

Character Building on the Oregon Trail

A sign on the classroom door read "Fort Watts." Inside the room was arranged to simulate a fort on the Oregon Trail in the nineteenth century. Looking around the room you could see the chief factor's residence, trading post, jail, ammunition stores, food stores, and a blacksmith shop.

Various artifacts contributed to the atmosphere: a large model of a covered wagon, a trunk that actually made the trip across the Oregon Trail, patchwork quilt, sunbonnet, buffalo hide, beaver skin, gold panning equipment, powder horn, animal trap, bullet mold, and Jew's harp.

To get a taste of life along the Oregon Trail, the children made soap, baked cornbread, and built model forts.

The travelers were divided into three wagon trains. Their desks were arranged in three semicircles within the fort. Each wagon train had a wagon master or trail boss. He or she was responsible for the discipline of the wagon train. Each group had to work together, obeying their trail boss, to see who could make the 2,000-mile journey along the Oregon Trail.

Moving Along the Trail

Across one wall stretched a huge map of the Oregon Trail. Each wagon train was represented by a small wagon that moved along the trail each day. They had to travel 13 miles to move one inch on the map. Each wagon master

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kept a chart of the miles earned or lost.

The wagon trains earned mileage by getting their contracts done on time, reading books about the Oregon Trail, doing research projects, keeping their wagons neat, and participating in group assignments, etc.

They lost mileage for talking out of turn, having messy desks, littering the floor, fighting, disturbing the class, call-

ing names, breaking school rules, or not putting belongings away.

You should have seen how those teams worked together! The wagon master made periodic desk inspections and ordered offenders to clean their desks. He or she would make them behave at recess and would tell them to be quiet if they became noisy.

The wagon master who led the win-

BY DOROTHY EATON WATTS

ning team used persuasion rather than dictatorial commands to keep his group working. He divided up the work, assigning books to read and research projects to do. He even asked for special projects so that his team could make extra miles. He rewarded those who cooperated by bringing them little treats.

Dirk had a real problem with neatness. His desk was always a disaster area, with the mess covering the floor for three feet in all directions. The girls in his wagon train helped him clean up and mothered him. He thrived on the attention and tried his best to keep things put away.

Coping With Disasters

What made the Oregon Trail Game exciting was knowing that each wagon train would have to cope with both scheduled and unexpected delays. At certain points on the map, each wagon train would meet a disaster that set them back from one to five days travel time. Some scheduled disasters were Indian attack, cholera epidemic, snowstorm in the Rockies, flood on the Snake River, and rapids on the Columbia River.

Added to this were surprise disasters that the wagon master drew out of a jar

once or twice a week. Some sample disasters read as follows:

1. Axle breaks on rough road. Lose 10 miles.
2. Child gets lost. Go back to find him. Lose 25 miles.
3. Take wrong fork in the trail. Retrace your steps. Lose 25 miles.
4. Ox dies. Lose 35 miles.
5. Halt wagon train early to hunt for food to replenish your supply. Lose 20 miles.

Occasionally, though, a wagon train would draw a card reading, "Trouble-free day," "Tail wind. Gain 10 miles," or "You come upon an abandoned

