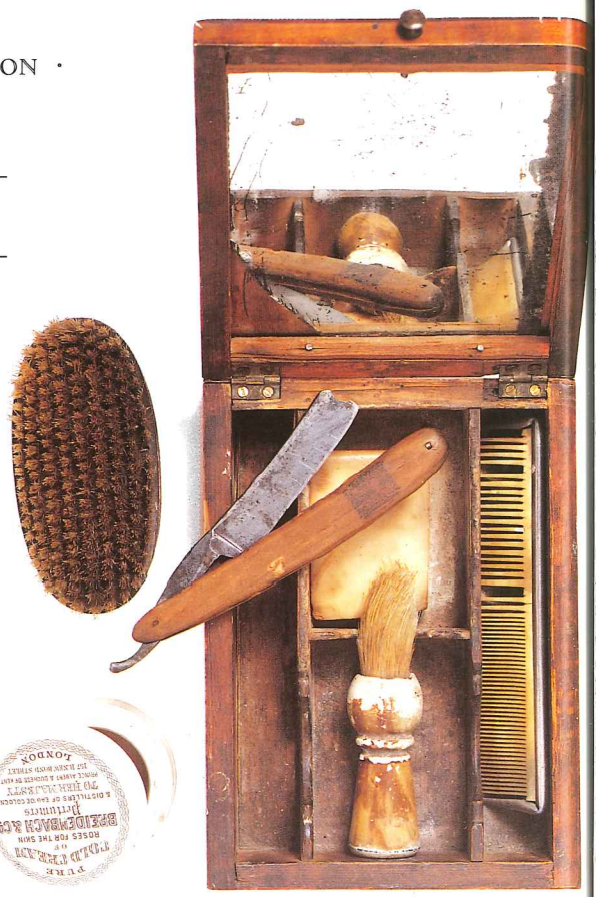
On The Trail

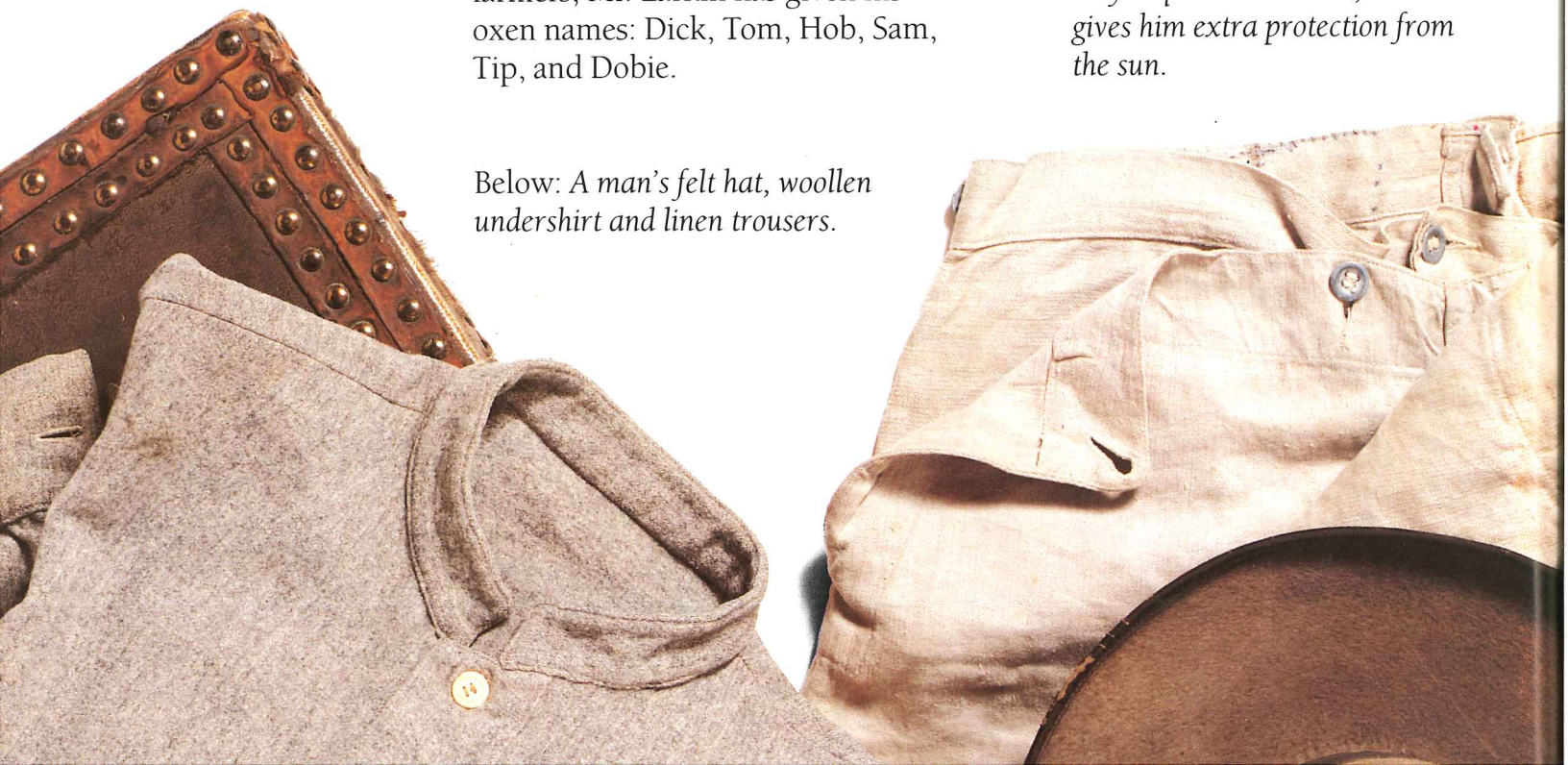
With no springs or cushioned seats, the Larkins' wagon was far too uncomfortable to ride in. Most of the pioneers traveled the 2,000 miles of the Oregon trail on foot. If it rained, they simply put on oilskin ponchos or unfurled umbrellas and marched on. They did not have to walk fast, however, since the wagons lumbered along at the rate of only one or two miles per hour. Children who got tired might hitch a short ride on the wagon tongue. Sick people who had to ride in the wagon were put on featherbeds and padded round with pillows to relieve the worst of the jolting.

