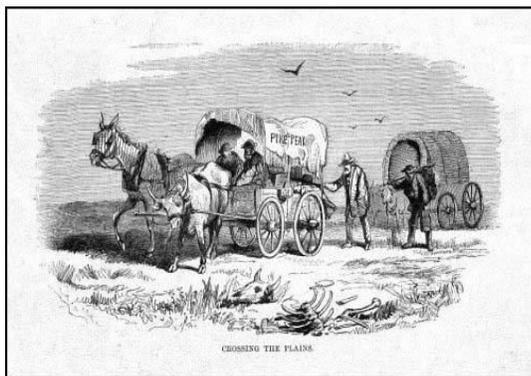


Chapter Five The Highs and Lows of Travel

Of the more than 300,000 emigrants who headed west, around 30,000 or ten percent died along the way. The most common cause of death was disease. Doctors did not yet know how diseases were spread and treatments were limited. For example, they knew that dirty water was associated with cholera, but not that boiling it would kill the germs.



Measles, typhoid, dysentery, and cholera were ongoing concerns. Cholera, typhoid and dysentery are spread anywhere with poor water supplies and inadequate plumbing. The wagon trains were camping at the same sites day after day with no proper toilets. They drew water in the same river where dirty bedding and clothing had been washed. Cholera, the most deadly of the diseases, caused vomiting and severe diarrhea. When untreated, the death rate was 50-90%.

Treatments were almost always unsuccessful. Cholera became a pandemic (or epidemic across the world) from 1852-1860. It is thought to have been brought to the United States by immigrants from Europe.

Most settlers carried medicines. Laudanum (tincture of opium) was a painkiller. Camphor was used for cholera, quinine for malaria, hartshorne for snakebite, citric acid for scurvy, castor oil for bowel problems, borax and alum for boils and sores, whiskey and herbs for everything else. Sometimes doctors traveled with a wagon train.

When a member of the wagon train died, burial would often be at night. Graves were concealed by building a fire on them and then driving the entire train of wagons over them in the morning. This prevented grave robbers and wild animals from digging up the corpse.

Disease was not the only reason people and animals died.

One killer of oxen was alkali water, which was full of chemical salts left behind when lakes dried out. An ox could be saved, however, if chunks of bacon and swigs of vinegar could be forced down its throat to stop the salts from burning its insides.

Mountains were another challenge. Going up was easier than going down. To go up, teams could be doubled up. If it was a very steep grade, an empty wagon was staked at the top of the hill with one set of wheels running free and a strong rope or chain tied to the axle. The other end of the rope was tied to the second wagon. The men and oxen would slowly turn the wheels, reeling the wagon up the hill. Going down was more difficult, as the oxen could not be used for braking. Rope brakes were used to lock the wheels and let the wagon down slowly. Sometimes even that didn't stop a wagon from sliding down the hill and being destroyed.

Mud could seriously delay a wagon train. Sometimes it rained for days and the oxen would sink up to their knees in mud. Children gathered long grasses and laid them across the ground in front of the

wagon wheels. Then the oxen would pull from the front and while people pushed from behind. The wheels turned on the grass and slowly came out of the mud. When the mud was quicksand, only immediate action could prevent the animal or person from being sucked under.

Too much water in the rivers was as much a problem as not enough. Drowning was one of the major killers, since many did not know how to swim or didn't have the strength to overcome the rushing waters of a fast moving stream. Animals, wagons, supplies and pioneers were lost to rapidly moving rivers.

The opposite problem was land that was too dry. The dust was sometimes so thick that it was hard to see what was ahead. In her journal, Days on the Road, Sarah Raymond describes the dust. *"Oh, the dust, the dust; it is terrible. I have never seen it half as bad. It seems to be almost knee-deep in places. We came 20 miles without stopping and then camped for the night. We are near a fine spring of most excellent water. When we stopped, the boys' faces were a sight. They were covered with all the dust that could stick on. One could just see the apertures where eyes, nose and mouth were through the dust. Their appearance was frightful. How glad we all are to have plenty of clear cold water to wash away the dust."*

Accidents happen everywhere, but there were special challenges on the trail. Sometimes children hitched a ride on the wagon tongue and, if they fell off, could be run over by the wagon. Gunshot wounds injured or killed. Fires could burn the clothing of those who were not used to cooking outside. Snakebite was a constant threat.

Another frequent problem was that the oxen's feet got sore. The pioneers learned a trick that helped. First they cut a small piece of animal skin. Then they made small holes all around the edge and put a leather string through the holes to make a drawstring. The hairy side of the skin would be placed around the ox's foot and the string tightened. After a few days of wearing these "moccasins" the ox's feet would be better.

Life on the trail was not all difficulties. The pioneers knew how to have fun too. Almost everyone enjoyed singing and dancing. Songs about home and love were popular, as well as funny songs like "Oh Susanna". When someone had a fiddle or a harmonica to provide music, a square dance or reel was enjoyed by young and old. Sometimes everyone sat around the fire and listened to stories.



The Fourth of July was often the biggest celebration of the journey. If the train had reached Independence Rock by July 4, they were right on schedule and had completed about half of the trip. Usually the women would organize the celebration. They would pull

out their cloth scraps and create a makeshift flag. A pole was erected in the middle of the circle of wagons. Some folks dressed in costume, but most wore their best clothing. The children sometimes came as "Lady Liberty" or as Native Americans. There were recitation contests with prizes of candy or chocolate. A potluck lunch and afternoon of dancing followed and the day ended with a gun salute to the country. Food included buffalo, antelope, wild turkey, jackrabbit, potatoes, beans, rice and special treats like pickles. They wanted the day to be a special occasion that they would always remember.

Landmarks along the way helped make the journey go faster. These included Courthouse Rock and Jail Rock, Chimney Rock, Independence Rock, South Pass, Soda Springs, Steamboat Springs, and Devil's Gate. Forts Kearney, Laramie, Bridger and Hall added variety to the miles and miles of walking.

Martha Jane Canary wrote about her adventures in [The Life and Adventures of Calamity Jane](#).

"In 1865 we emigrated from our homes in Missouri by the overland route to Virginia City, Montana, taking five months to make the journey. While on the way the greater portion of my time was spent in hunting along with the men and hunters of the party. In fact, I was at all times with the men when there was excitement and adventures to be had. By the time we reached Virginia City I was considered a remarkably good shot and a fearless rider for a girl of my age. I remember many occurrences on the journey from Missouri to Montana. Many times in crossing the mountains the conditions of the trail were so bad that we frequently had to lower the wagons over ledges by hand with ropes, for the trails were so rough and rugged that horses were of no use. We also had many exciting times fording streams, for many of the streams in our way were noted for quicksand and boggy places, where, unless we were very careful, we would have lost horses and all. Then we had many dangers to encounter in the way of streams swelling on account of heavy rains. On occasions of that kind, the men would usually select the best places to cross the streams, myself on more than one occasion have mounted my pony and swam across the stream several times merely to amuse myself and have had many narrow escapes from having both myself and pony washed away to certain death, but as the pioneers of those days had plenty of courage, we overcame all obstacles and reached Virginia City in safety."

Many journals and letters written by the pioneers are still available to those who want to learn more about the challenges and adventures on the trails to the West.

