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The Oregon Trail

Travel across the west was a trip neither easily made, nor easily forgotten. The destination was Oregon, first named Ouragon by the French in the 1600s. The name means hurricane. It lies on the west side of the Rocky Mountains and joins the Pacific Ocean. Its mystique has held the curiosity of many people on the east coast and for a period of about 30 years enticed more than 300,000 travelers by way of the Oregon Trail.

Robert Stuart, the first person to make the trip, did so in 1812 and 1813. However, he did it coming from the west, from Astoria, to the east. There, a fur company had been established at the mouth of the Columbia River, to St. Louis, where he went to make a progress report.

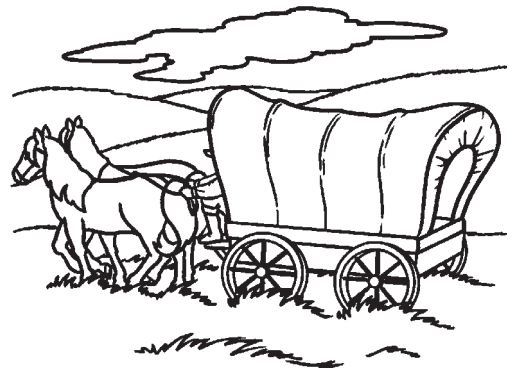
The first travelers to make the trip from east to west were Jedediah Smith, David E. Jackson, and William Sublette. They went as far as the east side of the Rocky Mountains to take supplies to trappers. The year was 1830.

In 1837, a Scottish explorer hired Alfred J. Miller to accompany him on the trail and paint scenes along the way to show the people back east what the west was like and pique their interest. This coincided nicely with a time when money was tight and success was doubtful in the east. John L. Sullivan wrote in a New York paper that it was “our manifest destiny” to control all of North America. He encouraged people to set out to find their stake.

During the 1840s–1850s, the Oregon Trail was at its most popular. All kinds of people, known as emigrants, headed west. Farmers went for fertile land; fishermen and trappers were attracted by the bounty in the woods and waters; explorers went to make new discoveries; loners went so they could seclude themselves; woodsmen went for good timber; gold prospectors dreamed of becoming wealthy; and some folks just went for the adventure of it.

Covered wagons, called prairie schooners, were the most common mode of transportation. Large groups of about a hundred wagons, a thousand people, and maybe three or four thousand head of cattle traveled together at a speed of about 15 miles per day.

Though many Native Americans were friendly, some could not understand why so many people were coming to claim territory that they felt did not belong to anyone. The emigrants had to learn to protect themselves against various tribes who were sometimes on the attack. However, many lives were lost at the hands of the natives.



Disease, starvation, extreme temperatures, and wild animals also took many lives on the Oregon Trail. About 35,000 people died along the way over the years. Yet, many people did complete the trip and were able to begin a new, prosperous life.

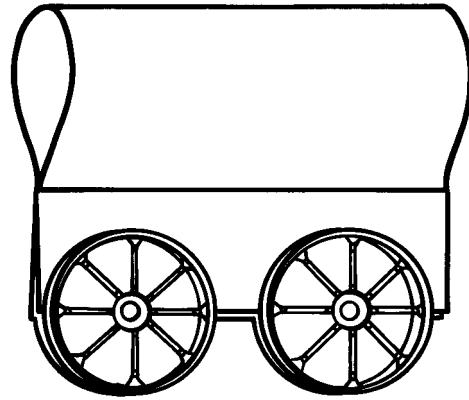
In 1861, the Civil War lured many would-be travelers away from the Oregon Trail to join the armed forces instead. By the time the war was over, railroads and stagecoaches were able to carry west-bound travelers more efficiently. Though there were still a few who traveled on the Oregon Trail, its heyday had come and gone. But for thousands of people the memories were unforgettable.

Putting Together *The Oregon Trail*

Materials

For each student you will need:

- one sheet of white paper
- one sheet of brown construction paper
- one sheet of beige construction paper
- one copy of the wagon pattern and text strip (page 141)
- scissors
- glue



Assembly Directions for the Lift-tab Book

1. Run off one copy of the pattern on white paper and another on brown construction paper. Cut out each pattern.
2. Cut out the text strip and glue it to the white wagon.
3. Place the brown wagon directly on top of the white wagon and staple them together across the top, creating the lift tab.
4. Glue one short end of the beige paper on top of the staples.
5. Curve the beige paper to the back of the wagon, being sure not to crease (fold) it. Glue other end to the back of the wagon, creating the wagon cover.

