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# Women's lives on the Overland Trail 1830-1860

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WOMEN'S LIVES ON THE OVERLAND TRAIL  
1830-1860

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of History  
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
Brenda K. Jackson  
May 1995

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ABSTRACT

WOMEN'S LIVES ON THE OVERLAND TRAIL

1830-1860

by Brenda K. Jackson

This thesis addresses the lives of women on the Overland Trail during the migrations of the mid-1800s. It examines the manner in which women stepped away from the "women's sphere" and assumed non-traditional tasks, to hasten arrival in the West. In addition, relationships and modifications to domestic chores are examined, since women continued to give attention to these as the wagons rolled westward.

Surviving diaries and journals suggest that most women were agreeable travelers, willing to endure the hardships of the trail in exchange for the rewards waiting in the West. While not averse to stepping out of the "women's sphere" for the duration of the journey, pioneer women were eager to return to its comfortable confines at trail's end.

Without the contributions of pioneer women during the overland journey, the settlement of the West would have been much more sporadic and gradual.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A project of this magnitude cannot be accomplished without the support and assistance of many people. My heartfelt thanks go to Dr. Billie Jensen, Dr. Elizabeth Van Beek and Dr. John Winterle, of the San Jose State University History faculty, without whose wisdom, guidance and patience this thesis would never have been completed. Thank you, too, to the Archives staff at the University of Idaho, and in particular to Judy Nielsen, for the tremendous amount of assistance they provided.

Family support is essential when embarking on an undertaking of this nature. Thank you to my parents, Dick and Shirley Jackson, my brothers and sisters-in-law, Loren and Malea Jackson and Kevin and Mary Jackson, and my nephews, Alex, Matt and Drew Jackson, for all of the love, patience, support and encouragement they have given me through the years.

Last, though certainly not least, my deepest gratitude goes to America's pioneer women who took the time, during their long and arduous journeys, to keep diaries and journals, and write letters home to the east. Without the dedication these women gave to their task, their attention to detail, and their intuitive knowledge that the endeavor they had undertaken deserved chronicling, this project would have been impossible.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my great-grandmother, Edith Elizabeth Fisher Jackson, whose covered wagon journey across America's northern plains inspired and encouraged me to dedicate my studies to American women and their histories.

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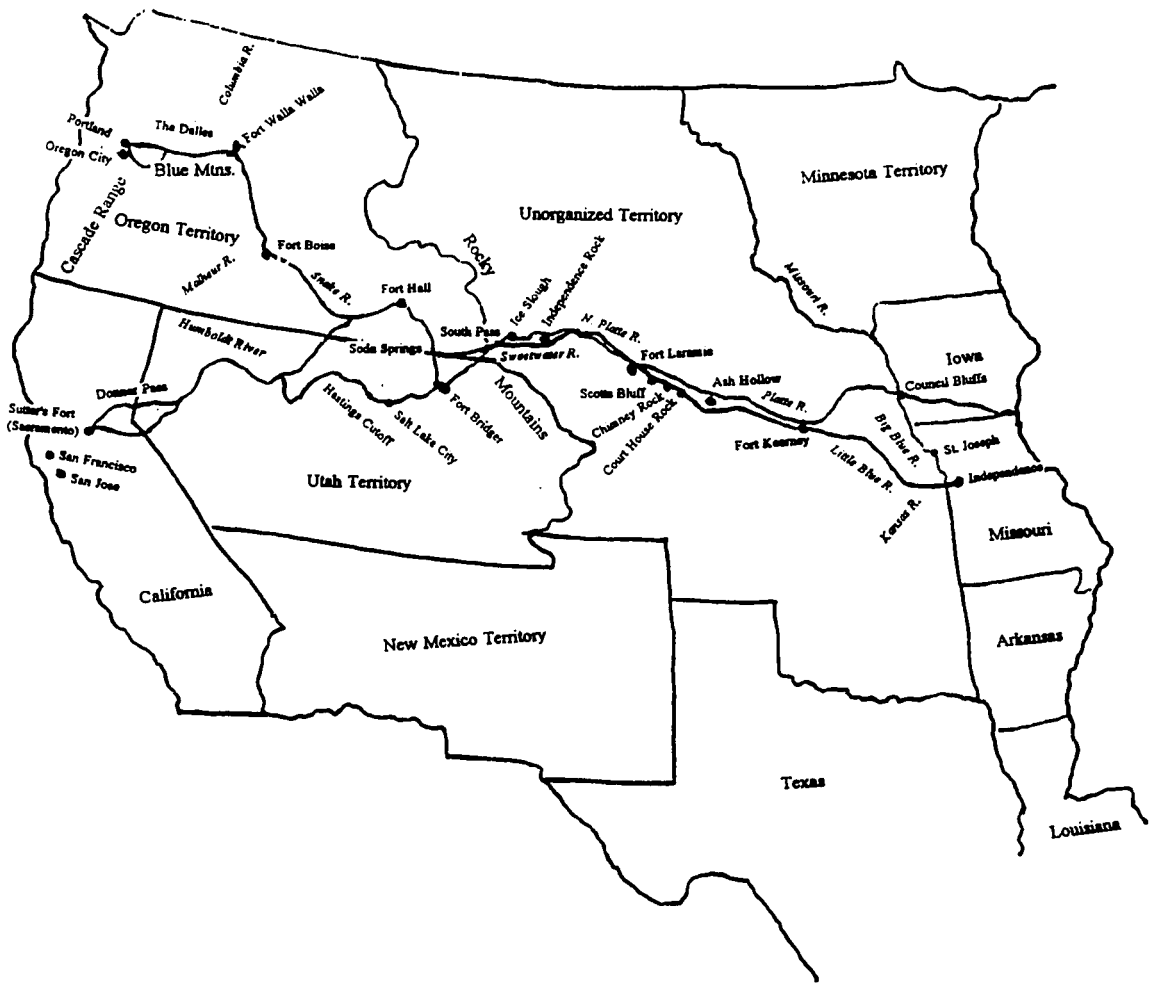
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# OVERLAND TRAILS TO OREGON AND NORTHERN CALIFORNIA



## CHAPTER 1

### WOMEN ON THE OVERLAND TRAIL - THE STORY SO FAR

The image is a familiar one, white bonneted wagons, filled with pioneer families and their meager possessions, floating westward along the Platte River in a heat-enhanced wave. This is the picture that novelists and dramatists continue to turn to as they present their interpretations of life on the Overland Trail. While these representations captivate audiences with their tales of excitement and romance, left virtually untold are the challenges of daily living and the struggle for human survival on the journey overland.

The story of the pioneers and their westward trek has been handed down from generation to generation with little variation in each successive telling. The central character is usually the stalwart male head of household, who bundled up his family, harnessed the oxen and guided them all westward toward the lush agricultural Garden of Eden that was the Oregon Territory's Willamette Valley. He defended them against the perils of weather, wilderness and Indian<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The term "Indian" was used in the diaries and journals of the women traveling west to refer to the members of the

warrior on the long and tedious journey, and risked both life and limb in the process. Finally, after traveling two thousand miles or more, the surviving family members emerged, ragged, hungry and devoid of material possessions, but ready to begin again in Oregon. This story is not inaccurate, but it is incomplete, for omitted are the contributions made by the female members of the wagon trains. The relocation of over a quarter of a million Americans was a monumental undertaking, and without the cooperation and participation of women the mass migration to, and settlement of, the West might not have happened.

Historians have encountered great difficulty in establishing a set of attributes unique to the American pioneer woman. Striving to recapture her character and tell her side of the story of the overland journey, scholars are torn between two long-accepted extremes. Some view pioneer women as shrinking violets, forced to abandon home, family and friends and travel across the unfriendly frontier at the whim of a domineering mate.<sup>2</sup> Others take a more progressive

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many Native American tribes they encountered on the journey. In the interest of continuity, "Indian" will be used throughout this paper when making reference to Native Americans.

<sup>2</sup>See, in particular, Dee Brown, The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West, (New York: G.P. Putman's Sons, 1958); Robert L. Munkres, "Wives, Mothers, Daughters:

look at these westering women and describe the strong and adventurous, those determined to work in partnership with their husbands and carve out a prosperous new life in the West.<sup>3</sup> In fact, both of these character types, and every type in between, were present during the mass migrations of the 1840s and 1850s. There were women eager to move west, women determined not to go and women who would be content with either decision.

Emerson Hough was one of the first historians to dedicate a portion of his study to the female pioneers, whose population accounted for at least twenty percent, and possibly as many as forty percent, of the emigrants traveling west in the mid-1800s. When he wrote in 1918 of "the chief figure of the American West," he was not referring to a pioneer man, but of the "woman sitting on the front seat of the wagon . . . her face hidden in the same ragged sunbonnet which had crossed the Appalachians and

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Women's Life on the Road West," Annals of Wyoming 42 (October 1970): 191-224; and Georgia Willis Read, "Women and Children on the Oregon-California Trail in the Gold Rush Years," Missouri Historical Review (October 1944): 1-23.

<sup>3</sup>See, in particular, John Mack Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979); Sandra L. Myres, Western Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982); and Glenda Riley, "Women in the West," Journal of American Culture 3 (Summer 1980): 311-29.



Missouri long before." To Hough, the future of the West rested with the pioneer woman: "There was the seed of America's wealth. There was the great romance of America."<sup>4</sup> In spite of this early accolade, discussions of women in scholarly works were usually relegated to a footnote. Indeed, even Hough, as quoted above, described the resolve of these "gaunt and sad-faced" women as reduced to no more than "following her lord where he might lead her."<sup>5</sup> Although this picture of the timid and downtrodden emigrant was well established as a staple in early scholarship, in 1944 Nancy Wilson Ross identified, and gave credence to, those women who "were stirred with the American appetite for change, and gladly left sheltered towns and farms."<sup>6</sup> Her study revealed that women, as well as men, were eager to leave situations of poverty, deprivation and disease in search of new lives that beckoned from the West. More recently, Glenda Riley suggested that, despite assertions to the contrary, there is no hard evidence in women's overland diaries and journals "to support the view that . . . women

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<sup>4</sup>Emerson Hough, The Passing of the Frontier (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921), 93. Quoted in Glenda Riley, "Women in the West," Journal of American Culture 3 (Summer 1980): 311.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Nancy Wilson Ross, Westward the Women (New York: Random House, 1944), 26.

were dragged from their homes against their wishes and better judgment."<sup>7</sup> Clearly, new schools of thought on the motivation of westering women were born with Nancy Ross's work.

Dee Brown, in his 1958 volume, The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West, wrote that "wives and older daughters occasionally had to lend a hand at men's work."<sup>8</sup> In fact, by the time pioneers reached present-day Idaho, and the journey's midway point, gender roles had begun to blur in earnest, and women were called upon to assume tasks traditionally carried out by men on a regular basis. Brown gave little credence to the contributions made by women on the trail and went so far as to imply that since the "basic aid to feminine daintiness," could be found in "a good soaking bath,"<sup>9</sup> little else was needed to appease these weary women and expunge the rigors of the journey from their minds. While it is evident from diaries and journals written on the trail that women were eager for the opportunity to soak in a hot tub, this luxury certainly

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<sup>7</sup>Riley, "Women in the West," 314.

<sup>8</sup>Dee Brown, The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1958), 109.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 143.

would not erase the sadness of leaving home and family, nor the travails that women encountered on the Trail.

Sandra Myres revealed, in her 1982 book Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915, that some domestic chores were eliminated during the months on the trail for there were "no floors to scrub, no iron stoves to be cleaned and blacked" and, for the duration of the journey, most women gave up the hope of keeping the family's clothing ironed.<sup>10</sup> The suspension of these duties allowed women to assume other tasks when the necessity arose, and by journey's end there was virtually no trail job that women had not added to their list of chores. Women "drove the teams of oxen," Lillian Schlissel's 1988 article pointed out, and "they loaded and unloaded the wagons at . . . river crossing[s]." When there was a threat of Indian attack, women "stood watch at night. They melted lead and poured bullets." And when climbing the western mountain ranges "they set rocks behind the wheels of the wagons."<sup>11</sup> In short, recent scholarship confirms that, when their labor was needed, pioneer women responded.

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<sup>10</sup>Sandra L. Myres, Western Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 133.

<sup>11</sup>Lillian Schlissel, "Mothers and Daughters on the Western Frontier," Frontiers 3 (Summer 1988): 30.

The addition of new tasks certainly did not mean that women were excused from the domestic chores of cooking, laundry and child care. Johnny Faragher and Christine Stansell, in their 1975 study, are quick to assert that "while women did men's work, there is little evidence that men reciprocated."<sup>12</sup> Julie Roy Jeffrey, concurring with this argument in her 1979 work, Frontier Women. The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880, maintained that the clouding of work roles on the trail was most detrimental to women since "a man assuming female responsibilities was doing a favor. A woman doing a male job was doing what was necessary."<sup>13</sup> The popularity of perceiving pioneer women as victims, common in the 1970s, was dissipating by the early 1980s. Contrary to earlier scholarship, for instance, Glenda Riley wrote in 1980 that men, "when not busy with their chores . . . would set up tables, start fires and even cook."<sup>14</sup> The difficulty of the new chores, and the adaptation of old ones to trail conditions, was not as burdensome to pioneer women as were the hours added to the work day for, as Riley

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<sup>12</sup>Johnny Faragher and Christine Stansell, "Women and Their Families on the Overland Trail to California and Oregon, 1842-1867," Feminist Studies 2 (no. 2/3, 1975): 155.

<sup>13</sup>Julie Roy Jeffrey, Frontier Women. The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), 44-45.

<sup>14</sup>Riley, "Women in the West," 316.

pointed out, women "were out of phase with the rest of the trail schedule; women's [domestic] chores began when the rest of the train stopped."<sup>15</sup>

Most American women had been confined to traditional, female roles from the earliest days of colonial settlement. In adhering to the guidelines of these spheres, American women spent the majority of their laboring hours in the company of other women. In so doing, according to Faragher and Stansell, a separate female subculture, the "women's sphere" was born. This "women's sphere" included women's church groups, philanthropic organizations and reading circles that paid particular attention to those publications dealing with the female issues of child raising and home life. Perhaps most important was the fostering of the female community, and it was this facet of feminine life most disrupted by the decision to travel west.

Julie Roy Jeffrey suggested in 1979 that "far from welcoming the expansion of the female sphere . . . women hoped . . . to recapture it."<sup>16</sup> In other words, while the disruption of the "women's sphere," brought about by the journey overland, gave women the opportunity to challenge traditionally accepted stereotypes, few took advantage,

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<sup>15</sup>Riley, "Women in the West," 316.

<sup>16</sup>Jeffrey, 45.

finding it difficult "to throw off accustomed ways of thinking even when forced into new ways of behaving."<sup>17</sup> Faragher and Stansell have suggested that the journey itself broke down this "women's sphere" and caused women to fight "against the forces of necessity to hold together the few fragments of female subculture left to them."<sup>18</sup> Their study indicated that pioneer women took advantage of the evenings in camp to recreate a small part of the sphere they had left behind. Once the wagons had circled and the inhabitants were settled for the night, the ladies of the party spent peaceful hours "clustered together, chatting, working, or commiserating."<sup>19</sup> This image of feminine tranquility, when in the company of others in their sphere, is one aspect of scholarship that has remained constant and essentially agreed upon throughout the years. As early as 1958, Dee Brown commented that there were intervals during the day when "women visited from wagon to wagon, sometimes spending an hour walking with others of their sex, reminiscing . . . voicing hopes for their future . . . exchanging gossip."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Jeffrey, 26.

<sup>18</sup>Faragher and Stansell, 151. Emphasis in original.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 158.

<sup>20</sup>Brown, 113.

