

1840 to 1850

## LIFE ON A WAGON TRAIN

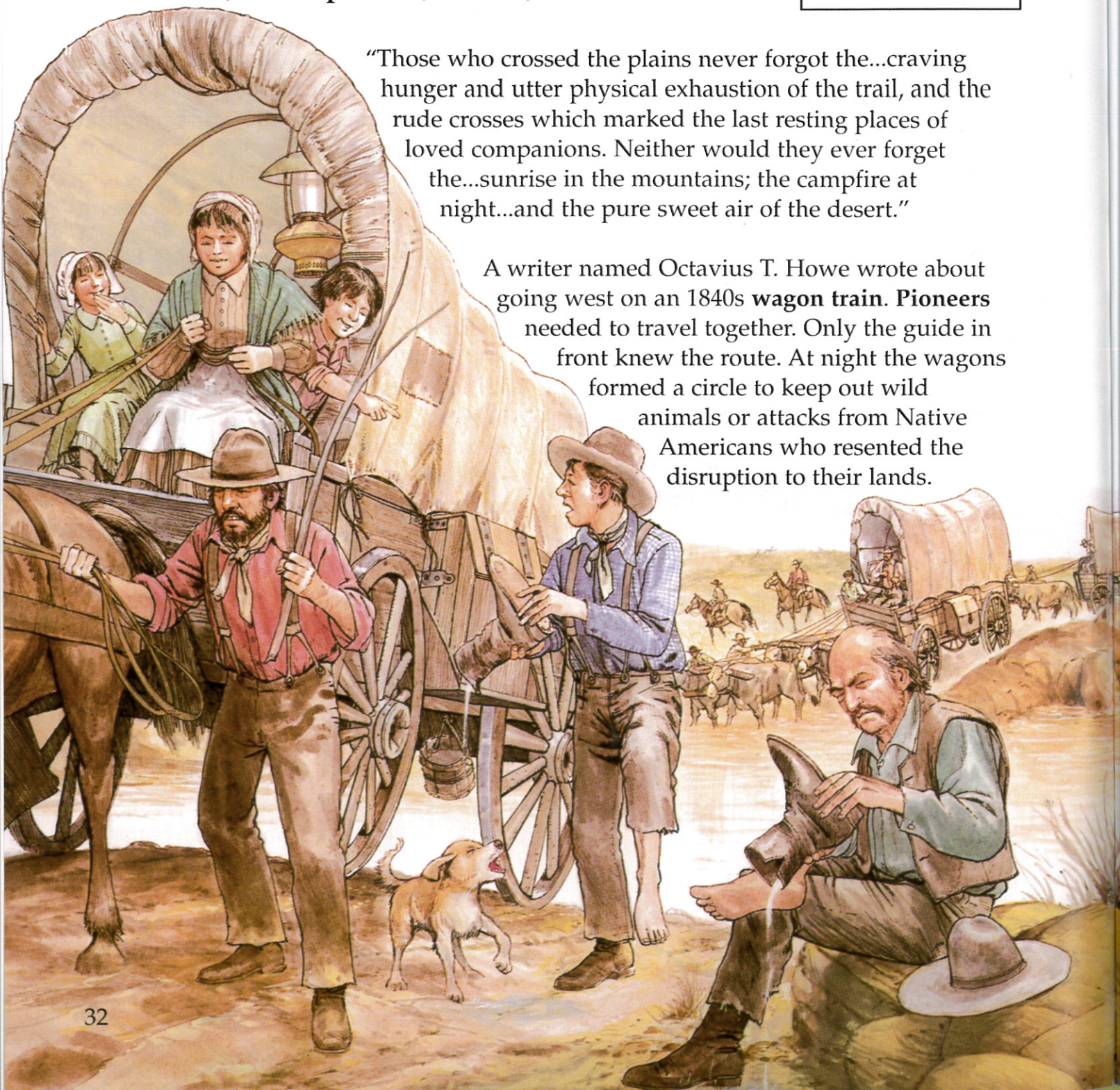
They called it Oregon Fever. Thousands of people packed their belongings in covered wagons and went west. They had heard stories about wheat growing 6 feet (1.8 m) high and land enough to make everyone rich. The 6-month trip took them 2,000 miles (3,200 km) from home, across prairies, deserts, and the Rockies.

### A day on the trail

**4:00 A.M.** Wake up, eat breakfast, milk cows, take down tents, pack wagons  
**7:00 A.M.** Hitch the oxen to the wagons and move on along the trail  
**12:00 noon** Stop to eat, rest, and feed animals  
**6:00 P.M.** Stop for the night. Bring the wagons into a circle, make a campfire, cook, eat, sing songs, sleep.

"Those who crossed the plains never forgot the...craving hunger and utter physical exhaustion of the trail, and the rude crosses which marked the last resting places of loved companions. Neither would they ever forget the...sunrise in the mountains; the campfire at night...and the pure sweet air of the desert."

A writer named Octavius T. Howe wrote about going west on an 1840s **wagon train**. **Pioneers** needed to travel together. Only the guide in front knew the route. At night the wagons formed a circle to keep out wild animals or attacks from Native Americans who resented the disruption to their lands.





► This engraving of the 1850s by W.H. Cary shows pioneers traveling west.

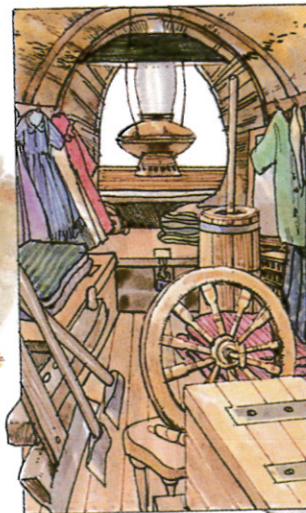
▼ This is a reconstruction of a trading post at Fort Laramie, Wyoming, where pioneers could buy cooking equipment.



## Timing the journey carefully

Before setting out, families met in a "jumping-off town" such as Independence, Missouri. They started their journey in May, when there was grass along the trail for their animals. If they left too late, they would not make it over the Rocky Mountains by the first snowfall in October.

From 1840 to 1860, over 300,000 people made the journey to Oregon or California. Most pioneers traveled the Oregon Trail. During the summer months, the trail was dry and dusty. Rain turned the trail to mud. Wagon wheels broke. Animals died. Still, the pioneers had to keep on the move. Those that had to cross the Rocky Mountains in the winter usually died.



▲ A wagon train was a group of covered wagons that traveled west together. Usually, there were set trails to follow. Small children and their mothers rode in the wagons. So did the injured and sick. Men rode horses. Everyone else walked, keeping an eye on the pioneers' cattle, dogs, and chickens.

Wagons were called "prairie schooners." From a distance, their white canvas tops looked like sails on a ship. Oxen or mules pulled the wagons. The wagon train traveled 15 to 20 miles (24 to 32 km) a day. The trip to Oregon took between 4 and 6 months.

▲ Families took only their most important possessions, such as clothing, pots and pans, guns, saws, and axes. However, if the wagon broke or an ox died, these possessions were left on the side of the trail to lighten the load.

▲ All pioneers brought along their cooking utensils. The family chickens laid eggs and the cows provided milk. Men hunted antelope for steaks and prairie-chickens for stews. Pioneers cooked their meals over a campfire or under hot coals.