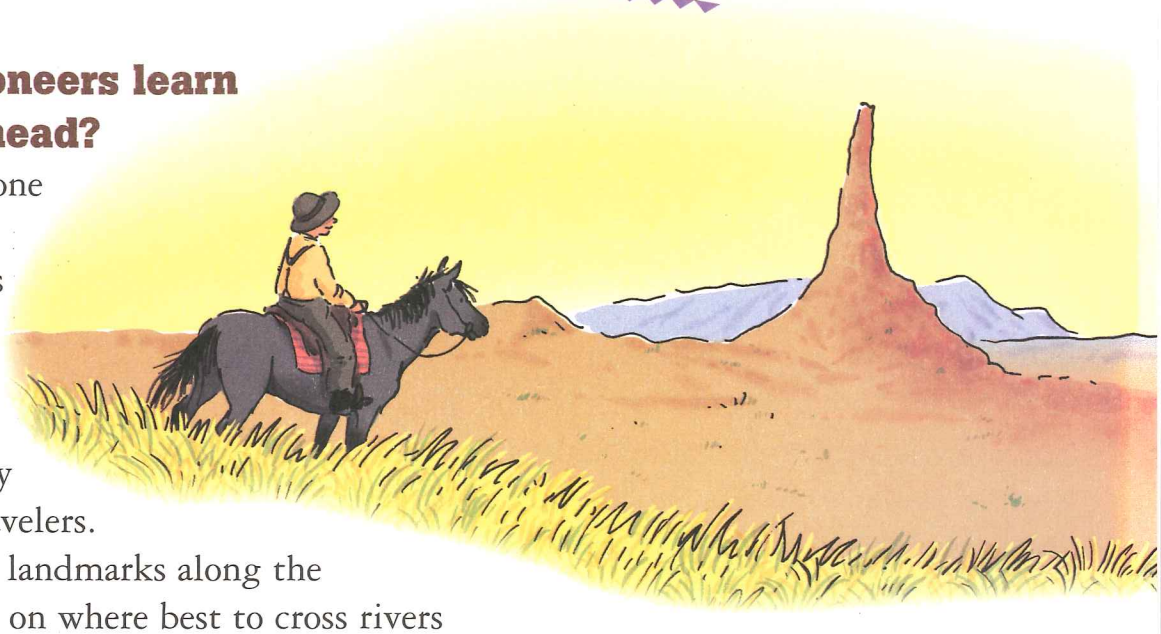
LANDMARKS

How did the pioneers learn what was up ahead?

From those who'd gone before them. By 1845, many pioneers owned guidebooks, like *The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California,* written by scouts and earlier travelers. The books described landmarks along the trail and gave advice on where best to cross rivers and camp for the night.



Sometimes pioneers learned what was up ahead from *go-backs,* discouraged pioneers who had turned around to go back east. These travelers were said to have "seen the elephant." This expression suggested they'd seen something new and different—the hardships of the West—and didn't want any part of it.

To see for themselves what was coming up, some members of the wagon train rode ahead on horses. An even better source of information, pioneers found, was a message system called the "roadside telegraph": notes from earlier travelers scrawled on paper and attached to trees, placed under rocks, or wedged into notched sticks stuck into the ground. Other times pioneers painted their messages right onto rocks or onto the skulls of cows, oxen, deer, or even humans. Some messages were notes to friends, but others warned of danger. One message read, "Look at this—look at this! The water here is poison, and we have lost six of our cattle. Do not let your cattle drink on this bottom."

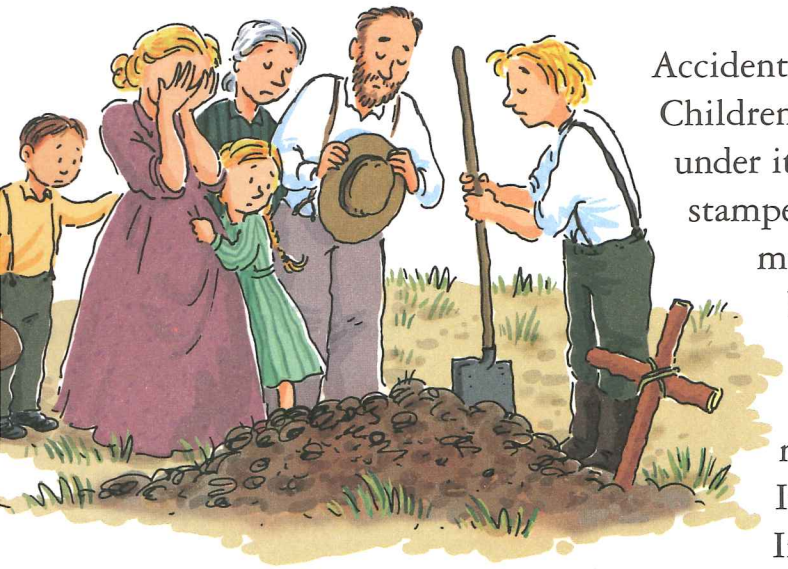
TRAIL DANGERS

What was the greatest danger to pioneers on the westward trails?

a) accidents
c) Indians
b) sickness
d) buffalo

All these things were dangerous, but the answer is *b*. Of the thousands of pioneers who died on the journey west, most were victims of diseases such as cholera, measles, smallpox, typhoid, or dysentery. Pioneers did have medicines and herbs, but no one knew much about treating these diseases.

