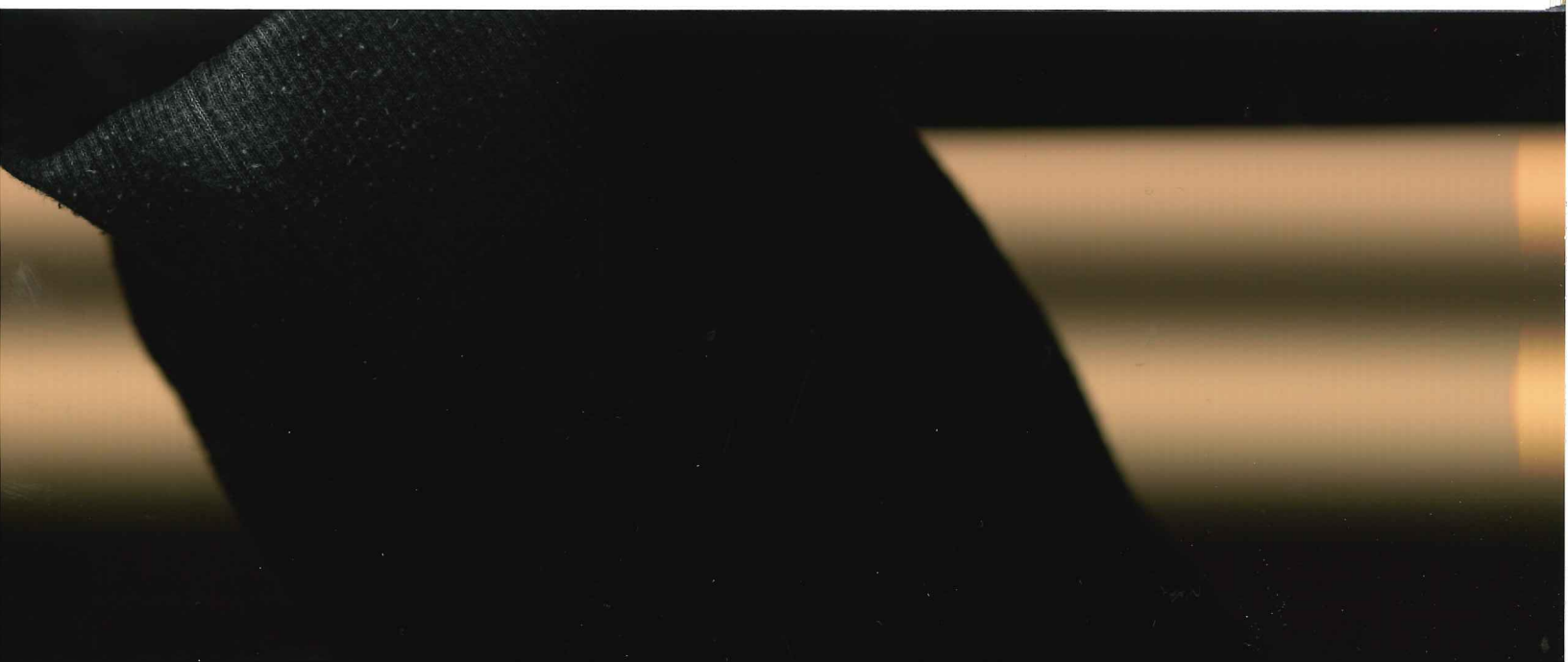
Could you send a letter or receive one?

Back in the 1840s there were no post offices west of the Mississippi River, so it wasn't easy to send or receive a letter. But there were a few ways that you could do it.

Sometimes people would send letters to you at a fort on the trail. Some supply wagons going West would carry the letter to the fort and leave it there for you to pick up.

At the forts you might be able to leave a letter, which another wagon train would carry back home for you. In some places you were charged money to send a letter, and in some places you were charged money to receive one.

Today, of course, only the sender of the letter pays money for the stamps.

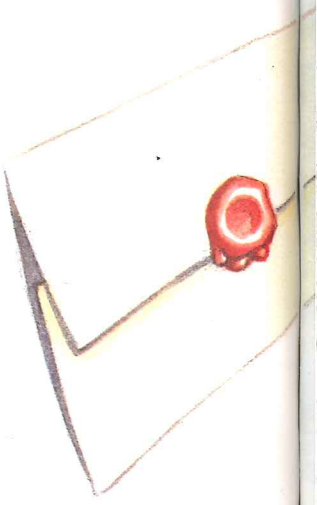


There were no envelopes for letters in those days. You would fold the letter up and drip some melted wax on the edge. When the wax cooled and hardened, the letter could not be opened until you broke the wax. That way you would know that nobody had read your letter.

