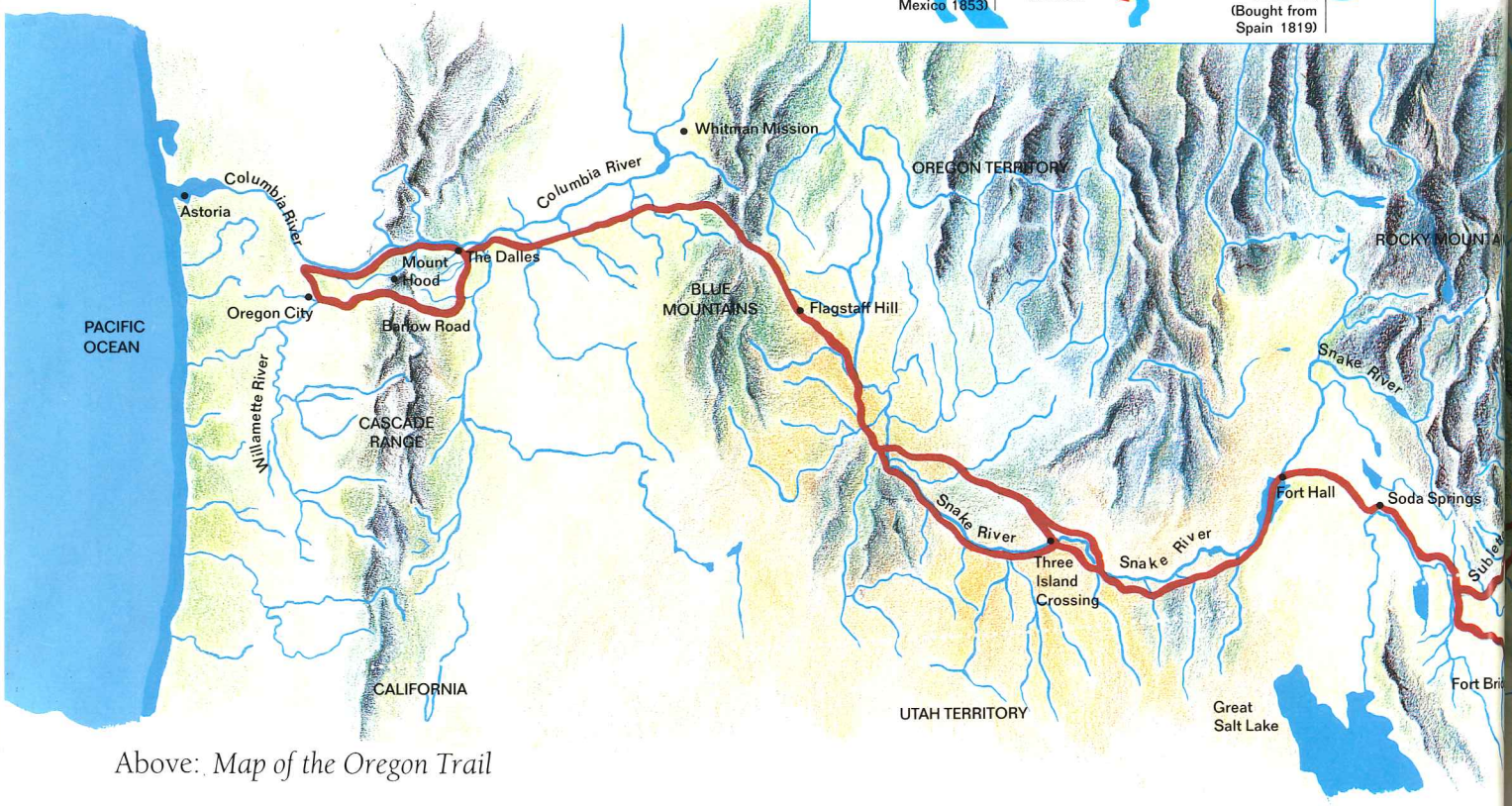
Going West

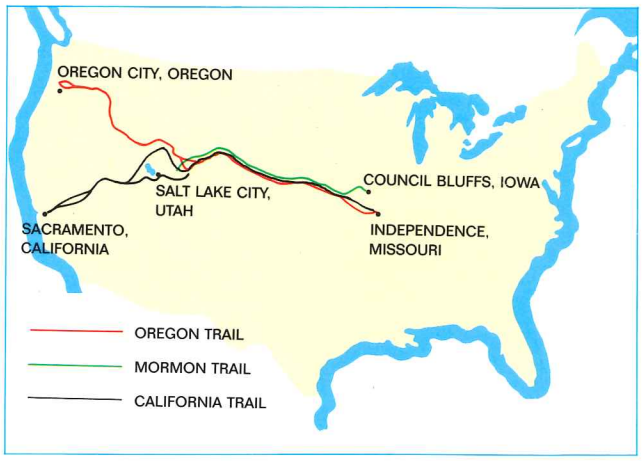
In the 1840s the United States doubled in size (*see map right*). By either negotiation, war, or purchase, it acquired most of Oregon, Texas, California and the American Southwest. There was a great desire to expand into these new and little known territories, and several

