

# Emigrant Trails

Through discussions, journaling and an interactive activity students relive the hardships and good fortunes American emigrants experienced as they traveled west along the emigrant trails.

**Grade Level:** 4th

## Objectives:

- Students will identify reasons why emigrants sought to move west and identify hardships they experienced on the trail.
- Students will discuss the importance of journaling and identify important features journals should contain
- Students will discuss the differences/similarities of their lives and the emigrants' lives

## Materials:

- Emigrant trails map
- Visualization activity description
- Various colors—chenille sticks
- Wagon group profiles
- Color key booklets
- One journal per group
- Two-month descriptions
- Comparison chart

## Appendixes:

- Emigrant trail activity diagram: Page 6
- Visualization activity: Page 7
- Wagon profiles: Pages 8-11
- Two-month descriptions: Pages 12-13
- Color keys: Pages 14-15
- Journals: Pages 16-19

## Time Considerations:

Preparations: 5 minutes

Lesson Time: 50-70 minutes

*Introduction: 10-15 minutes*

*Activity 1: 5 minutes*

*Activity 2: 10-15 minutes*

*Activity 3: 20-25 minutes*

*Conclusion: 5-10 minutes*

## Related Lesson Plans:

Dinosaurs, First Explorers, Native American Myths, Digging Up Nevada's Past



Nevada Department of  
Education Standards

Excellence in Environmental  
Education Guidelines

## Nevada Social Studies Standards— Nation Building and Development

**H.2.4.2** Describe the experiences of pioneers moving west.

## Strand 2.3—Humans and Their Societies

**A)** Learners understand that experiences and places may be interpreted differently by people with different cultural backgrounds, at different times or with other frames of reference.

## Background

In the mid-1800's, the United States was populated by emigrants migrating west. The emigrant trail is the name collectively given to the network of wagon trails throughout the American West during the middle of the 19th Century. These trails were used by emigrants from the eastern United States to settle lands west of the Rocky Mountains. One of these trails, the Oregon Trail, was the pathway to the Pacific for fur traders, gold seekers and missionaries (*National Park Service*).

Travelers usually left their homes, primarily in Illinois, Missouri and Arkansas, around the first of May. If travelers left too early, the roads would be too muddy, the

rivers too full and the grass too immature to sustain the livestock. If they left too late, the feed would be mostly eaten and trampled by those who started earlier, and there was danger of being trapped in the Sierra Nevada Mountains by an early snowfall - the fate that befell the Donner party in the winter of 1846-1847. Emigrants making their way west would live by the rule, be over the Sierras no later than October first, any time after that would become too harsh of a journey. That meant they had about 123 days to go 2,200 miles.

Ironically, nature saved the worst for last. In the early stages of the trip fresh men and fresh teams had only the flatlands of Nebraska to deal with. Later, with the oxen starving and worn out, and the

men bone weary and gaunt, they faced poor water, alkali deserts and finally the terrible challenge of the Sierras. Nearly one fourth of the entire trip was taken up crossing Nevada. It is a miracle that any of them made it at all. This lesson helps students understand the difficult journey emigrants took and the scarce resources available to them through their travels.

## Preparation

Gather all lesson materials which includes eight color keys, three two-month descriptions, wagon profiles, multiple chenille sticks, student journals, emigrant trails poster and emigrant trail pictures.

The following website is a good resource to use for background on the different trails going west and a map: <http://www.tngenweb.org/tnletters/usa-west.htm>.

Make a comparison chart if you would like to use it for the conclusion. Title it Emigrant Life, with four columns: weather, food/water, life/death and supplies.

Put together color keys for each station, each color key contains nine colors.

Plan to arrive 15 minutes early to the school to set up the main activity outside. An outdoor set

up is best for this activity, but can be done inside if weather conditions are poor.

Instructors should set up the main activity when arriving at the school early. To do so, distribute the color keys on the ground in a grassy area to create a large circle. Be sure plenty of space is left between each key, so that groups are able to work well, without being distracted by other groups. In the space between the color keys, scatter seven to eight chenille sticks of different colors. See the emigrant trail activity set up diagram for a visual

## Doing the Activity

### **Introduction:**

It is important to introduce an attention getter at this time. Which ever one you use, make sure students understand its importance during this lesson. Practice it at least twice before the lesson.