Prior to the studies of the 1970s the "women's sphere" had not been clearly defined, though psychological breakdowns suffered by women on the overland journey, as a result of disruptions to the sphere, were acknowledged in scholarship. "Sometimes women grew desperate . . . set fire to their wagons, struck their children, [and] threatened to kill themselves," Nancy Wilson Ross wrote in 1944 in one of the earliest pieces of scholarship devoted to women traveling west. To some pioneer women, after several months on the trail, these options sometimes seemed more viable "than [to] endure another hour of heat, flies, dirt, dust, weariness, lack of water, lost cattle, sick babies, and a receding horizon."<sup>21</sup>

In her 1992 work, Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey, Lillian Schlissel assumed a more reasonable tone than the earlier historians, and insisted that "even the depressing necessity of having to do men's chores could be absorbed as long as women could make a social fabric of their lives on the Trail."<sup>22</sup> This is a far cry from her earlier assertion, in a 1978 article for Frontiers, in which she stated that the move west was "a major dislocation in

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<sup>21</sup>Ross, 7.

<sup>22</sup>Lillian Schlissel, Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 78.

the emotional fabric of women's lives,"<sup>23</sup> and again points to the movement away from the trend of viewing pioneer women as victims.

The dependence of women on others of their sex for support and companionship continued, and became more important, as the wagon trains lumbered further and further west toward Oregon. Pregnancy was not considered reason enough to forego, or delay, the journey, and it has been estimated that as many as twenty percent of the women traveling west during the migrations of the 1840s and 1850s were at some stage of pregnancy. These women counted on the presence of other women at the time of childbirth, and during the cursory one-day stopover allowed for both the birth and recovery. Nancy Wilson Ross pointed to the steadfastness and bravery of these pioneer mothers who "were expected to endure without complaint," even when this meant bearing "the agony of the racking motion of clumsy wagons on rough land,"<sup>24</sup> with bodies still aching from delivery, and newborns demanding attention. Lillian Schlissel discussed the notion that "women were expected to be strong enough to serve the common needs of the day, and strong enough to meet the uncommon demands as well." Further, she noted that "the

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<sup>23</sup>Schlissel, "Mothers and Daughters," 29.

<sup>24</sup>Ross, 9.



society of emigrants yielded little comfort to frailty or timidity - or, for that matter, to motherhood."<sup>25</sup>

A frequent occurrence on the trail, and one that women in the parties dreaded, was the splitting of wagon trains into smaller units. As the emigrants progressed westward, destinations were reached for some, detours were taken by others and, after a time, a family could end up traveling in the company of only a few other wagons, or alone. After these break-ups it was not uncommon for a woman to find herself the lone female in an abbreviated train. This occurrence, as Julie Roy Jeffrey's 1979 study revealed, made it "clear that women would be unable to keep the world they valued intact. . . . Female friendships were broken off as companies separated."<sup>26</sup>

As though losing the comfort of female companionship was not enough, pioneer women found that as the journey wore on they had to discard many of the possessions and reminders of home so carefully packed into the nooks and crannies of the wagons. "Yet another defeat within an accelerating process of dispossession,"<sup>27</sup> was how Faragher and Stansell characterized this disposal of cherished possessions.

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<sup>25</sup>Schlissel, Women's Diaries, 35.

<sup>26</sup>Jeffrey, 41.

<sup>27</sup>Faragher and Stansell, 158.

As certain scholars have suggested, one problem with much of the early scholarship was that the accounts and reminiscences that pioneer women themselves left behind were often not included. This criticism is particularly prevalent throughout the work of many female scholars. As, for instance, Nancy Wilson Ross stated in 1944, "it is men who have written the world histories and in writing them they have, almost without exception, ignored women."<sup>28</sup> She further insisted that "they [the diarists] made possible the tracing of less obvious aspects of feminine nature. We can see emerging the hidden drives of the American woman."<sup>29</sup> And Julie Roy Jeffrey noted that "most historians overlooked the women altogether, never stopping to consider that their work omitted the experiences of almost half the pioneers crossing the Mississippi."<sup>30</sup> When Sandra Myres wrote in 1982 that "trail women themselves seemed to have harbored far less resentment about their lives than that with which modern writers have burdened them,"<sup>31</sup> she threw down the gauntlet and challenged other historians to spend more time reading and listening to the words of the pioneer women

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<sup>28</sup>Ross, 5.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 172.

<sup>30</sup>Jeffrey, xii.

<sup>31</sup>Myres, 134.

themselves, and less time reading and listening to each other. The intention of this thesis is not to chastise any of the men or women who have written women's history. Rather, it suggests that any scholarship relying primarily on familiar stereotypes, as a means to identify and categorize America's pioneer women, be disregarded in favor of those studies, regardless of the author's gender, that utilize, and pay particular attention to, the surviving diaries and journals.

The scholarship concerning the lives of women on the Overland Trail has made dramatic progress since it first gained popularity in the 1940s and 1950s. Most historians now agree that a clear and accurate portrait cannot be painted of the women who came west on the Overland Trail until the women themselves are allowed to tell the story. From Nancy Wilson Ross's contention in 1944 that "undeniably any intelligent woman can tell us . . . what life was actually like in the Far West in early days,"<sup>32</sup> to Glenda Riley's 1980 suggestion that "since more and more sources of women's history are being unearthed, letting women speak for themselves . . . may be at least a partial antidote to the stereotyping of frontier women,"<sup>33</sup> the message is clear.

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<sup>32</sup>Ross, 173.

<sup>33</sup>Riley, "Women in the West," 313-14.

The saga of the women who traveled the Overland Trail has been written, by them, and it is now up to historians to make their stories available. As this thesis reveals, the women described as "gaunt and sad-faced," yet "strong enough to meet the uncommon demands," were certainly not the dainty and timid creatures referred to in early scholarship. Rather, they were hearty, determined and capable of doing whatever was necessary to hold their lives, and the lives of their families, together on the long overland journey.

## CHAPTER 2

### PLANS AND PREPARATIONS

#### Reasons for Emigration

Trappers and traders, lauding the beauty of the Oregon valleys, caused Americans from all walks of life to consider a westward relocation. Particularly attractive to those whose livelihood was earned in agriculture was the abundance of land ready to be claimed, and the relative ease with which the journey west could be accomplished. The opinion of the newspapers was mixed on the wisdom of making such a journey. Positive or negative reaction depended largely on the geographic location of the paper, and its proximity to the hub of emigrant activity. After reports that the wagon train crossings in 1842 and 1843 were successful, the Daily Missouri Republican touted the journey as "little else than a pleasure excursion," and one that "required scarcely as much preparation as a journey from St. Louis to Philadelphia thirty-five years ago."<sup>1</sup> In stark contrast was Horace

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<sup>1</sup>John Mack Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 6-7.

Greeley's opinion, as it appeared in an 1843 New York Tribune article. "It is palpable homicide," Greeley wrote, "to tempt or send women and children over this thousand miles of precipice and volcanic sterility to Oregon."<sup>2</sup> Into 1846 the Newport Herald of the Times, another eastern paper, reported that, "we might as well attempt to march an army to the moon, as to march one overland to Oregon."<sup>3</sup>

This mixed advice did not dissuade those determined to journey west. Each spring they gathered by the thousands at the several meeting places along the Missouri River. "We can see emigrants as far as the eye can reach,"<sup>4</sup> Cecilia Adams wrote in 1852, as her wagon moved into its assigned position in the train. Reasons for making the journey were as varied as the pioneers themselves, with the financial crash of 1837, and the depression that followed in its aftermath, one of the most common determinants for travel. The serious economic difficulties that resulted for farmers in the Mississippi Valley, coupled with bad weather, disease and the generally accepted notion that the valley was

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<sup>2</sup>Ric Burns, "'Never Take No Cutoffs' on The Oregon Trail," American Heritage 44 (May/June 1993): 64.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Cecilia Adams, The Oregon Trail Diary of Twin Sisters Cecilia Adams and Parthenia Blank in 1852 (Medford, OR: Pacific Northwest Books Company, 1990), 28.

filling up and becoming over-populated, made the wide open spaces of Oregon preferable at any cost, even a long and dangerous journey. "Going to the far west," wrote one Ohio woman, "seemed like the entrance to a new world, one of freedom, happiness and prosperity."<sup>5</sup> And an Illinois family packing the wagon did "not in the least regret leaving [behind] the sickness and cold."<sup>6</sup>

Escape from economic difficulty and the desire for healthier surroundings lured many a pioneer, but the most popular reason for emigration was the chance to acquire large parcels of land in Oregon. "The motive that induced us to part with the pleasant associations and the dear friends of our childhood days," wrote Phoebe Judson of her 1853 trek, "was to obtain . . . a grant of land that 'Uncle Sam' had promised to give to the head of each family who settled in this new country."<sup>7</sup> Judson was one pioneer woman cognizant of the opportunities that the move west might mean for her family, and she kept up her enthusiasm and good humor throughout the trip.

Scholarship through the decades has chided emigrant men for not consulting with female family members when

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<sup>5</sup>Jeffrey, 29-30.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>7</sup>Faragher, 17.

making the decision to move west. However, this entry from an Iowa farmer's journal<sup>8</sup> is probably a more accurate account of how most couples made the decision to travel, "I finally got the consent of my wife," Enos Ellmaker wrote, "to sell and move to the far-distant Oregon."<sup>9</sup> Whether women were a part of the decision making process or not, most wives agreed to accompany their husbands on the overland journey, though the general sentiment was that "the thought of becoming a pioneer's wife had never entered my mind."<sup>10</sup>

Some women were given the choice of whether or not to make the journey. Many husbands offered to make provisions so that their wives and children could stay at home until the men were settled in the West, at which time the families would be sent for. Basil Parker suggested this alternative to his wife, Matilda, who, fearing that once he left without her she might never see her husband again, chose to

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<sup>8</sup>Many of the overland accounts do not specifically call themselves either diaries or journals. Therefore, throughout the balance of this paper, the terms "diary" and "journal" will be used interchangeably when referring to written accounts of overland travel left by the pioneers.

<sup>9</sup>Faragher, 168. Emphasis in original.

<sup>10</sup>Jeffrey, 30.



accompany him.<sup>11</sup> American women did not have the right to vote during this period in history, nor could married women own property. This lack of privilege gave women great cause to worry about what might become of them, and their children, should husbands be lost on the trail. Worry over the possible loss of property and possessions caused Mary Jane Hayden, and others like her, to be adamant about keeping their families together. "We were married to live together," Mrs. Hayden told her husband when he suggested traveling west alone, and should he proceed with his plan to leave her behind, he need "never return for I shall look upon you as dead."<sup>12</sup>

Even when the decision to emigrate was mutual, the prospect of leaving family and friends was very difficult for most women. For every good reason to go, there was an equally good reason to stay, as was the case with Abbey Fulkerath who dreaded the thought of "leave[ing] my children buried in [the] Milton graveyard."<sup>13</sup> Despite her feeling of loss at leaving the graves of her babies behind, she remained agreeable with her husband's desire to emigrate and together they traveled to the West.

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<sup>11</sup>Faragher, 167.

<sup>12</sup>Jeffrey, 32.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 31.

It would be inaccurate to characterize these pioneer women as fearful and retiring, for they certainly were neither of these. The woman who wrote, "we had nothing to lose, and we might gain a fortune,"<sup>14</sup> was clearly willing to leave the comfort of her old home and pursue happiness in a new one, nearly a half-continent away. Whether women shared the excitement of the overland trek with their husbands or not, they were well aware of their place in society. The hardships they faced in eastern homes, combined with the difficulties that might be encountered during the absences of husbands, caused many women to conclude that traveling west was the only choice they could make.

#### Making Preparations

Once the decision to travel had been made, the preparations began in earnest, and here women played a monumental role. Keturah Belknap, who traveled west from Iowa in 1848, decided that "the first thing is to make a piece of linen for a wagon cover and some sacks."<sup>15</sup> She decided on a double layer wagon cover, "the muslin on first and then the heavy linen for strength." Her next task was

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<sup>14</sup>Jeffrey, 32.

<sup>15</sup>Kenneth L. Holmes, ed., Covered Wagon Women. Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails, 1840-1890, vol. 1 (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1983), 213.

to "make a new feather tick<sup>16</sup> for my bed," and she "put the feathers of two beds into one tick."<sup>17</sup> Belknap had good reason for doubling the number of feathers. She wanted to be warm enough to ward off the chill of the cold prairie nights, and she also realized that her feather bed would be placed over boxes and barrels and the extra feathers would keep her from feeling the sharp angles and edges while she slept.

With space at a premium, not an inch in the wagon was empty or went to waste. Phoebe Judson had straps "attached to the hoops, overhead, for the rifle," and she "lined [the wagon cover] with colored muslin to subdue the light and heat of the sun while crossing [sic]<sup>18</sup> the desert plains."<sup>19</sup> Maintaining some sense of normalcy for their families was important to pioneer women, and making the wagons as homey

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<sup>16</sup>The "tick" that Mrs. Belknap is referring to is a large case, similar to a pillow case. When the case is filled with down and feathers it becomes a feather bed.

<sup>17</sup>Holmes, Covered Wagon Women, 214.

<sup>18</sup>In order to not take away from the colorful words and descriptions set down by the pioneer women in their diaries and journals, "sic" will not be used each time a word is misspelled.

<sup>19</sup>Phoebe Goodell Judson, A Pioneer's Search for An Ideal Home (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 14.

and comfortable as possible was one way of accomplishing this feat.

The amount of food needed to see a family through the trip was "enough to stock a small grocery store,"<sup>20</sup> Martha Masterson recalled, and while the minimum recommended supply varied from one guidebook to the next, a portion of a standard grocery list, per person, consisted of: 150 pounds of flour; 25 pounds of bacon or other pork, which could be salted; 25 pounds of sugar; coffee; and yeast for baking bread.<sup>21</sup> The absence of fruit, vegetables and dairy products is startlingly apparent, and it is no wonder that many emigrants reached the West in varying stages of ill health. Mary Powers set out a detailed list in her diary of the "outfit and eatables" she packed to sustain her family of five as they journeyed from Wisconsin to the West. Her stores included,

three sacks of flour, 100 lbs. bacon, 50 lbs. sugar,  
55 lbs. coffee, 7 lbs. tea, half bushel dried apples  
. . . bottle pickles, two tin pans, two tea kettles,  
one dish kettle, one bake kettle, one coffee mill  
. . . knives and forks, six tea spoons, three large  
table spoons, eight tin and iron cups, one candle  
stick, eight pounds candles, frying pan, tin and  
wooden pail, keg for water, nine bars soap, five

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<sup>20</sup>Lois Barton, ed., One Woman's West (Eugene, OR: Spencer Butte Press, 1986), 25.

<sup>21</sup>Cathy Luchetti, Home on the Range. A Culinary History of the American West (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 42.

woolen blankets, one large tent, rifle and accoutrement."<sup>22</sup>

Comparing this list with the provisions suggested by guidebooks, and carried by other pioneers, the Powers' provisions were probably very sparse by the time they reached their destination.

Meal planning and the packing and preservation of food supplies were particularly difficult tasks for these pioneer women since they had no earlier examples to emulate. The travelers preceding the wagon trains had been primarily single male trappers and their mules, and the journey by wagon and team would certainly last longer, and take different routes, than those the trappers and traders had traversed. Also to be considered was the fact that families with children were now making the journey. The single men, who had previously made up the white population in the West, probably did not worry if an occasional meal was missed. Likewise, it is doubtful that they took pause to consider the nutritional value of the foodstuffs they were consuming. For pioneer women, however, food stores had to be planned, and packed into the wagons, that would provide both variety and the nutritional value that their families, and particularly their children, needed. Quite naturally, foods

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<sup>22</sup>Mary Rockford Powers, "A Woman's Overland Journey to California," The Amateur Book Collector 1 (October 1950): 1.

that would pack the easiest and keep the longest were favored. Bacon would keep for quite some time, provided it was protected from the heat, and emigrants accomplished this by packing their bacon and hams in bran or some other type of meal. Eggs could also be packed in this manner, and would remain quite fresh for the first few weeks of the trip. When the eggs were gone, the meal was baked into bread and pioneer woman had accomplished the feat of packing two food products into a single space. Despite careful planning and packing, the fear of exhausting the food supply before journey's end was present in the diary or journal of almost every woman on the westward trail. "We laid in 50 lbs. of flour and 75 lbs. of meat for each individual," Tamsen Donner wrote early in the trip, "and I fear bread will be scarce."<sup>23</sup> Her provisions make those of the Powers' family seem even more sparse for while the Donners had allotted 75 pounds of meat per person, Powers allowed only 20 pounds for each of her five family members.