Right: *Western Expansion of the United States by 1853.*

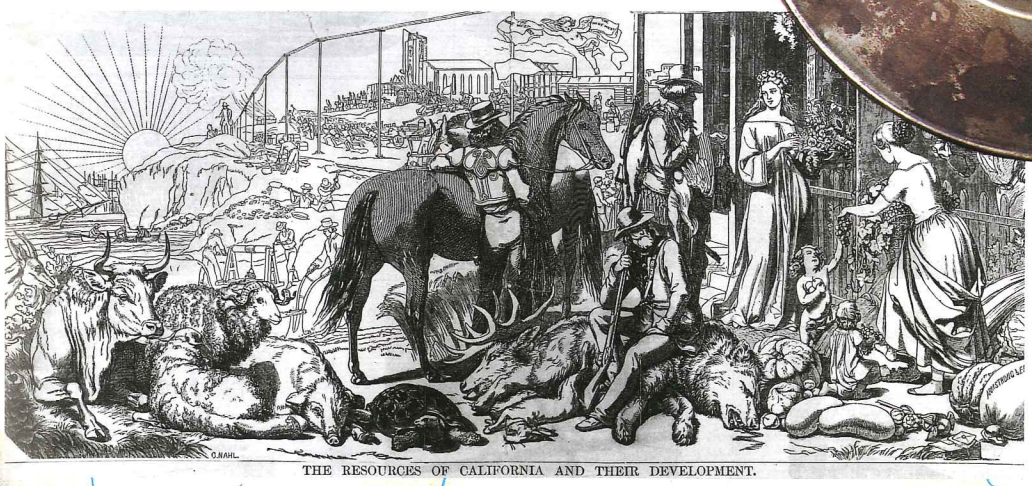


Above: *Map of the Oregon Trail*

people went out to explore the region and came back with reports of rich soil and good opportunities for farmers. Interest in the west grew, until it was said that "if hell were in the west, Americans would cross heaven to get there." Newspaper editors spoke of the "Manifest Destiny" to make the United States stretch "from sea to shining sea." "Oregon Fever" was just one part of this western expansion. According to the "boosters" who encouraged people to move west, Oregon was a paradise "flowing with milk and honey." It was even said that pigs ran around ready cooked with knives and forks sticking in them so that anyone could have a slice.

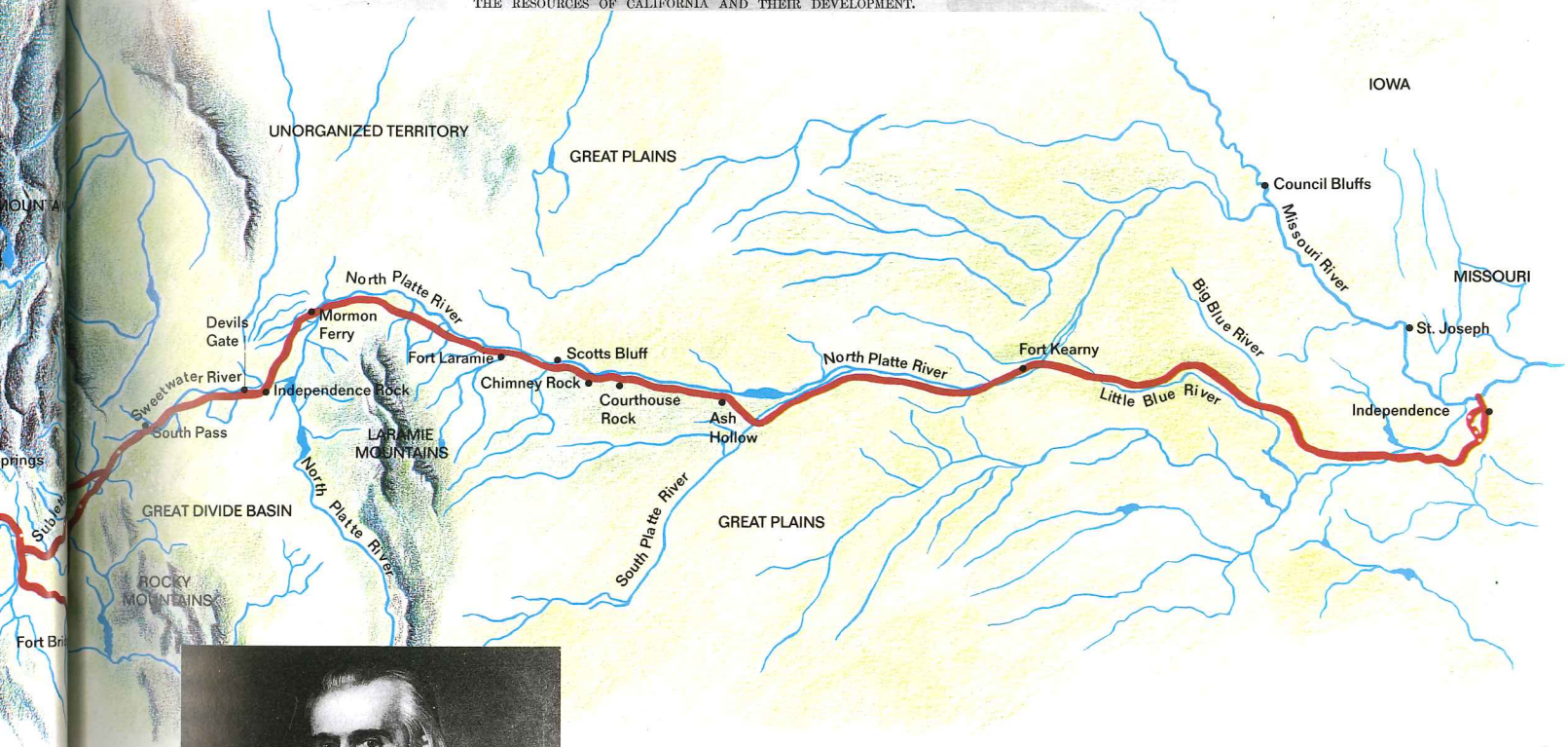


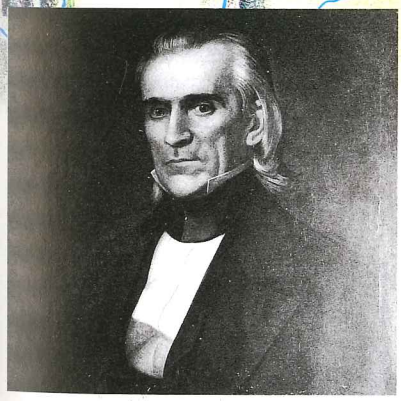
Above: *The Three Main Trails West*



Above: *A gold pan.*

Left: *A "boosterist" poster showing California as a paradise.*





Above: *James K. Polk became President in 1844 because he promised Americans "All of Oregon or War!" In the early 1840s, part of Oregon still belonged to Great Britain.*

The journey west was very dangerous, and even Horace Greeley, the newspaper editor famous for saying "Go west, young man!" warned against making it. However, the success of the first wagon train in 1843 proved him wrong, and soon thousands were emigrating to Oregon. Despite the difficulties of crossing "the Great American desert," there were several reasons to go west. Some people, like the Mormons, wanted to be free to practice their religion; others, like the "Forty-Niners" of the 1849 California gold rush, hoped to find gold and get rich; and others wanted to make better lives for themselves farming on the fertile land.

