



By 1846, there were books and guides filled with information about how and what to pack, challenges of the trails and other useful tips. Newspapers published articles about California and Oregon. Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune* wrote, "If a young man is about to commence in the world...we say to him publicly and privately, go to the West. There, your capacities (*abilities*) are sure to be appreciated and your industry (*hard work*) and energy rewarded." After the Civil War (1865) he encouraged former soldiers to "Go West, young man, go West and grow up with the Country." Once the decision to go west had been made, the first thing many did was to sell their farm or business and start putting together the things they would need for the journey and for life when they arrived at the new location.

The next decision was where to go and how to get there. In the early years, almost half of the adventurers went by sea, which was quicker but costlier. Most of these lived near the Atlantic or Gulf Coasts and were familiar with ships and shipping. Most of those going overland lived in the Midwest or near the Ohio, Mississippi or Missouri Rivers. The journey was longer and harder, but they could take their families, cattle and possessions.

Who were these adventurers? According to the 1850 census, 95% of the people going to California were male. In later years, more families joined the wagon trains. Fifth to seventy percent were farmers and many already had the supplies, wagons, and animals needed for the journey. It is estimated that between 250,000 and 300,000 settlers traveled the California trail between 1841 and 1868.

The New Castle, Indiana Courier newspaper carried an article about I. J. Harvey's trip on March 2, 1850.

"A company of citizens of this place will start to the "land of promise" about the last of this month. The company will consist of I.J. Harvey, Jesse Shelly, Joseph Shelly and his son, William. They design going by land route to Oregon, where they will winter and make arrangements to get down to

the mines early in the spring. They are all just the right kind of men: hardy, patient, industrious, energetic...and if they can only have health, they will return with a 'pocket full' of the root of all evil. Mr. Harvey sold his stock of goods to Judge Hoover."

A pioneer's typical outfit, for three to six people, usually consisted of one or two small, sturdy farm wagons, outfitted with bows and a canvas cover (costing \$75-\$175), and six to ten head of oxen (\$75 to \$300) or mules with chains and yokes or harnesses to attach the animals to the wagons. For traveling 2000 miles over rough terrain, the wagons used were typically small and as lightweight as possible. The large Conestoga wagons used for freight were almost twice the size of the typical "prairie schooner". Nothing was more critical to the success of a trip than the wagons that carried the pioneers and their belongings.

The typical wagon weighed about 900-1200 pounds when empty. It was recommended that settlers start with a load of no more than 2000 pounds, including their equipment and food. The wagon needed to be light enough not to over stress the mules or oxen but strong enough not to break down under a heavy load.

The three main parts of a wagon were the bed, undercarriage and cover. The bed of most wagons was about 11 feet long, four feet wide and two feet high. At the front end was a jockey box where the driver could sit. It held tools that would be needed to care for the wagon.

The undercarriage consisted of the wheels, axle assemblies, the reach (which connected the two axles assemblies), the hounds (which fastened the rear axle to the reach and the front axle to the wagon tongue) and the boosters (which supported the wagon bed). Dangling from the rear axle was a bucket containing a mixture of tar and tallow for lubricating the wheels.

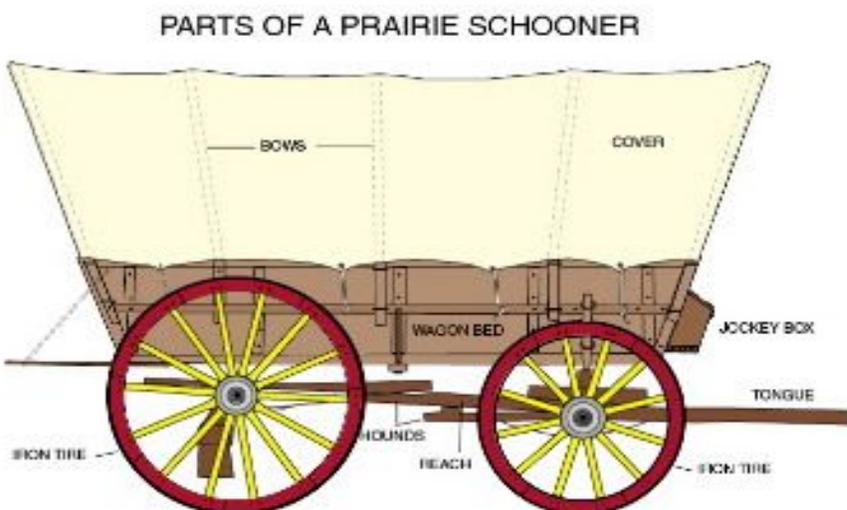
The cover was made of canvas or cotton and was supported by a frame of hickory bows and tied to the sides of the wagon bed. It was closed by a drawstring. The cover served to shield the

wagon from rain and dust.