Use the following expectations whenever you use your attention getter. At the moment it is used, students should immediately give you their attention and put their hands behind their back. This will be key for doing the main activity outside.

### **Introduction: Visualization**

In the classroom, begin by setting the mood for the lesson. Explain to students you will be

describing a period in time to them, in which the class will attempt to visualize. Tell the class to keep their thoughts to themselves until the end, at which point they will be able to share their thoughts on what was being described. Read the visualization activity description to the class.

Ask students if they know what time period we're going to talk about today. (likely answers will be pioneers, Oregon Trail, California Trail or the gold rush)

Absolutely! The pioneers made the trails they traveled famous! Hold up the trails map and point out the main starting point in Missouri and the many different trails that were traveled west. Discuss reasons why pioneers decided to move west. Some reasons are: gold, fertile soil, new beginnings, families and friends were moving, desire to have space, etc...

### **Activity 1: Emigrant vs. Immigrant**

This section of the lesson is meant to be brief. Here the class is simply getting introduced to new terms.

Explain the pioneers heading west were also known by another name. Hint that this name has to do with people moving from one place to another. Any ideas? (emigrants) An emigrant is a person who is

traveling to a new place to live.

The term immigrant is very similar, but differs in a very small way. A person who leaves their country and travels to a new place is known as an immigrant.

Confusing right? Both these terms sounds exactly alike. Give the class the following example, along with the following explanation: "I'm a citizen of Mexico who is planning to move to the United States. To Mexico, I'm emigrating to the United States. To the United States, I'm immigrating from Mexico." Therefore, any person who is moving from one place to another, is both an emigrant and immigrant. It's just a matter of perspective.



Pioneers on the emigrant trail

## **Activity 2: Emigrant Trail**

### **Activity Instructions**

Transition into the next activity by explaining that today everyone will become an emigrant and "travel" the trails west in wagon groups. In their travels, wagon groups will come

upon some of the same experiences as the real emigrants did over many years ago. Some will better their fortune, while other experiences will create hardships for their wagon group.

As wagon groups have their experiences, each group will record their reactions to the experiences in their journals.

Ask students why it was important for pioneers to record their experiences as they traveled west.

Create wagon groups of three or four and hand out a journal and a wagon profiles to each group. Explain that now that students are in their trail groups they will be taking on the groups identity and the people in it. Their wagon profile tells the them who they are, what supplies they are leaving with and their destination.

Have group read their profile out loud in their group and fill in the front cover of their journals.

Groups are able to bring their wagon profiles with them as they travel the trail outdoors.

Once students have their front cover filled in, direct their attention to moving outside for the activity.

Encourage students to think of

the different experiences the pioneers/emigrants had along the trail as you move outside. Direct trail groups to line up at the door together and lead your class outdoors.

Lead the class to the edge of the activity. The first thing that must be done is to rehearse the attention getter. Make sure everyone understands the importance of this and what to do when it is you use it.

Next, explain the movement of the game and how exactly wagon groups will get their experiences.

Demonstrate the following movements:

1. Rotations: groups will move two color keys every rotation
2. Experiences: during each rotation, one member from each group will pick up one chenille stick, this represents the experience the wagon group had along the trail.
3. Color Key: when the wagon group arrives at their new color key, the group will use the key to determine what experience they had as they moved.
4. Once the experience is found by using the color key, the group should first briefly talk about the experience. Encourage students to be creative and really try to imagine how the emigrants dealt with the experience.
5. Next have one group member write two things in their journal

on the correct page: what their experience was -which is found in the color key and their reaction to the experience.

6. Before the next rotation, explain students will not carry their chenille stick with them. Instead groups are to toss the stick back to the ground.

Before each movement in the activity, read a two month description card to the group. These cards will let groups know where they are heading and the type of terrain they may encounter along the way.

