail, ruts carved into a land that had been breathtaking but was now scarred. Some folks died trying to get their wagons through these places. We read about pioneers who made it all the way to the Columbia River, only to die when they turned their wagons into something of a boat. People perished traveling water that gave them sustenance, water that was such a precious commodity on the trail. The Oregon Trail has been called the longest cemetery in the United States, but these numbers don't include the Native Americans who died as a result of starvation or diseases brought by the pioneers.

These people lived, they were photographed, they wrote journals, and they were written about. It's now in the literature that readers learn about their lives and the place where they met their fates. After driving the approximate route of the Oregon Trail and taking an ample amount of photographs, I look at place or setting in a much different manner. Place has an impact on the actions of what is alive. What is alive has an impact on place. My memories and my photographs led me to further my understanding of the Oregon Trail by reading more and more about the 2,000 mile long place that was a multitude of places that each brought their own challenges. After seeing the vistas, landmarks, and living history museums, I would highly recommend that other readers embark on a journey to explore place.

"The West is a land of infinite horizons and unimaginable distances. But it was never empty. To the Native Americans it was home, the center of the universe. To the Spanish, who came from their colony in Mexico, it was the north. The British and French arrived by coming south, out of Canada, while the Chinese and Russians came by sailing east. But it was the American—the last to arrive—who named it the West and made it part of their nation" (Stephen Ives and Ken Burns quoted in *The West: An Illustrated History for Children*, vii).

### **Works Cited**

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### **Suggested Reading**

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Hakim, Joy. *A History of US. Liberty for All?* New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Hatt, Christine. *The American West: Native Americans, Pioneers and Settlers*. New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1998.

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Smith, Carter, ed. *Native Americans of the West: A Sourcebook on the American West*. Brookfield, CN: Millbrook Press, 1992.

Wexler, Alan. *Atlas of Westward Expansion*. New York: Facts on File, 1995.

### **Suggested Video**

"The Story of the Oregon Trail." Boettcher/Trinklein Television, 1993.

### **Suggested CD**

"Voices From the Oregon Trail." Trail End Band. Trails End Production, 1996.

### **About the Author**

Dee Storey is a professor of teacher education at Saginaw Valley State University where she teaches courses in children's literature, language arts, and reading. Dr. Storey writes and presents at professional conferences in her speciality areas which include integrating literature with the teaching of social studies and storytelling.