



THE PEOPLE WHO CAME WEST BY WAGON

Simulating life in a different time in history is the essence of the Environmental Living Program. At Sutter's Fort this means recreating the 1840s. We cannot relive a time without knowing the people; what they thought, how they dressed, what work they did, how they had fun, what they ate. Before role selection can even begin to take place, a general background of the times should be learned. The following can help to give the student an idea of how men, women and children lived "back in the States", and why and how they came to California.

WESTWARD EXPANSION

There had been a steady move west from the Atlantic, accelerated by the Louisiana Purchase. The parents of most of the California emigrants had already been part of this expansion, moving west of the Appalachians through the Cumberland Gap. This movement was hastened by the building of turnpikes, expansion of less expensive steamboat service on the Mississippi (to carry produce to market and goods to farmers), construction of the Erie Canal and expansion of the canal system in the 1820's, 30's, and 40's that opened up much of Indiana and Ohio.

The reasons for the leap from the Missouri River to the Pacific were to acquire free land, to improve economic status and health, or to join family members. The depression of the late 1830s and early 1840s was accompanied by bad weather, floods and disease as epidemics of plague, ague, malaria and yellow fever swept the Mississippi Valley.

MIDWESTERN FARM LIFE

In the 1840's farm life was affected by three important things: distance, the seasons and tradition.

Distance was measured in hours and days. A visit to close neighbors might take a half day. The transportation of produce to market was a major difficulty. Transporting produce from Ohio, by Ohio River steamboat, to Pittsburgh by canal, to Philadelphia and on to New York by railroad, took 18-20 days. Farmers with access to rivers could float produce to the Mississippi and load it on steamboats. However, most farmers bartered produce at the nearest settlement for goods or for the services of local craftsmen. Thus, the accumulation of cash was very difficult.

Seasonal changes had a major effect on the day-to-day life of farmers whose lives were largely controlled by the weather. In spring farmers cleaned, drained, plowed and planted the fields. Sheep were washed and sheared and geese plucked. In midsummer they had to cultivate the corn, make hay, and harvest and thresh the winter wheat. Late summer chores included fence mending. In the fall grain had to be harvested, bound, shocked and threshed; corn picked, husked and cribbed; vegetables and fruit picked, dried, pickled or preserved. Winter wheat was planted, firewood cut for winter, cracks in the house daubed, and the foundation banked. In late autumn hogs were butchered and salted or smoked. Through the winter there were daily chores: manure to be hauled and spread, repairs and improvements made on the house and outbuildings. Winter allowed some free time for visiting neighbors, trading surpluses and making plans for the next season. This grueling round of work paid off in near self-sufficiency. Farmers rarely needed (or could afford) to





buy anything except coffee, rice, salt, spices, shoes, metal for farm implements, and occasional dry goods.

Traditional roles also had an effect on their lives.

- Men were responsible for clearing land (limited to about 50 acres for one man with hand tools), constructing the house and outbuildings, plowing and field work, caring for large animals,; and making and maintaining tools, implements, and wagons. They were also perceived as the defender and provider of the family.
- Women were responsible for the house and children. The wife raised a small patch of buckwheat, vegetables, an herb garden for spices and medicines, flax for linen. She fed the animals, collected eggs, milked the cow, made butter and cheese, cleaned the pens and stalls, and hauled manure. Often a family's only cash income was derived from the sale of butter (12 1/2 cents per pound) and eggs (6 1/2 cents per dozen). Women prepared all the food, cooking on an open hearth, since stoves were not yet common. They made all the family soap from animal fat and homemade ash lye. They also spun the wool and flax, wove and dyed cloth (at least 10 yards per person per year), and then made the garments. Although cloth was readily available throughout the Midwest, it required the expenditure of cash which was always in short supply.
- Children were not exempt from work. At age five or six both boys and girls were taught to sew, knit and card (at about ten the training of boys to do men's work would begin). They also helped with such chores as weeding vegetables and picking bugs off plants. Some of the amusements children enjoyed were also learning and working experiences. They had knitting or spinning races just as their parents competed in plowing the straightest furrows or making the most beautiful quilts. Just as the children participated in useful work as play, so did their parents socialize while accomplishing specific tasks. Bees were common social events where in addition to gathering to gossip, court, eat and joke, they quilted, carded, log-rolled, husked corn and built houses and barns.