There was no television or radio back in the days of the covered wagons. People learned about what was going on in the world from reading newspapers, magazines, and letters.

Before there were big cities in the West, all the newspapers and magazines came from the East. They had to be mailed out West just like letters.

By the time you got all the way to Oregon, it might take two years for a letter to get to you. And it could take just as long for a newspaper to get all the way out West. You might not know who was president of the United States until two years after the election!



If you ran out of supplies, could you get more?

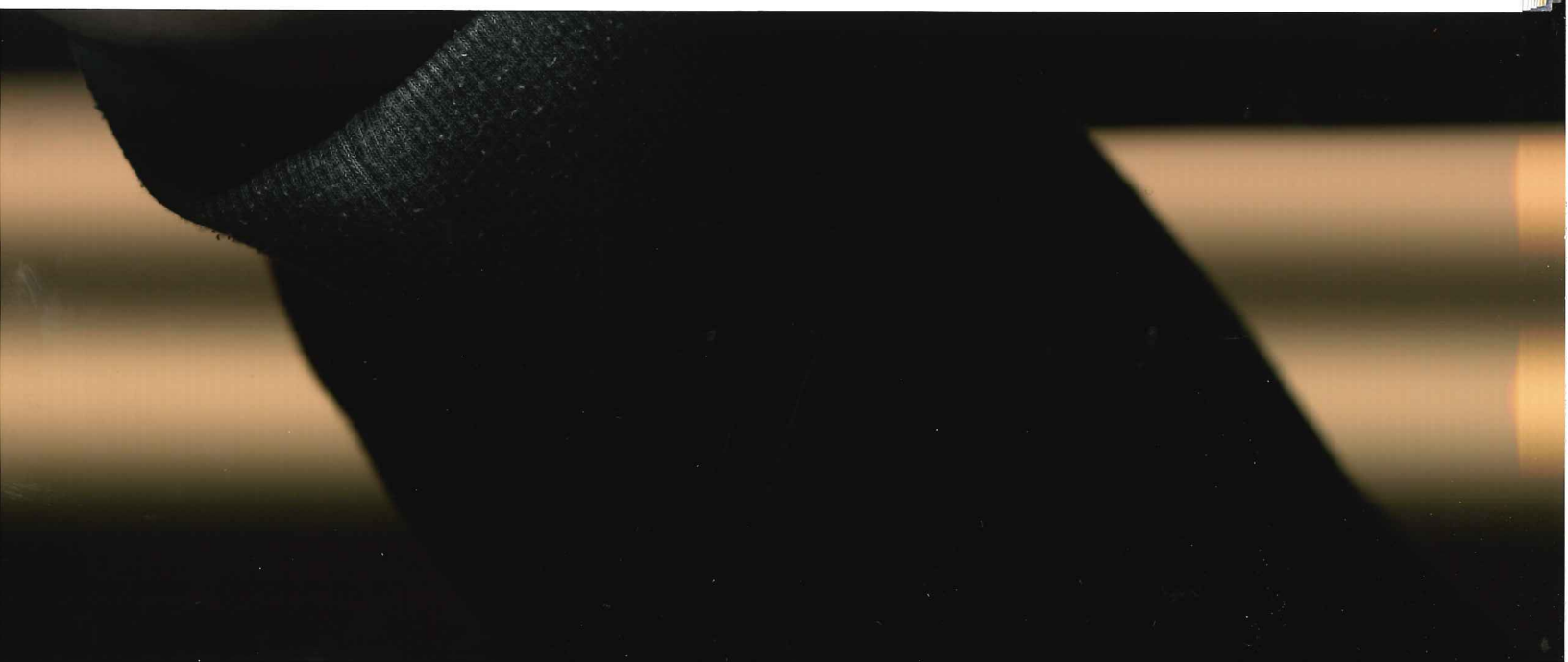
Sometimes. Along the trail there were a number of forts where the wagon trains would stop. You would usually stay over at a fort for a few days to rest up. It was also a chance to let the oxen, horses, and cows have a rest.

After you left Independence, Missouri, the first big fort you reached was Fort Laramie. It took about forty days to reach the fort. Most wagon trains got there at the end of June.

