

The Oregon Trail

The Dangers of Traveling West in the 1850s



The Oregon Trail was a path across the United States. It went from east to west. Lots of people wanted to move west. They wanted their own land. They wanted a new life. They wanted the American Dream. They were called pioneers. Pioneers are the first people to settle in a new place.

Thousands of families became pioneers. Each family piled its things into a wagon. They traveled west on the Oregon Trail. It was a 2,000-mile trip.

Most pioneers walked the whole way. Often, they were barefoot. Their wagons were too heavy for horses to pull. They used strong oxen or cattle. The going was slow and rough.

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Many pioneers traveled in wagon trains. Wagon trains were made up of many wagons. They followed each other west. Some trains were 5 miles long. Long trains had lots of people.

There were many dangers on the Oregon Trail. But nothing was more dangerous than cholera (KAWL-er-uh). Not baseball-sized hail. Not freezing to death in winter. Not getting crushed under wagon wheels. Not even drowning in a river crossing.

Cholera is a disease. It was the number one cause of death on the Oregon Trail.

You get cholera from contaminated water or food. Pioneers did not have toilets. They did not have sinks. They used water from streams and rivers. They dug holes in the ground for toilets. Rain washed the contents of these holes into the streams or rivers. This contaminated the water. Pioneers didn't wash their hands after using the "toilet." Handling food with dirty hands contaminated the food.

Cholera is a bad way to die. It gets into your gut. It can make you vomit. It can give you muscle cramps. It gives you nasty, watery diarrhea. This can dry out your body very fast. It can make your body shut down. Cholera could kill a healthy pioneer in just a few hours.



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The Oregon Trail was a pathway across the United States. It led from east to west. The west held the promise of new opportunities. The American Dream. Moving west offered people the chance to start big farms and find their fortunes. Whole families emigrated, or moved, from east to west following the Oregon Trail. They piled all their belongings into a wagon and started their journey. They were known as pioneers.

Thousands of families became pioneers and traveled west on the Oregon Trail. It was a 2,000-mile trip.

Most pioneers walked the whole way, often barefoot. Their wagons were too heavy for horses to pull. They used strong oxen or cattle. The going was slow and rough.

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Many pioneers traveled in wagon trains. Wagon trains were made up of many wagons that followed each other west. Some trains were 5 miles long and could have hundreds of people.

There were many dangers on the Oregon Trail, but nothing was more dangerous than cholera (KAWL-er-uh). Not baseball-sized hail. Not freezing to death in winter. Not getting crushed under wagon wheels. Not even drowning in a river crossing.

Cholera killed more emigrants than anything else along the Oregon Trail. During bad outbreaks, cholera killed two-thirds of entire wagon trains.

Pioneers got cholera from contaminated water or food. On the Oregon Trail, they didn't have running water or toilets. They drank water from nearby streams and rivers. They dug holes in the ground for toilets. Many emigrants probably didn't wash their hands afterward. Rain washed the contents of the holes into the streams or rivers. This contaminated the water. Handling food without washing their hands contaminated the food.

Cholera is a bad way to die. It gets into your gut. It can make you vomit. It can give you muscle cramps. It gives you nasty, watery diarrhea. This can dry out your body very fast. It can make your body shut down. Cholera could kill a healthy pioneer in just a few hours.



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The Oregon Trail was a pathway across the United States that led from east to west. The untamed west offered the promise of new opportunities, the American Dream. People living in the east wanted the chance to start big farms and find their fortunes. Whole families emigrated, or moved, from east to west following the Oregon Trail. They piled all their belongings into a wagon and started their 2,000-mile journey. They were known as pioneers.

Pioneers are the first people to move into and settle a region. Most of the pioneers walked the entire way across the Oregon Trail, often barefoot. Their wagons were too heavy for horses to pull so they used strong oxen or cattle. The going was slow and rough.

Sometimes, groups of wagons traveled together. These were called wagon trains. The wagons followed each other along the Oregon Trail. Some wagon trains were reported to be 5 miles long. They could include hundreds of people.

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Traveling the Oregon Trail was very dangerous. Nothing was more dangerous to the pioneers than cholera (KAWL-er-uh). Not baseball-sized hail or freezing in bad weather. Not getting crushed by the wheels of a wagon. Not even by drowning on overloaded ferries at river crossings.

Cholera killed more emigrants than anything else along the Oregon Trail. During bad outbreaks, cholera killed two-thirds of entire wagon trains.

Pioneers got cholera from consuming contaminated water or food. On the Oregon Trail, they didn't have running water or toilets. They drank water from nearby streams and rivers. They dug holes in the ground for toilets. Many emigrants probably didn't wash their hands afterward. Rain washed the contents of the holes into the streams or rivers. This contaminated the water. Handling food without washing their hands contaminated the food.

Cholera is a bad way to go. Once infected, the bacteria get into your gut. Cholera can cause vomiting and muscle cramps. But it almost always causes horrible, watery diarrhea. This can severely dehydrate you very quickly. When your body dries out, it begins to shut down. A pioneer could go from healthy to dead in just a few hours.