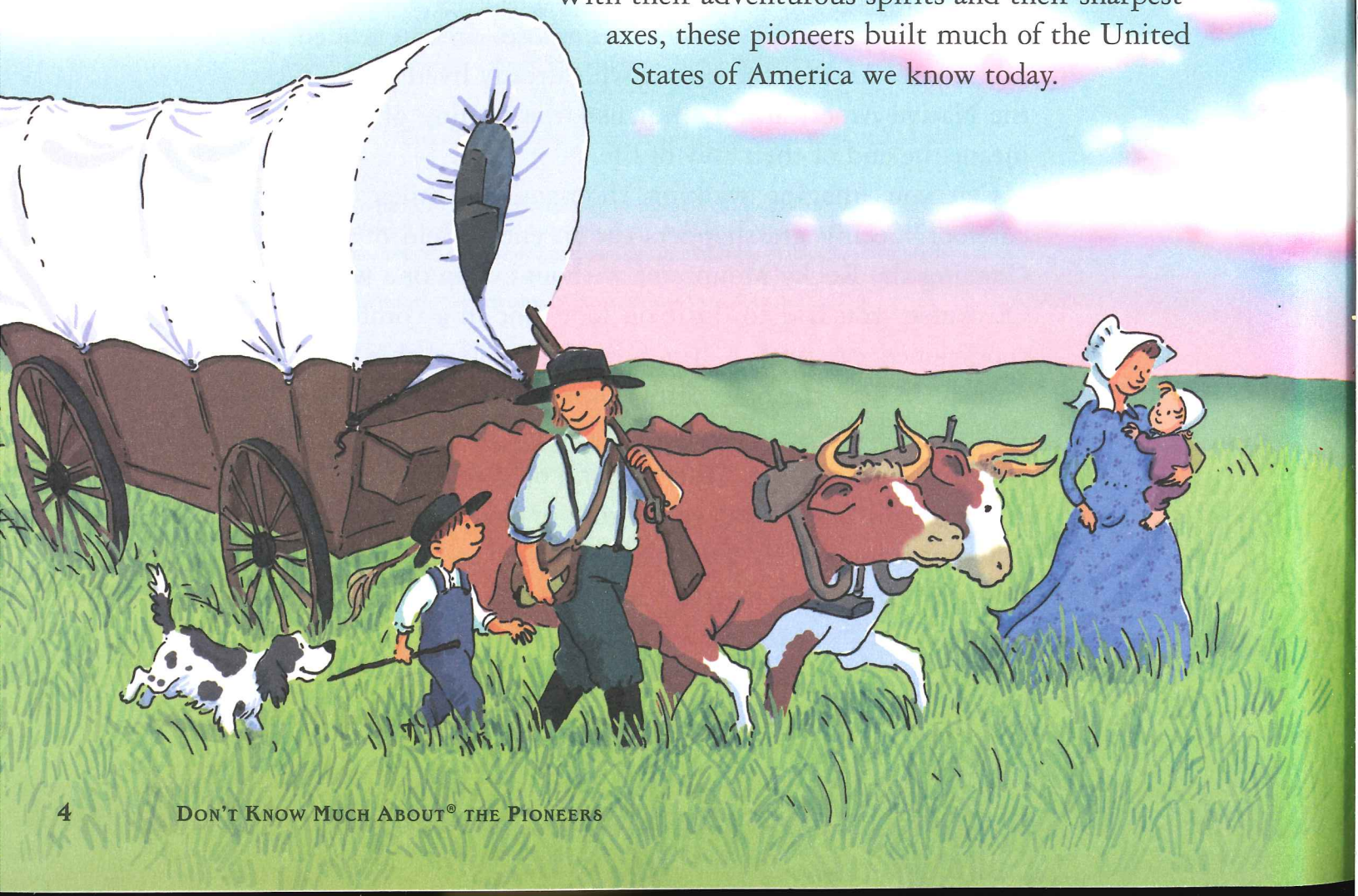
Most of the pioneers wanted to bring "civilization" with them: Fashions and entertainments as well as laws, schools, and colleges. They wanted to stay in touch with what was happening back east, no matter how different their new lives were.

Who Were the Pioneers?

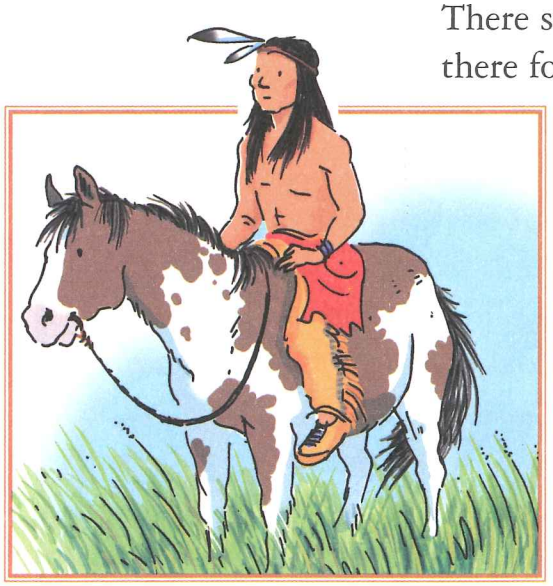
What is a pioneer?