Mr. Larkin walks alongside his oxen, shouting commands like "gee" ("go right") and "haw" ("go left"). He carries a bull-whip which he cracks over their heads to tell them which way to go, and sometimes he uses it to flick flies away from their ears, but he never hits them with it. The pioneers considered it very bad to strike the oxen. Like many pioneer farmers, Mr. Larkin has given his oxen names: Dick, Tom, Hob, Sam, Tip, and Dobie.

Above: *Men's boots were made with no distinction between right and left, so they were very large.*



Above: *Matt Belknap likes to shave whenever he gets the chance, in order to show off his dashing mustache. His shaving kit is very precious, as it was one of the few things left to him by his father. Mr. Larkin's beard not only requires little care, but it also gives him extra protection from the sun.*

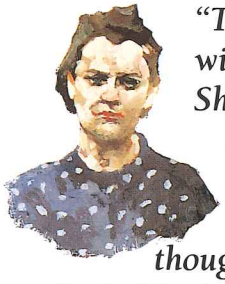


Below: *A man's felt hat, woollen undershirt and linen trousers.*

Men's Clothes

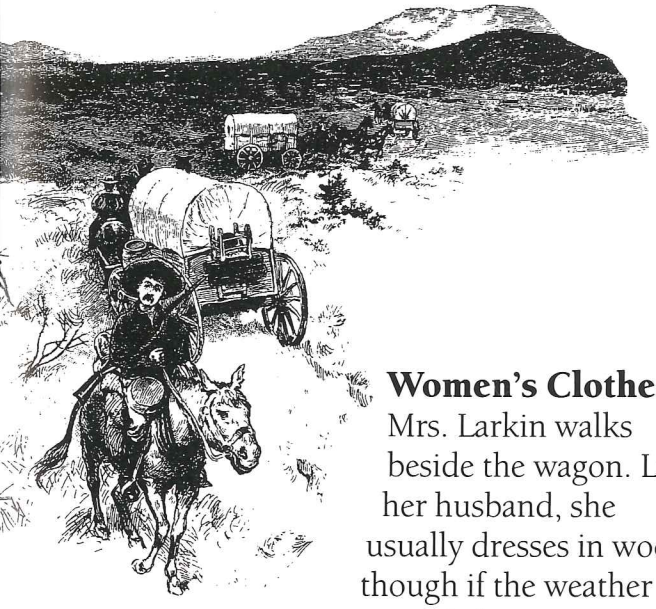
Like most of the men in the wagon train, Mr. Larkin wears the same clothes day in, day out. Even though it is mid-summer, he wears a long-sleeved flannel shirt with a woolen undershirt beneath and trousers of wool or linen, or a mixture of the two called "linsey-woolsey." Wool, as the guidebooks noted, offered good protection against the midday sun, the rain or any sudden changes in temperature. Denim, which is often associated with the West, came into wide use only after Levi Strauss introduced it in San Francisco in the 1870s. On Mr. Larkin's feet are stout boots that give good protection against snakebite. He also wears a broad-brimmed hat to keep the sun off his head and face – with no sunglasses or sunscreen, this was very important.