After preparation and planning came the time to pack the wagon, a task accomplished primarily by the women. Each wagon would hold between 2,500 and 3,500 pounds, depending on its size and the number of oxen the family owned. Even the largest wagon would hold only a small portion of the

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<sup>23</sup>Holmes, Covered Wagon Women, 70.

family's possessions, and Keturah Belknap recounted in her diary the process of packing as much as possible within the confines of their prairie schooner. The first thing into the wagon was a large box, filled with bacon and salt that would "just fit in the wagon bed." On top of the box she had fashioned "eight boards nailed on two pieces of inch plank" which, when legs were affixed, became a table. Next, within Belknap's easy reach, came the trunk in which was packed "clothes and things . . . to wear and use on the way." Room was made for the very important medicine kit, and a small space was reserved "to set a chair . . . there I will ride." The next item loaded was a tall chest packed with "things we wont need till we get thru" and on top of the chest went sacks of flour, cornmeal and other food products. The Belknaps were probably quite comfortable financially for they had the resources to pack a large supply of fruits, rice, beans and coffee, foods that families of lesser means did without on the long journey. The last empty corner was just the right size for Belknap's wash tub and the lunch basket, the latter filled with the dishes to be used on the trip. Finally, the heavy iron pots and pans were placed, "in a box on the hind end of the wagon" for easy access and daily use.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Holmes, Covered Wagon Women, 217.

Putting together a medicine kit was an important part of the preparation for travel. Injury, illness and disease were a regular part of life on the trail and the aim of pioneer women was to be prepared when such calamities struck. "No one should travel this road without medicine," Elizabeth Dixon Smith noted in her diary, "for they are almost sure to have the summer complaint." She suggested that, at a minimum, each family should pack "a box of phisic pills and a quart of caster oil a part of the best rum and a large vial of peppermint essence."<sup>25</sup> With these home remedies on hand, pioneer women and men were able to treat much of the injury and illness that beset them during the course of travel.

Last, but certainly not least, a few cherished family treasures were packed into the wagon's odd nooks and crannies. Some women might pack a Christmas knick-knack, some found room for one or two special place settings of china, and others tucked away a daguerreotype of children or other loved ones. Not to be left behind was each family's precious collection of books, which pioneer women took great pains to carry safely to their new homes in the West. These books and familiar trinkets helped women endure the days of loneliness on the trail and stave off the sadness of an old

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<sup>25</sup>Holmes, Covered Wagon Women, 119.



home, friends and loved ones falling farther and farther behind.

The organization and packing of the wagons required both strength and planning, and the women who prepared for the long trek were up to the task on both counts. As she manipulated pieces of furniture, feather beds and heavy sacks of grain, Keturah Belknap was into her fifth month of pregnancy. Her son, Lorenzo, was born on the trail in eastern Oregon on August 10, 1848.

#### Final Farewells

When supplies had been purchased, properties sold and wagons packed, the time for final goodbyes and departure was at hand. "The saddest parting of all was when my mother took leave of her aged and sorrowing mother," Martha Gay Masterson recalled, "knowing full well that they would never meet again on earth."<sup>26</sup> Sallie Hester, fourteen years old at the time her family traveled west from Indiana, was another to remark in her diary that her mother was "heartbroken over this separation of relatives and friends."<sup>27</sup>

The night before departure was often fraught with sadness and tears. One emigrant woman recorded in her diary

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<sup>26</sup>Barton, 28.

<sup>27</sup>Holmes, Covered Wagon Women, 235.

that her family's situation became so sorrowful that she "arose and announced that we would retire for the night," and threatened not to leave the next morning, as planned, "until everybody could feel more cheerful."<sup>28</sup> In this case, the will and steadfastness of one pioneer woman helped an entire family through the difficult time.

Once on the trail, Lodisa Frizzell reflected on the sadness of the first few nights in the wagons as the full impact of farewell set in,

Who is there that does not recollect their first night . . . the well known voices of our friends still ring in our ears, the parting kiss feels still warm upon our lips, and that last separating word Farewell! sinks deeply into the heart.<sup>29</sup>

As if saying goodbye was not difficult enough, the act of departure itself was an emotional ordeal for, instead of quickly moving out onto the trail, procedure called for each wagon to move forward slowly into a previously assigned position. When this tedious process of lining up was accomplished, the long train of prairie schooners rolled slowly across the Missouri border and onto the wide open plains.<sup>30</sup> "Farewell to Missouri," America Rollins Butler

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<sup>28</sup>Jeffrey, 36.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>30</sup>Huston Horn, The Pioneers. The Old West (Alexandria: Time-Life Books, 1974), 92.

wrote in her journal, as they pulled away in April of 1852,  
"I greet thee for the last time fare thee well."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Oscar Osburn Winther and Rose Dodge Galey, "Mrs. Butler's 1853 Diary of Rogue River Valley," Oregon Historical Quarterly 41 (December 1940): 339.

CHAPTER 3  
THE OVERLAND TRAIL

Mile By Mile

The overland trail placed obstacles in the paths of the emigrants who traveled it from beginning to end. The journey could not get underway until spring rains had ceased and the prairie grasses were several inches high, and it had to be completed before winter snows blocked the treacherous mountain passes. Most emigrants had limited knowledge of the journey that lay ahead, knowing only that they would first travel across extensive plains, labeled either "Indian Country" or the "Great American Desert," depending on the guidebook in use. There would be three substantial mountain ranges and a handful of deserts to cross, and the monotony of day after day, placing one weary foot ahead of the other, would be broken only by the incredible beauty of the country through which they were traveling.

The first part of the journey took the pioneers along a series of rivers, the Kansas, Big and Little Blues and Missouri among them, then up the Platte River to Fort Kearney in Nebraska Territory. This first phase covered a

distance of between two hundred and three hundred miles, depending on the jumping-off place. Independence and St. Joseph, Missouri and Council Bluffs, Iowa were the three principal points of departure for pioneers traveling west on the Overland Trail. When these towns were out of sight, the pioneers had left behind the last bastion of civilization separating the States<sup>1</sup> from the wilderness. When "we set foot on the right bank of the Missouri River," Mary Medley Ackley wrote in 1853, "we were outside the pale of civil law. . . . in Indian Country, where no organized civil government existed."<sup>2</sup> Fort Kearney was the first settlement the wagons reached and here the pioneers could rest their teams and purchase basic supplies. After a short respite of not more than a few days, the wagon trains were back on the trail, following the Platte River westward.

The Platte was a wide, and relatively shallow river, several miles wide in spots and only inches deep. It had no river bank to speak of and the surrounding area was completely devoid of timber. This unique landscape was the result of prairie fires and grazing herds of thousands of

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<sup>1</sup>The term "States" is widely used in the women's diaries and journals to refer to areas east of the Missouri River and the jumping off points. In order to maintain continuity, the term "States" will be used throughout this paper to identify these regions.

<sup>2</sup>Faragher, 27.

buffalo. "The river is a perfect curiosity," wrote Martha Missouri Moore, "it is hard to realize that a river should be running so near the top of the ground . . . and no bank at all."<sup>3</sup> The plains, standing in the stead of the river bank, were covered with short prairie grasses but, as Sarah Cummins noted, were as empty of trees as "the wild regions of Africa."<sup>4</sup> It is doubtful that Mrs. Cummins had visited Africa, though her comparison was quite accurate.

These early miles were traveled during the temperate months of May and June, and left the pioneers with a false sense of confidence that the balance of the journey would be accomplished as easily as the first several weeks. Water and feed for the livestock were plentiful, and wood for their campfires was still in adequate supply. "Evening we come to water and grass and plenty of wood," Keturah Belknap wrote of her company's first nights on the trail, "we make fires and soon have supper fit for a king."<sup>5</sup> Encounters with hostile Indians were rare during this phase of the journey as the Platte lay in a veritable no-man's land between the warring tribes of the Pawnee and the Cheyenne,

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<sup>3</sup>Merrill J. Mattes, The Great Platte River Road: The Covered Wagon Mainline Via Fort Kearney to Fort Laramie (Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969), 163.

<sup>4</sup>Horn, 92.

<sup>5</sup>Holmes, Covered Wagon Women, 219.

found to the north and south, respectively. The early river crossings presented the only real obstacles for the pioneers, as Esther Hanna learned first hand while crossing the Big Blue. Riding on horseback behind her husband, she was startled when "the water came up so as to wet my feet,"<sup>6</sup> and while quite disconcerting at the time, these river encounters would seem easy when compared with crossings farther along the trail.

While the journey had been traveled with relative ease to this point, the days soon became repetitive and tedious, with one long day following the other. "We are creeping along slowly, one wagon after another," Amelia Knight lamented to her diary, "the same old gait; and the same thing over, out of one mud hole into another all day."<sup>7</sup> The excitement pioneers had associated with the westward trek prior to departure quickly dimmed as the monotonous daily routine began to take shape.

The next segment of the journey took the pioneers further up the Platte toward Fort Laramie. The lush grass that had carpeted the prairie turned brown and dry as the calendar moved into late June, and the firmly packed prairie

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<sup>6</sup>Eleanor Allen, Canvas Caravans (Portland, OR: Binfords & Mort Publishers, 1946), 28.

<sup>7</sup>Schlissel, Women's Diaries, 203.

grasses were replaced with sand that "was nearly up to the hub of our wagons,"<sup>8</sup> as Esther Hanna noted. It was at this point that the wood supply for campfires ran out and pioneers were forced to improvise, buffalo chips becoming the primary fuel source.

Landmarks began to emerge on the skyline in the form of rock formations, and the emigrants could see for themselves the well-known, and easily identifiable, Courthouse Rock, Chimney Rock and Scott's Bluff. "We ascended the rock [Chimney Rock] nearly 200 feet with some difficulty," wrote one emigrant woman, "and engraved our names as hundreds of others have done."<sup>9</sup> These rock formations, the only breaks on the flat and even prairie, became the attendance rosters of the trail. Inscribed on their flat surfaces was the name, or the mark, of almost every pioneer that had passed. The nights turned cool as the pioneers neared Fort Laramie, indicating that the gentle climb up the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains had begun. By now the monotony had become almost unbearable and the emigrants yearned for anything that would break the sameness of each day. "How I wish the Indians would

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<sup>8</sup>Allen, 45.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 46.



attack,"<sup>10</sup> one emigrant woman wrote in her diary, though certainly she was speaking out of desperation born of boredom rather than from the heart.

Fort Laramie provided the pioneers with a much needed opportunity to replenish supplies, repair wagons and equipment and rest trail-weary livestock for a day or two, though they did not receive the warm welcome they anticipated. Esther Hanna noted in her diary that they "encamped a mile from the Fort . . . emigrants are not allowed to encamp within a mile of it."<sup>11</sup> This one-mile rule was not devised to keep emigrants away from the fort, but to ensure that the wagon trains' hungry livestock would not devour the grazing land reserved for the Army's herds. In 1853 the Hines party had to make camp three miles from the fort, and instead of reaping the comfort and benefits they had hoped for, were left with "no wood and nothing but rain water standing in puddles on the prairie."<sup>12</sup> These experiences quickly taught pioneers that the government's frontier posts would not welcome them with open gates.

Following a brief stopover at Fort Laramie the journey continued across the alkali encrusted flatlands to the

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<sup>10</sup>Burns, 70.

<sup>11</sup>Allen, 35.

<sup>12</sup>Mattes, 203.

Sweetwater River. Traveling through the sand hills of this region subjected the pioneers to fierce winds that "blew the pebbles against my face," Elizabeth Wood recalled, "almost hard enough to fetch the blood."<sup>13</sup> Independence Rock, or the "register of the desert" as it was known, was the most famous prairie landmark and the next one to greet the pioneers. Its soft sandstone texture created a perfect slate for the pioneers to inscribe their names upon and when Sallie Hester wrote, "with great difficulty, I found a place to cut mine,"<sup>14</sup> it is probable that her difficulty came not from the task of inscribing, but from locating an empty spot on the rock, already crowded with names, dates and sentiments.

The mysteries of nature continued to enchant the pioneers as they viewed Devil's Gate, a four hundred foot rock wall, cut by the Sweetwater River, and Ice Slough, where even in the heat of July ice could be cut from beneath the grasses. Traveling 280 miles from Fort Laramie, the pioneers reached the eight thousand foot summit at South Pass. This gradual ascent was accomplished with such ease

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<sup>13</sup>Elizabeth Wood, "Journal of a Trip to Oregon 1851," The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society 27 (March 1926): 194.

<sup>14</sup>Holmes, Covered Wagon Women, 238.

that many may not have realized they were crossing the Continental Divide.

By now it was mid-July and summer on the plains, but the beginning of the change of season high in the Rockies, a lesson the emigrants learned when ice formed on the tops of water buckets during the night. The most popular route from South Pass took the emigrant trains along the water and timber lines 110 miles south to Jim Bridger's supply station, and then another 230 miles north to Fort Hall, on the Snake River. It was here that oxen began to tire and loads had to be lightened. The Hannas "had our wagon cut in two and had a cart made of it,"<sup>15</sup> since the oxen could simply no longer pull the large, loaded prairie schooner.

The trail from South Pass to Fort Hall was a relatively easy one, and the pioneers usually reached it by the middle of August. By this time the travelers had been on the road for three months and had covered over 1,200 miles. Unbeknownst to them, however, the most difficult terrain still lay ahead. "Had we known of the desolation and barrenness of the route that lay before us," Phoebe Judson later wrote of the journey west of Fort Hall, "I fear we would have been tempted to give up in despair, for it proved by far the roughest and most trying part of the

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<sup>15</sup>Allen, 57.

journey."<sup>16</sup> A day or two beyond Fort Hall, California-bound emigrants turned their wagons south, while those whose destination was the Willamette Valley continued to creep along the cliffs of the Snake River's south bank. The turbulent and raging rapids were always audible, though often shielded from view by the deep and perilous gorges through which they flowed. "To me this river was thoroughly typical of the country," Esther Selover wrote of the Snake, "mighty, fearsome, solitary, yet with its own wild beauty possessing attractions at once fascinating and wonderful."<sup>17</sup> Her poetic description of the mighty Snake perfectly captured the wonders of the region and the awe that it inspired in those who came in contact with it.

After 175 miles of this difficult and hazardous travel, the wagon trains crossed the Snake, and moved north along the Boise River to Fort Boise. Three very difficult, and successive, river crossings followed, beginning with the Boise, followed by encounters with the Snake and the Malheur. "Our books, what few we have, have been wet several times,"<sup>18</sup> Narcissa Whitman wrote of her precious

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<sup>16</sup>Judson, 53.

<sup>17</sup>Agnes Ruth Sengstacken, Destination West! A Pioneer Woman on the Oregon Trail (Portland, OR: Binfords & Mort Publishers, 1972), 77.

<sup>18</sup>Brown, 161.

possessions. The next 150 miles, through the Oregon desert, included at least six more water crossings as the many rivers, streams and creeks of the region intertwined with the trail. The scrub-filled desert was replaced by the towering grandeur of the Blue Mountains, whose grades were so steep and severe that ropes, pulleys, animal and human strength were all required to enable ascent and restrain descent. "Such hills as never were viewed by us poor mortals before," wrote Maria Parsons Belshaw as her wagon party made their way west in 1853, "or such beautiful tall straight pine trees from 100 [to] 150 feet high."<sup>19</sup> The change in terrain from barren deserts to lush mountains made such an impression on pioneer women that, though they were exhausted by day's end, many took the time to record the grandeur they had observed during the day's travel.