PREPARATION FOR THE OVERLAND TRAIL

A pioneer family started to get ready to leave their farm almost a year before they actually left. They had to sell their property and outfit themselves for the hard 2,400 mile journey. They had to leave early enough so there would be plenty of grass for the animals as they traveled, which meant early April. The trip was timed for arrival on the eastern slope of the Sierras no later than late August or early September to assure crossing the mountains before winter set in. The land between the Missouri River and the Pacific Ocean was largely unmapped and uninhabited, so they had to be prepared with clothing, food, medical supplies, tools and spare parts to last six months or more, plus money and/or supplies to last through that first winter in the new land. Their preparations included:

- The husband had to buy or build a wagon strong enough to carry over 2,000 pounds of supplies over prairies, mountains and through rivers. Besides food and clothing the wagon had to carry enough spare parts such as the tongue, axle, spokes and wheels. Also needed was extra rope for dragging the wagon up mountains or letting it down over cliffs, and buckets of tar to caulk the slats for river crossings.
- He had to obtain and train four yoke of oxen.





SUTTER'S FORT

STATE HISTORIC PARK

- The wife had to spin, weave (or purchase) the cloth and sew a tough linen wagon cover and tent, both of which would have linings for warmth and be water resistance. She also had to spin, weave (or purchase) the cloth and sew bags for food supplies.
- The family had to calculate the amount of food required for the journey and to make sure that one wagon would indeed carry it all. Guide books were used for information on food stuffs. For instance, some suggested taking the following for each adult:

200 lbs. flour	2 lbs. tea	10 lbs. salt
30 lbs. pilot bread	25 lbs. sugar	½ bushel corn meal
75 lbs. bacon	½ bushel dried beans	½ bushel corn
10 lbs. rice	1 bushel dried fruit	2 lbs. saleratus
5 lbs. coffee	Small keg viengar	

These supplies, if possible, would be provided by the farm to save money.

- Sufficient strong clothing for the trip kept all the women of the house spinning, weaving and sewing. If possible, heavy cowhide boots were obtained for both men and women. Also needed were quilts, blankets and linens.
- Cooking on the trail would be done over fires, so camp cookware not already owned was bought such as a Dutch oven, long-handled frying pan, legged cooking pot, coffee pot, coffee mill and a heavy kettle.
- A washtub, washboard and about ten pounds of lye soap were needed.
- The head of the house needed to take his rifle and sufficient lead (approximately 15 lbs.) and powder (5 lbs.). Because tools were scarce and expensive in California, the farmer needed to take tools such as axes, augers, shovels, saws and plow molds. He also needed to pack his wife's spinning wheel and any loom parts that were difficult to build, such as the reed.
- Boxes and sacks were needed to hold different items.

THE OVERLAND TRAIL

The family was finally ready and had to say goodbye to loved ones and neighbors. They traveled only a few miles the first day, as they had been advised, so if anything was forgotten or any trouble encountered it could be easily remedied. If the spring was a wet one (as 1846 was) the family was often drenched with rain and shivering in the cold. Slogging through deep mud was difficult, but the family generally walked both to lighten the oxen's load and because the rocking and jolting of the wagon was worse than walking.

Once to the Missouri River, they joined other wagons to form a train for protection and for civil order. The men met to draw up a constitution, by-laws, and elect officers.

Beyond the river crossing the campsites continued to offer good water, plentiful wood and sufficient grass for the animals. Soon, however; the scattered woodlands gave way to continuous prairie and wood became scarce. A sack was hung on the side of the wagon and, as they moved, the children collected dry buffalo dung for the evening fires. Though many women found it distasteful to cook over fires of dung, they found the chips burned hot, fast and odorless. The cook fires were built in small trenches with pots hung over the fire or straddling the trench.





Soon the journey for the women became exhausting work, rising early to milk the cow and cook breakfast. Dishes had to be washed and the tent, bedding and other equipment repacked into the wagon. Then came the long morning of walking over rough ground or riding in a jolting wagon. A brief stop for lunch was no rest as she served her family lunch. The long afternoon repeated the morning, and at the evening stop she had to cook another meal over a fire. If she had time, she made rising bread as a change from biscuits or fry bread. The women usually tried to convince their husbands not to travel on the Sabbath. If the train was making good progress, they could stop for Sundays, giving the stock a rest. The women found it necessary to do work they thought inappropriate for Sunday, such as washing. The combination of cold water, lye soap and wind sometimes chapped their hands so badly they cracked and bled.

The women were frightened of the Indians, although they noted the handsome and well-dressed Pawnee and Sioux. They were annoyed by the Indians stealing and "begging for food", not realizing that the Indian ate with strangers as a way of showing friendship. But they become adept at trading with the Indians, finding shirts and bread best for trading for dried meat and moccasins.