> "One day a [buffalo] herd came in our direction like a great black cloud, a threatening moving mountain, advancing toward us very swiftly and with wild snorts, noses almost to the ground and tails flying in midair. . . . One [wagon] was completely demolished and two were overturned. Several persons were hurt."
>
> —FROM THE DIARY OF CATHERINE HAUN, A YOUNG BRIDE, 1849



Accidents were the next biggest cause of death. Children fell from the wagon and were crushed under its wheels; people were trampled in buffalo stampedes or drowned during river crossings; men on watch at night shot one another by accident. Travelers got lost, starved, froze to death, or unknowingly drank alkali water, which contained deadly mineral salts. Very few were killed by Indians. (In fact, pioneers killed more Indians than the other way around.)

No one knows how many pioneers traveled west on the overland trails, but the number is probably somewhere between 250,000 and 650,000. We do know that at least 20,000 people died on the journey, which averages about ten graves per mile of trail.

Another problem was sickness. Some people became very ill with high fevers and aches and pains. Both grown-ups and children got diseases called cholera and malaria. Sometimes they died on the trip. You would pass many grave markers by the side of the trail as your wagon went by.

Today there is medicine to keep you from getting these diseases, and to cure you if you do get them. People didn't know as much about diseases and medicines in the 1840s as they do today.

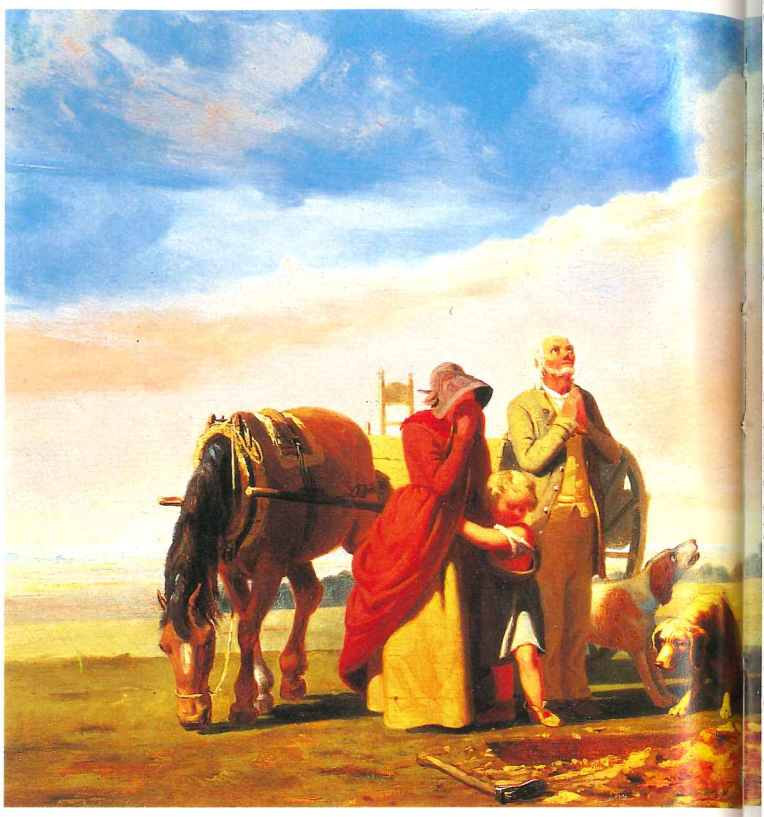
Sickness & Death

Of nearly 300,000 emigrants who headed west between 1840 and 1860, around 30,000, or one in ten, died along the way. Some diaries speak of practically nothing but death and burial. Accidents accounted for the deaths of some of the overlanders. Diary accounts tell of little children falling out of wagons and being crushed beneath the wheels, of people being shot by night guards who mistook them for Indians trying to steal their livestock, and of men being swept away and drowned when they tried to herd their cattle across raging rivers.

