

Looking West, Jumping Off

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If your education was like most, your history book handled the Civil War, western migration, and the Gold Rush in three separate sections. For many people, this causes a distinct disconnect, and it may take years to realize that all of these major events in American history happened during the same era!

While battles raged back east, individuals and households continued to emigrate, prospect, and settle the west. For modern living history enthusiasts, understand the vast pull of the West is a great addition to mid-century context, and can even enter into specific interpretive presentations.

New Lands

Beginning with white missionary settlement in the 1830s, the western territories that would become the states of Oregon, Washington, California,

Utah, Nevada, Colorado, Montana, and Idaho captured the imagination and hopefulness of a young nation eager to spread out and find new horizons. Land grant programs beginning in 1843 allowed any adult citizen to claim western acreage, provided he lived on and improved the property (called “proving” a claim) for several years; married men were able to claim double acreage. Starting in 1854, acreage could be either “proved” or purchased outright. The Homestead Act of 1862 again granted free claims of up to 320 acres with five years “proving”, or paid claims with six months residency, and \$1.25 per acre. With farmland growing more expensive in the northern states, and increasingly tapped out or battle-wearing in the south, “free” land in the west grew more and more attractive.

New Lives

The west drew more than those seeking a permanent piece of land to settle: mineral booms in beginning in 1848 brought thousands west seeking a quick fortune; many who came

planned to return east as soon as their “stake” was made, and expected that any living arrangements out west would be transient.

People quickly realized there was more cash to be made from the miners than from mining, and merchant opportunities flooded the west. The opportunities also expanded rapidly for other careers: by 1850, shipworks both above and below the fall lines in Oregon City called for machinists and other laborers to construct steamboats; coopers, smiths, livery operations, publishers, lawyers, tailors, librarians and teachers all found ready work. In the west, you could undertake virtually any occupation, limited only by your own

ability, and your willingness to barter for your living.

Kitting Up

The first steps on the western trails were close to home: gathering needed supplies and equipment for a 2500 mile trek and establishing a new life in the west. Published advice on what to take along, when to start, and what path to travel became popular all across the east, shared by recent emigrants writing to friends and family back in the States, by those hoping to encourage western settlement, and in newspapers throughout the more settled areas.

One of the earliest published guidebooks, Hastings' Emigrant's Guide, first published in 1845, shared a rather romanticized vision of western life and emigration. (Unfortunately, some of the routes Hastings proposed he had not actually traveled, which led in part to the Donner party's tragic experience in 1846.)

Published in 1859, Marcy's Prairie Traveler was a bit more practical, reflecting the changing conditions along the trail routes, and greater awareness of the rigors of the trek. Marcy encouraged emigrants to make use of the various resupply opportunities in the first 150-250 miles past the jumping off points, where settlement had extended into the frontiers. Even with the ever-expanding edge of settlement, certain communities remained key “jumping off” points, final bastions of ready supplies and settled living. Places like Independence, Missouri experienced a yearly deluge of western emigrants, even during the war years.

Costs to outfit for western migration varied widely, depending on the resources already available to the household. A farming family who owned a solid wagon and livestock was well ahead; if they determined to make the crossing the spring before, they could focus a year's efforts on preparation, and bring the cash costs down very low. An emigrating family, or group of families, could work cooperatively to sew sturdy canvas wagon covers and storage bags at home.

Clothing preparation, too, could be undertaken largely at home, collecting and constructing a variety of sturdy garments to withstand the crossing and into the first year in their new home. Emigrants typically wore “normal, everyday, common” clothing for the crossing, wardrobe components that would be familiar from their daily lives. (Women even started their emigration wearing or carrying along hoops and cages, though these were typically set aside or discarded as they crossed the mid-western plains, due to the



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hassles of open-fire cooking and nearly-incessant wind.)

Little alteration was needed to a well-made standard farm wagon; the addition of bows and a canvas cover converted the wagon to emigration use. Newspapers in "jumping off" cities and re-supply cities (such as Salt Lake City) typically contained advertisements for wagon purchase, repair, and outfitting.

Counting Costs

For someone starting from scratch, it could cost an average of \$800 to \$1200 to prepare for a three to six-month crossing; average travel time for an overland crossing started at 120 days. Based on 1860 dollars, the cost is equivalent to the 2011 purchasing power of between \$21,600 and \$32,500.

Without the costs of wagon and oxen, the overall costs could be as little as \$50 per person for food, clothing, and other equipment. Net costs to emigrate decreased when the sale of any eastern property or belongings factored in; hired help (drivers, stockmen, etc) led to higher costs (though often, just the cost of extra food, as many were willing to trade labor across the continent for "room and board" to get there.)