Above: *A woman's blouse and sunbonnet.*



"Today mother became very angry with me for removing my sunbonnet. She pointed out to me some girls who did not wear bonnets, and as I did not want to look as brown as an Indian squaw, I put it on again, though it causes me no little discomfort."

Rachel Larkin's Diary



Women's Clothes

Mrs. Larkin walks beside the wagon. Like her husband, she usually dresses in wool, though if the weather is very good she may wear checked gingham. Her skirt is hemmed an inch or two higher than would have been thought proper back East, to make it easier for her to walk over the rough ground. Mrs. Larkin also wears an apron, partly to keep her dress clean, and partly because she, like everyone else at the time, considers the apron to be the right thing for a proper married woman – that is, a housewife – to wear. Although she does not have many clothes for the trip and has few chances for washing, Mrs. Larkin makes a point of wearing a neat, light-colored apron on special occasions (*see page 36*). Her only regret is that she cannot starch it properly, as she would have back in Indiana. She always wears a sunbonnet to protect her face.

Rachel's clothing is much like her mother's, but because of her delicate health she usually rides on horseback, sitting with her skirts carefully pulled down to cover her ankles. Rachel feels envious of the more daring women in the party, who are wearing "bloomers."

Left: *Mr. Larkin bought this fine side-saddle for Rachel in St. Louis.*

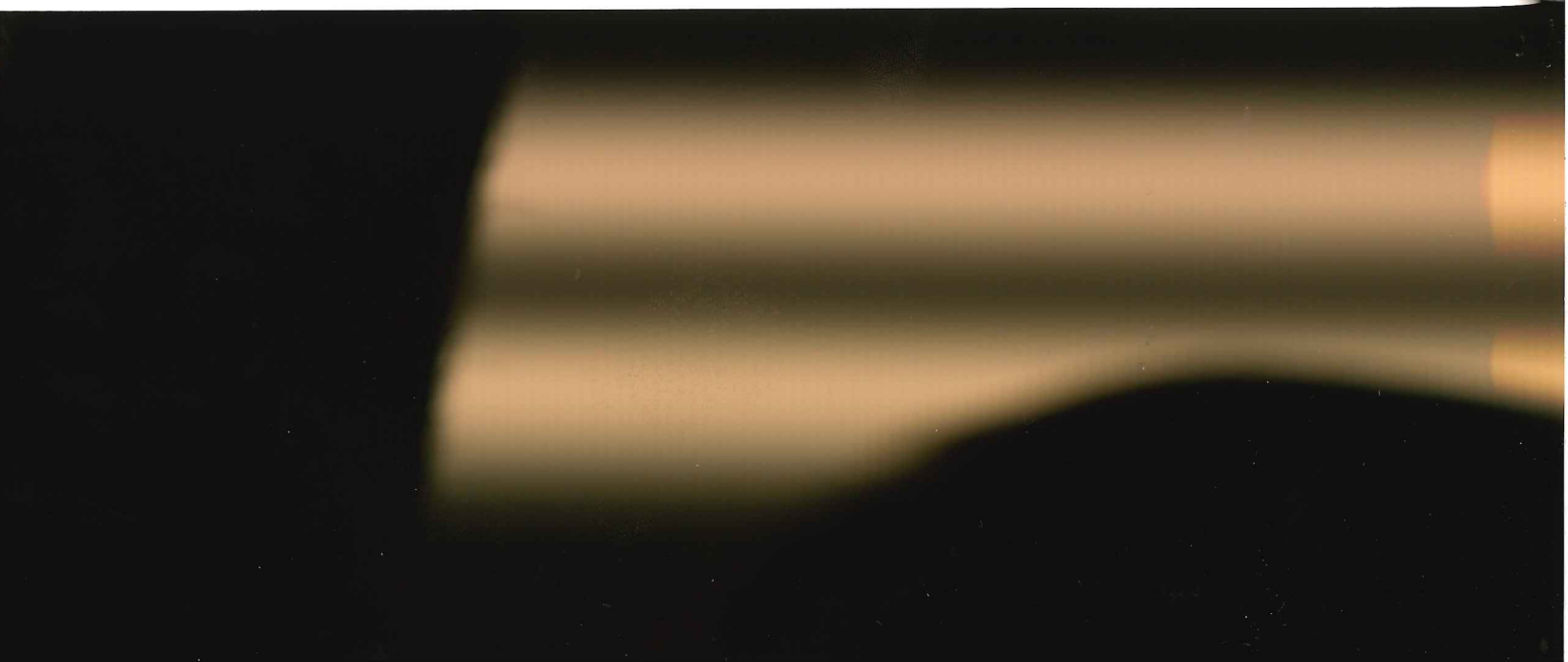
How far would you travel in a day?