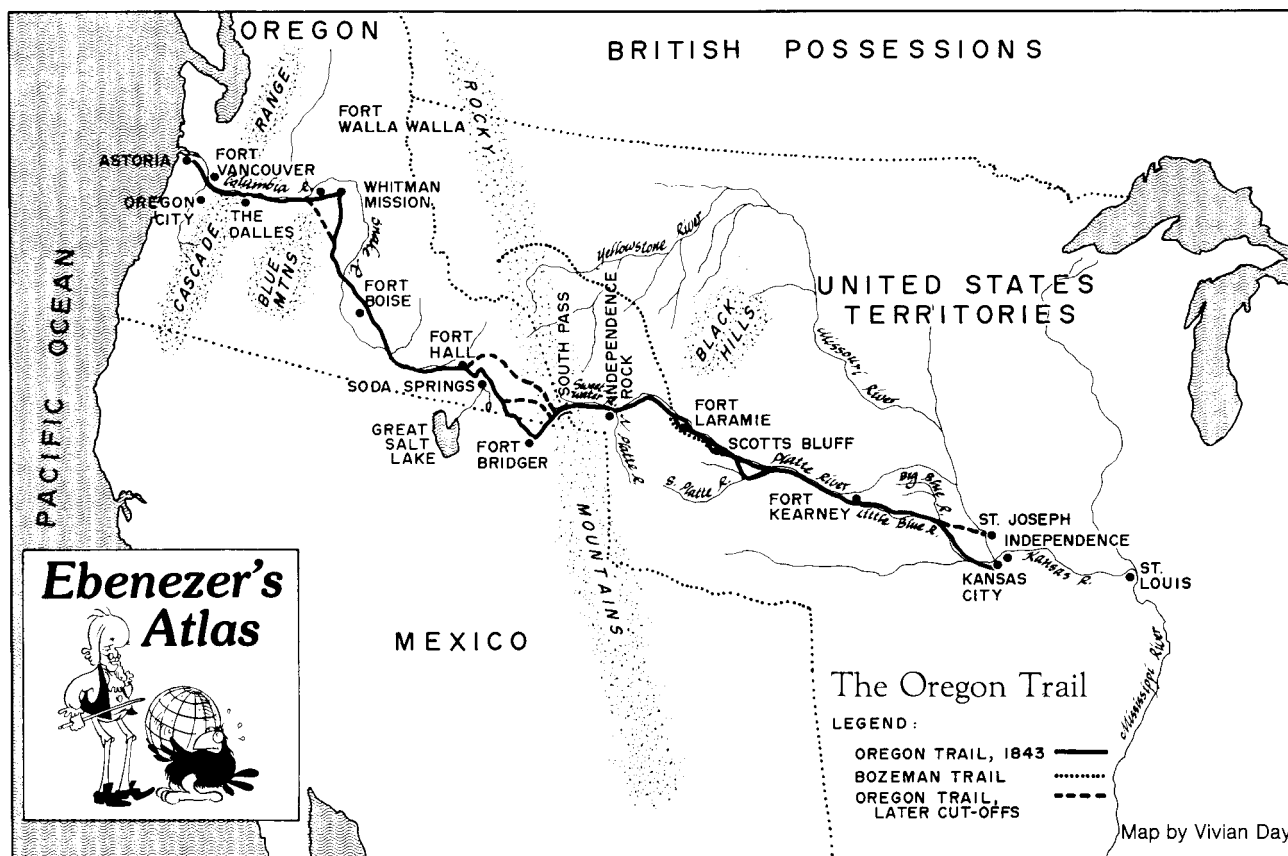
wagon. Take off the wheels and add to your supplies. Gain 50 miles."

On one occasion the wagon train that was leading drew a disaster that lost them only 10 miles. The last train drew a disaster that set them back 45 miles. There were tears. "It's not fair!" the wagon master exclaimed.

"Who said life is fair?" I asked. That led to a discussion about what life was like on the Oregon Trail. It was not fair. Hardships came to good people who were trying hard to reach their goal. It took courage to go on when wagon axles broke and oxen died. I told them I expected them to show the same courage in pressing on in spite of all odds to reach their goal.

When we started our three-month journey each child received a new identity. For instance one child represented Mr. and Mrs. Jedediah P. Smithson from Ohio. They had one horse, a pair of oxen, five chickens, and two cows. They had a 12-year-old girl and two boys, eight and five. Mrs. Smithson was expecting their fourth child. Along the way the baby was born, causing further delay in their trip.

As they journeyed along Mr. Smithson, a blacksmith, found himself much in demand when axles broke on the wagons.



Deciding What to Take

The children spent one day loading their wagons at the outset of the journey. They were allowed only 1,000 pounds. Therefore, they had to choose between food, tools, ammunition, rugs, pianos, seeds, and other useful items.

As troubles occurred along the way, it helped a lot if they had what they needed to meet the emergency. For instance, one disaster read, "If you have axle grease, grease your axles. Gain 10 miles." Another said, "Dry spell. No water for two weeks. Lose 50 miles to look for water. Gain 5 miles for

each barrel of water in your supply wagon."

If an ox died they were sometimes able to trade something they had for another. If a wagon broke down, and couldn't be repaired, they had to find space for their family with someone

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AVAILABLE SUPPLY LIST

DIRECTIONS: The following 92 items represent 92 popular and often vital supplies that were carried by pioneers heading west. Since you cannot take everything, you will have to select those items you believe would be most important to you on the trail and at your homestead in Oregon. You can elect to take as many of each item as you believe necessary for you and your family. Later you will enter the supplies you select on your WAGON TRAIN SUPPLY LIST. The number in parenthesis after each supply is its BULK WEIGHT UNITS (BWU). These BWUs represent a combination of the size and weight of each item. **Remember that your wagon holds only 1000 BWUs.** Notice that as you begin to select supplies, those that are heavy or large soon fill your wagon, while those that are small and light take less room. Select your supplies carefully, considering the uses and importance of each item both on the trail and once you get to Oregon. Very possibly your fate will depend on how wisely you select these supplies.

HOUSEHOLD ITEMS

- pair of candlesticks (2)
- bedding for 1 bed (12)
- 15 yards of material (12)
- baby cradle (15)
- bedpan (2)
- cooking utensils for family (4)
- lantern (3)
- clock (5)
- stool (8)
- 5 candles (1)
- set of dishes (20)
- woven basket (5)
- spinning wheel (25)
- mirror (10)
- match bottle and matches (2)
- cooking pan (6)
- bed (30)
- blanket (7)
- family Bible (5)
- Dutch oven (6)
- wooden bucket (5)
- coffeepot (3)
- butter churn (10)
- cooking stove (75)
- plants (10)
- butter mold (2)
- coffee grinder (6)
- loom (35)
- rocking chair (15)
- pitcher and bowl (10)
- chest for clothing (35)
- family heirlooms (20)
- rug (25)
- table and 4 chairs (50)
- piano or small organ (100)
- 1 gallon coal oil (12)
- needle and thread (1)

PERSONAL ITEMS

- hunting knife (3)
- powder horn (4)
- bag of clothing for 1 person (20)
- children's toys (8)
- guitar (6)
- fiddle (5)
- eating utensils for 1 person (2)
- family first aid kit (10)
- pistol (4)
- rifle (6)
- extra pair of boots (7)
- chaps (8)
- snowshoes (6)

TOOLS

- pickaxe (5)
- 100 feet of rope (6)
- hatchet (4)
- axe (7)
- shovel (7)
- 3-prong pitchfork (6)
- 2-man crosscut saw (7)
- hammer (2)
- corn sheller (25)
- anvil (18)
- 4 steel animal traps (5)
- metal plow (40)
- large grinding stone (20)
- bellows for fire (10)
- vise (5)
- tool assortment (10)
- grain cradle (10)
- twine
- axle grease (13)
- oxen yoke repairs (15)
- hoe (4)
- scythe (7)

FOOD

- 50 lbs. of flour (50)
- 25 lbs. of bacon (30)
- 25 lbs. of vegetables (30)
- 5 lb. tin of fruit (8)
- 25 lbs. of dried beef (25)
- 15 lbs. of salt pork (20)
- 25 lbs. of Pinto beans (25)
- 20 lbs. of sugar (20)
- 5 gal. of vinegar (25)
- assorted spices (5)
- 25 lbs. of salt (30)

MISCELLANEOUS SUPPLIES

- 50 lb. bag of seeds (50)
- chicken coop (12)
- wood box full of wood (25)
- extra keg of gunpowder (20)
- winepress (25)
- 20 gallon barrel of water (60)
- saddle (25)
- feed for 1 pair of animals (30)

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else. Precious belongings had to be discarded along the trail.

The object of the game was to reach Astoria before the end of the quarter so that your wagon train could go to the teacher's house for a party. As the time grew short, it appeared that one wagon train was not going to make it in time. Then a beautiful thing happened. One of the other wagon trains that had already reached Astoria said, "May we go back and help them?"

"Surely," I replied. With their help the slow train with the most difficulties made it just in time. We all got to celebrate.

Learning Self-Discipline

The effect of the Oregon Trail upon discipline in the room was amazing. For several months before the project I kept a record of how many times I had to remind each child to get back on task. In the weeks before the Oregon Trail this averaged one or two times per child per day, or between 100 and 200 times a week.

During the first week of the Oregon Trail, after I put the responsibility on the wagon masters, I had to remind the children only 26 times. That was an average of only once per child per week. Though the rate later increased to 50 times per week, it was still a dramatic improvement.

Some of the lessons I saw my students learn during the Oregon Trail Game were interdependence, cooperation, teamwork, courage, helpfulness, determination, creativity, the value of planning, priorities, self-control, responsibility, and decision making.

The wagon masters developed leadership ability. They also learned to delegate and inspire others to action.

When asked to write about what the class had learned during the Oregon Trail experience, one child wrote, "We learned to work together. We also learned to keep pushing on toward our goal no matter what disasters came our way."

It seems to me that is pretty much what life is all about. □

Scale of Miles

1 inch = 14 miles

7.2 inches = 100 miles

1 yard = 500 miles

Mileage Rates

Each member present = 1 mile

Each lesson contract finished on time = 5 miles

Each lesson contract finished late = 2 miles

Each math star = 1 mile

Desks neat = 1 mile

Each book about pioneers read = 5 miles

Each book about the Oregon Trail read = 10 miles

Trail Hazards

Each person late for school = -1 mile

Writing on desk = -1 mile

Each item on floor = -1 mile

Each person sent from room for disruptive behavior = -5 miles

Sent to the principal for bad behavior = -10 miles

Each time teacher speaks to person off task = -1 mile

Quarreling at recess = -1 to -5 miles (Teacher discretion)

Delays (Faced by every wagon train when they reach that spot)

1. Expect Indian attack. Lose 1 day's average mileage
2. Help fight prairie fire. Lose 1 day's average mileage.
3. Cholera epidemic. Bury dead. Lose 3 days' average mileage.
4. Snowstorm in mountains. Lose 5 days' average mileage.
5. Landslide fills pass. Lose 2 days' average mileage.
6. River at flood. Wait until it goes down. Lose 1 day.
7. Rest and restock supplies. Lose 1 day.
8. Face swift rapids. Look for alternate route. Lose 3 days.