This activity will take time. Groups will not rotate through all the color keys. Wagon groups on average will only make three rotations. The first rotation will be full of questions and will take much longer than the last two rotations.

### **Activity 3: Emigrant Trail Activity**

After explaining all of the above, space groups out evenly around the activity - leaving one color key between groups.

Finally the activity is ready to start! Start the activity with the groups rotating. Rotations should last seven to eight minutes.

## **Conclusion**

The instructor has two options for the wrap up. Both options

depend heavily on the amount of time available.

### **Less Time Option:**

Begin with students forming a circle and sitting down.

Debrief the activity by first allowing groups to share their favorite or most unique experiences.

Next use the following debrief questions with the goal that students will reflect and relate their own lives to some of the experiences the emigrants had traveling west. What made it hard? Were these experiences realistic? Why was it important for the emigrants to record their experiences? Can we learn anything from their hardships? As a kid, do you have similar challenges growing up or are your challenges extremely different? Etc...

### **More Time Option:**

Begin with students forming a circle and sitting down.

Use the comparison chart to write some of the experiences groups had as they traveled the trail. The chart's columns will help students to organize their thoughts.

The last column is used to help students reflect on how their lives are similar to those of the emigrants.

## **Vocabulary**

**Emigrant:** somebody who leaves a place, especially his or her native country, to go and live elsewhere

**Emigrant trail:** the name collectively applied to the network of wagon trails throughout the American West during the middle 19th century, used by emigrants from the eastern United States to settle lands west of Rocky Mountains; the term specifically applies to three interrelated routes: The Oregon Trail, California Trail and Mormon Trail

**Gold fever:** a popular mania for gold hunting

**Gold rush:** a surge in activity in a specific area by individuals seeking to capitalize on newly discovered gold present in the area; workers will migrate to the area where gold has been discovered and work aggressively trying to collect as much gold as they can

**Immigrant:** someone who comes from abroad to live permanently in a country or area

**Native American:** one of the original inhabitants of North, Central or South America or a descendant of these; sometimes called American Indians

**Sierra Nevada Mountains:** Spanish meaning "snowy mountain range" is a mountain range located in California and Nevada; it is bounded on the west by California's Central Valley and on the east by Nevada's Great Basin

With either option, finally conclude with the thought that emigrants paved the road for us to be where we are at today. Through their experiences, we can better appreciate the experiences we have in our lives. Without their records of hardships and good fortunes, we today could not appreciate them as fully as we do.

## Assessment

Assess students based on their actions and responses throughout the lesson. Also, assess the students' understanding of the lesson and game based on their responses in their emigrant journals.

an adult would have to do either before or after - can add some extra flare to your emigrant journal. This is a fun activity for the students to do and the end result is even more useful.

## Extensions

Students can make their own journals made to look like they came straight off a covered wagon. A good method for aging paper is staining it with coffee. Brush the paper with the coffee. To make the paper look very old and worn, you can apply several layers. The students can either crumple the paper before or after staining, which also gives it an extra worn look. Burning the sides of the paper - something