On many days you would travel ten to fifteen miles. If it was muddy and raining hard, you might make one mile in a whole day.

Today if you are driving in a car on the highway, you usually travel fifty-five miles in one hour. In a covered wagon it might take you five or six or even *seven* days to go as far as you can go today in one hour!

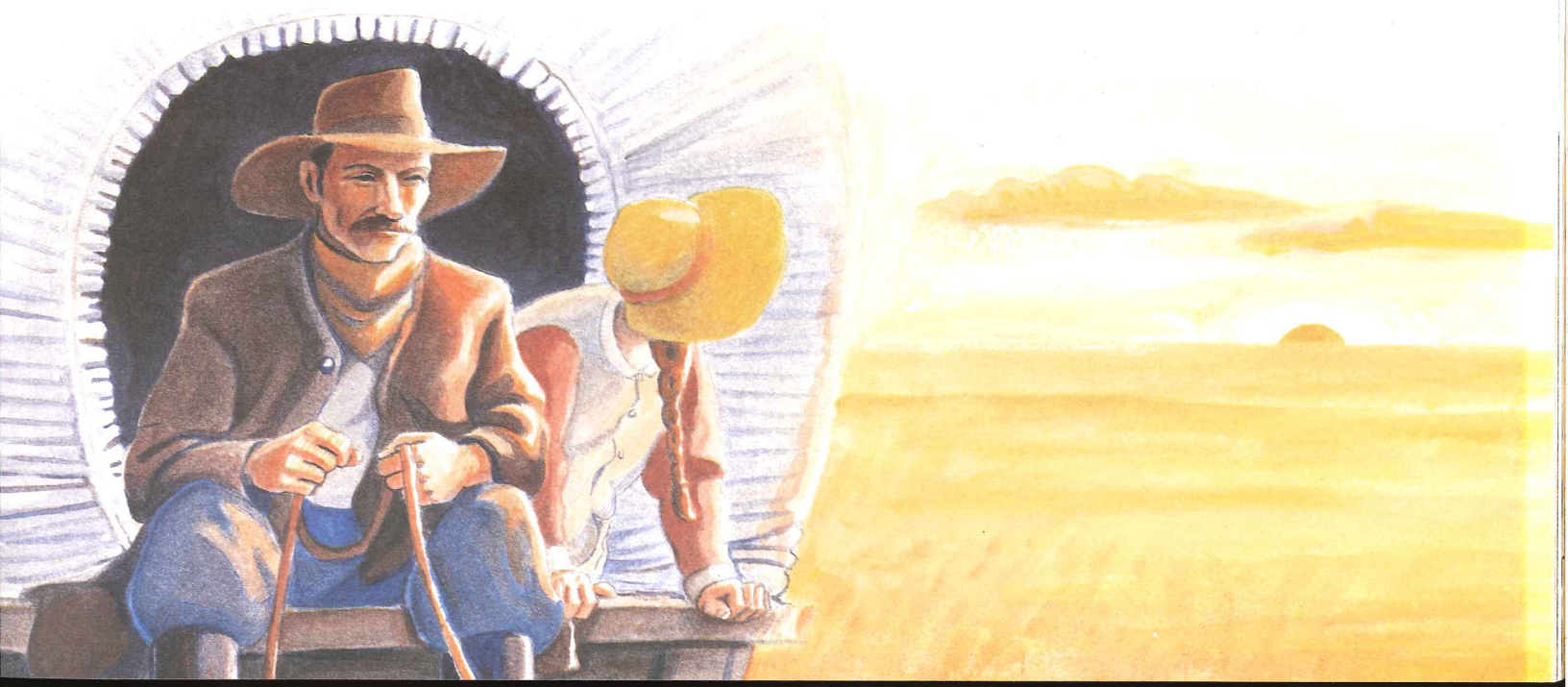
You would usually have to get up very early to start traveling in the wagons. Most people got up around four o'clock in the morning, when it was still dark.