A pioneer is a trailblazer—someone who leads the way for others to follow. There are pioneers of invention, like Thomas Edison. There are pioneers of ideas, like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Susan B. Anthony. But when we talk about the pioneers, we usually mean the thousands of men, women, and children who moved to the North American West between about 1840 and 1890 to build homes, farms, and eventually cities. They were families and single men and women. They were grandparents and newborns, blacks and whites, Mormons and Jews, Americans and newcomers from around the world.

With their adventurous spirits and their sharpest axes, these pioneers built much of the United States of America we know today.



Weren't there people already living in the West 150 years ago?

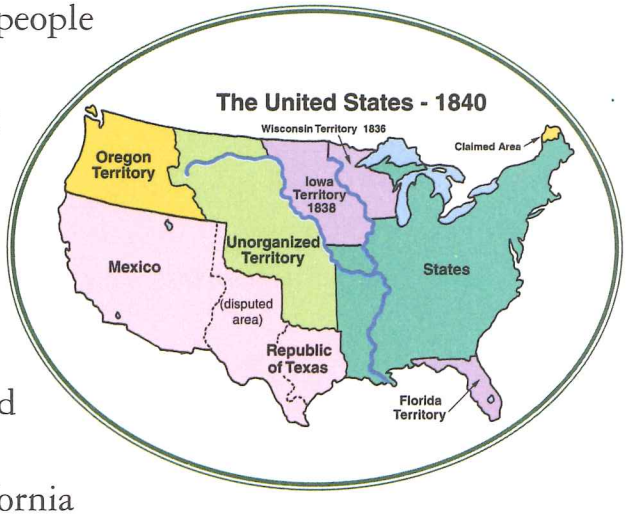


There sure were. Hundreds of Indian tribes had been living there for thousands of years. Europeans also lived on western lands claimed by Spain, Great Britain, and France. Yet even before the United States was born, people from the east coast of North America began pushing west. They took the *frontier,* or the boundary between settled lands and wilderness, with them.

The first frontier stood at the Appalachian Mountains. After Daniel Boone led settlers through a gap in the mountains in 1775, pioneers spread to Tennessee, Kentucky, and Ohio, then farther west to the Mississippi River. When the United States bought the Louisiana Territory from France, pioneers began looking all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Many Americans came to believe it was the fate, or *Manifest Destiny,* of the United States to stretch from sea to shining sea.

Did pioneers call themselves pioneers?

No. They called themselves "emigrants," meaning people who leave their own country for another. That's because many of the places the pioneers were going weren't part of the United States yet. When the first pioneers set out in the 1840s, the United States ended at the Missouri River. Beyond that was unorganized territory, home to Indians. And beyond that, both Great Britain and the United States claimed the Oregon Territory, which included present-day Oregon, Idaho, Washington, western Canada, and parts of Montana and Wyoming. California and the Southwest belonged to Mexico, and Texas was its very own country.



Lewis and Clark

Why was President Thomas Jefferson so curious about the West?

Because Jefferson was curious about everything! Jefferson was especially curious about the West because few white people had been there when he became president in 1801. President Jefferson asked his private secretary, Captain Meriwether Lewis, to lead a group of men, or a "Corps of Discovery," across the unknown land. Lewis chose William Clark as his co-captain. In 1804, the Lewis and Clark expedition set out for the Pacific Ocean. Jefferson told the captains to make careful scientific records of the land, plants, and animals they saw and to meet peacefully with any Indians on the way. He also asked them to look for a *Northwest Passage,* or an all-water route to the Pacific.

"We were now about to penetrate a country at least two thousand miles in width, on which the foot of civilized man had never trodden; the good or evil it had in store for us was for experiment yet to determine."

—The Journals of Meriwether Lewis, April 7, 1805

Lewis and Clark knew less about their destination than the first astronauts to go to the moon did—at least the astronauts had pictures!

What important shopping did Jefferson do just before Lewis and Clark set out?