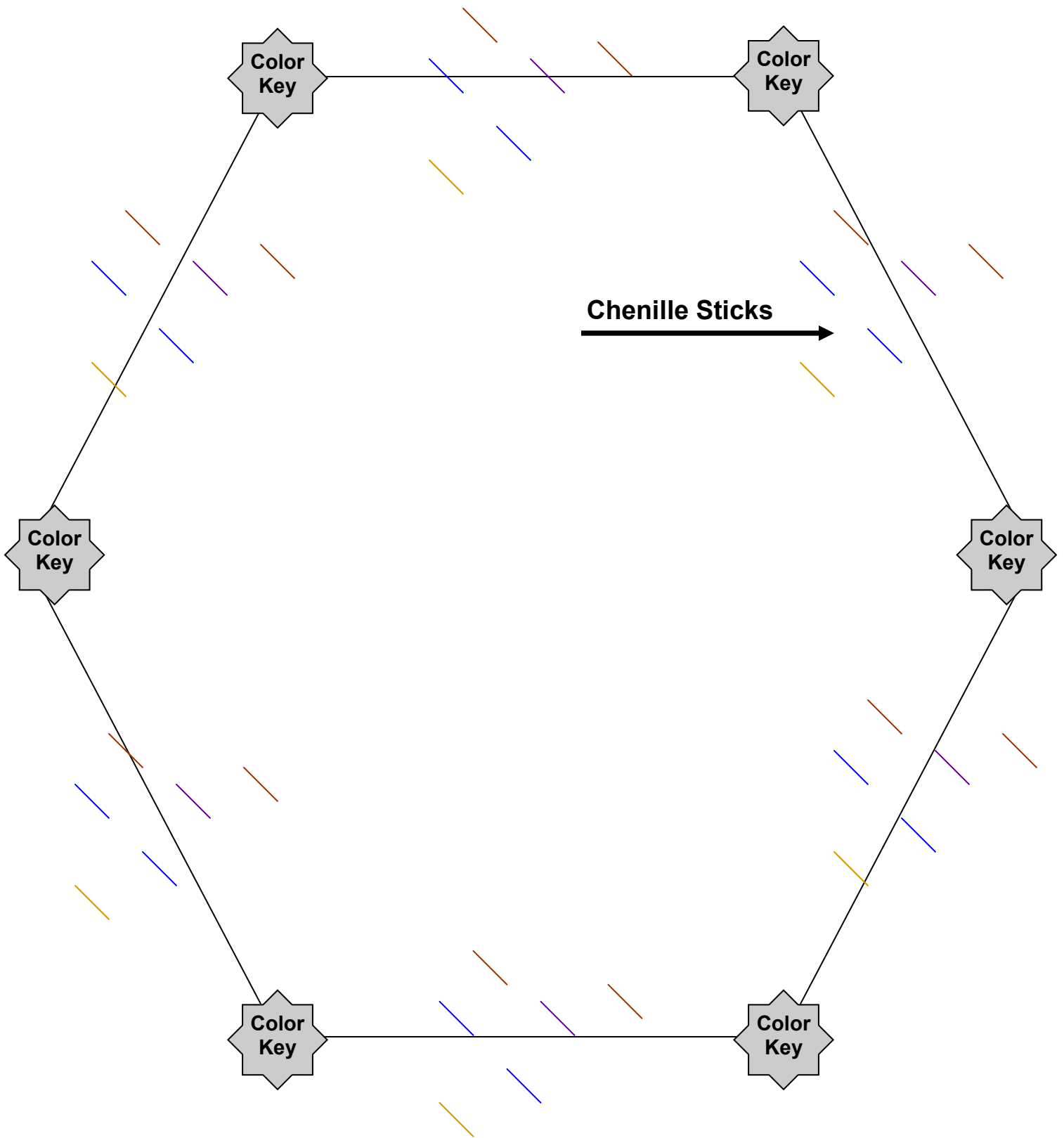
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### Images:

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# Emigrant Trail Activity Diagram



## Visualization Activity

Instructors: this activity is important for setting the mood for the lesson. The description below should be changed so that it fits you and how you tell stories. In any visualization activity include the senses. Describe what the students may be smelling, seeing, hearing or touching.

Begin by telling students to sit comfortably in their desks or tables. Allow them to stretch out in their chairs or to rest their heads on their desks. Have every student close their eyes and try to imagine this period in time and what is happening. Once everyone looks relax begin.



It is the spring of 1847. The weather is mild and you feel both excited and nervous. As you look around, you see people packing and loading large wooden wagons with supplies. Boys, you are dressed in brown trousers, with suspenders pulled over your shoulders and a large hat on your head. Girls, you're wearing long dresses that flow down to your ankles and a bonnet on your head.

Dust is flowing in the air. You smell cattle, horses and oxen. As you and your family leave town, you look down the road ahead of you. This road is not paved or even well maintained. Instead it is rough, with two tracks carved in it by the wagons that left before of you.

The sun is hot overhead. You find yourself walking in the shade of the white canvas that covers the wagon. You're heading west. You do not know where your family will stop or when you will arrive. The only thing you know about this road comes from the stories you have heard. Some stories tell of mountains filled with gold, of Indians and of green grass that grows right up to the ocean. Your excited and nervous to travel west.