Marcy's recommendations for basic foodstuffs for one person included:

- 150-200 pounds flour in double-sewn bags
- 20 pounds corn meal
- 50 pounds bacon, sewn tightly in canvas bags or packed in bran to withstand the heat
- 40 pounds sugar
- 10 pounds coffee (beans, green)
- 15 pounds dried fruit
- Desiccated vegetables in similar quantities
- 5 pounds salt
- 1/2 pound saleratus (baking soda, baking powder leavening mix)
- 2 pounds tea
- 5 pounds rice
- 15 pounds dry beans
- Clarified butter (ghee) in soldered tins
- Pepper, other spices (citric acid and essence of lemon were popular, as they could be mixed together for powdered "lemonade".)

Regardless of the published source, emigrant food advice carried an expectation of hunting, fishing, and foraging while on the trail to extend the food supply. Additional supplies generally included items like chewing and smoking tobacco, trade goods, firearms and ammunition, and soap (25 pounds for a four-person party was a good start.)

Draft Stock

At mid-century, mules or horses were typical choices for pulling wagons and carriages, with mules or oxen favored for draft hauling. For overland emigration, oxen had distinct advantages. Oxen (adult cattle of either sex trained for hauling) were slower than horses or mules by about 10% and traveled at between two and three miles an hour, but they were more trail-hardy, better able to survive by grazing, less easily stressed by difficult trail conditions, and cheaper, too, costing an average of \$200 for a team of eight oxen, versus \$600 for six mules. Another big advantage to oxes was the training time--for humans, not animals. Learning the skills needed to manage an ox team could take about a week, as the ox-driver tended to walk beside the time, rather than drive from the wagon seat.

Jumping Off

Those concerned most with costs typically tried to outfit as much as possible before reaching their jumping off point, but not everyone arrived at the edge of the frontier by wagon. River travel added more travel expenses, but provided a sometimes faster and less arduous route to the beginning of a continent-spanning hike.

Jumping off towns such as Independence, Westport, and St Joseph, Missouri served as outfitting points as well as organizational bases for forming up wagon companies. Successful crossings were more likely with enough wagons in the company to share skills and physical resources (such as heavier tools) but not so many as to over-stress grazing opportunities or water in later stretches of the trail.

By mid-April each year, the scene in most jumping off towns was similar to that described by a 23-year-old Francis Parkman in his 1846 series of articles for Knickerbocker's Magazine (his account was published in 1849 as "The Oregon Trail: Sketches of Prairie and Rocky Mountain Life"):

A multitude of shops had sprung up to furnish emigrants with necessaries for the journey. The streets were thronged with men, horses and mules. There was an incessant hammering and banging from a dozen blacksmiths' sheds, where the heavy wagons were being repaired, and the horses and oxen shod. While I was in the town, a train of emigrant wagons from Illinois passed through--a multitude of healthy children's faces were peeking out from under the covers of the wagons.

Emigrants waited for the key moment: when prairie grasses had emerged sufficiently to support the livestock. The sooner a company could safely depart, the greater their chances of making the crossing while sufficient grazing and water were present, and before fall storms dropped snow in



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the Rocky, Blue, and Cascade Mountain ranges that lay before them. Start too soon, however, and they would not find enough for the animals to eat, and risked being forced to turn back early or winter over in Salt Lake.

Shakedown Days

The initial days of travel served as a “shake down”; animals settled into the physical demands of the trail, and emigrants adapted to the routine they could expect for the next few months. Mornings began early, with a bugle blast or other rising signal between four and five in the morning. Breakfast preparations, taking down any shelter tents erected the night before, re-stowing equipment and supplies, rounding up livestock, and harnessing draft animals took a few hours. By seven or eight, most companies were moving forward. A hour-long “nooning” stop mid-day allowed rest for animals and emigrants alike. Travel continued until about five or six in the evening, when the company began dinner preparations and settled in for the night.

While the rigors of emigrant life were initially different from the routines most people lived, the change of pace was seen as a welcome change by many. Freed from typical housekeeping duties, a woman might temporarily revel in her new circumstances; this was often accompanied by new frustrations, such as cooking out-of-doors instead of on a cookstove or indoor hearth, and a lack of ready water access from her well or city supply.

Children, too, treated early travel as vacation: little to no formal schooling, minimal daily chores, and very infrequent baths added up to quite an enjoyable interlude! For men used to heavy daily labor, the tasks of harnessing, unharnessing, riding, driving, and scouting came as an almost-leisurely change. For those used to indoor or sedentary work, the initial weeks of travel served as a very valuable “hardening” period, allowing them to adjust to a more active life in relatively comfortable surroundings and some of the most gentle terrain they would encounter on the trip.

Read More About It:

Check out Google Books for digitized versions of Hastings' Emigrant's Guide (facsimile reprint from 1994), Marcy's Prairie Traveler, Parkman's The Oregon Trail, and many other original resources.

Visit your local library for access to books containing diary and letter accounts of western immigrants. By focusing on books with whole or excerpted first-person accounts, you can gain a better perspective on the wide range of personalities who made the trip west.



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