

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.

The Oregon Trail



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.