The journey for the men also took on a pattern. Each morning before dawn they rose to gather the stock and hitch up the team. There was the constant danger that the Indians would run off stock, delaying the round-up in the morning so the men took turns standing guard each night. They also dealt with broken wheels and axles caused by the rough country. In places along the Platte River, buffalo using the same trail month after month to and from the water, wore paths in parallel lines about 20 yards apart, 12 inches wide by 10 inches deep that were very destructive to wagon axles. Each time the train came to a stream or river they encountered the dangers of steep banks, fast currents and soft mud or quicksand. Sometimes the cattle drowned and personal goods were lost or drenched. To lighten the oxen's load across muddy bottoms, it was common to unpack a wagon, raft the contents across and repack on the other side. Sometimes they tried to ford a stream without unpacking, drenching all their goods, making it necessary to unpack and dry everything out before continuing.

The children found the journey less arduous, not being burdened by their parents' responsibilities. They saw only the flowers, the different countryside, and adventure. Many small boys felt quite grown up as they herded stock with the men and caught fish and small game on their own. Young people also had dances and courted on the trail. Many eligible young ladies of 14 or 15 were married en route to California. However, the trail was very dangerous for children. Often, they fell, landing under wagon wheels causing injury or death. Childhood diseases continued to afflict them on the trail: measles, mumps, whooping cough, etc. These were complicated by the often poor diet, bad weather and inability to stop for a sick person. Stopping for an illness or injury endangered everyone since a delay could cause the train to be in the mountains when winter set in or to run out of food before the journey was complete. Few families escaped the serious illness, injury, or the death of at least one child. Some children were orphaned on the trail and continued the journey with kin or family friends.

The first major landmark was the Platte River about 300 miles northwest of Independence. From this point, they traveled along the south fork of the Platte. The river was sometimes called the "River of Sand" because the water was so muddy. Along the Platte, they found acceptable grass for the stock although it began to get thinner and tougher. They passed already famous landmarks





such as Courthouse Rock and Chimney Rock. When they reached Fort Laramie, they had traveled over 600 miles. Here, the settlers were able to sell excess supplies and purchase needed items.

Leaving Fort Laramie the trail become rougher, passing through the Black Hills. About a hundred miles out it was necessary to cross the dangerous, rapid North Platte. The train then turned south to Willow Springs and the Sweetwater River. They passed Independence Rock where many scratched their names or wrote them with axle grease. Soon the trail became rougher and in some places was covered with jagged rocks which had to be smoothed with picks before the wagons could get through. The oxen's feet became sore and bled, and the emigrants' shoes wore through. It was usually at this point they began discarding possessions to lighten the wagons. This discarding would continue through the desert and the Sierras.

Next they reached Fort Hall, turned south across dry, rocky terrain with poor grass and bad water to reach the Mary's or Humboldt River. The oxen were worn from the journey by now, and were beginning to fail. The emigrants followed Mary's River until it disappeared into the sand of the desert. They knew they had a 40 mile trek to the next water, so they filled every available container with water and, moving by night and resting by day, managed to cross the desert. Many animals, weakened by the trip, poor food and lack of water, died in the yoke in this desert. Many people were also ill from the same causes and from inhaling and swallowing the fine alkali dust. Many were stricken with bloody flux (dysentery) and camp fever (possibly typhoid).

When they reached the Truckee River and Meadows they rested a short time before beginning the crossing of the Sierras. In the mountains they often had to hitch as many as 14 yoke of oxen to a wagon to pull it up the steep grades, then unhitch the oxen and lead them down to pull the next wagon up. Some days, the emigrants traveled only three or four miles. They reached cliffs where they had to rig up block and tackle and lower wagons, people and animals down the side. They also had to ford and reford many small, cold, rocky streams, some so winding that they might have to be crossed a dozen times in one day.

After six or more months on the trail, the emigrants descended from the mountains into the northern Sacramento Valley where they found the weather still hot and dry, but good water and plentiful grass. Arriving in the new country, they sought out people and places they had heard of such as Captain John Sutter and his settlement of New Helvetia. Captain Sutter had rooms in and around his establishment to house several families, and he was equally hospitable to those who wanted to camp on his property.

Immigrants who arrived in the fall of 1846 found a country at war. Most of the men had gone south to fight in the Bear Flag Revolt. Some of the new arrivals joined them. Others found nearby valleys and open land to winter on before deciding their next move. Families that stayed in the vicinity of the Fort spent their days recuperating from their journey, repairing their wagons and equipment, buying or bartering for supplies, and listening to discussion of good and bad sites in California to settle. They might stay a day or two, a week or even a month or more. Captain Sutter was willing to hire those who wanted to work, especially men who had skills. This was a community in every sense of the word and was a welcome oasis to weary travelers. After resting and making their decisions, families again packed their wagons and spread out over Northern California to begin their new life.

