

It was also very important to know how to find your way back to the wagon train if you got lost out on the prairie. The trail was usually close to the river. So you would be safe if you could find your way to the water.

If you had gone out exploring on the prairie, it wasn't always easy to see the river. Although the land looked flat, the rivers usually ran in a valley. Sometimes the sides of the river banks were sixty feet high.

The secret was to follow the buffalo tracks. The buffalo walked in single file — many rows of them — to the river to drink. They used the same paths over and over again. So their paths were sometimes ten inches deep and a foot wide. You couldn't miss them.

The pioneers also learned how to leave messages on the trail for wagons coming after them. Sometimes notes were written on the bones of cattle that had died along the way.

Another way to leave messages was to cut a slit in a stick, put a piece of paper with your message on it

into the slit, and stand the stick in the ground near the trail so that the next wagon train could see it.

Sometimes messages told you that a cow had been lost and would you please watch to see if you could find it. Other notes might tell you that there was a good place to camp up ahead. Sometimes notes just sent greetings to friends.





Right: Otto Sommer's painting of the Oregon trail, Westward Ho!



Above: With this folding pocket sundial and compass, the Captain can tell both time and direction.

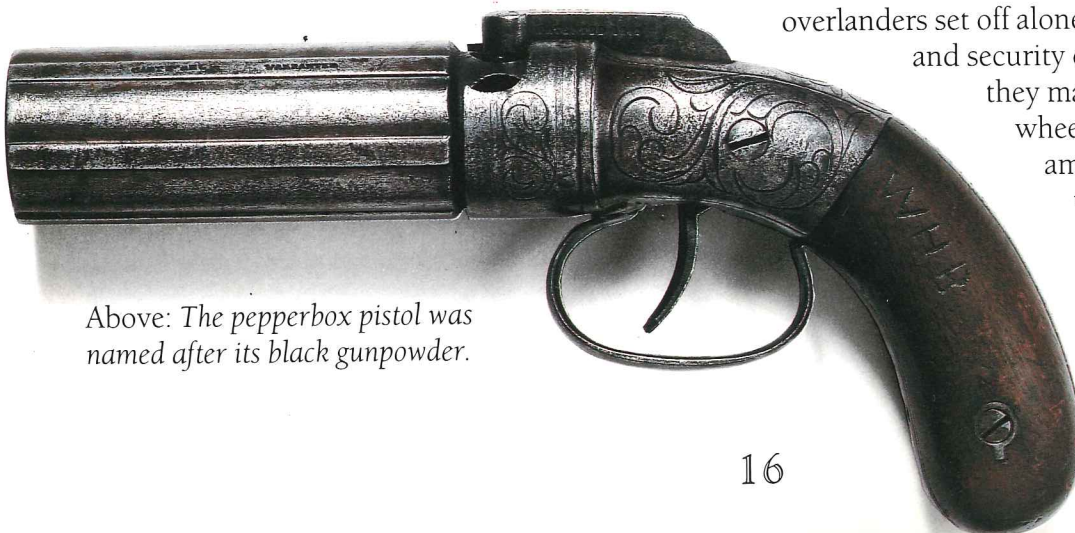


ROLLING THE TRAIN

At 7 a.m. a bugle sounds. As the women bundle away the last of the cookware, the men shout commands to their teams. "Roll the wagons!" shouts the captain of the wagon train. The first wagon moves out of the camp, and soon the whole company has spread out across the prairie in a growing cloud of dust.

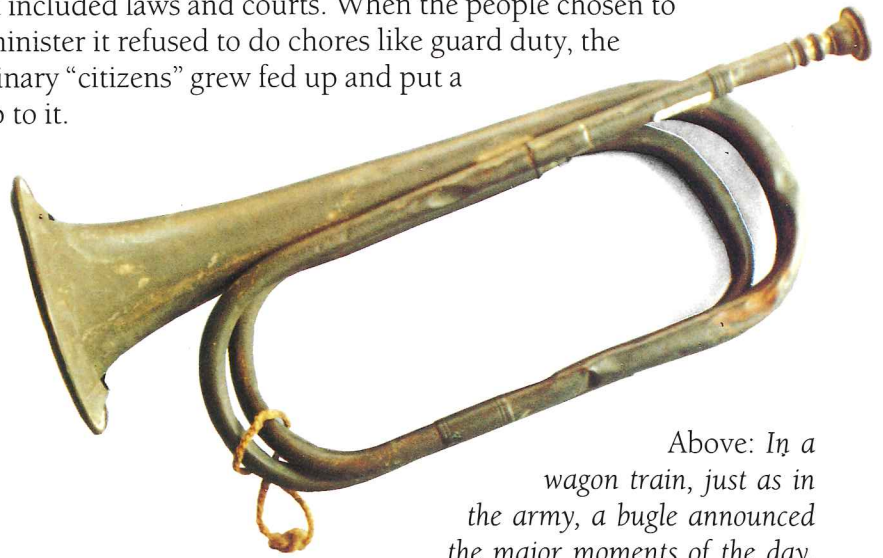
There are 60 families in the Larkins' wagon train. Some of these are old friends from Franklin County, Indiana, with whom the Larkins have been sharing travel plans for many months, and there is a larger party from Illinois. Finally, there are assorted smaller groups from Missouri.

Even after the trail has become well worn, few overlanders set off alone, preferring the support and security of a large group. Together, they make up a sort of village on wheels, with men of all trades amongst the travelers. Like a village, the wagon train needed some sort of government, and meetings were held to elect a captain.



Above: The pepperbox pistol was named after its black gunpowder.