From this point forward, the trail was often barely discernible as the wagons moved from mountain splendor to vast wasteland. Two hundred miles of travel through these desert conditions brought the pioneers to The Dalles, on the Columbia River, a point at which most opted to ferry their wagons and families down river on rafts, rather than attempt to cross the Cascades. Cattle and other livestock were

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<sup>19</sup>Joseph W. Ellison, "Diary of Maria Parsons Belshaw, 1853," The Oregon Historical Quarterly 33 (December 1932): 323.

driven over the mountains and, if all went reasonably well, families, wagons and stock were reunited in time to reach their final destinations, sometime in October.

#### Sights Along the Way

Nature placed many obstacles in the paths of the pioneers, beginning with the distance itself, which was over two thousand miles from the jumping-off points to the Pacific. Daily progress proved to cover much less ground than the guidebooks had anticipated, and rather than twenty miles a day, most wagon trains averaged no more than fifteen, some especially difficult days yielded five miles or less.

The scenery that unfolded before the pioneers as they slowly moved west was uniquely beautiful, and the women made careful and precise references in their diaries and journals to each new wonder that they encountered. These bounties of nature helped compensate for the sameness of each day by producing an endless array of magnificent sights. Mary Richardson Walker, crossing the plains with a missionary train in the late 1830s, was one of the first women to make the journey while pregnant, though her condition did not diminish her interest in her surroundings. "The minerals are interesting," she wrote, "if I could only mount and

dismount without help how glad I would be."<sup>20</sup> Mrs. Walker traveled most of the distance on horseback and was probably in her fifth or sixth month of pregnancy at the outset of the journey. Once mounted, she spent most of the day in the saddle, and was forced to view the sights from aloft.

The slow and deliberate pace of the wagon trains gave pioneer women ample opportunity to drink in the majesty of the mountains and plains, and many compared them with other, more familiar, spectacles of nature. Julia Lovejoy likened the plains to the ocean, the grasses "undulating like the waves of the sea,"<sup>21</sup> and Lodisa Frizzell expanded on the theme, seeing in the boundless prairie the waves "when [they were] subsiding from a storm."<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Dixon Smith surmised that the lands where her party made camp one night must have once been under water for, "my husband found on top of a mountain sea shells petrified in the stone."<sup>23</sup>

The farther west the wagons lumbered, the fainter became the image of the "gaunt and sad-faced" pioneer, as the women traveling across the prairies and plains took an active interest in each new landscape they observed.

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<sup>20</sup>Ross, 55.

<sup>21</sup>Myres, 29.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Holmes, Covered Wagon Women, 128.

Elizabeth Wood discovered "wild pepper, camomile, and a great many things I didn't expect to see,"<sup>24</sup> and Helen Carpenter, noticing an array of beautiful stones on the trail, "did a great deal of walking just for the pleasure of picking them up to admire for a little while." No doubt she was surprised to discover, "all the colors of the rainbow. . . . carnelian, amber, emerald, topaz, rubies, etc."<sup>25</sup> The mountains themselves interested the emigrants as Elizabeth Wood noted of her family's trek through Dakota Territory. "We go up some very high hills, called the Black Hills," she wrote, "which are very handsome to look at."<sup>26</sup> Each new sight and sound brought a response from pioneer women as they inspected the unique qualities of each region. "There is such romantic scenery," wrote Helen Stewart as her party passed the rock formations, "we can see scots bluff and a range on the opposite side that is far more beautiful."<sup>27</sup>

Lone trees standing on the prairie became landmarks that pioneers looked forward to reaching. Cecilia Adams and her sister, Parthenia, made sure to get "a few splinters,"

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<sup>24</sup>Wood, 194.

<sup>25</sup>Myres, 31.

<sup>26</sup>Wood, 192-93.

<sup>27</sup>Ruth Barnes Moynihan, "Children and Young People on the Overland Trail," Western Historical Quarterly 6 (July 1975): 283.



of one of these, "in memory of it."<sup>28</sup> The mountains were Sarah Cummins' favorite part of the journey and she spent many a pleasant afternoon "feasting my eyes . . . upon their varied and wonderful scenes."<sup>29</sup> Jane Gould was most taken with the stately trees, first observed as she crossed the Rockies. "Such beautiful trees as the firs are," she wrote as they ascended into the high country, "I would like to have some of them in a dooryard."<sup>30</sup> The sulphur springs interested Esther Hanna who wrote, "I should like to have a day or so to explore and see all of the curiosities of this place."<sup>31</sup> Hanna was one of many pioneer women who regretted the lack of time available to fully examine the regions through which they were traveling.

"There are many things we meet with . . . to compensate us for the hardships and mishaps we encounter,"<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Wood wrote of her journey west. She, like Esther Hanna and the others, quickly came to realize that once on

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<sup>28</sup>Adams, 29.

<sup>29</sup>Sarah J. Cummins, Autobiography and Reminiscences (Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1987), 45.

<sup>30</sup>Jane Gould, The Oregon & California Trail Diary of Jane Gould in 1862 (Medford, OR: Pacific Northwest Books Company, 1987), 52.

<sup>31</sup>Allen, 67.

<sup>32</sup>Wood, 199.

the trail there would be no turning back, and that realization heightened each woman's interest in Oregon and the sights encountered en route. "I have a great desire to see Oregon," Elizabeth commented, though noting also that "a lazy person should never think of going to Oregon."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Wood, 199.

## CHAPTER 4

### LIVING ON THE TRAIL

#### Making a Home in a Wagon

An important part of making the overland journey tolerable for everyone involved was the ability of the women to turn their family wagons into comfortable, temporary homes. Sarah Cummins was well aware that "on such a journey one should take only the bare necessities of life," yet she sought the approval of her journal for the remembrances of home she had packed into the recesses of the wagon. "In every home there are many treasures," she wrote, "that are most valuable for their associations than for their intrinsic value or usefulness."<sup>1</sup> At the outset of the journey, pioneer women worked to maintain some routine and normalcy in their families' lives. Keturah Belknap had made four white tablecloths especially for the journey. The first night on the trail she spread one of them out and the family sat down to a finely set table, as though they were

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<sup>1</sup>Cummins, 73.

at home.<sup>2</sup> "Our wagon is very comfortable," Esther Hanna wrote after giving her new home a nod of approval, "I have my looking glass, towel, etc., hung up and everything in order."<sup>3</sup> And Virginia Ivins decided, after filling the inside of her wagon, to have chests constructed "along the sides . . . long boxes like window gardens." Inside these she packed "sewing materials and various odds and ends dear to the housewife's heart."<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Ivins' inventiveness allowed her to pack her special items without taking up space inside the wagon reserved for "essentials."

#### The Effects of Weather and Pests

Whether they liked it or not, for the duration of the overland journey the emigrants lived out of doors, and for six months to a year they were called upon to endure some of nature's more unpleasant aspects. Episodes of bad weather and hoards of annoying insects received the brunt of the pioneers' frustrations. "The horse flies are very bad today," Cecilia Adams noted in June of 1852, "I never saw such large ones and so many of them before."<sup>5</sup> And Jane

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<sup>2</sup>Holmes, Covered Wagon Women, 220.

<sup>3</sup>Allen, 25.

<sup>4</sup>Faragher, 71.

<sup>5</sup>Adams, 20.

Gould wrote that "the wind blew in our faces . . . and nearly suffocated us with dust." The Goulds were traveling through the Fort Hall area, where "the dust is worse than Indians, storms, or winds or mosquitoes, or even woodticks,"<sup>6</sup> Jane insisted. Other pioneers might not have agreed with her assessment, but on that particular day Gould could imagine nothing worse than blankets of prairie dust.

Dust was also a menace for Esther Hanna's party and she wrote of the effects of the dust storms that kicked up along the Platte, the gritty pellets "causing a burning and smarting, [and] making the face and hands rough and sore."<sup>7</sup> As though dust storms were not enough of a bother, within the space of a few weeks armies of grasshoppers descended on the Hannas' camp, so quickly and in such great number that "we could not set our feet down anywhere for them."<sup>8</sup>

America Rollins Butler made faithful entries in her diary at the beginning of the family's 1852 overland crossing. In one entry she recounted the power and force of an April storm. "Dark and lowering are the clouds," she wrote, and "O how it pores." Unable to push the wagons further under such conditions, the Butlers "stop righ[t] in

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<sup>6</sup>Gould, 56.

<sup>7</sup>Allen, 31.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 38.

the muddy road and here remain all night getting wet."<sup>9</sup> The wagon train carrying Elizabeth Wood and her family had their 1851 Independence Day festivities interrupted by an unexpected summer storm that "blew over all the tents but two, capsized our stove . . . set one wagon on fire," and created "not a little confusion in camp."<sup>10</sup> The storm left no injuries in its wake, however, and the hearty emigrants soon had the stove and tents righted and a fine celebration underway.

The ferocious prairie winds played havoc with many an emigrant, as Martha Moore found on one occasion when she was virtually trapped by its force. "I could not get out of the wagon," she wrote as the wind howled wildly across the vastness of the plains, "for fear of being blown away."<sup>11</sup> Some encounters with weather did end in tragedy, and Esther Selover might easily have suffered serious injury had it not been for the quick thinking of others in the party. She was resting in the wagon with her sister and baby when a tornado touched down on the plains. The wagon was caught by the twister and "whirled rapidly down the incline." Fortunately for the occupants, just as the prairie schooner was about to

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<sup>9</sup>Winther, 339.

<sup>10</sup>Wood, 193.

<sup>11</sup>Mattes, 96.

plunge into the rushing river below, "it was caught and held by several strong men."<sup>12</sup> This episode was not one to be taken lightly, and after her recovery, Mrs. Selover recognized the importance of recording the event in great detail.

Sudden storms were a frequent occurrence on the plains and Helen Marnie Stewart witnessed the strength and power of one that blew past her camp. "I sit in the wagon in despair," wrote the eighteen year old pioneer, "and hold the door shut which was no easy job."<sup>13</sup> Helen pushed fear to the back of her mind as she tenaciously fought to keep the canvas flaps tightly closed and the contents of the wagon somewhat dry. Canvas tents and wagon covers afforded little protection for pioneers who were left, as Amelia Knight noted, with no choice but to make "our beds down in the tent in the wet and mud."<sup>14</sup> The Knights did not have long to wait for their next encounter with weather, and in mid-May Amelia noted that storm winds blew "so high I thought it would tear the wagons to pieces. Nothing but the stoutest covers could stand it," she wrote, and even those made of the heaviest canvas could not hold back the torrents

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<sup>12</sup>Sengstacken, 51.

<sup>13</sup>Moynihan, 283.

<sup>14</sup>Schlissel, Women's Diaries, 202.

indefinitely and soon "the rain beat into the wagons so that everything was wet."<sup>15</sup> Pioneer women quickly abandoned the idea of keeping the contents of their wagons dry, knowing that the squalls would soon pass, the skies would clear, and clothing and bed linens could be laid out to dry.

#### Disease - The Emigrant's Deadliest Enemy

While the danger that weighed most heavily on the minds of westering women was an attack by hostile Indians, disease, and particularly the cholera epidemics that ran unchecked across the plains, should have generated a greater fear since the destruction left in their wake was much more widespread and indiscriminate. Cholera, sometimes known as mountain fever, would strike wagon trains without warning, and it was not unusual for entire families to lose their lives during a single outbreak. Abigail King recalled that when her mother was stricken with cholera, "Father didn't know what to do, so he had her drink a cupful of spirits of camphor."<sup>16</sup> Despite protestations from others in the train that the remedy was too extreme, and possibly life

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<sup>15</sup>Mattes, 94-95.

<sup>16</sup>Fred Lockley, Conversations with Pioneer Women (Eugene, OR: Rainy Day Press 1981), 190. Camphor is a crystalline substance, made from the wood of the camphor tree and used as an insect repellent, or medicinally as a stimulant and expectorant.



threatening, it was successful and Abigail's mother recovered.

"Today we saw 2 new graves," Cecilia Adams recorded in her diary, "good clothing scatter[ed] around caused us to think they had died with some contagious disease."<sup>17</sup> The Adams' party traveled in 1852, one of the worst years of epidemic on the trail, and when passing scenes such as this the wagons scarcely slowed, given the emigrants' fear that even casual contact might bring the disease into their midst. Women often kept detailed counts in their diaries and journals of the number of graves passed each day, noting whether the graves were new or old and if each one held a child or an adult. It is impossible to know whether such careful chronicling was an obsession with the possibility of death on the trail, or simply another example of the interest and awareness women assumed for every aspect of the journey.

The preponderance of graves made it clear to the pioneers that sudden and unexpected death on the prairie could easily occur within their own wagon trains. "We passed a lonely nameless grave on the prairie," Jane Gould wrote in 1862; "it seems so sad to think of being buried and left alone in so wild a country with no one to plant a

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<sup>17</sup>Adams, 20.

flower or shed a tear over one's grave."<sup>18</sup> And as travel progressed, most pioneer women were called upon to leave a friend or loved one in an unmarked grave on the dusty plains. Ida McPherson revealed that a great fear among pioneers was the thought of "being buried without a coffin."<sup>19</sup> This fear was realized by many on the Overland Trail since building materials for coffins were not among the "essentials" packed into the already crowded wagons. Elvira Apperson Fellows' family started out with two wagons, and the bed of one soon became a coffin for her father. "They dug a grave in the middle of the trail," she recalled of his burial, "and when the grave was filled they coralled the oxen over the grave so the Indians would not find it and dig up the body to get the clothes."<sup>20</sup> This precaution was well-founded for, on several occasions, emigrants came upon Indians donned in the clothing of their deceased contemporaries, the earth from shallow graves still clinging to the garments.

While pioneer women endured and conquered the trials they met during the long overland journey, the death of a child, husband or parent was the most difficult to face.

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<sup>18</sup>Gould, 21-22.

<sup>19</sup>Mattes, 88.

<sup>20</sup>Lockley, 42-43.

Rachel Fisher was one pioneer woman who was called upon to endure more than her share of grief, for she was just nineteen years old, a wife and the mother of a toddler when her husband suddenly sickened and died not far from Fort Laramie. In a letter home to her parents, Rachel wrote of her husband's last moments: "I had to bid him farwell and see him breathe the last breath of Earthly Life," and she described his final resting place as, "close to the road side by a small grove." As for Rachel, she "fared as well as I could have expected,"<sup>21</sup> and found a great deal of comfort and support from the other members of her wagon party.

Mr. Fisher's death was not the end of Rachel Fisher's woe, for just weeks later, while still on the trail, her baby daughter became ill and within just a few days she, too, died. "You may judge of my lonely situation," Rachel wrote to her family, made "more lonely by my driver being drown on the third day of the week following."<sup>22</sup> Being left widowed, childless and even driverless may have broken the resolve of a weaker woman, but for Rachel Fisher there was but one choice, to press on toward Oregon. Despite all of

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<sup>21</sup>Kenneth L. Holmes, ed., "Letters from a Quaker Woman. Tribulations and Fortitude on the Oregon Trail," American West 10 (November 1983): 41.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 43.

the hardship she was called upon to endure during her journey, Rachel's story does have a happy ending, for not only did she conquer the Overland Trail and reach Oregon, but once there she remarried and raised a family.

Of the over 250,000 emigrants who traveled west during the peak emigration years of 1842-1846, it is estimated that 30,000 died en route, disease by far being the trail's deadliest killer.<sup>23</sup>

#### Crossing the Mountain Ranges

Crossing the three great mountain ranges, the Rockies, the Blue and the Cascades, presented difficulties the pioneers could not possibly have imagined. In sharp contrast with the wide open plains and prairies, the trails leading through the mountains were narrow and thickly wooded. "Some of the trees are rubbed one third of the thickness through by the wagon hubs,"<sup>24</sup> Maria Belshaw recorded in her diary of travel through the Blue Mountains. Even the most skilled pioneer horsewomen had difficulty negotiating the ascents and descents of the mountain ranges, and Mary Walker wrote in a letter home, "you know I am not

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<sup>23</sup>Burns, 70.