First they would start the fire so that they could cook breakfast. Then they would round up the cattle and start to load up the wagons with the tents, blankets, pots, and pans.



The wagons would start moving by seven o'clock in the morning and travel until lunchtime. Then you would rest for an hour or two. After lunch you would travel again until about four or five or sometimes six o'clock at night. Finally you would stop until the next day.

After five or six months, you would have traveled more than two thousand miles. Today that would take about three or four days in a car, and three to four hours in an airplane!



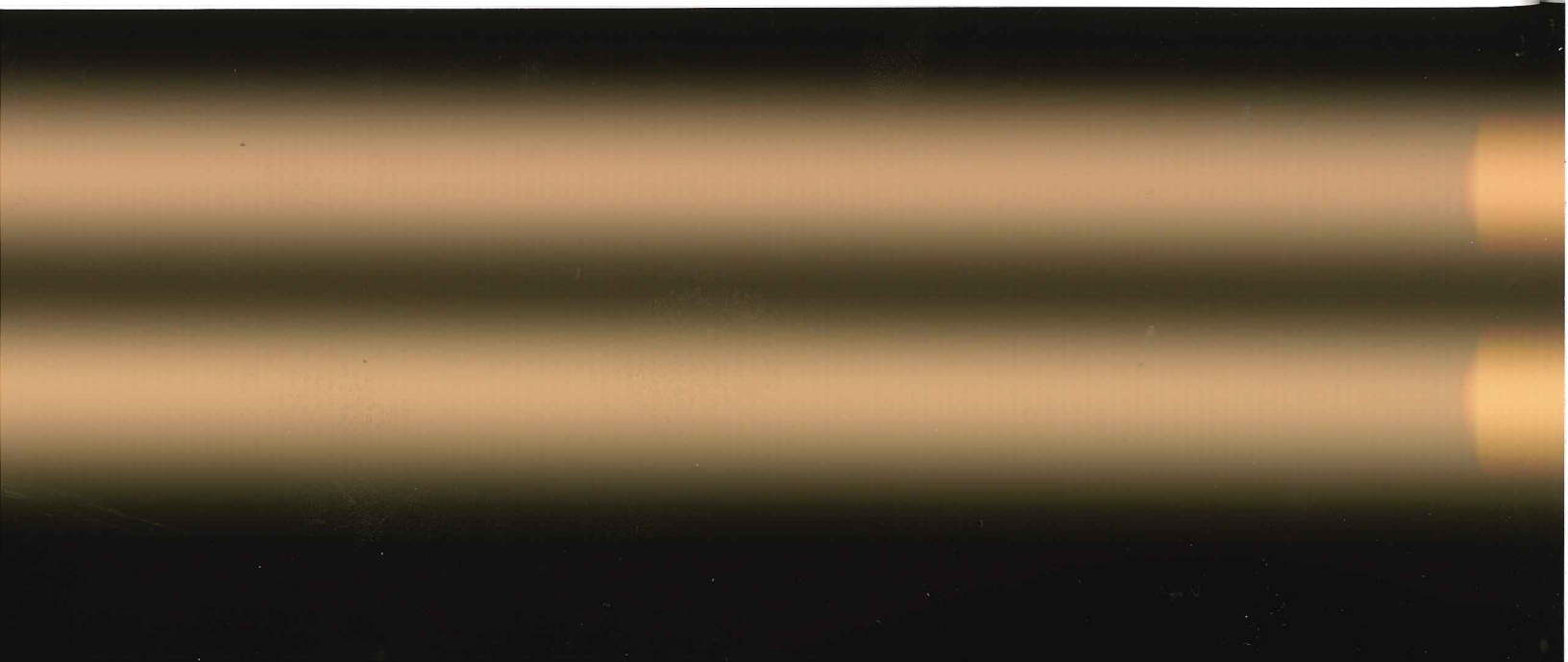
Would you ride in the wagon for the whole trip?