## Wagon Profile

Having heard of the new and undeveloped country, Oregon, that has mild climate and fertile land, free for the taking, John and Rebecca Bonser decided to come to Oregon. They spent five busy months assembling the supplies and domestic animals they were going to bring with them on the trail. Mother Rebecca also was busy, getting her stove-house of supplies assembled and ready for the trip.

<b>Destination:</b>	Oregon
<b>Wagon Members:</b>	Bonser Family

<b>Supplies:</b>	Food, clothing, medicine, cornmeal, ham, bacon, dried apples, pears, peaches, prunes, cloth, thread, wool, etc.
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### Emigrant Trail

## Wagon Profile

James Madison Coon was born on September 24, 1813 in Jefferson County, Kentucky. He was the second son of a family of eight children. Nancy Iness Miller was born on April 8th, 1827 in Montgomery County, Indiana. She was the seventh child of a family of thirteen! James and Nancy were married on February 21, 1847 in Mercer County. Two months after their wedding they left on their journey to Oregon.

<b>Destination:</b>	Clackamas County, Oregon
<b>Wagon Members:</b>	Coon Family

<b>Supplies:</b>	Clothes, dried beef and pork, salt, sugar, flour, rice, milk, etc.
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### Emigrant Trail

## Wagon Profile

Preparing to leave, encouraged many others to join a wagon party - even at short notice "Mother says there were two large perfectly matched mules at the wheel and two white mules to lead. The wagons, mules, horses, oxen and cows were shipped out ahead of us by water from St. Louis. Uncle William Merriman, mother's brother decided to make the trip with us. His wife was very sick when we started. They had two small children, a boy and a girl. The early days of April, 1852, everything was in readiness for the start. There were many other families with their wagons who desired to join the 'Isaac Constant Train', making a setup of some 25 wagons."

<b>Destination:</b>	Oregon
<b>Wagon Members:</b>	Constant Family

<b>Supplies:</b>	Four oxen, wagons, dried beef, pickles, clothes, medicine, etc.
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### Emigrant Trail

## Wagon Profile

In 1859, John McTunk Gibson, traveled on the Oregon-California Trail during the Pike's Peak Gold Rush. His trip began from his home in Marengo, Iowa where he left his wife and small children and set off with several friends in search of wealth and a better life. To leave one's family was common during these exploratory days. Some men did return for their families, while others started new lives out west.

<b>Destination:</b>	Pike's Peak, Colorado
<b>Wagon Members:</b>	John Gibson & Friends

<b>Supplies:</b>	Wagon, oxen, clothes, blankets, dried meat, milk, medicine, etc.
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### Emigrant Trail

## Wagon Profile

Many folks traveling west went for many different reasons. Some wanted the fresh, fertile soils while others sought out new beginnings of their faith. “Though many of my friends tried to dissuade me [change my mind] from going, by telling me of the many dangers and difficulties, I should have to go through, exposed to wild beasts, my mind leads me strongly to go. I want to preach to the people there” in Oregon.

<b>Destination:</b>	Oregon
<b>Wagon Members:</b>	Joseph Williams and Family

<b>Supplies:</b>	Wagon, clothes, food, and <u>only enough dried meat to last until a trading opportunity.</u>
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### Emigrant Trail

## Wagon Profile

“In the spring of 1847, my father, grandfather and uncle John Grim had a chronic case of Oregon fever and the only cure was a trip across the plains to that far off country, Oregon. So they sold the farms and bought oxen teams and wagons, two wagons for each family. About the first of May we bid goodbye to our neighbors and set off.” Oregon fever drew many people to the new state. Some to begin new farms, others to search for gold.

<b>Destination:</b>	Oregon
<b>Wagon Members:</b>	Geer Family

<b>Supplies:</b>	Oxen teams, wagon, cows, food, medicine, clothes, thread, cooking supplies, etc.
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### Emigrant Trail

## Wagon Profile

Pioneers knew the months towards the end of the trip would become cold as winter began its approach. Much thought was put into preparing for this as recorded here by the Scott Family. "Through the winter preceding the April morning when the final start was made, the fingers of the women and girls were busy providing additional stores of bedding and blankets and stockings and bonnets...so that family might be equipped for the trip."