There were lots of things to do when you got to Fort Laramie. It was a time to fix the wagons, do the laundry, and buy or trade for new supplies.

Usually there were Indians at the fort. They set up their tents, which were called tepees (tipis), outside the walls of the fort, and traded with people at the fort.

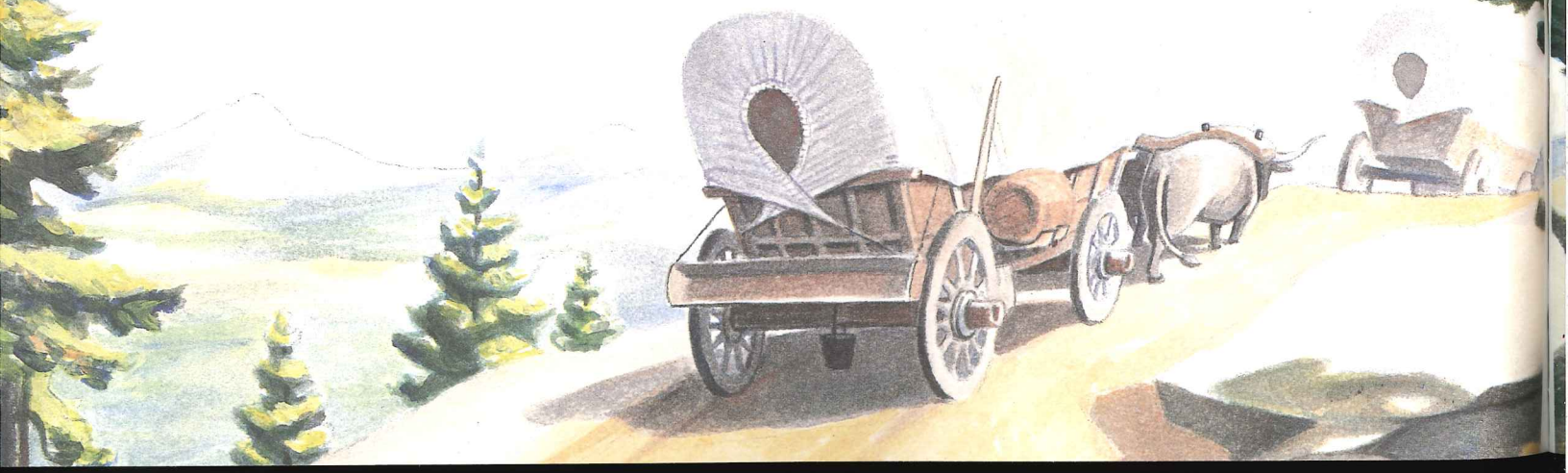
The pioneers wanted to buy sugar, flour, coffee, cloth, leather, and other things they had run out of.



Sometimes the fort had extra supplies. But sometimes a wagon train had arrived before you and bought out just about everything. You would be out of luck then.

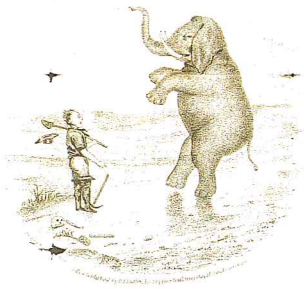
It might take you almost thirty more days to get to the next fort, called Fort Bridger. This fort was named after a man called Jim Bridger, who was an early fur trader and trapper. He even helped guide some wagon trains west.

Another fort before you reached Oregon was Fort Hall. From there you traveled west and north to Oregon. Some pioneers left the Oregon Trail at Fort Hall and went south and west to California instead. On either trip you would still have to travel at least two more months!