No. In fact you probably wouldn't ride for even most of the way. If you ever had a chance to ride in a covered wagon for more than an hour, you would know why.

Too bumpy! There were no smooth highways or roads back in the 1840s. Sometimes you made your own trail by being the first wagon to go over a piece of ground. Other times you rode in the ruts made by other wagon wheels.

You could feel every bump when you sat in the wagon. There were no cushioned seats — just wooden boards covered with a few blankets.

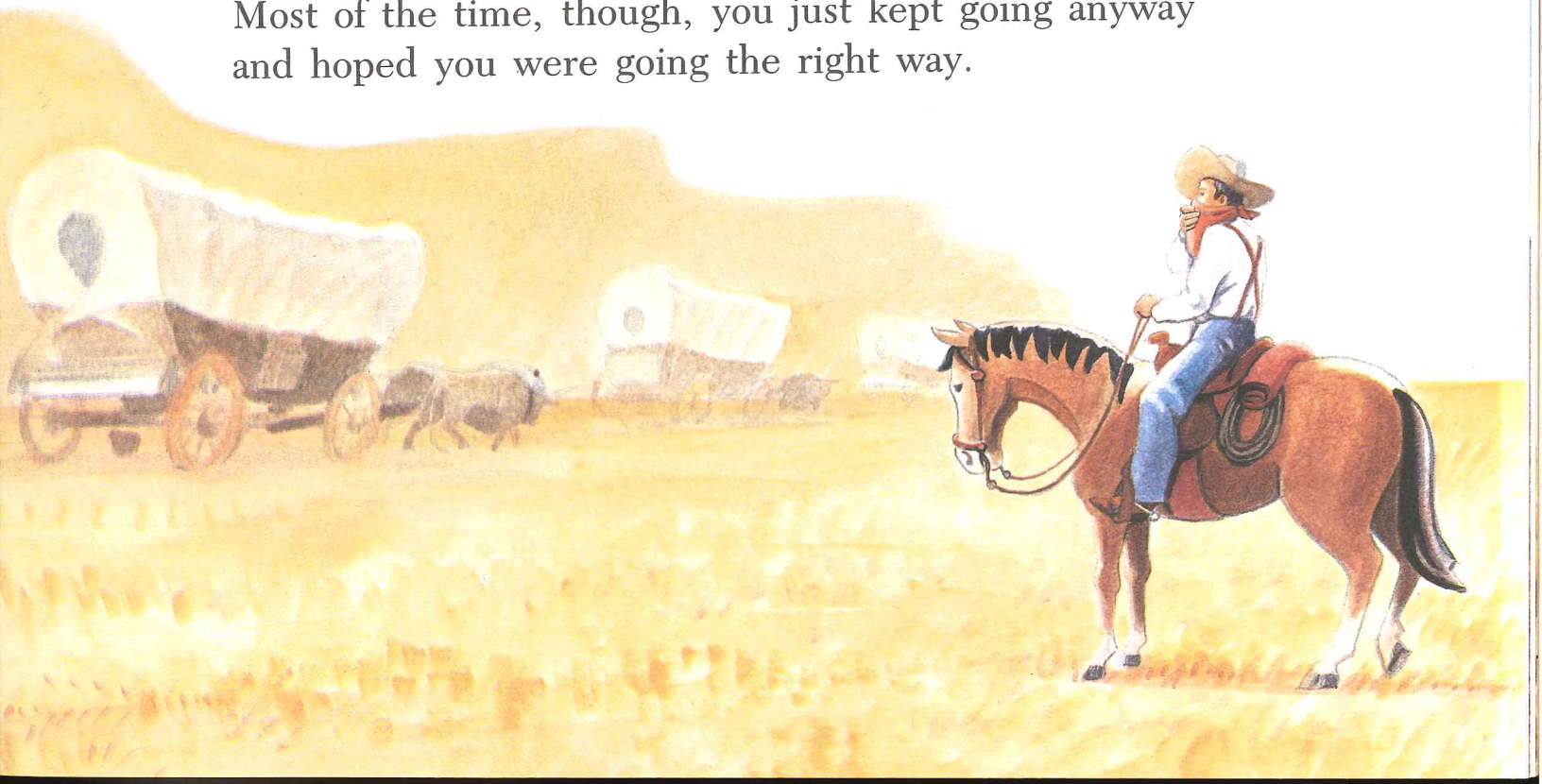
Much of the time you would walk next to the wagon. The wagons traveled very slowly, so you could easily keep up with them. When your feet got very tired, then you might climb up and ride for a while. And sometimes you might want to ride in the wagon just to get the view from high up.



