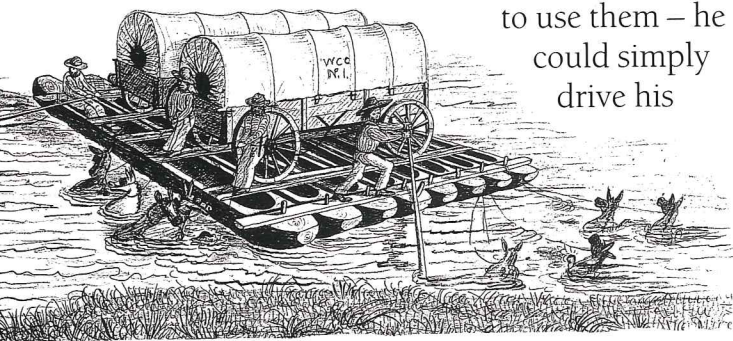




CROSSING A RIVER

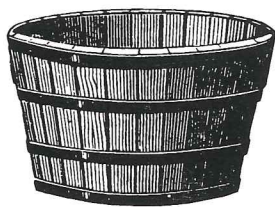
The wagon trail followed the course of rivers, which were important because they provided water and grass. However, they had to be crossed again and again, often with some difficulty. By the time of the Larkins' journey, there were many ferries. They made crossing safer and easier, but heavy traffic on the trail sometimes created delays of several days, and prices were high. If there was no bridge or ferry – or if the overlander did not have enough money

to use them – he could simply drive his



wagon across the river or stream at its shallowest spot, with his family inside.

Mr. Larkin, whose guidebooks were out-of-date, had not expected the extra expense, so he usually makes the livestock swim across and puts only the wagon on the ferry. He is annoyed by the delay of waiting for the ferry, but Mrs. Larkin is delighted to have a chance to do the laundry. Lacking firewood, she and Rachel must make do with cold water and lots of strong soap. The soap was homemade, from a liquid called lye which was got from ashes and animal fat.



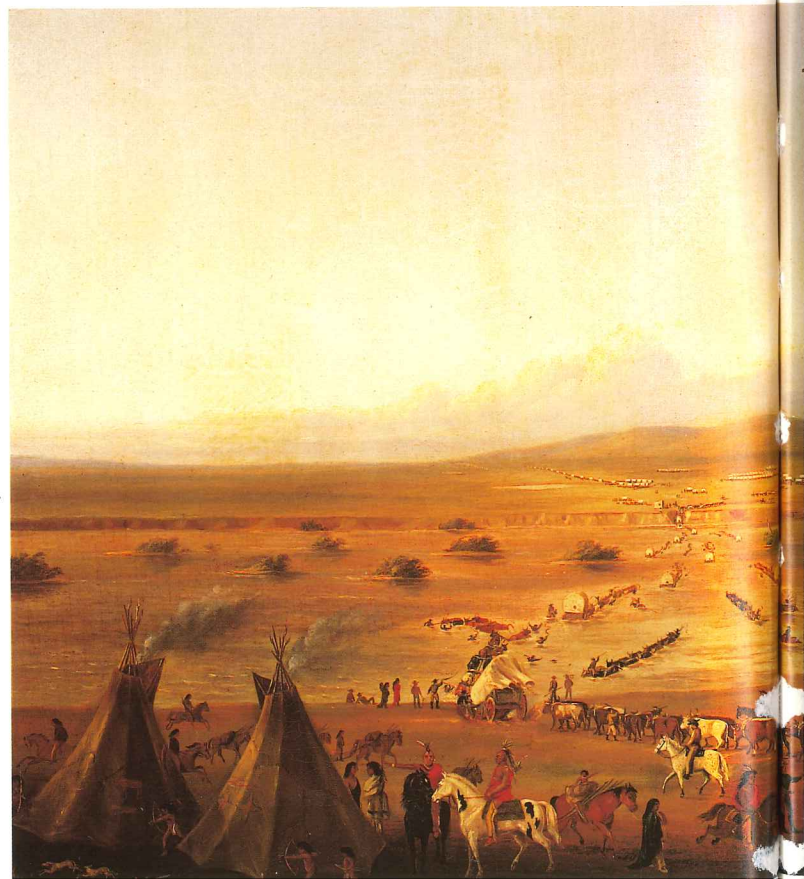
After a thorough rubbing, the clothing is rinsed, wrung out, and hung on any available bushes to dry. If there are no bushes, it may simply be put on wet.

“Mother and I burnt our arms very badly while washing. They were red and swollen and painful as though scalded with boiling water.” Rachel Larkin's Diary



Above: Good fords were not always easy to find. Hidden boulders or quicksand could wreck a wagon, like the abandoned one shown here, or it might overturn in a tricky current.

Below: If the water was too deep to drive across, there was no alternative but to tow the wagon across with the swimming cattle, as this painting shows. Mr. Larkin usually asks Matt to ride ahead of the wagon and look out for any dangers.



the Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma

How would you cross rivers when there were no bridges?

It wasn't easy crossing rivers back in the 1840s. The covered wagons started West from towns on the Missouri River. So, often the very first thing you had to do on the trip was to cross a river. One place to start from was a town called Independence.

Independence was a small town with a few farms, some stores that made and fixed wagons and wheels, and many people sleeping in tents waiting to begin their trip West.

Large flat boats called scows would take the wagons across the Missouri River. But the horses, cows, and oxen had to swim across because they couldn't fit on the scows. The covered wagon had blocks of wood placed in front and in back of its wheels so that it wouldn't roll off the scow.

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Once the wagons crossed the Missouri River into Kansas and Nebraska, the pioneers were in Indian territory. Sometimes Indians had rafts and would ferry you across rivers. You would have to pay them with money or beads or something else they wanted.

Sometimes you crossed rivers on rafts that you would help to build. You would tie together willow branches and put thick, long grasses called rushes on top. Then you would roll the wagon onto the raft and ferry it across the river.

Most of the time you would seal the wagon tight by filling in all the cracks in the wood with tar or candle wax mixed with ashes. Children helped make the wax paste and put it in the open spaces in the wooden planks. Sometimes you would cover the inside with animal skins to make the wagon even more waterproof.

Then you would take the wheels off and push the wagon into the water. It would float across the river like a fat, flat boat.

Children usually rode inside the wagon. Two or three men also rode inside and steered the wagon with long poles. Others would ride horses into the water and try to steer the wagon from the outside. It could take over an hour to get across a river this way. If there were a lot of wagons in your wagon train, it sometimes took five days for everybody to get across.

Sometimes wagons tipped over and everything inside was lost in the river. And sometimes the river flowed so fast that a wagon was dragged away and you couldn't catch it. If that happened, you and your family would probably ride with other families in the wagon train.