The wheels were usually 40 to 50 inches in diameter, as the larger wheels could roll more easily over rough grounds and rocks.

Although the wheels were made of wood, the rim or outside surface was iron, usually about 1.5 inches wide. A blacksmith installed the tires to the wood when the iron was hot so it would shrink tightly to the wood when it cooled. If the iron rim fell off along the wagon,

the pioneer could use wooden wedges to hold it on or could soak the wooden part in water until it expanded enough to fit the rim again. Wagon wheels could often be repaired or replaced with an abandoned wagon wheel. Some damaged wagons were salvaged by cutting the wagon in half and converting the front and rear halves of the wagon into two-wheeled carts.



Many wagons had a tool box mounted on the left side, with an ax, wagon jack, ropes, shovel, and wheel chains. The jack was used for raising the wheels when work needed to be done on them.

Greasing the axle was one task that had to be done regularly. Wagons were not comfortable to ride in and there was little room to sit because most space was taken up by supplies. As a result, most of the pioneers walked the entire way.

In Bound for Oregon, Jean Van Leeuwen describes the Todd family's wagon.

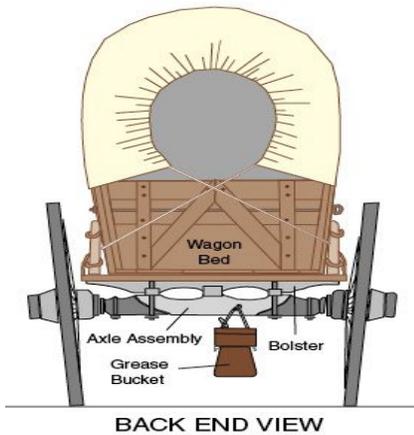
“Our wagon had high boards on the sides, making it nearly four feet deep. Father divided the space into two stories. On the bottom went everything that we would not be using every day, like the huge sacks of flour, medicines, extra clothing, dishes and wagon parts. This was carefully leveled. Then a strong piece of canvas was stretched over it, making a kind of second floor. On top of this were placed all the things that would be in daily use, neatly rolled and bundled. Father made a wooden grub box with a lid for food, and that sat in the front of the wagon, with the cooking pots wrapped snugly in sacks. An outside box was attached to the wagon for halters, hobbles, ropes, chains, axe, shovel, hammer and other tools. And there was a rack for Father's gun.”

Another decision was whether to use mules or oxen. Mules or horses usually cost more and required more expensive harnesses, but they were ten percent (10%) faster. Oxen were cheaper, tougher, stronger and easier to catch and train. They

were better able to survive with little or poor quality feed. About 70% of the settlers used oxen. By the end of the trip, mixed teams of dairy cows, oxen and horses were sometimes hitched up to make a usable team.

Those who wanted to go west could consult guides which were published with maps, equipment lists and suggestions. Some were more reliable than others. Basically, a family of four needed one or two farm wagons, six to ten head of oxen, a milk cow or two, perhaps some chickens, plus all the necessary food, clothing and utensils needed for survival for four to six months on the trail. Often heavy items such as furniture, stoves, pianos and books would be freighted to the West Coast by clipper ship around the Horn of South America. If these items were put on the wagons, they were often left along the wayside. Some travelers would salvage discarded items, picking up essentials or trading theirs for others of better quality. Discarded wagons or furniture were used as firewood.