<sup>24</sup>Ellison, 324.

skittish at all, but I could scarcely sit my horse."<sup>25</sup> The gradual and easy climb into the Rockies had left the pioneers unprepared for the steep and difficult descent. Elizabeth Wood was one who wrote that she "found worse hills going down the Rockies than when ascending."<sup>26</sup>

The pathways that guidebooks generously referred to as "trails" were seldom visible for more than a few feet at a time directly in front of the teams. "We can see but a short distance before us," Elizabeth Wood commented, "and it seems as if the high mountains ahead had to be climbed but could not."<sup>27</sup> The virgin wilderness of the mountains caused many a pioneer woman to fear that theirs was the first party to traverse some of these courses. Wood, ever amazed that the wagons could continue to roll when the climb seemed impossible, wrote, "if we were the first that ever went along here, I should think we had come to the end of the road."<sup>28</sup>

Ascent into the Rockies signaled the first of a series of episodes of lightening the crowded wagons, a dreaded task that forced pioneer women to leave behind, scattered along

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<sup>25</sup>Ross, 66.

<sup>26</sup>Wood, 195.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 196.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

the trail, their reminders of home. Catherine Haun and her husband had filled their wagon with merchandise they had hoped to sell in the West, and these bundles and packages were the first to be left behind. Wary of the tales they had heard of the influence of alcohol on Indians, the Hauns took care to bury "the barrels of alcohol least the Indians should drink it."<sup>29</sup> To do her part in lightening the load, Phoebe Judson "emptied one of our trunks and left it, with my little rocking chair."<sup>30</sup> Leaving the little chair by the side of the trail saddened Mrs. Judson. She had given birth during the family's overland trek and had taken great joy in rocking the baby during the few leisure moments life on the trail allowed. Esther Hanna's family had already broken apart and burned their trunks and discarded "carpet sacks, tinware, baskets, axes, shovels . . . and many other articles of value."<sup>31</sup> A few weeks later, as they began an ascent, they decided to "leave our cart and also the things we could most easily spare."<sup>32</sup> Though Esther Hanna recorded this family decision in a forthright manner, she must have

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<sup>29</sup>Schlissel, Women's Diaries, 179.

<sup>30</sup>Judson, 59.

<sup>31</sup>Allen, 49.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 84.

agonized as the last of her possessions were strewn along the trail.

Esther Selover crossed the plains in 1851 and was devastated at leaving so many valued belongings behind. "Words cannot tel how I felt about leaving all these good things of ours . . . after we had carried them so far," she wrote after most of her possessions were left at the foot of the Blue Mountains, "most of us had already sacrificed so much."<sup>33</sup> The Selovers hoped that discarding the heaviest of their remaining possessions would allow them to keep their wagons intact as they traversed the Cascades. They soon found, however, that the combination of wagon weight and exhausted oxen made the climb into the mountains out of the question. Abandoning both wagon and team they "tried to walk over the mountains . . . but we found that impossible."<sup>34</sup> Their fear of having to spend the winter in the mountains was staved off when nearby settlers offered the use of fresh and rested teams to deliver the family over the dangerous mountain passes.

The discarded possessions of one pioneer woman often became the cherished treasures of those who followed, as was the case for Rachel Bond. One day while walking along the

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<sup>33</sup>Sengstacken, 80.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 81.

trail some distance ahead of the train, Rachel came upon a little copper kettle with a round bottom and a handle. She found that the little kettle was the perfect size for her sewing items and patchwork squares and, since it was small, she could easily carry it over her arm as she walked the long and dusty trail.<sup>35</sup>

Most of the pioneer women did not cross the Cascades. Instead, they were ferried down the Columbia River with their small children and possessions, while the men and boys drove the livestock over the mountains. Sarah Cummins, an exception to this rule, accompanied her husband over the great mountains, though her decision might have been poorly made since the party lost its way in a snowstorm near the summit. Cummins suffered a painful case of frostbite and spent the night thawing her fingers and toes in front of the campfire. The heartiness of the women who traveled the Overland Trail is apparent in Sarah Cummins, for the very next day found her much recovered and able to climb Mt. Hood where, from her perch on the Oregon peak, she "sat down, lost in thought and admiration of the beautiful and wonderful view that opened before my eyes."<sup>36</sup> By this time

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<sup>35</sup>Walter H. McIntosh, Allen and Rachel. An Overland Honeymoon in 1853 (Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1938), 48-49.

<sup>36</sup>Moynihan, 294.



the storm had subsided, and the party located the trail and began their descent out of the Cascades. Before they emerged from the mountains, Sarah insisted that they stop so that she could "put on my spick and span new dress and corded sun-bonnet which I had carried safely on my saddle," and despite being weak from hunger and exposure, "by my husband's help, I staggered into the door"<sup>37</sup> of her first home in the West. Sarah Cummins was a wonderful example of the strength, will and tenacity displayed by American pioneer women as they kept up with the demands of the long overland journey.

One story of survival that has been passed down through the years, is of a Mrs. Longmire, who crossed the Cascades on foot with her baby in her arms, a toddler by the hand and all evidence of worldly possessions lost. The little party happened upon a startled mountain man who told Longmire that she and the children would have to turn back as heavy snows had rendered the mountains impassable. The trail weary mother kept her eyes forward, her feet moving ahead and answered him simply, "We can't go back we've got to go forward."<sup>38</sup> Longmire was another example of the determination displayed by America's pioneer women as they

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<sup>37</sup>Moynihan, 294.

<sup>38</sup>Ross, 8.

pushed their families west. After all of the trials they had faced up to this point of the journey, little question remained as to their ability to put mind over matter and reach their destinations.

#### American Indians - Friends or Foes?

The pioneers knew that the journey west would bring them in contact with a host of new and unusual sights and sounds, and one of the most anticipated was the first face-to-face encounter with the Indians who roamed the plains. A prevailing fear of Indians ran through the emigrant trains, and caused Esther Hanna's party to "have a watch placed every night"<sup>39</sup> after they spotted an Indian party in early May. An anonymous pioneer woman, traveling across the country with her two small children to join her husband in the West, wore a small gold locket around her neck. Inside the locket were pellets of cyanide for each of them to take in the event of capture by the marauding tribes.<sup>40</sup> There were scattered messages along the trail, left by earlier emigrants warning those who followed of the treachery of the Indians in the region. Helen Carpenter made note of several of these warnings in her journal, "look out for the

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<sup>39</sup>Allen, 20.

<sup>40</sup>Riley, Women and Indians, 101.

Indians," was one that she recorded, and "Indians ran off all the stock of train ahead,"<sup>41</sup> was another.

Through the early years of emigration fear of Indians was usually unfounded since the large and well fortified wagon trains were seldom targets for attack. In fact, members of many tribes along the trail befriended the pioneers, and provided them with various forms of assistance. Some Indians operated ferries across the rushing rivers, others advised unknowing pioneers on the location of firewood and good grazing lands and at times Indians even provided hungry pioneers with gifts of fresh game.

Stories of the noble savage had flourished in the States, and many pioneer women traveled west with images of the grand warriors firmly planted in their minds. Unfortunately, these images were often dashed, particularly by the Indians who kept in close proximity to the forts. The Indians in the Fort Laramie area clearly did not live up to Esther Selover's image at all. They "were great beggars," she wrote, "[who] appeared quite surly when we declined to give them what they wished."<sup>42</sup> The problem of begging Indians grew with each passing year of migration.

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<sup>41</sup>Riley, Women and Indians, 87.

<sup>42</sup>Sengstacken, 65.

The Indians came to expect the pioneers to provide them with food, livestock and anything else they took a liking to, upon demand. This particularly angered pioneer women who were opposed to giving up any of their precious provisions. Lucy Ann Deader recalled that Indians had approached the family's camp one day while her mother baked bread. One Indian brave crept up while Mrs. Deader was looking the other way and stole the fresh, hot loaves. "Mother hoped it had burned him well," Lucy wrote, "but if it did he made no sign."<sup>43</sup>

Despite their fears, pioneer women were intrigued by the appearance, costume and plumage of the Indians they encountered on the trail, and took great pains to get close enough so that they could later describe the splendor in their diaries and journals. Away from the forts and western "civilization," the images they had expected came to fruition and the slovenly beggars gave way to the regal warriors the pioneers recognized from stories and legend. "Several indians of the Sioux tribe came to our tent," Lodisa Frizzell wrote, "they were tall, strongly made, firm features, light copper color, cleanly in appearance, quite well dressed in red blankets, and highly ornamented." The Frizzells were camped a short distance beyond Fort Kearney,

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<sup>43</sup>Lockley, 56.

and Lodisa was obviously impressed with the visit paid them by the prairie's native sons. She went on to note that the Indians were armed "with bows and arrows in their hands," though this did not seem to alarm the pioneers, who "gave them some crackers and coffee with which they seemed very much pleased."<sup>44</sup>

Caroline Richardson made note in her 1852 journal of a visit by neighboring Indians while her party was camped. She was particularly taken with the embellishments of these "Chien" Indians, "their heads adorned with skulls and brass rings about 2 inches in diameter."<sup>45</sup> Earlier fears dimmed as the travelers became accustomed to the Indians who might silently appear at their campfires at any time. "They appear to be perfectly harmless and you would be surprised to see me writing so quietly in the wagon alone," wrote Harriet Ward, "with a great wild-looking Indian leaning on his elbow on the Wagon beside me, but I have not a single fear except that they may frighten the horses."<sup>46</sup> The Indians on the plains and in the mountains were eager to trade their hand-tooled goods for food, and Helen Carpenter

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<sup>44</sup>Mattes, 225.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 261.

<sup>46</sup>Myres, 57.

"got a pair [of moccasins] for a quart of 'soog' (sugar)."<sup>47</sup> In her diary she described the appearance of the visitors she bartered with as "tall fine looking Indians." Carpenter was particularly impressed with their hair, so unlike anything she had seen in the States. "The women and men alike wear the hair in two long braids hanging down the back," she wrote, "from its sleek glossy appearance it shows the care it receives."<sup>48</sup>

While most Indians did not intend to inflict harm on the pioneers, particularly in the early years of travel, they did spirit away horses and other livestock with such skill, it was as though the animals had vanished. Rachel Fisher wrote home of a less talented group of Indians, and of the shock that surged through her camp when "about 40 Indians running past the camp trying to take the horses."<sup>49</sup> Even with most of the men away on a hunting excursion, those remaining, along with the older boys, successfully chased the marauding band away from camp, with no harm done.

Indians were as curious about the emigrants, traveling across their lands in cumbersome wagons, as the emigrants were about them. Of particular interest to them were the

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<sup>47</sup>Mattes, 332.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Holmes, "Letters from a Quaker Woman," 42.

young women of the wagon trains. Mary Ellen Todd recorded one instance when "a young Indian rode up to the back of our wagon and threw a lasso at me." Fortunately, this Indian was not an expert with the rope and it missed Mary Ellen and "struck the sheet above my head."<sup>50</sup> Another pioneer woman recalled her encounter with Indians while crossing the plains in 1850, when she was just sixteen years old. "One day when walking thus in advance, an Indian rode by and threw his lariat at me to catch me," she remembered. "I dodged and it fell on Lizzie's shoulder, she shook it off and we began to call for the men folks. The Indian rode off in a hurry."<sup>51</sup> The fair coloring of many pioneers attracted the Indian men, most of whom had never seen a blonde or red-head before. "I was afraid," one young woman wrote, "because the Indians were crazy over my red hair and several times offered to trade a pony for me."<sup>52</sup> While these episodes were disconcerting at the time, most attempts at abduction were foiled by the strength of numbers in the wagon trains and the general naivety of the young Indians attempting them.

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<sup>50</sup>Henrietta Applegate Hixon, On to Oregon (Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1971), 33.

<sup>51</sup>Lockley, 170.

<sup>52</sup>Myres, 55.

By the 1860s, the Indians had determined that too many emigrants were moving into their territory and attacks on wagon trains became more frequent. "We were aroused this morning at one O'clock by the firing of guns," Jane Gould wrote of one such assault, "I hurried for the children and had them dressed and get into our wagon." In an attempt to keep stray bullets and arrows from penetrating the wagon cover, Mrs. Gould "put up a mattress and some beds and quilts on the exposed side of the wagon to protect us." Apparently the wagon train was adequately fortified and able to defend itself. Gould later recorded that "the firing did not continue long or do any harm."<sup>53</sup>

Reactions to, and opinions about, Indians changed and varied throughout the years of emigration, but the general feeling of most pioneers was probably best expressed by Lodisa Frizzell. "It truly seemed to us in our long journey traveling alone that the Indians watched over us," she wrote, "perhaps our utter loneliness and unprotected position . . . awoke in their breasts a feeling of chivalrous protection."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Gould, 65.

<sup>54</sup>Myres, 57.



### The Mighty Buffalo

Another event that pioneers looked forward to was their first sighting of the great herds of buffalo that roamed the western plains, as they had for centuries. The emigrants knew they were in buffalo territory when the prairie became a series of deep furrows, stamped into the ground by the herds as they lumbered along in single line formations. Sarah Cummins noted that these grooves were "as regular as any set of ploughed furrows," though they did set the pioneers in "a constant rocking motion,"<sup>55</sup> as wagon and team rumbled in and out of the trenches.

There was no shortage of stories about the huge, shaggy buffalo that roamed the plains and prairies, and the pioneers were eager to add theirs to the folklore that would filter back to the States. "Every one was on the alert to catch a view of that celebrated animal," Mrs. Ferris wrote in an 1852 diary entry, when "finally the huge animals . . . burst upon our vision."<sup>56</sup> She recalled another encounter as a herd of the mighty beasts suddenly came upon the Ferris' wagon train. "They started to run in three mighty streams, two of which went directly through the gaps of our train," she wrote. "As they thundered past in blind fear, shaking

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<sup>55</sup>Mattes, 244.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 254.

the very ground beneath their feet, it seemed to me as though everything must be dashed to pieces." Mrs. Ferris continued, "I thought I could then realize something of the terrific . . . charge of cavalry."<sup>57</sup>

Despite their enormous size and lumbering appearance, buffalo were able to move very quickly once they were in a full stampede. The animals were often upon wagon trains before the pioneers had an opportunity to turn their teams. "There they came thundering down toward us," Martha Gay Masterson recalled of such an encounter, "nothing would turn them." Finally the captain called for the wagons to halt, just as the stampeding buffalo passed in front of the lead wagon. "We heard their heavy puffing and could almost feel their breath as they passed," Martha wrote, "we all looked after them as they disappeared over the hills . . . thankful to escape being trampled."<sup>58</sup> Not all wagon trains pulled up in time, and Mary Jane Hayden wrote that "part of a train of emigrants was run over by buffaloes and badly wrecked . . . several members were crippled."<sup>59</sup> As pioneers continued to cross the plains in the 1840s and 1850s, accidents of this

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<sup>57</sup>Mattes, 256.

<sup>58</sup>Barton, 34.

<sup>59</sup>Mattes, 256.

nature occurred regularly, though they scarcely earned a footnote in later diaries and journals.

In making a life for their families on the trail, pioneer women accomplished their primary goal. In addition, they staved off the ill effects of weather and disease, marveled at the magnificence of Indians and buffalo and wondered at the varied terrain that made up the western portion of the continent. Through it all they managed to clothe, feed and care for their families, and push ever onward toward the West.