Left: *A wooden tombstone like this was unusual. Most graves were simply mounds of earth.*

"July 11. Passed 15 graves. Made 13 mi. July 12. Passed 5 graves. Saw 8 dead cattle. Made 10 mi."
Mr. Larkin's Diary

However, the most common cause of death on the trail was disease: Measles, typhoid, mountain fever, the "bloody flux," or dysentery, and above all the dreaded cholera. Asiatic cholera, carried by rats on ships, arrived in American port cities in late 1848 and 1849 and from there it spread to anywhere with poor water supplies and bad plumbing. Even cities such as St. Louis lost a tenth of their population, and the wagon trains, who were camping and watering every day with no proper toilets, in the same places as all the previous trains had camped, were particularly hard hit by the disease.



Above: Prairie Burial, *c. 1848. Painting by William Tylee Ranney. Even if a person was in the best of health, a serious attack of cholera could kill in a single day.*

Like most overlanders, the Larkins have a variety of medicines: Laudanum (tincture of opium) and camphor for cholera, hartshorne for snakebites, citric acid for scurvy, castor oil for bowel disorders, borax and alum for boils and sores, and whiskey and various dried herbs for everything else.

Doctors

If someone was very ill, the party might try to summon a doctor. Often traveling by wagon train themselves, doctors advertised their services and let people know where they were by posting notices on the "roadside telegraph." Their fees varied considerably. Some took payment only for medicines, while others charged a fee for visiting the patient. Typical charges might be $2 for seeing a cholera

REMEDIES FOR
CHOLERA
As prescribed by the Edinburgh Board of Health, and approved of by the Faculty of New-York.

CAREFULLY PREPARED BY JEFFERSON B. NONES,
APOTHECARY AND CHEMIST,
NO. 6441 BROADWAY, NEW-YORK.

NO. 1.—CHOLERA MIXTURE.

A table-spoonful with 60 drops of Laudanum, in half a wine-glassful of cold water. If this fail to relieve, repeat two spoonsful with 50 drops of Laudanum every half hour. Half these doses of mixture and laudanum, for children of 14. One-fourth for children of 7. Do not exceed the doses prescribed; and stop when the vomiting and cramps cease, unless you have medical advice.

NO. 2.—BOTTLE OF LAUDANUM.

To be used if the mixture No. 1 be vomited. Two pills at first, and then one every half hour, if the first fail to relieve. Half these doses for children of 14; one-fourth for children of 7. Do not exceed the doses prescribed, and stop when the vomiting and cramp cease, unless you have medical advice.

NO. 3.—CHOLERA PILLS.

NO. 4.—CHOLERA CLYSTERS.

Inject three tea-spoonsful in a wine-glassful of thin warm gruel, and retain as long as possible by pressure below with a warm cloth; if not retained, repeat immediately, but otherwise not. Half the dose for children of 14—one fourth for children of 7.

NO. 5.—MUSTARD POULTICES.

A fourth part is enough for one person. Dust it thickly over porridge poultices, of which apply a large one on the belly, and others on the soles and calves. Remove when the patient complains much of the smarting.

Above: *Advertisement for cholera remedies.*

victim and up to $5 for an amputation or for setting a broken limb.

But even doctors knew little about the cause and prevention of cholera. It was not until 1865 that Louis Pasteur demonstrated that germs cause diseases like cholera.

The doctors did know that dirty water was associated with the disease, but they did not realize that boiling the water would kill the deadly germs. It is very lucky for the Larkins that they like to drink strong boiled coffee with every meal. This makes them much less likely to catch cholera.

Even overlanders like the Larkins who remained fairly healthy still had the never-ending nuisance of mosquito bites to put up with. It was common for people to be bitten so many times that their blood stopped being able to clot.

Left: *A portable medical case.*

Right: *Quinine was used to treat the disease malaria, which overlanders caught from mosquito bites.*

"So many of our company have died of the cholera that I cannot recount all their names. The burials have been at night on account of Indians robbing the graves for wearing apparel. The graves are concealed by building a fire on them and then driving the entire train of wagons over them when we break camp in the morning."
Mrs. Larkin's Diary

Other emigrants died from accidents. Inexperienced around animals and wagons, some were trampled or killed by falls. Others drowned during river crossings. Families stood on the banks watching helplessly as their loved ones were swept away. Still others were killed during fierce lightning storms. The graves along the Trail were a constant reminder of how dangerous the journey was.

Sarah Marshall - May 17, 1852

I walked ten miles today. We left behind two wagons. The people were very sick. I'm glad we saw Courthouse Rock. It is beautiful and looks just like a castle. We carved our names at the top. All we see now are dead oxen or graves. There are lots of bones shining in the hot sun. Henry and Mrs. Harris have counted 98 graves. She wears black and just sits there counting. Tom calls her Grim Reaper. I'm going to mail my drawing of Courthouse Rock to Emily.

Harriet Marshall - May 22, 1852

Henry's friend died today. He was well, he got sick, and then he died, all in three hours. Poor Henry went from counting graves to digging them. I worry so about our family.