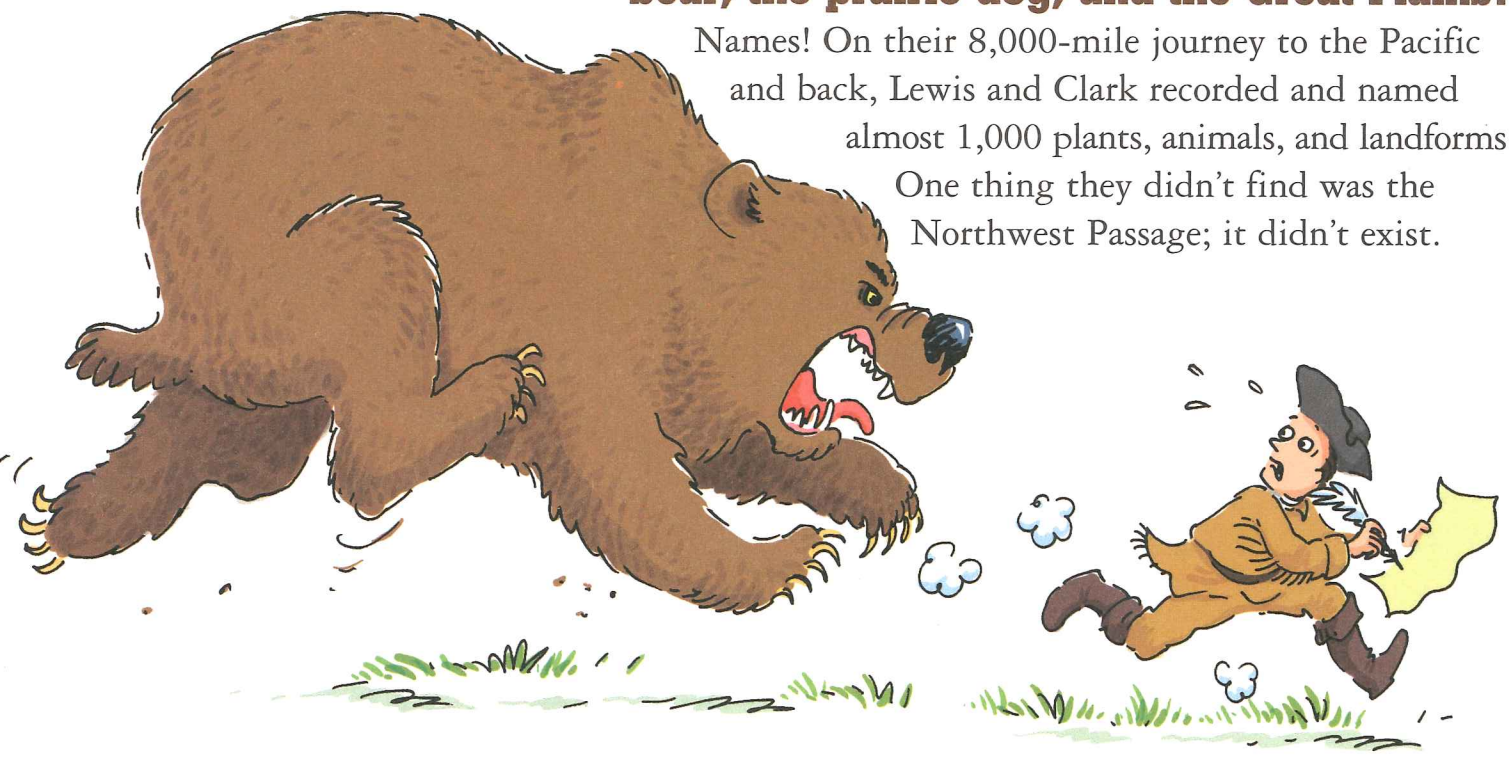
He bought all of the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803. Overnight, the United States became twice as big. (The enormous territory, which stretched from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains, was eventually broken into fifteen states.) The Louisiana Purchase meant that much of the land Lewis and Clark would explore now belonged to the United States.

What teenager helped make Lewis and Clark's trip a success?

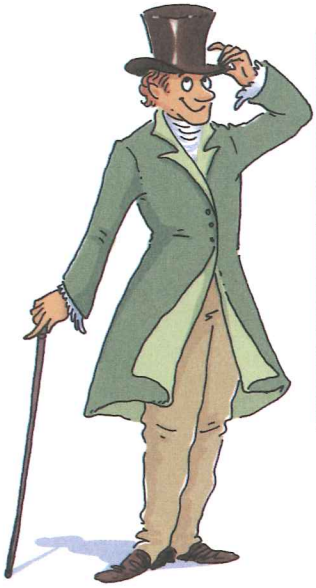
A Shoshone Indian named Sacagawea. Her two-week-old son strapped to her back, Sacagawea became a guide and translator for the expedition in the spring of 1805. She gathered plants that were safe for the men to eat. She led the explorers through land she remembered from her childhood. Most importantly, she arranged for the Shoshones to sell horses to the expedition. Without these animals, the Corps of Discovery might have become stranded in the snow-covered mountains.

What did Lewis and Clark give the grizzly bear, the prairie dog, and the Great Plains?

Names! On their 8,000-mile journey to the Pacific and back, Lewis and Clark recorded and named almost 1,000 plants, animals, and landforms. One thing they didn't find was the Northwest Passage; it didn't exist.



Mountain Men



Who blazed trails into the wilderness?

The adventurous mountain men. These rough and ready travelers were eager to trap the beavers and other animals Lewis and Clark reported in the West. Beaver fur, in particular, was worth a lot of money 200 years ago because beaver hats were fashionable in Europe. The British, French, Mexicans, and Russians had been involved in the fur trade for many years. Outdoorsmen from the United States now wanted a piece of the action.

Could mountain men be mistaken for Indians?

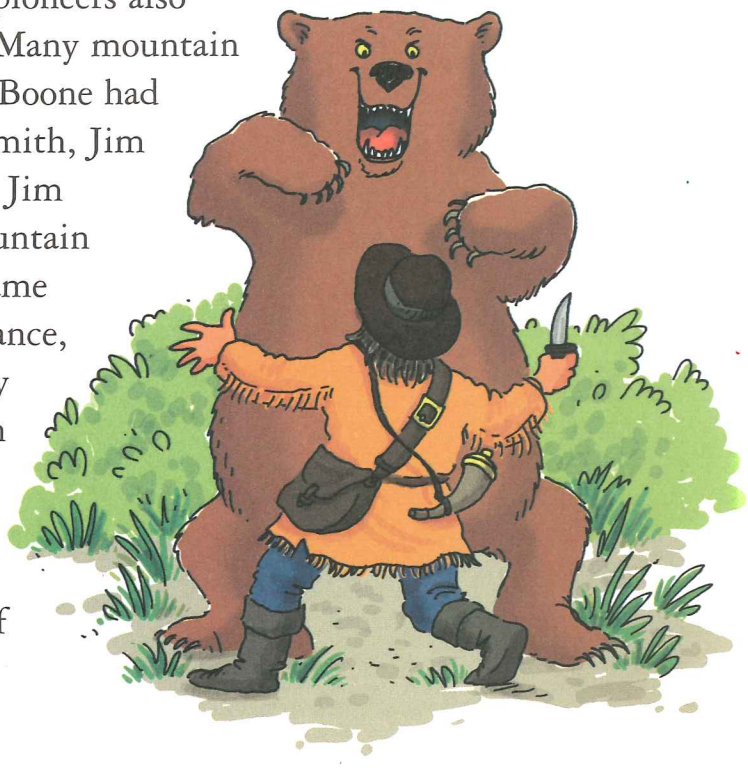
Some of them probably could have been. To survive in the wilderness for years at a time, the mountain men learned to live, dress, and eat like Indians. After all, Indians were the wilderness experts. Some Indians and mountain men fought, but often they met peacefully to trade. About half of the mountain men took Indian wives.