CHAPTER 5  
FOR WOMEN ONLY

The Problem of Women's Clothing

Women traveling westward soon learned that the clothing suitable for the lives they left behind was completely inappropriate for the trail. The hoop skirts that had been fashionable in the East were awkward for the prairie traveler, and afforded the wearer, as one emigrant woman wrote, "less personal privacy than the Pawnee in his blanket."<sup>1</sup> These cumbersome garments were soon among the discarded items and debris that littered the prairie. Due to the lack of space in the wagons for large wardrobes, a typical pioneer woman would pack only two or three dresses, made of calico or heavy wool, a linen petticoat and one or two aprons, a warm shawl and leather boots.<sup>2</sup> Esther Selover traveled west in 1851, a few years after the initial emigrant wave, and learned from the letters of those pioneer women who had gone before her to pack only "clothing that would not soil easily and which would stand hard, rough

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<sup>1</sup>Myres, 125.

<sup>2</sup>Faragher, 67-68.

usage."<sup>3</sup> Silks, velvet and lace were best left behind for such finery would serve no purpose on the trail, and would only take up precious storage space.

The most familiar costume donned by pioneer women was a homespun dress, an apron and a sunbonnet. Lavinia Porter found it necessary to make wardrobe adjustments after a short period of time on the trail since she "started out with two blue cloth travel dresses with an array of white collars and cuffs, scorning advice about homespun and linsey woolsey." Mrs. Porter soon discovered that her cloth dresses would not withstand the hard wear of the journey and "these were soon discarded. . . . Fortunately I had with me some short wash dresses which I immediately donned," she wrote, "tied my much betrimmed straw hat up in the wagon, put on a big shaker sun-bonnet and my heavy buckskin gloves, and looked the ideal emigrant woman."<sup>4</sup> The sight of Lavinia's discarded hoop skirt around the waist of an Indian brave put to rest any concern she might have had that her abandoned clothing had gone to waste! "In jumping off the horse alone today, I caught my dress in the horn of the saddle and tore almost half the skirt off," another pioneer

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<sup>3</sup>Sengstacken, 52.

<sup>4</sup>Mattes, 68.

woman wrote of the hazards of the trail to her sparse wardrobe, "that I must mend tonight."<sup>5</sup>

Most women discarded the footwear that had been fashionable at home. Instead they opted for leather shoes or boots, which were smaller versions of those favored by the men and much more suitable for trail living. During the long months of walking, some pioneer women found that no shoes at all were better than ill-fitting ones, and Rachel Bond walked barefoot over miles of trail when her only comfortable shoes wore completely through from constant wear and tear.<sup>6</sup>

Besides being unsuitable for the hard life on the prairie, women's clothing could also be dangerous for the wearer, especially when prairie breezes caught the long, flowing skirts and blew them in the direction of campfire flames. One emigrant woman recorded a near calamity within her party when "Capt. Hines' [wife's] dress came in contact with the fire," and it erupted into "a mass of flames."<sup>7</sup> Fortunately, the Captain was nearby and extinguished the flames before his wife suffered serious injury. Cecilia Adams' clothing suffered a different fate, for somehow her

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<sup>5</sup>Faragher, 105.

<sup>6</sup>McIntosh, 47.

<sup>7</sup>Judson, 64.

"cloths get out of the wagon and the oxen ate them up," an event that, despite the comical image it conjures up, caused her a great deal of dismay since one of the items was "my woolen dress."<sup>8</sup>

The prairie wind created problems of modesty for pioneer women. As it raced across the open plains, women's long skirts were caught in the draft, and whipped around their ankles and up over their heads. Helen Carpenter recalled that her aunt pinned small rocks and pebbles into the hems of her skirts to keep them in place when the winds churned. While the remedy was successful in holding her skirts down, she soon rejected it because the rocks banged constantly against her ankles and shins, which, no doubt caused her considerable anguish.<sup>9</sup> "I have had no dress on since the day we came to Westport but my palm leaf muslin delaine,"<sup>10</sup> wrote one female traveler, and "I mean to stick to it as long as I can. It is very dirty and has been torn nearly if not quite twenty times," she confided, "but another would look nearly as bad in a day or two."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Adams, 19.

<sup>9</sup>Myres, 125.

<sup>10</sup>"Delaine" is a lightweight fabric of wool, or a combination of cotton and wool, used in dressmaking.

<sup>11</sup>Faragher, 106.

It is not surprising that, under these adverse travel conditions, clothing was tattered, torn and reduced to rags by the time the pioneers reached their destinations. "Our clothing was patched and threadbare," Mary Ellen Todd recalled of the family's appearance on its arrival in Oregon, "our shoes were all worn and out at the toes." Even the sunbonnets showed signs of wear, the splints peeking through threadbare fabric.<sup>12</sup> Luzena Wilson recoiled from the view of townspeople, dressed in their clean and freshly ironed clothes, as her party reached journey's end, her own worn and travel weary dress "torn off in rags above my ankles."<sup>13</sup>

Bloomers were adopted by some women on the trail, and were actually more practical than the traditional long skirts that dragged in the dust and were easily torn. Despite the feasibility of this alternative style of dress, many pioneer women found bloomers far too immodest, and could not bring themselves to don them. Mary Warner was one of these women and while she considered herself "brave enough to cross the Plains," she was decidedly "not brave enough to wear bloomers!"<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Hixon, 43.

<sup>13</sup>Jeffrey, 44.

<sup>14</sup>Mattes, 68.



### Women's Tasks and the Blurring of Gender Roles

Daily life on the Overland Trail upset the very fiber of women's lives. The most difficult adjustment must have been the extended work day, for pioneer women rose before dawn and labored well past dark. Long days of walking the trail as the wagons lumbered along added to women's fatigue, since a full range of domestic chores still had to be accomplished after the wagon train made camp for the night.

The workday for women on the trail began at least an hour before that of the rest of the family, as they rose to rekindle the campfire from the previous evening's coals and begin breakfast preparations. After the meal was eaten, dishes were washed and stowed away and the wagons were readied for the day's travel. When the party stopped for the short midday break, commonly known as "nooning," the wives and daughters served the meal, usually a cold one that had been prepared the night before, then re-packed the dishes and utensils and the westward procession continued. While many women were well-versed in the tasks of meal preparation and clean-up, these chores were made all the more difficult and tiring by the absence of tables or other flat surfaces upon which to work. "All our work here

requires stooping," one pioneer woman wrote, "it is very hard on the back."<sup>15</sup>

Arrival at the site of the evening camp signaled the beginning of the second phase of the women's workday, with four or five hours of hard work still ahead before they could rest. They had to locate fuel for the campfire, then light the fire and bring water into camp. This task alone could be an arduous and time-consuming one, particularly if the water source was a mile or more from camp, as was often the case. After the evening meal was eaten and dishes were washed and put away, more chores awaited. Beds needed to be made up and children had to be tucked in before the women of the party could start cooking for the next day's meals. "Everybody is in bed but Agnes and myself," one pioneer woman wrote in her diary, taking a few minutes away from her labors to record the events of the day. "We would be there to but we have wait til the apples are stewed enough."<sup>16</sup> Though they longed for the comfort of bed and a good night's rest, cooking, mending and other domestic chores had to come first.

During the day while the wagons moved slowly westward, most pioneer women opted to walk alongside the teams to

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<sup>15</sup>Allen, 37.

<sup>16</sup>Faragher, 78.

lighten the load, and conserve the strength and stamina of their oxen. Time was passed in a variety of ways, and gathering the buffalo chips that dotted the prairie was one of the most common. "I believe that I ran an extra five miles [each day]," one diarist recorded, "trying to gather . . . buffalo chips for our evening fire."<sup>17</sup> During the first weeks of travel this activity "caused many ladies to act very cross," Sarah Cummins wrote in her 1845 diary. "Many were the rude phrases uttered," she revealed, "far more humiliating to refined ears than any mention of the material used for fuel could have been."<sup>18</sup> Of course, when prairie nights turned cool, and firewood was but a memory, these same women experienced a change of heart, and were thankful for the light and warmth campfires fueled with buffalo chips provided.

The long days spent walking the trail left emigrant women little time for the more traditional "female" activities of mending, reading and writing letters or in journals. In order to accomplish these tasks, pioneer women became very creative and adapted their tasks to the unconventional nature of life on the trail. Mary Ellen Todd recalled that her stepmother always kept knitting and

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<sup>17</sup>Faragher, 77.

<sup>18</sup>Cummins, 38.

mending close by, "working as many of the other emigrant women did, while we were traveling."<sup>19</sup> In fact, some women taught themselves to knit and crochet as they walked so that not a single moment of daylight was wasted. Rachel Bond found that if she walked a distance ahead of the wagon train, she could find a place to sit and mend while she waited for the wagons and teams to catch up to her.<sup>20</sup>

Doing the laundry was one of the most difficult tasks to be accomplished during the journey due to the distance between water sources, the scarcity of the water that was available and, possibly the biggest hurdle, the unwillingness of the men to lay-by for a day or so while the chore was done. "The greatest trouble was with the women who wanted to stop and wash up regularly,"<sup>21</sup> one old timer complained, echoing the sentiments of many men on the journey west. The low-growing shrubs and bushes, which pioneer women used as drying racks, added another set of problems. Catherine Bell quickly learned her lesson after she dried her baby's clothes "on some poison oak not knowing what it was and poisoned him very bad."<sup>22</sup> Though most women

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<sup>19</sup>Hixon, 15.

<sup>20</sup>McIntosh, 47-48.

<sup>21</sup>Ross, 7.

<sup>22</sup>Myres, 126.

had kept a regular wash day east of the Missouri, "we made no attempt to keep Monday as a regular wash day," Esther Selover wrote of laundry day on the trail. "To tell the truth," she continued, "often we did not know when Monday came."<sup>23</sup> This statement speaks volumes of how the sameness of life on the trail made one day indistinguishable from the next, as Mondays blurred into Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Sundays.

Gender roles also blurred during the westward journey as outright need caused women to assume tasks traditionally associated with men. "My husband was taken sick and I had to drive the team," wrote one westering woman of the event that caused her to step out of her womanly sphere. "That was a sad day for me," she continued, "I had never done anything in that line and was very awkward."<sup>24</sup> By the time the summer months rolled around it was not unusual for pioneer women to be taking regular turns at driving both teams and livestock. Finding themselves behind the reins of the wagons, churning across a seemingly endless plain, could be dangerous for tired women, as Jane Gould learned first hand. After laboring late into the night with cooking, cleaning and mending, the rolling motion of the wagon the

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<sup>23</sup>Sengstacken, 52.

<sup>24</sup>Myres, 131.

next morning lulled her "to sleep a multitude of times to awaken with a start fancying we were running into gullies."<sup>25</sup> Mrs. Gould spent a great deal of time behind the reins since her husband was often ill and incapable of handling the teams. During one of the many river crossings along the trail, the water level rose more suddenly than she expected and Jane's camp kettle and watering pail were caught in the current and started to float away. Utilizing the quick thinking and dexterity acquired during the journey, she "caught the kettle with the whipstalk but the pail was too far back . . . to catch."<sup>26</sup>

Some women did step completely out of the women's sphere during their overland journey. Sarah Cummins was one of these, as she served as a scout during her party's river crossings. On horseback, Sarah "would ride in front [of the wagons] and discover hidden boulders." She relished the importance of her assignment, and felt that her efforts prevented mishaps since "most of the accidents in fording streams came from wheeling over these dangerous obstructions."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Gould, 40.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>27</sup>Cummins, 50.

Most of the time pioneer women were called upon to assume these male-associated tasks following the death of a husband or father. After her husband's sudden death on the trail, Rachel Fisher had no choice but to assume all responsibility for the teams. "My cattle all stand the journey well have not lost any,"<sup>28</sup> she wrote just weeks later, clearly becoming comfortable with her new role as head of the family. Women who suffered such loss on the Overland Trail did not have the luxury of a grieving period, for the wagons had to continue to roll. And, in spite of their sorrows, pioneer widows were as determined as the others in the party to see their journeys through.

#### Cooking on the Trail

Meal preparation was made difficult by trail conditions for, no matter how talented the cook, after a few weeks on the trail the dining fare was anything but varied or nutritious. A typical meal consisted of "bacon, gravy, bread and molasses," as one emigrant woman duly noted, though on Sundays she added a little spice to the fare, with "a mess of dried fruit; also we had dried corn now and then."<sup>29</sup> Pioneer women, after some experimentation, learned to substitute the plentiful, native food products for the

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<sup>28</sup>Holmes, "Letters from a Quaker Woman," 42.

<sup>29</sup>Allen, 32.

more familiar, unavailable, ones. Maple syrup, molasses or honey could be used in place of sugar, vinegar-soaked potatoes substituted nicely for apple pie filling and parched rye or corn made a fine alternative to coffee.<sup>30</sup>

While traveling through the Soda Springs region, Esther Hanna found that the powdery, salty substance which covered the ground could "raise a biscuit equal to saleratus."<sup>31</sup> And while other pioneers shied away from scooping up the substance, Mrs. Hanna "tried it and found it to be very good."<sup>32</sup> Arrival in the Black Hills caused Elizabeth Wood and her party to dispense with milk drinking altogether for the region was rich in alkali, which the cattle ingested as they grazed. The alkali was subsequently passed on to the pioneers through cow's milk, and made the drinker very ill. Mrs. Wood was able to substitute coffee as the family's primary beverage since, once the water was boiled, any alkali that was present no longer produced ill effects.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Luchetti, xxix.

<sup>31</sup>Saleratus is a sodium or potassium bicarbonate used in cooking as a leavening agent, more commonly known as baking soda.

<sup>32</sup>Allen, 65.

<sup>33</sup>Wood, 193.



The fresh fruits and vegetables that the emigrants had gathered in abundance from their gardens before the trip were non-existent on the trail. After weeks of bacon, bread and beans, Mary Ellen Todd and her stepmother were delighted to find "some sourdock<sup>34</sup> and other harmless weeds,"<sup>35</sup> growing wild on the prairie. They picked an armful of the native vegetables and prepared fresh greens for dinner, a treat that the whole party thoroughly enjoyed. Esther Selover discovered many varieties of wild berries and currants on the trail, which she subsequently turned into pies and preserves. "You can imagine whether we like them or not," she wrote, "after our long enforced abstinence from all kinds of fresh fruit."<sup>36</sup>

Experimentation with food products and preparation was important on the trail. One woman discovered that, "if we hung milk in a covered bucket under the wagon in the morning, by evening it would be churned into butter."<sup>37</sup> This method of butter churning was adopted by many westering women and insured that, as long as they had milk, they could

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<sup>34</sup>Sourdock is a small, weedy plant that grew wild on the prairie and was used to make table greens.

<sup>35</sup>Hixon, 32.

<sup>36</sup>Sengstacken, 63.

<sup>37</sup>Allen, 12.

also have butter. No matter how original recipes might be, however, when the eggs were gone, and cows could no longer give palatable milk, "about the only change we have from bread is to bacon and bread," as Helen Carpenter lamented.<sup>38</sup>

Depending on the hunting and fishing prowess of both the men and women in the party, fresh game and fish were abundant and available to supplement the emigrants' meager diets. Indians might also provide fresh food and game from time to time, as Lydia Rudd found when she traded an Indian "an old shirt some bread and a sewing needle,"<sup>39</sup> for a large salmon. Periodically, the pioneers met a peddler on the trail carrying fruit and vegetables on his cart, and Cecilia Adams was very pleased when they happened upon one in mid-August selling potatoes. "Of course we bought some," she wrote in her diary, they were "the first we have seen since we left the States."<sup>40</sup>

The cost of putting together wagon and gear for the journey west was quite high and discouraged families who were very poor from even considering making the trip. As a result, most of the women traveling west were from middle and upper middle class families. A number of these,

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<sup>38</sup>Myres, 123.

<sup>39</sup>Schlissel, Women's Diaries, 193.