The drivers would often walk alongside the oxen. They didn't use reins. They would shout and sometimes use a whip. But you wouldn't hit the animals. You would just crack the whip over their heads to make them go the way you wanted.

The opposite problem is when the ground is too dry. Then there would be dust — so much dust that it would get in your eyes, your mother's eyes, your father's eyes, and the cattle's eyes. The dust would be so thick that you could hardly see your hand in front of your face.

When that happened, sometimes you had to stop traveling because you couldn't see the trail at all. Most of the time, though, you just kept going anyway and hoped you were going the right way.



Where would you sleep?

Sometimes you would sleep in the wagon, sometimes under it, sometimes in a tent, and sometimes out in the open under the stars.

There wasn't enough room in the wagon to bring a mattress for everyone in the family. So if there was one mattress, usually your mother and father would sleep on it. They might leave the mattress in the wagon if there was enough room, or they might put it in a tent and sleep there.

Babies and little children usually slept in the wagon.

If it was raining, it wasn't easy to keep completely dry. The best place was inside the wagon. The next best place was in the tent. You would probably get a little wet if you put your blankets under the wagon and went to sleep there.

If it looked like it might rain when your parents set up the tent, they would dig a ditch around the tent so that water would run off into the ditch and not under the tent.

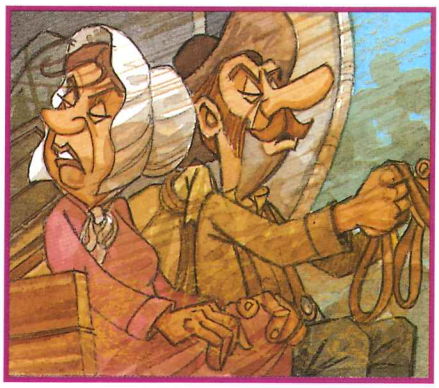
If you were going to sleep under the wagon when it was raining, your mother and father would wrap your blankets in an oilskin, which is a piece of cloth that has been rubbed with oil and is waterproof.

In good weather the nicest place to sleep was out in the open under the starry skies. If you lay on your back and looked up at the faraway stars, you could pick one, call it *Oregon,* and try to think how long it would take you to get there. Oregon would seem almost as far as that star.

Wet and

Sandstorms

Grass, grass, and more grass — that's all you see for at least two months, as the wagons follow the muddy Platte River across an endless plain. The journey, which was fun at first, gets boring and exhausting. The Sun beats down, and there is not a single tree for shade. Suddenly, out of nowhere, black clouds pile up to create violent storms. Lightning flashes make the animals bolt. Wind rips the wagon covers off and blows away the tents. In minutes, everyone is drenched, and the campsite becomes a sea of mud.



SAND IN YOUR FACE. West winds whip the dry, sandy soil into clouds of stinging dust.

SORE EYES. The sand makes your eyes sting and your eyelids swell up. Your lips get puffed and split.

SAND EVERYWHERE. Sand gets up your nose and down your throat, into your food and bedding, and all over your clean clothes.