A family of four might have packed: 600 lbs./ pounds of flour, 120 lbs. of biscuits, 400 lbs. of bacon, 60 lbs. of coffee, 4 lbs. of tea, 100 lbs. of sugar, and 200 lbs. of lard. These would be the staples. Other food might include cornmeal, rice, beans, and dried fruits. Bacon was packed in bran so the hot sun would not melt the fat. Eggs were packed in cornmeal to prevent breakage. Coffee was drunk by everyone to disguise the taste of the water, which was often bitter. When game was abundant, pioneers would kill buffalo or antelope. Another way to guarantee fresh meat was to take



WHEEL JACK

along a herd of cattle. Cows could also be milked. The milk was hung in pails beneath the bumpy wagon. By the end of the day, it had turned to butter! Each man also took a hunting knife and a rifle or shotgun. Farm implements like plows, shovels, rakes and hoes were often added. Seeds for corn, wheat and other crops plus cuttings from plants at the old family home were usually included. Carpentry tools like a saw, ax, mallet and plane often came in handy.

Here is a typical equipment list:

Cooking utensils: Dutch oven, kettle, skillet, reflector oven, coffee grinder, teapot, butcher knife, ladle, tin dishes and cutlery, water keg and matches.

Clothing: Wool sack coats, rubber coats, cotton dresses, wool pantaloons, buckskin pants, trousers, cotton shirts, flannel shirts, cotton socks, heavy shoes, boots, felt hats, sun hats and bonnets. Most had two changes of clothes and several pair of boots. Moccasins were often bought from the Native American tribes along the way.

Food: flour, bacon, coffee, baking soda, cornmeal, hardtack, dried beans, dried fruit, molasses, vinegar, pepper, eggs, salt, sugar, rice, tea, and lard.

Bedding and tent supplies: blankets, ground cloths, pillows, tent, poles, stakes and ropes

Tools and Equipment: ax, hammer, hoe, plow, shovel, whetstone, oxbow, axles, bolts, ox shoes, spokes, wagon tongue, heavy ropes, chains.

Luxuries: canned goods, additional spices, plant cuttings, school books, musical instruments, dolls and toys, family albums, jewelry, china, silverware, fine linens, iron stoves, furniture.

Weapons: rifle, pistol, knife, hatchet, gunpowder, lead, bullet mold, powder horn, bullet pouch, holster

Handy articles: surgical instruments, liniments and herbs, laudanum, quinine, and other known medicines, brandy, soap, bandages, campstool, chamber pot, washboard, lanterns, candle molds, tallow, scissors, sewing kit, Bible, trail guide, quills, ink, paper.

Most of the food was kept in waterproof barrels to keep from getting wet at river crossings. Wagons provided transport for goods and protection from weather during the trip and were often the settlers first homes when reaching their destination.

Most wagon trains also had a herd of animals. These horses, cows, oxen and mules were typically sold for profit in California. During the day, "cowboys" would herd the animals and at night the adult males would take turns guarding them.

The total cost to purchase and equip a wagon would have been at least \$300, but could easily exceed \$1000 if the wagon and oxen had to be purchased. Five hundred dollars represented about 300 days of work, so most of the poor were excluded from the journey unless they got a job herding or guarding the livestock or driving a wagon.



A critical decision was the choice of a wagon train guide. One of the more famous guides was James Beckwourth who was born in slavery in Virginia. In about 1828, while trapping in the Rocky Mountains, Beckwourth was taken captive by the Crow Indians. They adopted him and he followed their ways of life, becoming known as one of their best warriors. He first came to California to trap animals. While traveling through the Sierra Nevada, he found a mountain pass that still bears his name. Even though a pass had been found, the California Trail was not complete. In 1842, a Paiute medicine man named Winnemucca showed the Stevens party how to go from the end of the Humboldt River to the Truckee River across 40 miles of desert. He became known to the settlers as Chief Truckee.

Another famous guide was John Bidwell. In May 1841, he set out with a group of 69 men, women and children. They explored a new route across Utah and Nevada. Later he admitted that no one in the group had ever been to California and that they were exploring new territory. Only 32 members of the group reached Sutter's Fort. In later years, Bidwell moved north to the area where Chico is today and became a leader in early California government.

Guidebooks such as Thomas Farnham's **Travels in the Great Western Prairies** were created to give travelers an idea of what lay ahead, where they could find water and grass, and how they should prepare for the journey ahead. Some were reliable, but others were mostly opinion. Each guide had his own ideas about which route would be best and pioneers placed the future of themselves and their families into the hands of these mountain men.