<sup>40</sup>Adams, 49.

particularly those from the South, had been raised in households with servants and slaves and were not accustomed to performing their own domestic chores. Virginia Ivins had been married for four years when her journey west began, yet she had "never kept house" and did not "even know how to bake bread."<sup>41</sup> Catherine Haun was a young bride traveling west from Iowa in 1849. Since she was the lone woman in her party, Haun volunteered to take on the cooking duties for the wagon train, provided that the men offer their assistance when needed. Haun's was a noble offer indeed since, as she later noted in her diary, "having been reared in a slave state my culinary education had been neglected and I had yet to make my first cup of coffee."<sup>42</sup>

Securing fuel for cooking fires became more difficult as the wagons moved west along the Platte, and the use of buffalo chips became widespread. Helen Carpenter found that the hard, flat mounds also were very effective when used as a mosquito repellent. One or two smoking chips placed in the wagon soon drove the insects out, and did not seem to unduly disturb the wagon's human occupants, for, as Mrs. Carpenter recorded in her diary, "we can stand it [the

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<sup>41</sup>Myres, 103.

<sup>42</sup>Schlissel, Women's Diaries, 169.

smoke] longer than they can."<sup>43</sup> Phoebe Judson's family carried a small quantity of wood in the journey's early days, and used sparingly "just enough to boil the coffee and fry the bacon,"<sup>44</sup> at each meal. Occasionally wagon trains were forced to make camp on the wide, open prairie without benefit of either fuel or water. When this occurred prairie grasses were utilized to make small, cooking fires. "We have come about 12 miles and were obliged to camp in the open prairie," Lydia Rudd noted in her 1852 diary. She continued by noting that "[we] collected some dry weeds and grass and made a little fire and . . . made our supper."<sup>45</sup> Martha Gay Masterson learned that if she pulled the grasses in the evening and let them dry overnight, by morning the weeds were dry enough to "twist it into coils and burn it in our little wood stove to cook with."<sup>46</sup> Arvazine Cooper found cooking with buffalo chips, "much more satisfactory than one would think who had never tried them,"<sup>47</sup> and by the end of July, Elizabeth Dixon Smith had given up any thought

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<sup>43</sup>Myres, 105-6.

<sup>44</sup>Judson, 29.

<sup>45</sup>Schlissel, Women's Diaries, 189.

<sup>46</sup>Barton, 38.

<sup>47</sup>Eve Merriam, ed., Growing Up Female in America. Ten Lives (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 127.

of cooking over a wood fire. "We have sage to cook with," she wrote, and "I do not know which best it or buffalo dung."<sup>48</sup>

Though many families had packed camp stoves, after some practice of cooking over a campfire most found the stoves to be too much trouble. Pioneer women preferred to dig a trench, "about one foot deep and three feet long" over which they fashioned a crane "with the coffee pot and camp kettle," an arrangement that proved to be "a very good substitute for a stove."<sup>49</sup> Esther Hanna had received very little domestic training before she crossed the plains in 1852. After baking her first pan of skillet bread over a campfire, however, she found that "I get along cooking out better than I expected."<sup>50</sup>

Pioneer women took advantage of the periodic lay-overs allowed for births, burials or resting the animals, to cook large quantities of food, intended to last for several days. "I baked bread and pumpkin and apple pies," Cecilia Adams wrote after one of these cooking sessions, "cooked beans and

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<sup>48</sup>Holmes, Covered Wagon Women, 127.

<sup>49</sup>Myres, 106.

<sup>50</sup>Allen, 18.

meat, stewed apples and baked suckeyes<sup>51</sup> in quantities sufficient to last some time."<sup>52</sup> With all of this preliminary cooking done, Cecilia was able to serve warmed "left-overs" for the next several days.

#### Childbirth and Children

The topics of pregnancy and childbirth were deemed inappropriate for discussion in the mid-nineteenth century, and from casual conversation to letters written home from the Overland Trail, these subjects were avoided as though they did not exist.

On the trail, however, since nearly one in five women were pregnant during some stage of travel, these topics could hardly be avoided. When childbirth was imminent the wagon trains would suspend travel for the birth and a short recovery period. Travel then resumed usually within twenty-four hours. Arvazine Angeline Cooper, eighteen years old and already the mother of a sixteen-month old daughter, recorded in her diary the birth of her second child, "at two o'clock a little blue-eyed brother came to our wagon,"<sup>53</sup> she

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<sup>51</sup>Mrs. Adams is probably referring to sockeye salmon, a fish native to the North Pacific that was often provided to the pioneers, by the Indians, in trade for shirts, sewing needles, and other items from the States.

<sup>52</sup>Adams, 28.

<sup>53</sup>Merriam, 130.

wrote. Prior to the baby's birth, Cooper had not given a single indication in her diary that she was pregnant. Martha Gay Masterson was thirteen at the time her family came west in 1851, and she later recalled the Overland Trail arrival of a new family member. "I was awakened from a nervous sleep by the wailing of an infant," she wrote, and "I asked mother whose baby was crying so. She said it was hers."<sup>54</sup> Again, there was no previous mention of an impending birth in Martha's journal. Since this baby was born in June, Martha's mother was well along in her pregnancy at the outset of the journey, and Martha, at thirteen years of age, should certainly have been aware of her mother's condition.

Mary Ellen Todd almost broached the subject of pregnancy when she wrote in her journal that her stepmother "seemed more tired, and sometimes sat in her chair, directing us about the cooking."<sup>55</sup> A matter of weeks after these observations were made, Mary Ellen found "a little baby boy in bed with mother."<sup>56</sup> The baby was born the first of September, which indicates that Mrs. Todd was in her fourth or fifth month of pregnancy when the journey began.

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<sup>54</sup>Barton, 37.

<sup>55</sup>Hixon, 21.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 41.

With typical pioneer heartiness, mother and baby were prepared to resume travel the day following birth. "The baby and I can ride as well on this featherbed as not,"<sup>57</sup> was Mrs. Todd's response when asked if she was ready to travel. "The Sabbath dawned most serenely upon us, a bright, lovely morning, the twenty-sixth of June," Phoebe Judson wrote of another one of the many births which occurred en route. "I am certain of the date, for the day was made memorable to me by the birth of a son."<sup>58</sup> This child was born in late June, so Judson was between six and seven months pregnant before her journey was even underway, a much later stage than most of the expectant mothers at journey's beginning. The baby, Charles LaBonta Judson, was named for his birthplace, LaBonta Creek. This practice, of including the place of birth as part of the name, became common for children born on the trail.

Male doctors were seldom present for the birth of babies east of the Missouri during the nineteenth century, so it is not surprising that on the Overland Trail they were almost nonexistent. As in the cities and towns left behind, it was the midwife who assumed the duties of delivery, and on the trail her skills earned her the unofficial title of

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<sup>57</sup>Hixon, 41.

<sup>58</sup>Judson, 39.



heroine of the plains. One of the better known midwives who traveled west on the Overland Trail was Patty Sessions, a Mormon woman who made the journey in 1846 at the age of fifty. Sessions' talent in minimizing the pain and trauma of delivering healthy babies was known up and down the trail and, throughout the duration of her westward journey, she was sent for from wagon train to wagon train as labor intensified. "12 oclock at night I was sent for to go on two miles to put sister Shaw to bed," Mrs. Sessions wrote in her diary, where a note was made of each trail birth in which she assisted, "she had a daughter born 9 Oclock A M."<sup>59</sup> Patty Sessions, and the others like her, were truly a blessing to pioneer women for they were the only source of comfort and medical knowledge in the event of difficult deliveries and sickly babies.

There were times when a midwife was not available, and it was on those occasions that women turned to each other for assistance and support during delivery. Mary Louisa Black came to the aid of a woman in her party who was delivering twins, though the results she reported to her diary were sad ones. "One [baby] live until 12 Oclock

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<sup>59</sup>Holmes, Covered Wagon Women, 167.

a.m.," she wrote, "the other but a few minutes."<sup>60</sup> The absence of both midwife and physician increased chances of infant mortality when, under adverse trail conditions, seemingly normal deliveries developed unexpected complications. Merritt Kellogg wrote in his journal of his wife's efforts to help a woman from a nearby wagon train during the birth of her child. "She [Mrs. Kellogg] said, 'I am lame and ought not to go,'" he wrote, "'but that woman needs help.'" Kellogg assisted in the delivery of a healthy baby and, her husband wrote, came away from the experience with "the satisfaction that a person feels in doing for others as they would like others to do for them under similar circumstances."<sup>61</sup> For expectant mothers traveling as the lone woman in their wagon trains, the "Mrs. Kelloggs" of the prairie were a godsend. Without them, childbirth would have to be accomplished with only the assistance of the men in the traveling group, and this was a horrifying thought to women reared under the Victorian code of ethics.

Children traveling west with their parents created yet another set of problems since the logistics of travel and prairie living did not allow pioneer mothers the time they

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<sup>60</sup>Marguerite Black, The Oregon & Overland Trail Diary of Mary Louisa Black in 1865 (Medford, OR: Pacific Northwest Books Company, 1989), 37.

<sup>61</sup>Faragher, 140.

had had in the States to devote to their children. Toddlers and young children, in particular, were targets for trail accidents since their natural curiosity and endless energy, combined with their fearlessness, caused them to get into trouble on a regular basis. A common mishap occurred when children fell from the wagons and were run over by wagon wheels and teams. Martha Masterson recalled that the two year old son of their wagon train's captain was the victim of such an accident. The little boy had fallen out of the wagon, and "before the team could be stopped a wheel passed over his body and nearly crushed him to death."<sup>62</sup>

Thankfully, with quick medical care the child recovered.

Young Sarah Powers suffered a similar mishap when "she had got into the wagon and on top of the trunk," as her mother Mary recalled. "When I started the horses, she rolled completely out onto the ground and the horse that was hitched behind stepped over her."<sup>63</sup> It was truly a miracle that Sarah, and a host of others, emerged unscathed from these accidents, for not only were there wagon wheels to contend with, but the heavy, plodding hooves of the oxen could easily crush a small child. A young boy in America Butler's party was not as fortunate as some of the others

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<sup>62</sup>Barton, 30.

<sup>63</sup>Powers, (Oct. 1950), 1.

for when he fell from the wagon, "both wheels passed over his body." While "some hopes are entertained of its recovery,"<sup>64</sup> Mrs. Butler suspended her diary entries shortly after the accident, and it is unknown whether or not the child recovered.

Infants suffered their share of accidents, often because their make-shift prairie beds could not compare with the sturdy cradles that had been left behind. "In the night I heard Mrs. Wilson's baby crying very hard," Jane Gould wrote, "[he] had fallen from the wagon [and] struck on his head."<sup>65</sup> Keeping babies in dry diapers was an almost impossible task and one pioneer woman later recalled that she had used towels. She washed the soiled linens each evening, in cold stream water, and her husband waved them in front of the campfire until they were dry.<sup>66</sup> Other women used the soft prairie grasses and mosses inside their babies' diapers, to act as an absorbent and in place of powder.

Youngsters traveling west did not escape the normal childhood diseases of measles, chicken pox, and mumps. In fact, in addition to these maladies they were plagued by

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<sup>64</sup>Winther, 340.

<sup>65</sup>Gould, 38.

<sup>66</sup>Brown, 107.

adverse symptoms brought on by extreme weather conditions. Phoebe Stanton wrote that her four year-old daughter, "has the chills off and on ever since we left home."<sup>67</sup>

The saddest sight on the trail might well have been the children left orphaned by accident or disease. In these cases, the other women of the wagon train came to the rescue, either taking the children into their own wagons or making them wards of the party, with everyone contributing to their needs. Sarah Cummins wrote that several sets of parents died in her party, but "the children were kept together and no family was separated."<sup>68</sup> Margaret Inman took a special interest in the trail's orphans and, "carried a little motherless babe five hundred miles," after the child's mother died during the journey. Each evening, after the wagons had circled, Margaret "would go from camp to camp in search of some good, kind motherly women to let it nurse, and no one ever refused when I presented it to them."<sup>69</sup> Every mother on the trail recognized that her child could easily be in the same desperate circumstances and few refused to help when an innocent child was in need.

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<sup>67</sup>Holmes, 88.

<sup>68</sup>Moynihan, 282.

<sup>69</sup>Mattes, 64.

Women and Men

Many couples, and particularly those making up the missionary trains of the 1830s, were newly married when they made the overland crossing, and the rigors of travel put a strain on these new unions. The intimacies of married life were made even more awkward when couples learned that throughout the duration of the journey, accommodations would be shared. Mary Richardson Walker and her new husband shared a tent with another honeymooning couple, a curtain creating the only semblance of privacy.<sup>70</sup>

Though the accounts are few, there are records of affectionate and tender moments between husbands and wives. Amelia Knight recorded one such loving moment when her husband presented her with a bucket of snow after they had crossed the Sweetwater River.<sup>71</sup> His gesture was an especially sweet one, and well received by Amelia, since ice was a treat they had been without for many months. Later, in the region of the hot springs, Knight confided to her diary that "husband and myself wandered far down this branch, as far as we dare, to find [water] cool enough to bathe in."<sup>72</sup> Since many of the diaries written on the trail

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<sup>70</sup>Ross, 61.

<sup>71</sup>Schlissel, Women's Diaries, 208.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 211.

adhered to the Victorian code of ethics, and did not discuss such personal topics, it is rare to find one like Amelia Knight's that reveals the romance present during the journey, despite the hardships of trail living.

Romantic encounters were created by other westering couples when circumstances, or luck, would allow. Cecilia Adams and her husband stole some time alone together for a stroll but found they "had strayed too far from the wagons,"<sup>73</sup> when the skies opened and they were caught in a downpour. Though they were quickly soaked to the skin, the tone of Cecilia's diary indicates that the Adams' thoroughly enjoyed this time alone together. Asahel and Eliza Munger were another pioneer couple who managed to sneak away from the rest of the party so that they, privately, could take a drink "from the river that descends to the States, for the last time."<sup>74</sup> Allen and Rachel Bond traveled west in 1853 as newlyweds, and earned their passage by doing the cooking for their party. To accomplish their task, the young couple worked over the campfire long into the night, and even though the time was spent in labor, Rachel regarded the

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<sup>73</sup>Adams, 46.

<sup>74</sup>Asahel and Eliza Munger, Diary of Asahel Munger & Wife. Travel to the Marcus Whitman Mission May 4, 1839 to September 3, 1839 (Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1992), 19.

hours alone with her new husband as the happiest ones of the trip.<sup>75</sup>

Some pioneer husbands took steps to ensure that their families enjoyed at least a few comforts on the trail. John Black was one of these. The mornings had turned very cold by the time the Black family reached Idaho in August and Mary Black wrote of one when "John got breakfast," since she could not "stand the cold mountain air before sun up."<sup>76</sup> Mr. Black's actions certainly do not fit the image of the tyrant, pioneer husband. Instead he is portrayed as sensitive to the discomforts thrust upon his family by life on the Overland Trail, and dedicated to lessening these hardships whenever possible. While these occurrences may seem insignificant when viewed individually, together they reveal that many husbands and wives were not only concerned about each other during the journey, but relished the moments they were able to spend together, away from the demands of children and chores.

Time alone together was an ingredient missing from many marriages while the pioneers traveled westward. Esther Hanna lamented that she and her husband did not have these special moments. "I try to be brave but in times like these

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<sup>75</sup>McIntosh, 58.

<sup>76</sup>Black, 46.



my spirit falters," she confided to her diary, "if only Mr. H and I could have more time together!"<sup>77</sup>

Not all pioneer husbands were compassionate about the discomforts imposed by the trail and others, who were sensitive while the wagons were halted, lost this quality as soon as travel resumed. Lavinia Porter found this to be the case after she spotted a small grove of trees just off the trail. When she suggested to her husband that they make a slight detour and chop one down for firewood, Mr. Porter flatly refused. "Men on the plains I had found were not so accommodating," Lavinia wrote in her diary as she vented her frustrations, "nor so ready to wait upon women as they were in more civilized communities."<sup>78</sup> Her husband's later attempts to soothe her hurt feelings were only partially effective as Lavinia recorded how the climate of their relationship took on the "the gloom and somberness of the dreary landscape."<sup>79</sup> Mary Powers wrote that "if there is anything that makes a brute . . . of a man, it is a journey from Council Bluffs across the Plains."<sup>80</sup> The Powers family made the crossing with only their old horses to pull the

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<sup>77</sup>Allen, 88.