Mishaps

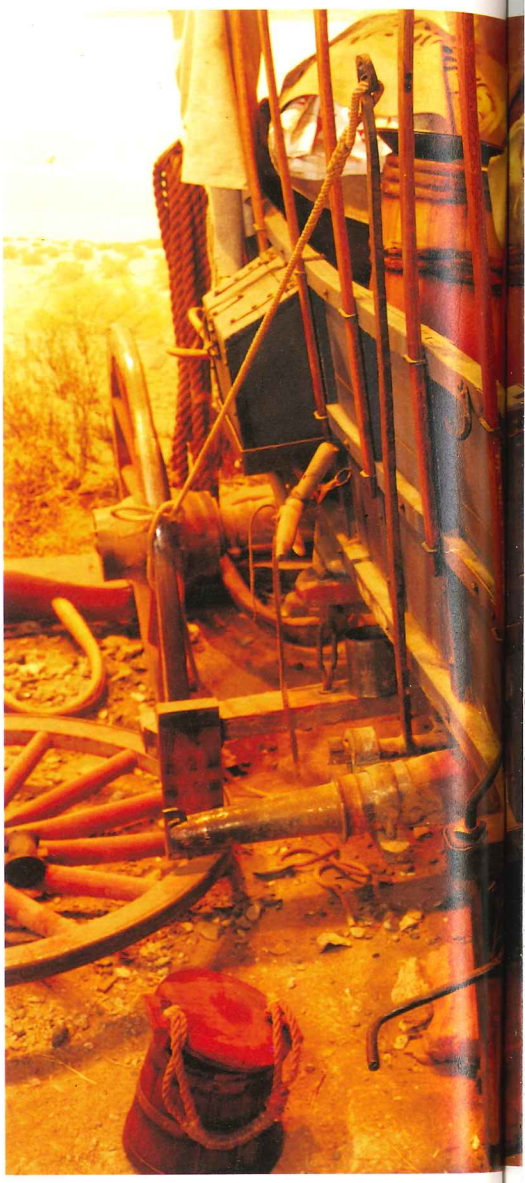
From 1852 to 1853, almost 90,000 overlanders headed for Oregon and California. The wagon trains, which left the jumping-off points almost daily, often overtook each other. They also met up with "go-backers" who were returning east. They had "seen the elephant" (*see left*), an expression meaning that they had experienced the hardships of life in the west and decided they could not put up with them. Besides the weariness of months of travel, the overlanders had many other problems: Even if the driver was as good as Mr. Larkin, any wagon, however well made, could break down, and the oxen could become sick or exhausted (*see below*).



Above: Crossing the Plains, *1851. Painting by Charles Nahl.*

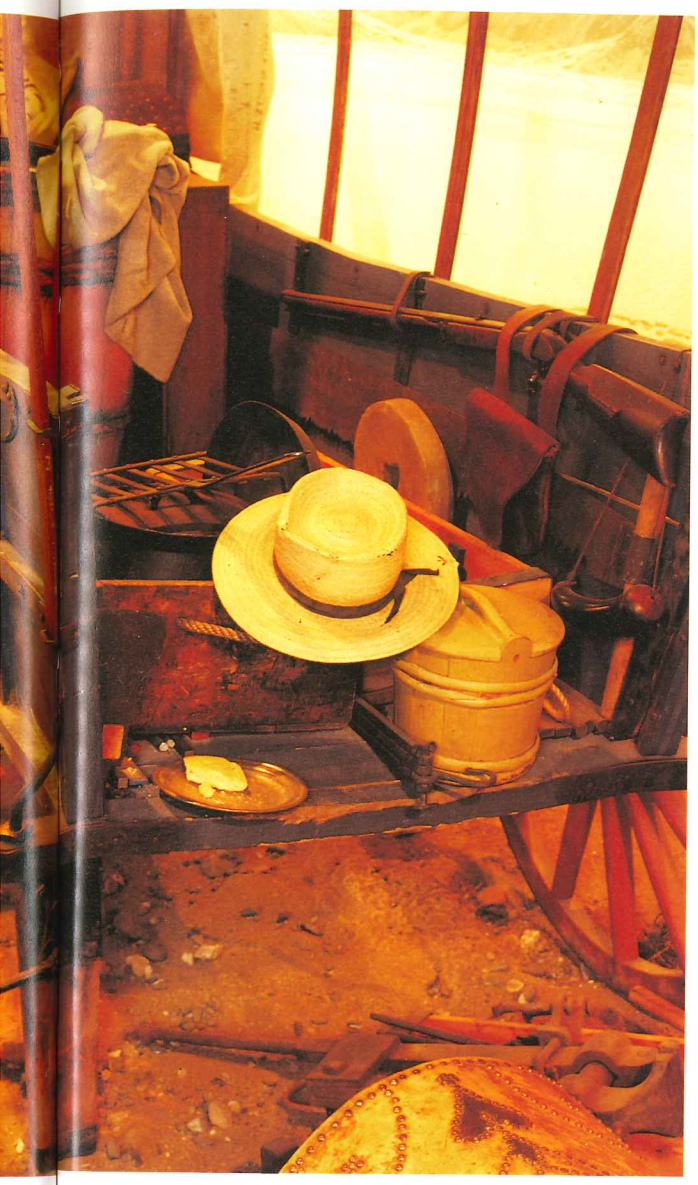
"Alkali water" killed many oxen. This water was full of chemical salts left behind as the lakes dried out in the hot weather. An ox that had drunk this water might be saved if chunks of bacon and swigs of vinegar could be forced down its throat to stop the salts burning its insides. Rough ground and desert sands were also a hazard, as they often led to lameness and sore feet. The remedy for this was to put the ox in booties made of rawhide.