Though the mountain men learned as much as they could from the Indians, they led dangerous lives as trappers and fur traders in the wilderness. They often traveled in lands unknown to white men. Starvation, bitter storms, accidents, illness, and attacks from animals or Indians were constant threats.

Were the mountain men trappers or mappers?

All of them were trappers, and many of them went on to become mappers, too.

By the late 1830s, nearly all the beaver were gone and silk hats had become the fashion. Mountain men needed a new way to make money. Because these men knew the western wilderness so well, the United States government hired some of them to blaze and map trails for pioneers. Some early pioneers also hired mountain men to guide their journeys. Many mountain men became famous explorers. Just as Daniel Boone had done before them, trailblazers like Jedediah Smith, Jim Bridger, Joe Walker, Kit Carson, and ex-slave Jim Beckwourth found and opened important mountain passes to the West. Some of the men also became legends for their courage and daring. For instance, Jedediah Smith survived an attack by a grizzly bear. After taking nearly all of Smith's head in its mouth, the bear tore off most of Smith's ear and a large piece of skin from his head. The companion who sewed up Smith's wounds said, "This gave us a lesson on the character of the grizzly bear which we did not forget."



OREGON FEVER

How did pioneers catch Oregon Fever?

From letters, rumors, newspaper articles—anything that told of the Oregon Territory's beauty and riches. *Oregon Fever* wasn't a disease, but an overpowering desire to pick up and move to the land that is now Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. In the late 1830s, letters drifted back east from a handful of missionaries who had gone to live among the Indians. (*Missionaries* are people who want to *convert,* or change the religious beliefs of, others.) These letters convinced people that the West wasn't just a wilderness, but a land of gentle climate, fresh streams, and rich farmland. It was only a matter of time before pioneers would go to see for themselves. About one hundred set out in 1841; one thousand in 1843; and hundreds of thousands over the next fifty years.

Pioneers went west because they:

a) couldn't go east—there's an ocean in that direction.

b) heard it was paradise.

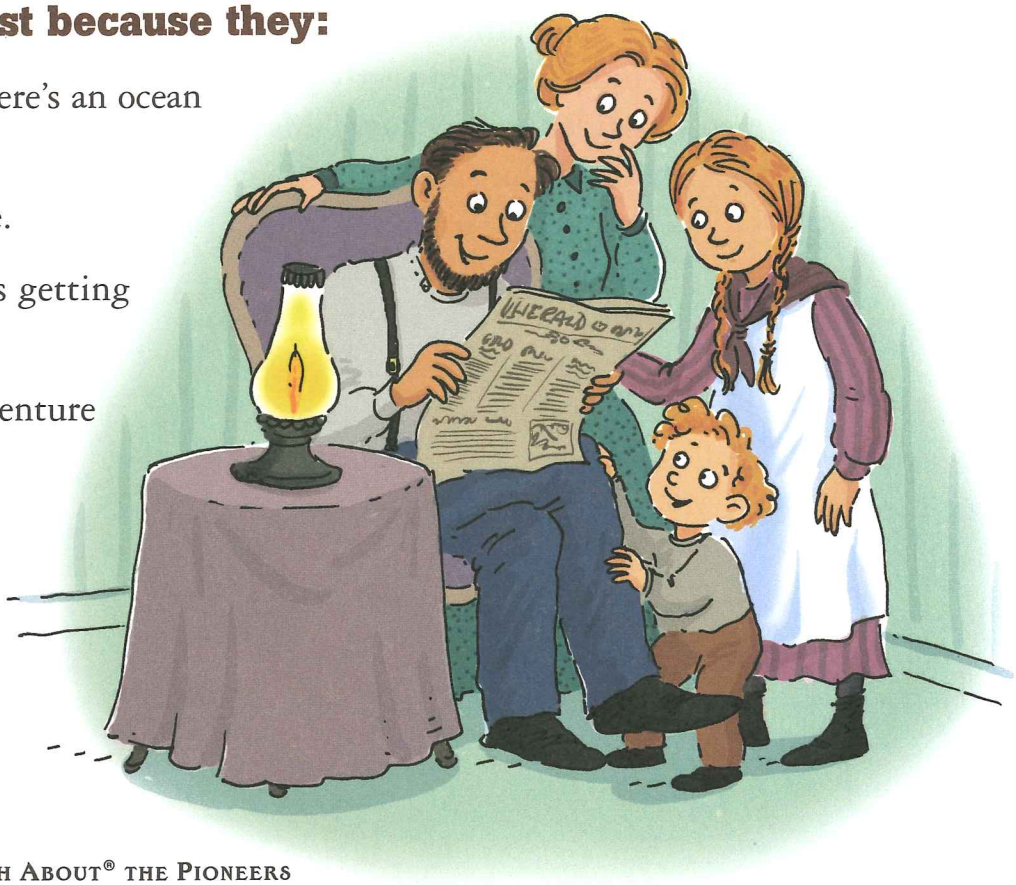
c) thought the East was getting too crowded.

d) were looking for adventure and buried treasure (gold and silver).

e) wanted free land.