One early party even worked out a miniature government system that included laws and courts. When the people chosen to administer it refused to do chores like guard duty, the ordinary "citizens" grew fed up and put a stop to it.



Above: In a wagon train, just as in the army, a bugle announced the major moments of the day.



"We have elected Captain Bonner, of Weston, Missouri, to lead our company. The Illinois men might have preferred one of their own, but even they must admit that he is an expert with a bullwhip and handles the cattle very well."

Mr. Larkin's Diary

Below: The captain's spyglass, pipe, and a fold-away knife for carving and whittling.



The Captain

James J. Bonner is captain of the Larkins' wagon train. A man of great experience, he already has crossed the plains in both directions and

knows the trail quite well, so the Larkins' party decided to hire him instead of a professional guide. Captain Bonner is responsible for all the major decisions about the wagon train:

The route they will travel, the time for starting and halting each day, the site where they will camp for the night, the site for the midday "nooning" (see page 29), the posting of guards and the daily rotation of the wagons.

Rotation was necessary because no one wanted to be at the end of a dusty wagon train every day!

Captain Bonner is worried because there has been a lot of rain. Although this means that there will be a good supply of grass for the animals, swollen streams and mud will slow down the wagons. The party will need to make good time to get to the mountain passes before they are blocked by snow. If they fail, they will have to spend the winter on the eastern side of the Blue Mountains.

Into the Unknown

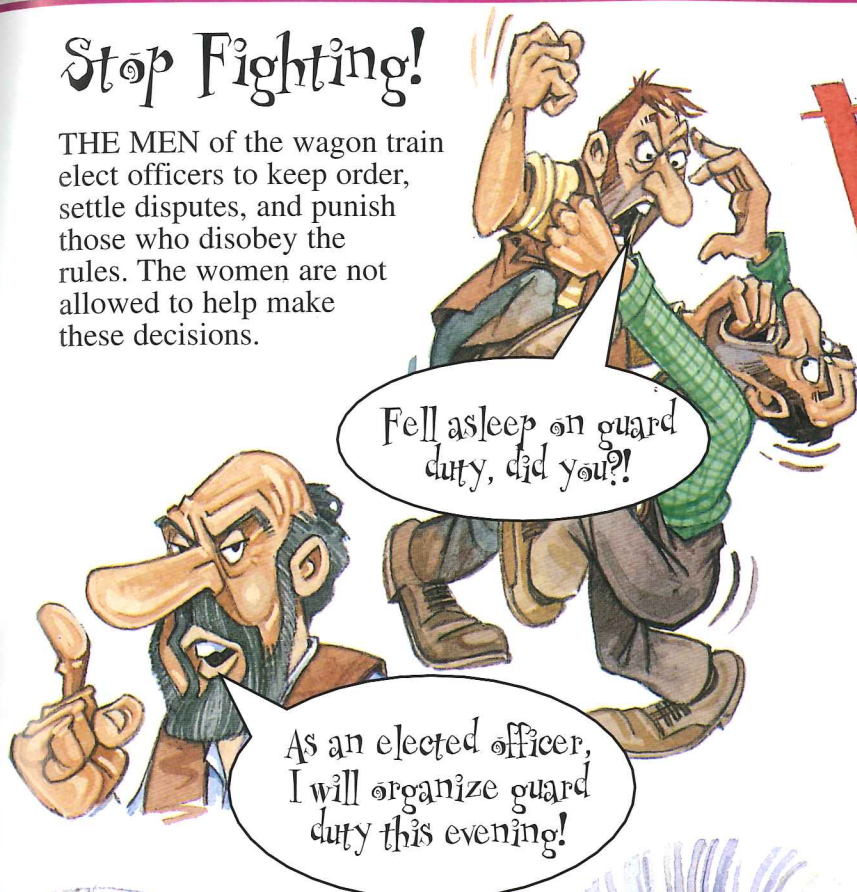
The pioneer families set off in a long line of wagons. Wagon drivers race to get to the front of the line to avoid the dust stirred up by other wagons. Going too fast exhausts the oxen and mules that pull the wagons. Two miles an hour (3.2 kph) is all they can do comfortably. It is not long before people are bickering.

No one can agree when to stop for a rest, where to camp, or who should keep watch at night. It is soon clear that rules and a daily routine will have to be established. Don't grumble when you are woken at dawn to get moving, and don't sneak off when it is your turn for guard duty at night.



Stop Fighting!

THE MEN of the wagon train elect officers to keep order, settle disputes, and punish those who disobey the rules. The women are not allowed to help make these decisions.



Handy Hint



Don't start your journey too early in the year, or there won't be enough grass growing to feed your animals. Don't leave too late, though, or you won't get over the mountains before they are blocked by snow.



ALONG the TRAIL

The emigrants came to understand the harsh realities of their journey as they passed by the many graves along the Trail. Many of the emigrants died during cholera epidemics. Cholera was caused by bacteria, which thrived in the crowded, unsanitary campgrounds along the Trail. The emigrants could do little to prevent or cure cholera. Cholera resulted in severe diarrhea, heavy sweating, and often vomiting. The sick died very quickly.

Harriet Marshall - May 13, 1852

All it seems to do is rain. Everything is soaked. Nothing ever dries. Many families have sick ones. We leave them behind and hope they find us. Medicine does not seem to help. But I make William, Tom, Sarah, and Henry take castor oil every day. I had to chase Henry to make him take it. William says we will soon be at Courthouse Rock. We found the grave of my nephew, Liddy's son. We prayed over it and left flowers. I fear losing a child on this journey.