"There is no end to the wagons, buggies, yokes, chains, etc. that are lying all along this road, and many the poor horses, mules, oxen, cows, etc. that are lying dead in these mountains." Mrs. Larkin's Diary



Above: *There were other hazards besides sick oxen. A broken wheel was almost irreplaceable. Few wagon trains had time to wait while a new wheel was made out of a discarded table top or some other piece of quality furniture.*

Right: *A "brake" made of strong rope stopped the wheels turning.*



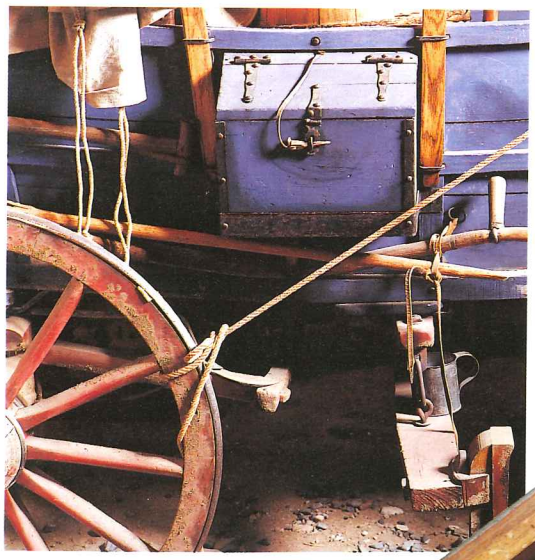
Broken axles were taken almost as a matter of course. Nearly every wagon started out with at least one spare, to reduce the risk of having to detour for miles in search of a tree large enough to be made into a replacement.

The iron tires on the wagon wheels sometimes became loose as the wooden wheels shrank in the dry desert air, and they had to be held in place by wedges.

Left: *Almost every overlander was obliged to abandon some valued objects, ranging from cook-stoves to barrels of bacon and boxes of books, in order to lighten their load. One overlander even saw an abandoned diving bell!*

Difficult Terrain

Mountain slopes and steep hills presented a challenge, even to the most experienced driver. It was relatively easy to go uphill, as the oxen were used to pulling, and they could be double-teamed. If the going was very hard, a makeshift windlass could be set up: An empty wagon was staked on the hilltop, with one set of wheels running free, and a strong rope tied to that axle was lowered to the wagon below. Then the men and oxen would slowly turn the wheels, reeling the wagon up the hill like a fish. Going downhill was more difficult, as oxen were not used to braking. Rope "brakes" could be used to lock the wheels, but this did not always stop the wagon sliding down the hill and being damaged. Even the gently rolling plains could cause problems for an inexperienced driver, as the top-heavy wagons tipped over easily.



Left: *Tool box for wagon repairs.*

William Marshall - May 7, 1852

We have reached Fort Kearny. It is just a bunch of sod buildings, not a big fort. I'm not sure how it would protect us. But we can buy food here. Also, we all got letters. Harriet got some letters from her sister, and I heard from James. The worst is yet to come, according to his letters. We will rest here for three days. Poor Sarah's feet need it. Tom is supposed to be helping her with chores, but he seems distracted by a girl in the wagon behind us.

Fort Kearny was the first military post built to protect the Oregon Trail emigrants. But it wasn't the sturdy, walled town they expected. Still, the fort was an important stopping point where emigrants could buy fresh food and other supplies. It was also a place where some of the emigrants, already discouraged, decided to turn back.

At this point many emigrants began to lighten their wagon loads. Crossing rivers with heavy wagons was dangerous. If the wagons tipped over, all was lost. The Trail became littered with furniture, food, and other belongings that were not essential for the trip. **Scavengers** came out from Independence to collect the things the emigrants left on the Trail. They either kept them or sold them to new emigrants arriving in Independence.

Determined to reach the Oregon Territory, the Marshalls pushed ahead. Thoughts of uniting with Harriet's family and beginning a new life on their own large and fertile farm drove them onward.