<b>Destination:</b>	Oregon
<b>Wagon Members:</b>	Scott Family

<b>Supplies:</b> Wagon, bacon, flour, rice, coffee, brown sugar, hard tack, milk, clothes, etc.
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**Emigrant Trail**

## Wagon Profile

<b>Destination:</b>	
<b>Wagon Members:</b>	

<b>Supplies:</b>
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**Emigrant Trail**

**Two Month Description**

**Location: Scottsbluff, NE**

**Date: June 21, 1847**

**Type of Terrain Cross:**

Nice flat lands with prairie in all directions. Tall grass and lots of very fast animals people call antelope.

**Journal Entries of Trail:**

Scottsbluff were something of an obstacle for the emigrants.

“This Scottsbluff is grand beyond description. It looks exactly like a splendid old fort all in thorough order equipped and manned and ready for service, at a moment’s notice” - Ada Vodges

“How can I describe the scene that now bursts upon us? Tower, bastion, dome and battlement via in all their majesty before us. A dark cloud is rising in the northwest. A most beautiful and majestic scene cannot be conceived how wonderful how great how sublime”

**Two Month Description**

**Location: Fort Hall, ID**

**Date: August 1, 1847**

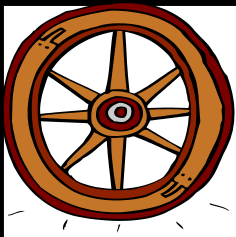
**Type of Terrain Cross:**

Fort Hall was a major stop along the Oregon/California Trail for settlers seeking the Oregon Territory and the gold of California. This famous fort was built along the Snake River which twists its ways through the dry, but fertile land. Weather is unpredictable along this way. Dry hot days can change to thunderstorms in the afternoon and some have written of snowstorms springing up.

**Journal Entries of Trail:**

“The road today was very hilly and rough. At night we encamped with in one mile of Fort Hall. Mosquitoes were as thick as flakes in a snow-storm...In the afternoon we came to a creek that appeared to be deep and bad to cross. Just as we were beginning to examine for a safe place to ford it, three Indians on horseback came toward us. They rode across the creek before us, apparently to show us the best way. We crossed without difficulty and they afterwards accompanied us to where we encamped for the night”

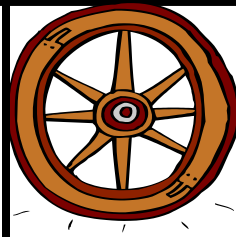




**COLOR KEY  
PINK**

*The men arrived back from their deer hunt with fresh meat.*

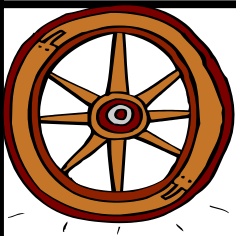
Does your group dry the meat and save it for later down the trail? Will your group feast on it because you are so hungry? Will your people share it with other families? Or does your group trade it for other supplies?



**COLOR KEY  
ORANGE**

*While crossing a river a wheel broke on your wagon and you lose some of your supplies.*

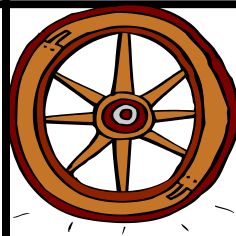
How will this affect your journey? Were you able to save some of the supplies? Were they important? What did you end up losing? Are you cold? Was the water warm?



**COLOR KEY  
BROWN**

*A late spring/summer blizzard hits your wagon group.*

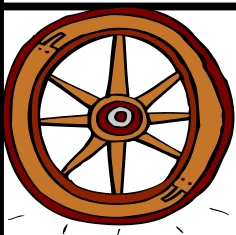
Will you have enough warm clothes and supplies? How will the children be affected by this extreme weather? Will you stop and wait till the weather gets better? Were you able to gather enough fuel to make a fire?