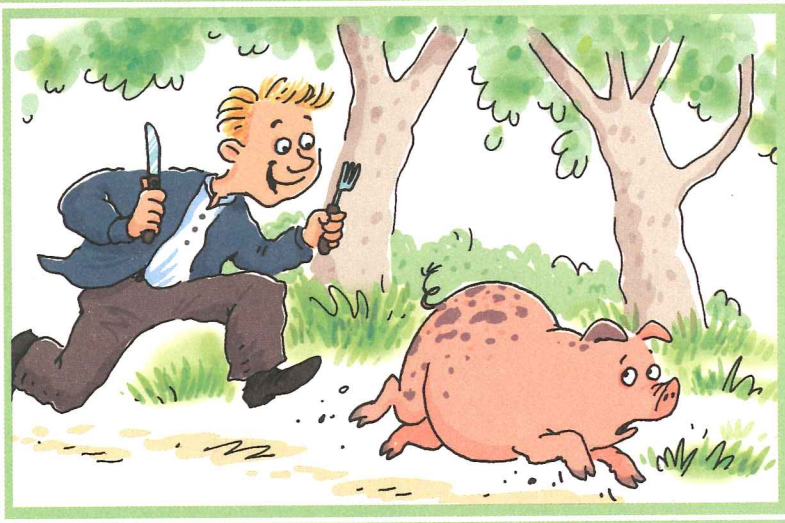
f) wanted freedom.

g) all of the above.



The answer is *g*. Pioneers went west for all these reasons. Some wanted to escape the dirt, disease, and crowds of eastern cities. Others were looking for adventure or a quick fortune mining gold and silver. Still others simply wanted to live in a place where they could practice their religion freely, or—as in the case of slaves—where they themselves would be free.

Probably the most common reason for going west was the promise of free land. Many people had lost their land and savings during money troubles in 1837, and they were looking for a place to start over. The West became a land of hope, a place where people could live as they wanted, a place where they could achieve the American Dream.



Reports of the West described Oregon as a "pioneer's paradise," where "the pigs are running about under the great acorn trees, round and fat, and already cooked, with knives and forks sticking in them so that you can cut off a slice whenever you are hungry." Do you think the Oregon promoter who said this was stretching the truth?

JUMPING OFF

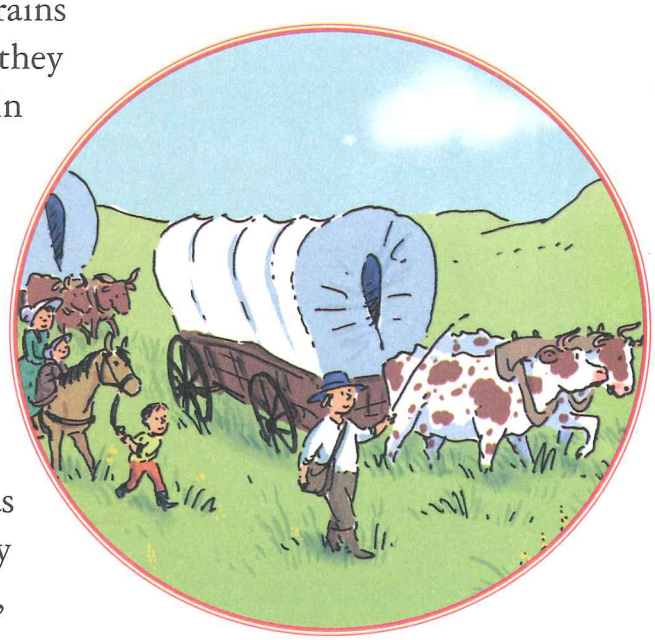
TRUE or FALSE Pioneers rode the 2,000 miles to Oregon in covered wagons.

False. Most pioneers who went west did travel with wagons, but the wagons carried supplies and were packed so tightly that they had no room for passengers. Families would make wagon space for those who were sick, hurt, very young, or very old, but the most common mode of transportation for everyone else was—you guessed it—feet. Even the person driving the wagon usually walked alongside the oxen or mules that pulled the load.

How long did the journey take?

Several months. (Just think, today you can travel the same distance in a few days by car or in a few hours by airplane!) Since oxen walk only 1 to 2 miles an hour, wagon trains usually traveled 10 to 15 miles a day—fewer when they ran into storms or rough ground. If your wagon train went 10 miles a day, how many days would you spend walking the 2,000 miles to Oregon?

Answer: 200, or almost seven months



Did pioneers follow the Yellow Brick Road to Oregon?

No. Most followed the *Oregon Trail,* which certainly wasn't made of brick! In some places it was hardly a trail at all. The Oregon Trail was really many separate Indian footpaths along the Missouri, Platte,

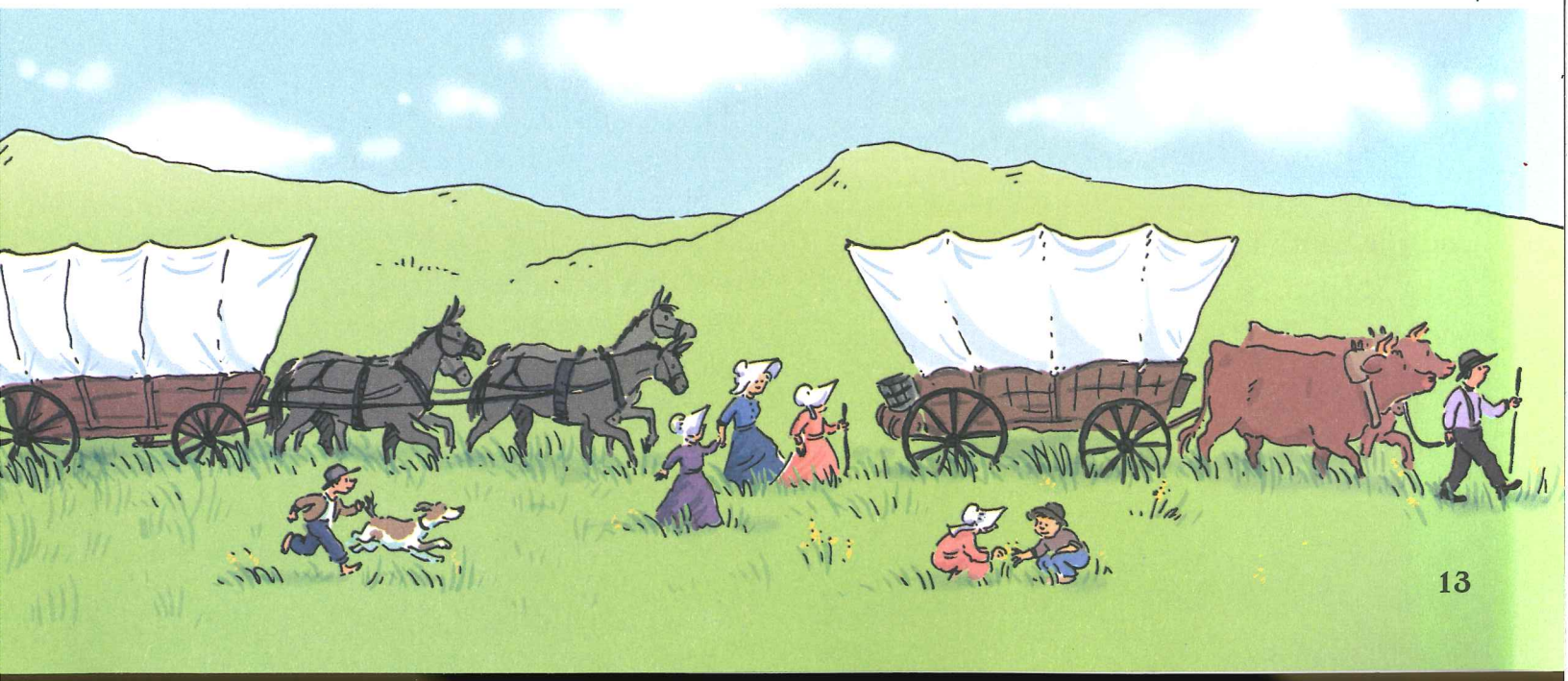
Snake, and Columbia Rivers that mountain men had linked together. The earliest pioneers knew it as the "Emigrant Road."

Did pioneers use their best parachutes for jumping off?

No, because they weren't jumping off an airplane. They were "jumping off," as they called it, into Indian country. The main jump-off point was Independence, Missouri, at the western edge of the state. (Can you guess which state's nickname is the "Gateway to the West"?) Pioneers gathered there and in other towns along the Missouri River to make repairs, buy last-minute supplies, and get advice. They also formed wagon trains, or groups, that went west together because that was safer than traveling alone. Most trains jumped off in April or May, when there was grass for the animals to eat and time to complete the journey before winter snows fell.

"The saddest parting of all was when my mother took leave of her aged and sorrowing mother, knowing full well they would never meet again on Earth."

—MARTHA GAY, 13 YEARS OLD, WHO MOVED TO OREGON WITH HER FAMILY IN 1850



Introduction

One hundred and fifty years ago there was no railroad that went all across the country. There were no cars or buses or airplanes. The only way to travel across the country was to ride a horse, or if you went with your family, to travel in a covered wagon.

In the 1840s and 1850s, thousands of people traveled West. So if you lived at that time, there was a chance you might have traveled in a covered wagon.

This book is about traveling and living in a covered wagon. It tells what it was like to be one of the early pioneers to travel to Oregon.

What was the Oregon Territory?

In the 1840s the Oregon Territory was made up of the land that is now the states of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and parts of Montana and Wyoming.

Back then nobody knew if the Oregon Territory was going to be part of America or if it was going to be part of England. Both countries had built forts in the territory. At the forts, trappers and Indians sold animal furs and skins, such as beaver, marten, and muskrat, and bought tools and supplies.

America and England agreed that Oregon would belong to the country that could get more of its people living in the new land. So to make Oregon part of America, many Americans had to go there to live. Oregon finally became a state in 1859.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WASHINGTON
END OF TRIP
COLUMBIA R.
WHITMAN MISSION
OREGON CITY
JESSE'S DEVIL'S BACKBONE
SNAKE R.
CONTINENTAL DIVIDE
ROCKY MTNS.
MONTANA
MISSOURI RIVER
NORTH DAKOTA
SOUTH DAKOTA
WYOMING
OREGON
FORT BOISE
STEAMBOAT SPRINGS
FORT HALL
SODA SPRINGS
IDAHO
PACIFIC SPRINGS
SOUTH PASS
INDEPENDENCE ROCK
TO OREGON
NEVADA
FORT BRIDGER
CHIMNEY ROCK
FORT LARAMIE
GREAT SALT LAKE
COLORADO
PLATTE R.
NEBRASKA
MISSOURI
KANSAS
CALIFORNIA
UTAH
INDEPENDENCE
THE OREGON TRAIL

Why did some people want to travel all the way to Oregon?

Back in the 1840s you heard about faraway places by reading newspapers or hearing stories told by visitors who came from the distant places. This is how people learned of a land on the other side — the west side — of the Rocky Mountains. That land was called Oregon.

Stories told about Oregon made it sound like a magical place. Flowers bloomed all year. The land was good for farming. And there was plenty of land that you could get for free. There were tall trees and big forests, and rivers and streams filled with fish.

So the very name *Oregon* made people think of starting new adventures.

What was a covered wagon?

A covered wagon was a wagon with a white rounded top made of cloth. The cloth was called canvas and was rubbed with oil to make it waterproof. It was stretched over big wooden hoops that were bent from one side of the wagon to the other.

There were drawstrings in the front and back of the canvas. If you pulled the strings tight, you could close the ends up to keep out the rain or wind. The canvas could also be rolled up on the long sides, so that you could get a breeze on a hot day.

The bottom part of the covered wagon looked like an ordinary wagon with one difference: The front wheels were smaller than the back wheels. That made it easier to make sharp turns.

Inside the wagon there were hooks on the wooden hoops. On them you could hang milk cans, guns, bonnets, spoons, dolls, jackets, and anything else there was room for.