<sup>78</sup>Faragher and Stansell, 157.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid.

<sup>80</sup>Powers, (Nov. 1950), 6.

wagon, a method not recommended by the guidebooks since horses lacked the strength and stamina of a team of oxen. The Powers' had hoped to acquire a fresh team after the difficult trek through the Black Hills, and when this did not happen Mary felt so bad about the burden being placed on their loyal horses she wrote, "if any one had spoken one word of sympathy I should have been a perfect baby. I drove on in silence my heart almost bursting."<sup>81</sup> The next day, the train captain located three yoke of oxen for the Powers family to use, and the horses survived for a time, driven unburdened behind the wagon.

The rigors of trail living could result in impatience and terse words between couples. Mary Walker made this discovery quite early on, writing that she "had a long bawl, husband spoke so cross I could scarcely bear it."<sup>82</sup> Other women experienced similar distress, though most hesitated to show the tears. "When I thought I had gone beyond hearing distance," wrote one such unhappy pioneer, "I would throw myself down on the unfriendly desert and give way . . . to sobs and tears."<sup>83</sup> Mary Powers wrote that, despite her

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<sup>81</sup>Powers, (Oct. 1950), 2.

<sup>82</sup>Ross, 63.

<sup>83</sup>Faragher and Stansell, 153.

despair, "we restrained our tears," knowing that, as a remedy to what ailed her, "they could not relieve."<sup>84</sup>

Some women's spirits ebbed by the time they reached the eastern border of the Oregon Territory in August. "I felt like giving up in despair today," Esther Hanna wrote after the difficulty of travel had firmly set in, "the interolerable heat and dust together with fatigue makes me sick at heart."<sup>85</sup> For others, the desperation became so severe that they set fire to wagons and threatened to kill their children and themselves rather than face another moment. Though these accounts are well documented and prevalent in literature and scholarship, the pioneers who resorted to these extremes were few. For most women, the periods of despair were short, and they mastered their emotions and pressed onward.

Though most diaries and journals recorded serious and somber moments, there were many episodes of fun and laughter on the trail. Lodisa Frizzell and her husband shared a joke when he brought mutton into their camp and tried to convince the others that he had brought down an antelope. The episode gave them "something to joke and laugh about," Lodisa wrote, "for it is seldom you meet with anything for

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<sup>84</sup>Powers, (Nov. 1950), 6.

<sup>85</sup>Allen, 83.

merriment, on this journey."<sup>86</sup> Charlotte Pengra awoke one morning and found that the tent she had gone to sleep under was gone! The "horses were hitched to the waggon, and the tent ropes also;" she noted in her diary, after discovering the cause. When the horses were startled in the night, they "jumped back drawing the tent and waggons after them."<sup>87</sup>

Mary Ellen Todd's stepmother had a funny experience with a pan of bread dough she had set out to rise. Upon returning to the warm spot where she had left the loaves, she found Buck, one of the family's oxen, munching the last of it.<sup>88</sup> So, while Buck enjoyed a fine treat of warm bread dough, the Todds ate their dinner without fresh bread.

Another aspect of the complex pioneer woman on the Overland Trail was the genuine interest she took in her surroundings. Some lamented, however, that their husbands did not take a similar interest in the scenery through which they traveled. Mary Richardson Walker was particularly interested in the plants and minerals she spotted along the way. "I wish Mr. W. would feel as much interest in viewing

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<sup>86</sup>Mattes, 72.

<sup>87</sup>Charlotte Emily Stearns Pengra, Diary of Mrs. Bynon J. Pengra. Kept by her on a Trip Across the Plains from Illinois to Oregon in 1853 (Eugene, OR: The Lane County Pioneer-Historical Society, Inc., 1966), 13.

<sup>88</sup>Hixon, 40-41.

the works of nature as I do," she wrote, "I think the journey would be less wearisome for him."<sup>89</sup>

Laboring on the Sabbath - Desecration or Necessity?

The pioneers often disagreed when the subject of travel on Sundays was broached. Most of the women in the wagon parties were quite religious, and had been active members of their churches back home. These devout ladies were not at all pleased when it became apparent that Sundays, more often than not, would be treated the same as any other day. "We baked and boiled and washed oh dear me," wrote one woman of the labors she performed on Sunday, "I did not think we would have abused the Sabeth in such a manner."<sup>90</sup>

For the missionary trains, traveling on the Sabbath was an even bigger issue. Mary Bailey and her husband traveled from Ohio and managed to observe every Sabbath except one during the first few months of travel. "How thankfull we ought [to be] for the Sabath," Mary wrote, "none but an in[fin]ite Being could have foreseen the absolute necessity of one [day] in seven for rest to man & beast. I never realized the good [of] Sunday so much

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<sup>89</sup>Ross, 65.

<sup>90</sup>Faragher and Stansell, 159.

before."<sup>91</sup> Though the necessity to move along at a rapid pace was well documented, Esther Hanna, who traveled in 1852, was "sorry to see that some of our company are deposed to travel on the sabbeth." Many of the members of this missionary train chose to shun the few who decided to travel ahead on Sundays and Hanna wrote in her diary that, "we will not have any further dealing with them."<sup>92</sup> Despite her condemnation of others, however, as the journey progressed Esther "was obliged to do many things I was loth to do on the Sabbath" for even those trains that layed over on Sundays could not dedicate the day to reflection and prayer. One Sunday lay-by followed a prairie rainstorm and Hanna spent the day airing out belongings and doing her baking. "Our provisions got wet and they had to be unpacked to air and then packed again," she wrote in agitation, "I had to bake biscuit as we were out of bread, - the first time I have ever did so on the sabbath and hope it will not happen again!"<sup>93</sup> There is a certain irony in the fact that Esther Hanna, who condemned others for traveling on Sunday, found herself spending the day at labor.

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<sup>91</sup>Winton U. Solberg, "The Sabbath on the Overland Trail to California," Church History 59 (no. 3, 1990): 354.

<sup>92</sup>Allen, 25.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 28.

The women traveling with the early missionary trains were particularly distressed when the Sabbath became an ordinary workday. "I cannot tell how it is inconsistent for us to break one of God's positive commands to keep another,"<sup>94</sup> Myra Eells wrote in the 1830s, deeply troubled by the compromises she was forced to make during the journey. "Some of them is washing today, but I do not think [it] right," Lavinia Porter wrote, "I would rather wash at night when we stop than do it on the Sabbath day."<sup>95</sup>

The Haun party maintained a more practical approach to observation of the Sabbath on the Overland Trail. "When the camp ground was desirable enough to warrant it we did not travel on Sabbath,"<sup>96</sup> Catherine Haun wrote. Everyone had tasks to perform while the wagons were halted, the men mended wagons and tack and saw to the animals, and the women did laundry, cooked, baked and did the mending. They were not without their Sunday services, however, for while they toiled at their chores often a preacher, or an elder member of the party, gave a sermon or read from the Bible in the middle of the circled wagons.

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<sup>94</sup>Ross, 61.

<sup>95</sup>Faragher, 96.

<sup>96</sup>Schlissel, Women's Diaries, 173.

The Importance of Female Companionship

While emigration to the agricultural valleys of Oregon was accomplished largely in family groups, men still outnumbered the women, who felt a profound sense of loss at being separated from female family members and friends. The large wagon trains that departed from the jumping-off places had split several times before journey's end. Sometimes this occurred as early as the Des Moines River crossing, less than one month into the trip, and it was not uncommon for women to find themselves devoid of female companions. "We had become so attached to each other having travelled so far together,"<sup>97</sup> one pioneer woman wrote as the wagons took their individual courses. For those who were the lone female in their party, fleeting contact with ladies from passing trains was a treat. "I visited a lady today at a train which had halted not far from ours," Margaret Frink wrote, "an unusual incident on this journey,"<sup>98</sup> and Mrs. Benjamin Ferris was "relieved . . . to find I am not the only female of the party."<sup>99</sup> Bonds of friendship were sealed quickly on the trail, and Sarah Cummins wrote that one of her new acquaintances "made tea by pouring the

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<sup>97</sup>Jeffrey, 41-42.

<sup>98</sup>Faragher, 137.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., 37.



boiling water over tea leaves," while they were in the area of the hot springs. The ladies shared the pot of tea "in remembrance of the place and the occasion,"<sup>100</sup> Sarah wrote of the event.

The loneliness that pioneer women felt was a recurring theme in their diaries and journals. Charlotte Pengra was "lonely having no female companion,"<sup>101</sup> as the family passed Independence Rock and Anne Booth wrote quite simply that "nothing can atone for the loss of society of friends."<sup>102</sup> Cecilia Adams was fortunate to be traveling in the same party as her twin sister, Parthenia Blank, and the sisters not only depended on each other for support during the difficult times, but enjoyed exploring together. "P and myself forded a little stream barefoot," Cecilia wrote, "and walked over the bluffs which are a mile in length."<sup>103</sup>

Asahel and Eliza Munger, who were among the earliest travelers, journeyed west with a small missionary train in 1839. In their joint diary Asahel was concerned with Eliza's prolonged despondency, "This day has been rather long and lonesome to E. she thought much of home - friends

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<sup>100</sup>Cummins, 46.

<sup>101</sup>Pengra, 36.

<sup>102</sup>Jeffrey, 37.

<sup>103</sup>Adams, 29.

- prospects - & present condition."<sup>104</sup> Munger was one of those without the companionship of other ladies on the trail and her husband's diary entries reveal that this accounted for much of her sadness and depression.

Not every female was a pleasant addition, however, and some women made themselves quite unwelcome to the others. "Mrs. Tait has agained caused trouble in camp," America Butler wrote, "they are now confronting her with some of her falsehoods,"<sup>105</sup> though Mrs. Butler does not say what these "falsehoods" were. Tait makes another appearance in Butler's diary, and is described as one "with a mind as changing as the wind [and] has adoped the bloomer dress."<sup>106</sup> Female companionship seems to have been essential for women making the long journey overland; without the presence of other women to confide in and depend on, despondency and despair could soon become unbearable.

One charming feature included in many overland diaries and journals was the advice that pioneer women made note of for future travelers. "Girls, do not waste the bread," Narcissa Whitman, one of the first two white women to cross the Rockies, advised, "if you knew how well I should relish

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<sup>104</sup>Munger, 28.

<sup>105</sup>Winther, 339.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., 340.

even the driest morsel. You should save every piece carefully."<sup>107</sup> And Charlotte Pengra advised which fabrics wore the best during the trip. "Those who come this journey should have their pillows covered with dark calico, and sheets colored," she wrote, "white is not suitable."<sup>108</sup> Elizabeth Dixon Smith shed some light on the bartering that future emigrants would engage in with the Indians, and advised women planning a westward journey to "make up some Calico shirts to trade to the indians." She explained that "in cases of necessity you will have to hire them to pilot you a cross rivers,"<sup>109</sup> and the shirts could be used as payment for this service. Phoebe Judson added her counsel to the "many girls and young wives who are not adept" in culinary prowess by outlining, in great detail, the method of making, and baking, bread while on the trail,

To one quart of water, one teaspoon of salt, thickened with flour until a stiff batter; I then set the little bucket containing the yeast into the camp kettle (covering it tightly to keep out the dust) and letting it remain in the front part of the wagon where the sun kept it warm. The secret in making it rise was the part the oxen and wagon performed - in keeping it well stirred, or in constant motion. When we came to a

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<sup>107</sup>Narcissa Whitman, The Letters of Narcissa Whitman (Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1986), 23.

<sup>108</sup>Pengra, 20.

<sup>109</sup>Holmes, Covered Wagon Women, 139.

halt at noon it was sure to be light and foaming over into the kettle. I then poured it into the bread pan, adding as much more water and thickened flour; when it again became light I kneaded it into a large loaf while the wagon was jogging along; when we reached our camping place at night my bread was ready to put into the "Dutch oven" and bake.<sup>110</sup>

The image of the "gaunt and sad-faced" woman has now faded completely from view and in her stead stands the strong and steadfast pioneer mother, wife and helpmate, the Phoebe Judsons and Jane Goulds of the Overland Trail. The pioneer woman revealed by diaries and journals drove the wagons, forded rivers, cooked over campfires, gave birth and attended to infants and children and buried some of them in lonely trail side graves. Despite the loneliness she felt due to the lack of female companionship, America's pioneer woman worked to keep a sense of home and well-being alive in her family as the wagon wheels rolled and the oxen lumbered ever westward.

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<sup>110</sup>Judson, 66-67.

CHAPTER 6  
THE END OF THE TRAIL

After six or more long and arduous months on the Overland Trail, pioneer women arrived in the West with emotions that ranged from joy and relief to sorrow and despair. "Oregon at last!" Esther Selover wrote when they reached the Grande Ronde Valley, "you cannot imagine how beautiful this valley looked to us."<sup>1</sup> Esther Hanna, still feeling the effects of the difficult journey, did not express the same excitement as Oregon drew near, "I can scarcely realize that we are all so near our contemplated home!" she wrote in September of 1852, "the way has been so long and heartbreaking!"<sup>2</sup>

Arrival in Oregon, whether by wagon, horseback or on foot, was not the end of the pioneers' journey or their labors. Often it was many years before the quiet of an evening, or the inquisitiveness of a visitor, caused pioneer women to look back on the journey that had carried them over the plains to Oregon. "A constant source of wonder to me

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<sup>1</sup>Sengstacken, 77.

<sup>2</sup>Allen, 102.

[is] how we [women] were able to endure it," Lavinia Porter later recalled of her 1860 trek. "An American woman well born and bred is endowed with the courage of her brave pioneers and ancestors," she continued, "and no matter what the environment she can adapt herself to all situations, even to the perilous trip across the western half of this great continent."<sup>3</sup> Casting aside the modesty of many overland travelers, Mrs. Porter did not hesitate to express the pride she had in herself, and in all pioneer women who conquered the hardships of travel and successfully arrived in Oregon with their families.

Some pioneer women took the time to record their immediate reactions to the West and most of these found the sights they encountered to be very pleasing. "In Marysville [Oregon] we have the most beautiful view," Maria Belshaw wrote, "green waving trees on one side, the beautiful hills on the right with occasionally the branches of a lone Fir bidding us welcome."<sup>4</sup>

The unwilling pioneer woman peeking warily from beneath her sunbonnet, perceived by many to be a shrinking violet, had survived the journey overland and had reached the West. "I realized that after six months of peril and

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<sup>3</sup>Jeffrey, 25.

<sup>4</sup>Ellison, 332.

privation, I was once more within the peaceful precincts of that most blessed of places - a home,"<sup>5</sup> Esther Selover wrote as she realized the goal that all pioneers sought at journey's end. After traveling over two thousand miles, through conditions unimaginable back in the States, pioneer families finally reached Oregon.

Though much of the scholarship written prior to the 1970s does not reveal this side of their character, the women who traveled to the West were strong, resolute and brave. They were called upon to step out of the familiar comfort of the "women's sphere" and assume new tasks. They wrestled with the elements of travel and nature and lost loved ones and cherished possessions on the trail. And, if the diaries and journals are to be believed, most women did these things with scarcely an audible word of discontent. Once their western destinations were reached, however, pioneer women were eager, almost relieved, to return to their traditional roles of wife, mother and homemaker. For many, the Willamette Valley would not be the last stop on a lifetime journey. Within a few years' time, families would once more pull up stakes and move, but no future relocation would be as extensive as the one they had just completed. The success of the overland migrations of the mid-1800s, and

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<sup>5</sup>Sengstacken, 83.

the transportation of families from cities and towns in the East to new communities along the Pacific coast, would not have been accomplished as quickly, or as completely, without the presence and labors of America's pioneer women. As this thesis has shown, the women who traveled the Overland Trail, by attending to both customary and unfamiliar tasks, ensured, for the first time, that families were delivered to the West. In so doing, they made significant contributions not only to the territorial growth of Oregon, but to the eventual growth of the nation.



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