**COLOR KEY  
PURPLE**

*Death occurred along the trail.*

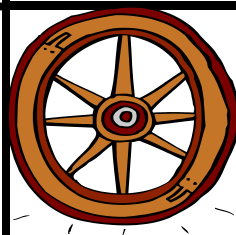
Will you be able to give them a proper burial? Who was it? How did it happen? Will you have enough strong people to still make the trip?



**COLOR KEY  
GREEN**

*Your group finds fresh grass for cattle and are able to trade for supplies with other wagons.*

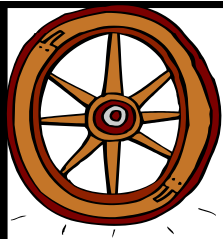
What supplies do you need? Does your group trade their cattle for supplies? Do you spend an extra day to enjoy the fresh grass or do you leave on time?



**COLOR KEY  
BLACK**

*Your shoes have finally worn out and you are forced to wear bandannas the rest of the way.*

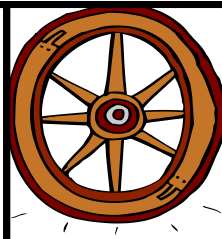
How does this affect your journey? Do you trade with local Native Americans for a pair of moccasins? Do you ride in the wagon with the women or continue to walk?



**COLOR KEY  
YELLOW**

*Your group drank bad water and a couple of people have diarrhea and are very sick.*

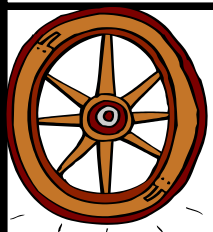
How does this affect the group? Does anyone die? Are there medical supplies? Is the rest of the water good? Or are you concerned to drink it?



**COLOR KEY  
BLUE**

*Another hot day in the 40 mile desert - the Black Rock Desert.*

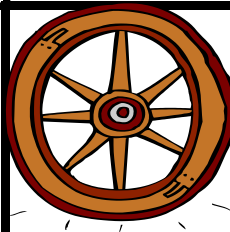
Do you do anything to keep your group's mind off of the heat? Do you have enough water for everyone? Do you travel at night to avoid the heat? Do any oxen die because of heat?



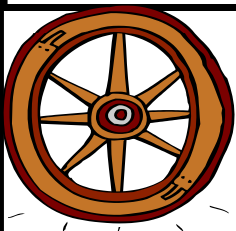
**COLOR KEY  
RED**

*A child was born two days back on the trail.*

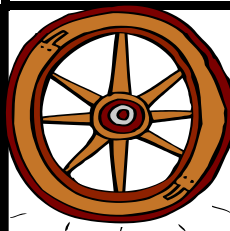
Is there enough supplies to care for the new baby? Does the child survive the long, hard journey? Is the heat too much for the baby? Or is the cold too much for the baby?



**COLOR KEY**



**COLOR KEY**



**COLOR KEY**

# Emigrant Trail Journal

Last Name:

Date Leaving: April 27, 1847

People in Group:



**Notes:**

**Notes:**

Date:

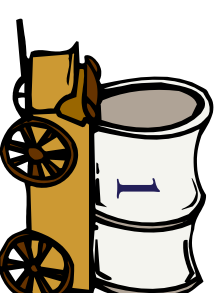
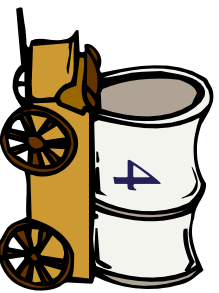
Color Key Experience  
(What happened?):

Reaction:

Date: June 21, 1847

Color Key Experience  
(What happened?):

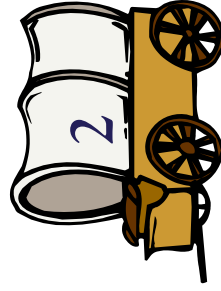
Reaction:



Date: August 1, 1847

Color Key Experience  
(What happened?):

Reaction:



Date: October 10, 1847

Color Key Experience  
(What happened?):

Reaction:

