FAMILY LIFE ON THE TRAIL WEST

What was it like for the women and children on the wagon trains on the epic treks across mid-nineteenth-century America? Elliott West draws on diaries and letters in this portrait of their hopes, fears, trials and tragedies.

The great overland migration is among the best known episodes of the American frontier story. Its familiar images - the creaking covered wagons weaving their slow way, the crack of whips and the straining oxen, the slouch-hatted men watching the horizon for trouble - have inspired scores of paintings, hundreds of novels and poems, and at least a couple of television series.

This was no thin trickling of pioneers. The overland trek was one of the great folk wanderings in the history of the western hemisphere.

Between 1840 and 1865, more than half a million people left the eastern United States to journey to the Pacific coast and to other destinations in the continent's interior, a figure roughly equal to the population of New York City in the 1850s or the combined residents of Texas, Florida, and Rhode Island.

This was also one of the nation's best documented mass experiences. To historians' delight, thousands of pilgrims kept diaries or wrote letters to anxious relatives back home. And that offers an excellent chance to study the workings and the inner life of the American frontier. In particular, the writings of these emigrants can tell us much about the American family, its strengths and weaknesses, and the part it played in pioneering.

Emigrants moved west by several routes. The majority began from half a dozen towns in the Missouri River valley and converged on a trail ascending the Platte River. After crossing a low pass in the Rocky Mountains, the trail divided, with one fork leading to Oregon and the other
through the Mormon settlements in Utah to California. A branch from this
great overland road led to the mining
towns of the northern Rockies. A
southern route crossed the south-
western deserts to California, and
shorter trails ran to Colorado and the
central Rockies.

The crowds on the roads did not
mirror national society exactly. Espe-
cially during the years of gold rush
hysteria (1849-52), their ranks were
dominated by young men, both bach-
elors and husbands who had left
wives and children at home. Officials
at Wyoming’s Fort Laramie kept a
tally of those who passed each year
on their way to California and Ore-
gon. By early June of 1850 they had
counted ninety-nine children, 119
women, and 17,445 men. Those
numbers seem to confirm the familiar
image of a male dominated frontier, a
place of beards and baritones.

But that image is exaggerated.
Families were always an important
cost part of frontier society – on home-
steads of the Great Plains, on desert
ranches, and in mountain mining
camps. And they were a common
sight, too, on the overland trails.
They were in evidence even during the
gold rush years. In May of 1849,
the Connecticut schoolteacher,
Goldsborough Bruff, wrote in his
diary of visiting an extended family
starting out for California, and two
years later the Englishwoman, Louise
Amelia Clappe, met four sisters and
sisters-in-law who had just crossed
the plains to the mines with thirty-six
of their children. ‘They could’, she
thought, ‘form quite a respectable vil-
lage’. Before 1849 and after 1852
families comprised a much greater
portion of emigrants.

These families’ stories reveal much
about the physical and emotional
experience of pioneering. After the
momentous decision to move west,
these pilgrims immediately faced
another question: what to take with
them. The result was a rigorous
gleaning. Most would travel in modi-

fied farm wagons, so the elements of
a new life and mementoes of the old
had to be wedged into about forty
square feet of storage – about the
same space as that in a bathroom of a
modern suburban house. A milch
cow and a dog might be taken along,
and some chickens in cages lashed to
the wagon’s rear.

Leave-taking was among the most

![Manifest destiny? Emmanuel Leutze’s 1861 allegorical painting Westward the Course of Empire takes its way finds space for women and children amidst the bustle of macho men.](image-url)
painful events of these pioneers' lives. Most families considered this giant leap westward a permanent move, and few thought it likely that they would return for visits. Most believed that they were seeing and touching relatives and friends for the last time. Departures were sometimes heart-wrenching scenes of wailing and prayers, of elders clutching frantically at grandchildren and trotting beside the wagons as they began their long roll toward new homes in the West.

Just how long a journey lay ahead depended on the destination and year the trip was taken. A family going to Oregon in the early 1840s might be on the road for twenty-four weeks; by 1860 the trip could be made in a month less. The crossing to Colorado was accomplished in only four or five weeks, practically a dash compared to the long haul to the Pacific. But whatever the trip and however long it lasted, travellers would typically recall the experience as one of the most memorable (and often the most traumatic) of their lives.

For the first couple of weeks, families' spirits were sustained by the exhilaration of fresh sights and experiences. They settled into the rhythms of travel. Women learned to cook biscuits and beans over an open fire while men broke in oxen unused to pulling a wagon all day. Children gathered firewood until they reached the treeless plains, then got their first lessons in gathering the alternative fuel of dried excrement of cattle and bison.

Whatever other changes the journey brought, however, at least one aspect of family life remained much the same. Men were the ultimate sources of authority and the directors of the enterprise. The decision to go West, to be sure, was sometimes made after close consultation between husband and wife. The newlyweds Mollie and Byron Sanford discussed for weeks whether to leave Nebraska for the Colorado gold fields. Then, in April of 1860: 'The die is cast, and we go to Denver in company with the Clarks, whether it will be for weal or woe, we do not know'. But in other instances fathers simply decreed that farms would be sold, belongings loaded, and the trip begun. The Victorian structure of domestic power was carried westward along with bedsteads and porcelain teacups. The family's patterns of labour also remained basically intact. Before leaving, men had been in charge of fields and herds while women commanded the work of the household. Now husbands drove the teams and pastured and guarded them at night while their wives prepared and broke camp, drew water, cooked, and saw to other domestic tasks.

Women, however, were breaking with the past in a way that men were not. Back home in Indiana or Alabama, most wives had drawn upon friends and family for help in their rounds of work, a nexus of physical and emotional support that was relatively more important for women than men. The move West usually shattered that network. The result was a more gruelling load of labour for wives and mothers.

Some wives had another reason for worry. A remarkable number of women started on the road West while pregnant; childbirth among women on the trail, in fact, was about as common as among those who stayed home. When labour began, an emigrant woman might find help from fellow travellers or neighbours in camp. But if not, or if any complications arose, the result would be the stuff of nightmares. And even if all went well, pregnancy on the trail, with its numbing burden of work, the stifling heat, and the thousands of hours in a jolting, rolling wagon, was no fun.

No wonder, then, that women were more likely than men to resist cutting their ties to home and heading for the Pacific. The rhythms of travel, furthermore, allowed men somewhat more time for leisure. A husband's day was one of exhausting labour punctuated by periods of inactivity. Mothers, by contrast, faced the endless duties of child care from before dawn to after dark. When parties paused occasionally for a day or so, husbands often lounged, visited and slept while their wives caught up on mending and other chores. Mollie Sanford's first Sunday on the plains in May of 1860 offered no reprieve: 'We have to roast and bake, and clean up generally, as the men will not stop of week days'. A month later she noted in her diary that her party was halting for a day of rest. Then she caught herself: 'Rest? Where is the rest for us?'

But too much can be made of these distinctions. The trip was a brutal,

Everything bar the kitchen sink: this 1869 sketch shows bedsteads and farm implements piled up in the wagons by the camp fire while the 'little woman' sews.
wearing experience for both sexes. During the day swarms of gnats and horseflies attacked people and beasts alike. Night brought clouds of mosquitoes that even veterans of southern and mid-western swamps found almost beyond imagination. Past the first 500 miles, just as deep fatigue was setting in, emigrants entered the high plains, with its deep sands that dragged at the wagon-wheels and wore at the oxen's hooves. Then came the Rocky Mountains, and beyond them a vast, stony desert, a furnace in the summer. For much of the crossing the columns of wagons were shrouded in suffocating clouds of dust. The plains were swept by a constant wind that kept eyes and mouths filled with grit. The region's legendary thunderstorms overturned wagons, tossed about the tents, scattered the stock, drenched bedding and clothing, and left everyone, children especially, with indelible memories. Jesse Applegate recalled a night on the trail in 1845:

Sometime during the night I suddenly awoke. The rain was pouring down into my face, my eyes were blinded by the glare, the wind was roaring like a furnace, and the crash of thunder was terrible and almost continuous. I could see nothing but what looked like sheets of fire, and hear nothing but the wind, the pouring rain, and the howling thunder... In the morning the little river had overflowed its banks and the encampment was flooded.

The daily grind left the travellers' tempers chafed and raw. Before long they were shouting at one another and sometimes doing worse. At times like these, children were especially vulnerable. Lavinia Porter described an outburst of violence in a nearby camp on the trail to Colorado in 1860. When some children played a prank on a man, he began beating them furiously with an ox goad. The youngsters' mother, who had been slumped in exhaustion, came to life in an instant:

With one bound, like an enraged tigress, she cleaved the wagon, catching up a horse whip as she ran, and soon reached the man, who was so unmercifully beating her children. Her attack was so sudden that he was unprepared for the onslaught. She rained quick and sturdy blows on his head, face, arms, anywhere in her blind fury. It required the combined efforts of two men of the company to make her desist. The man whom she had beaten was wild to chastise her in return, but those who had separated the angry couple protected the woman. The boys in the meantime had scamped out of sight. After many hot words, a truce was declared and the commotion died down. I comforted myself with the thought that we were not obliged to travel with such an inharmonious company.

W.T. Parker witnessed a similar brawl during his 1850 trip to Colorado: 'The woman pulled considerable hair out of the man's head.' Fights between men were more frequent. Most ended with little damage, but some were bloody affairs.

Open violence within families, on the other hand, was rare, although some beatings and abuse doubtless occurred in private. Quarrels, however, were another matter. The stress of work, discomfort, and close quarters were upon the cheeriest dispositions and the strongest marriages. With one small child and another on the way, Lavinia Porter asked her husband to drive a quarter mile off the road to gather some wood to save her a precious hour of gathering buffalo chips during their 1860 trip to Colorado. Worn down from driving cattle, he refused. She withdrew to the wagon in tears, telling him to cook his own dinner, and when he brought her some food as an apology, the undercooked corn left her sick (and unable to cook) for three more days. For the rest of the trip, the husband proved more accommodating. Occasionally these squabbles became more serious, as in a family making the crossing in 1847. Several hundred miles down the trail, the exhausted wife refused to go another yard toward the Pacific. When her husband insisted, she set their wagon afire.

In a few extreme cases, the bond of family was strained beyond the breaking point. There were rare reports of fathers walking away from wives and youngsters during the journey. In 1849, near the end of the trail in California, Goldsborough Bruff found a boy left behind by his father. The stress of the trip may have had lingering, pernicious effects. The divorce rate in western communities was the nation's highest, and its most common cause was abandonment. One wonders how much of that splintering had its start on the passage across the continent.

There was a far more frequent force separating husbands from wives and children from parents - death. Given the trying circumstances of travel, the mortality rate among overlanders - 5 or 6 per cent - was surprisingly low, but the risk of dying
was still far greater than if families had stayed home. Emigrants had some sense of this, and they started West with trepidation. Their particular fears, however, were misdirected. A tiny number of travellers died from snakebites, but virtually none fell prey to other beasts. Historian John Unruh has shown that more Indians were slain by whites than vice versa, and in any case the odds of being killed by a native were probably less than of falling down a well back home on the farm.

Travellers died instead from carelessness and chance. Fathers were mortally wounded when pulling rifles barrel-first out of their supply boxes. Women and children drowned when their wagons were swept down rivers swollen by spring rains. Boys and girls fell beneath the wheels of moving wagons. Some, amazingly, were unhurt, pressed into the deep dust of the road. Most, however, were killed or severely injured.

Disease was the most voracious killer by far. The overland trail was an ideal breeding ground for contact illnesses. As they moved across the sweeping openness of mid-continent, emigrants, paradoxically, suffered from overcrowding. Never before or after would they be pressed together so closely with so many persons. In each congested stopping place was the garbage and human waste from thousands of previous campers. All travellers drew upon the same water sources. These trails were as unhealthy an environment as New York's lower east side or the courts of back-to-back flats in East London.

Typhus, measles, scarlet fever and diphtheria struck early in the trip. During the second half of the journey, hundreds died from 'mountain fever', a term probably describing a variety of infections, including one carried by ticks indigenous to the Rockies. Dysentery plagued the emigrants from start to finish. The greatest scourge, Asiatic cholera, raged along the trails from 1849 to 1852. Travellers grew familiar with the terrifying symptoms - high fever, diarrhoea, swelling of the tongue, delirium and hallucinations. John Clark told in his diary in 1852 of seeing 'one woman and two men lying [dead] on the grass and some more ready to die'. Later he wrote of 'men... running about through the crowd hunting Physicians [and] enquiring for medicine'.

While most families escaped this plague, some were devastated. Letters and diaries of the trail are full of appalling details. Ezra Meeker met a returning column of eleven wagons, all driven by women; every man in the party had died of cholera. The forty-niner Vincent Hoover told of a family whose daughter showed the first symptoms at noon and succumbed by early evening. A brother and sister, taken the same day, were
buried together. 'Yesterday passed grave of a woman, today saw husband buried, with children left to go on with strangers', John Clark wrote. Later he told of finding a young girl walking the trail, well behind her party:

She was crying, and as I took her into my arms [I] discovered that her little feet were bleeding by coming in contact with the sharp flint stone upon the road. I says why do you cry, does your feet hurt you, see how they bleed. No (says she) nothing hurts me now. They buried my father and mother yesterday, and I don't want to live any longer. They took me away from my sweet mother and put her in the ground.

Survivors felt a special pain. Having left kin and friends behind, they now had to bury loved ones in alien soil, abandoned in what Louise Clappe called 'this boundless city of the dead'.

These episodes had an especially powerful effect on children. Here, for the first time, many grasped the full reality of death and its implications. The particulars could be grisly. Hurried travellers often laid bodies in shallow graves, which were quickly invaded by the packs of wolves and coyotes that always prowled at a camp's edge. Children at play found scattered skeletons and body parts. The two Stewart sisters, off on a stroll, found a woman's head, a comb still in its hair. At times the overland trail must have seemed more like Golgotha than the place of pristine beauty and wonder that many had imagined.

Yet for all the journey's trials – the exhaustion, irritations, and occasional horrors, the stresses and conflicts – families proved remarkably resilient and adaptive. What strikes the modern reader is the degree to which these pilgrims protected and preserved domestic pleasures and intimacies. Couples found time for walks and quiet chats. At least one overlander, John Lewis, believed the experience was a sexual inspiration. 'Love is hotter her[c] than anywhere than I have seen. [W]hen they love here they love with all thare mite & some times a little harder (sic)', he wrote.

Children would generally recall the trip as a pleasant and exciting time. They passed the days exploring along the route and playing with parents and among themselves. They devised new amusements from their chores, including a contest from gathering animal dung, and they carried westward traditional games, some dating back as far as medieval England.

Such child's play was just one demonstration of an important lesson of the overland experience – the pioneers' profoundly conservative nature. Young and old seemed determined to carry into the new country attitudes and patterns of behaviour woven through their mother culture. Joel Palmer looked around his camp on the way to Oregon in 1845 and concluded: 'Such is but a miniature of the great world we have left behind us'. Wagons were jammed with what they chose as the essentials of their heritage. In times of leisure and chores they read from periodicals and minor novels and from Dickens, Dumas, Bunyan, Coleridge, Scott, Milton, Pope and more: 'Read four chapters of Proverbs, part of As You Like It, shot at mark five times, two hundred and thirty yards', Charles Post wrote in his diary in 1859, and on the same road five years later Mrs V.F. Creek 'spent the remainder of the day with Mrs Jones, I sewing while she read aloud Locksley Hall. I do not know when I have enjoyed anything so thoroughly'.

Families amused themselves with traditional rhymes, riddles, and jokes. They held mock trials. They sang hymns and sea shanties, sentimental ballads and traditional rounds to the accompaniment of guitars, banjos, fiddles, cornets, flutes, tambourines, and bones. One family squeezed a piano into their wagon. Higher musical culture was not entirely neglected. Along the Arkansas River in 1859, Dr George Willing heard melodies from Mozart and Beethoven played at a nearby campsite; James Meline was awakened by soldiers singing selections from The Barber of Seville.

This cultural transfer showed travellers how much they had in common, but it also exposed them to new – and, to some, unwanted – characters from the republic's and Europe's diverse peoples. Americans ridiculed Germans and Frenchmen, southerners bristled at what they thought was Yankee aloofness, and New Englanders were appalled at southern habits. Lavinia Porter described her neighbours along the Platte River in 1860:

Sitting around their wagons were other unkempt [sic] soiled and bedraggled women, most of them lean, angular, and homely, nearly every one of them chewing on a short stick, which they occasionally withdrew and swabbed around in a box containing some black powder, while a muddy stream oozed from the corners of their polluted mouths. It was evident to the most casual observer that they were snuff dippers from Arkansas or Tennessee.

This cultural bumping and shoving revealed another theme of pioneer family life. For parents like this shocked Yankee mother, moving West was painfully paradoxical. To them, the new country was economically alluring and culturally threaten-
ing; as their children moved toward economic opportunity, they might also pull away from the values and traditions that assured that they would use that opportunity in honourable and proper ways. The trails, like the mining camps and farms at the other end, became social schools in which parents, and especially mothers, tried to resolve that paradox.

One reason for bringing along books was to tutor children both in reading fundamentals and their literary heritage. As she rolled toward Colorado in 1861, young Emma Hill was taught with romances, hymnals, and, appropriately, Pilgrim’s Progress. Tired mothers tested sons and daughters on multiplication tables and on readings from Rollins’ Ancient History. There were biblical lessons and, if a minister was available, Sunday services. With these came a thousand subtler messages. Mothers had been reared to make their houses ‘home-like’, a domestic enshrinement of Victorian teachings on behaviour and order, and even here, in the stover camps by the Platte, Sweetwater, or Humboldt, they carried out the duty. When the teenager, Mary Ronan, entered a neighbours’ tent, she found ‘it had to be fixed just so. It was just like stepping into a parlour’.

The interplay between adaptation and tradition, difficulties and pleasures continued throughout the trip. An observer at the trail’s end would have seen some of the results. Near the end of the trail in Oregon, the newly widowed Angelina Crews, having killed her last ox to feed her family, sent her nine famished sons and daughters into the forest to find what they could: ‘the children all would... smoke the wood mice out of the Logs and Rost and Eat them.’ Goldsborough Bruff was reduced to eating a bluebird and a candle (with salt and pepper). Others fared differently. ‘Kate is as fat as a pig’, T. J. Ables wrote of his daughter from California in 1857.

Many emigrants limped and staggered the final miles. Bruff saw a father with two daughters, aged ten and twelve, labouring under heavy packs. Having lost their oxen and wagon, they had put a few belongings on their backs and kept going. Many others had cast overboard cabinetry, chests, silverware, and clothing to ease their weary teams and battered wagons; they arrived with a few books and precious personal items, reminders of an earlier life.

The travellers’ condition suggests the ambivalent and complex legacy of westward settlement. Just as emigrants were forced to toss aside some belongings while keeping others, so they carried into the West a Victorian culture modified by stresses and demands of its new setting. The tribulations of mothers and fathers, daughters and sons anticipated the trials of pioneering; their survival and the pleasures they made suggested the remarkable flexibility and strength of the most important institution in westward expansion – the family.

At the trail’s end, most recognised that they had completed both a trip and a testing, a passage both of geography and character. It was now time to look ahead. ‘Tomorrow our long march will be ended,’ Mollie Sanford wrote on the eve of arrival. ‘I am thankful we are alive. I ought to think more of this than other affairs.’

FOR FURTHER READING:

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Journey’s end! A pioneer family of 1899 – by which time the epic treks west had all but drawn to a close.