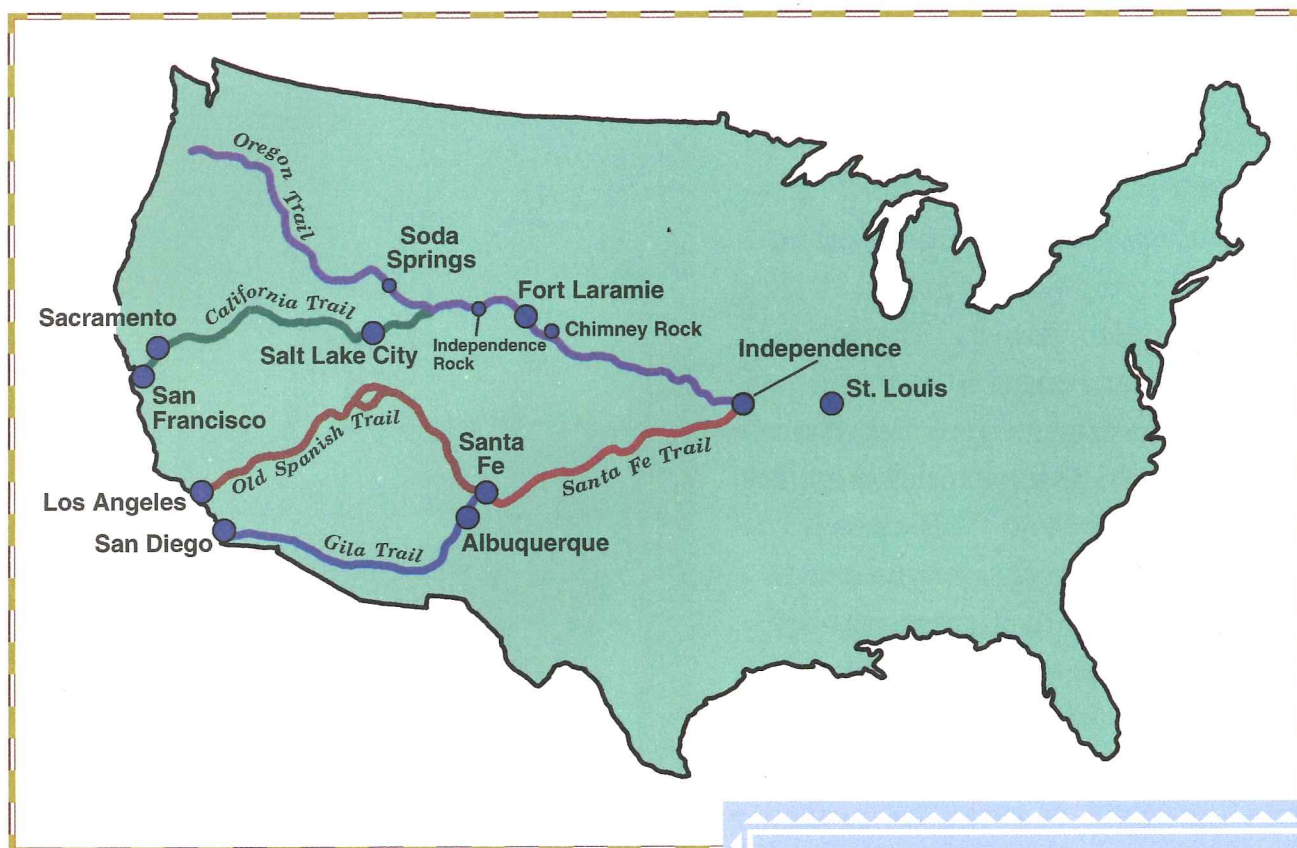


# DIFFERENT DESTINATIONS



## Was the Oregon Trail the only route west?

No, it was just the best known and most traveled. Several other trails left Missouri for different places in the West. These routes included the Gila and Old Spanish Trails, which led to San Diego and Los Angeles, and the Santa Fe Trail, a trading route to New Mexico. Settlers also went to Texas on various smaller trails that began in Missouri and Mexico.

California, Texas, and the Southwest were once part of Mexico. When Mexico became free of Spain in 1821, it welcomed thousands of Americans into Texas. Soon there were more English-speaking Americans and their slaves in Texas than Mexicans! These newcomers wanted to set up an independent, English-speaking Republic of Texas. Mexican leader Antonio López de Santa Anna didn't like that at all. In 1836, he defeated Davy Crockett and others at the famous battle of the Alamo. Soon other Americans defeated him, and Texas became a separate country (until it became a state nine years later).

## Were there Pilgrims on the trail?

No, not the Pilgrims who sailed on the *Mayflower*—but other pilgrims did travel west.

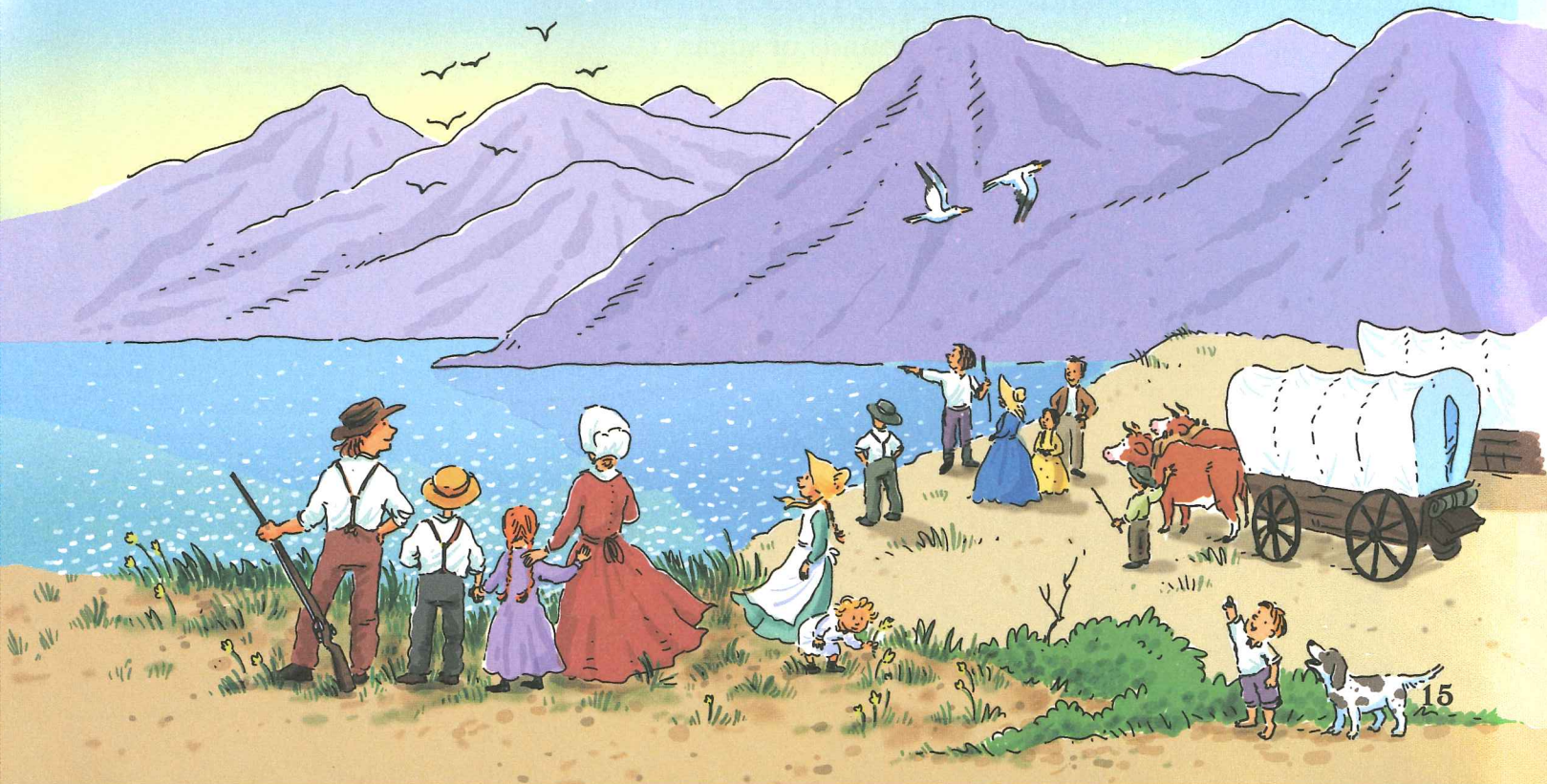


BRIGHAM YOUNG

A pilgrim is someone who makes a pilgrimage, or a journey to a holy land. Among the pioneers were members of a religious group called the Mormons, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Mormons had moved from New York to Ohio to Missouri to Illinois.



They were chased from state to state because many Americans disagreed with their beliefs. In 1846, their leader, Brigham Young, took a small group of Mormons to find a place where they could practice their religion freely. When the group came to the dry land near the Great Salt Lake in present-day Utah, Young said, "This is the place." Thousands of additional Mormons followed. Working together, they made the desert bloom.



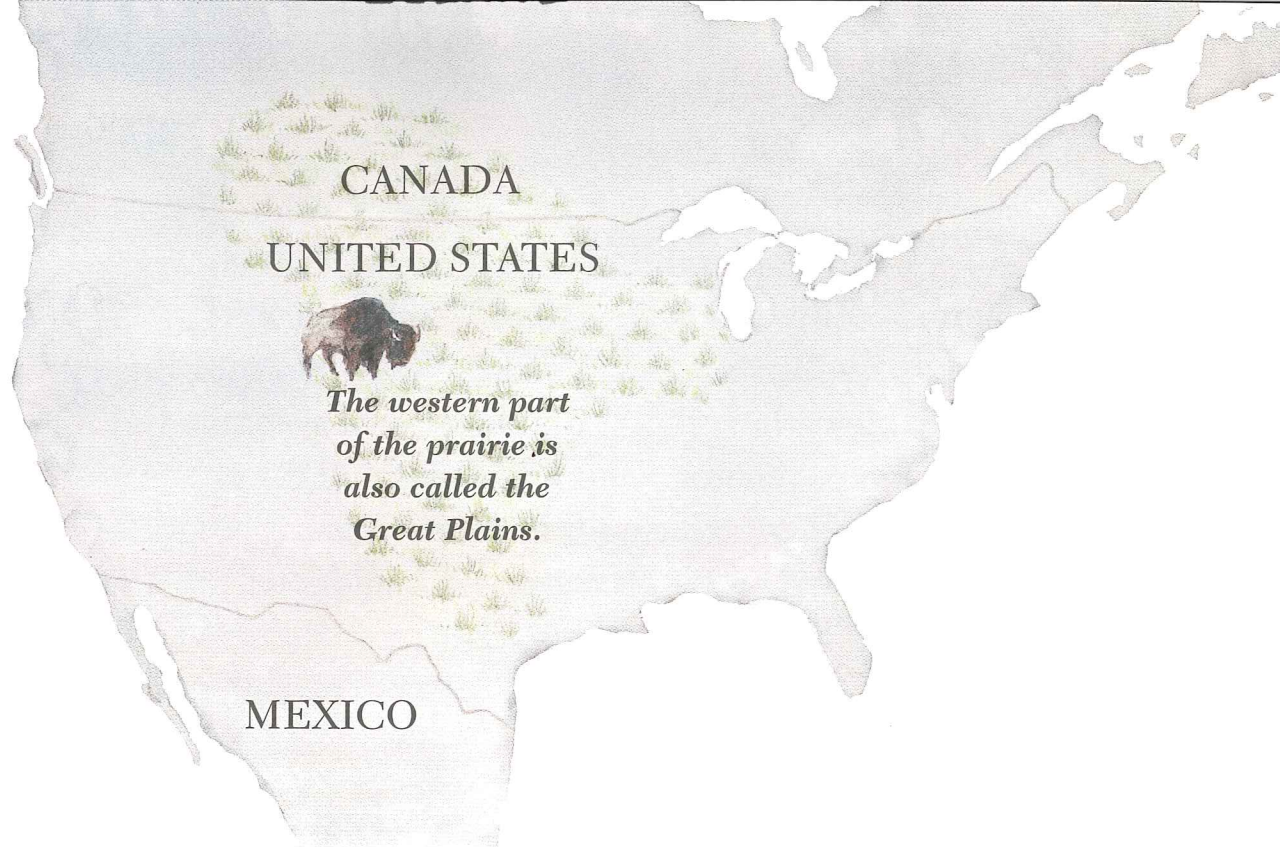


## *Introduction*

The first pioneers who traveled west weren't going to the prairie. They were going to Oregon and California. But they had to cross the prairie to get there.

As they traveled in covered wagons, all they saw was grass, grass, and more grass. The prairie had almost no trees and very little water. As they got farther west, the prairie got drier — so dry, in fact, that it was called the Great American Desert on their maps. The pioneers didn't think anyone except the Indians could live in such a place.

But all that changed after gold was discovered in California in 1848. Suddenly, more people than ever were rushing west, hoping to strike it rich. Special stores called road ranches sprang up on the prairie along the busy wagon trails. They served hot meals, sold supplies, and cared for the tired oxen and horses that pulled the covered wagons. Road ranchers raised their own cattle and often grew their own vegetables. People began to notice that you could actually live on this land. Word spread, and soon pioneers were living all over the prairie.



When did pioneers live on the prairie? The colored part of the time line shows you.

1776	1803	1835	1848	1861–1865	1869	1879	1890	1900
The 13 American colonies declare independence from England	The U.S. buys most of the prairie land in the Louisiana Purchase	First pioneers go west on the Oregon Trail	Gold discovered in California	The Civil War President Lincoln signs Homestead Act (1862)	Railroad across the U.S. completed	Thomas Edison invents electric lightbulb	Most of the prairie land settled	Early automobiles appear in the U.S.



## *What was the prairie like?*

Just imagine — only 150 years ago, America had the greatest grasslands the earth has ever seen.

The wind blew the grass in endless waves across the prairie. You could walk for miles and miles and never see a tree, except for those growing along the rivers. The grass and the sky seemed to go on forever. Pioneers called it a sea of grass.

Winters were freezing cold, with blizzards of ice dust sweeping down from the Arctic. Summers were very hot and dry, with freak hailstorms and tornadoes. As the grass





dried, prairie fires swept across the open land. Indians had lived on the prairie for thousands of years. Some who lived along the rivers, like the Pawnee, were both farmers and hunters. Others, like the Lakota Sioux, were mainly hunters.

More than sixty million buffalo roamed the prairie. When they ran, the earth shook. There were also antelope, wolves, bears, prairie dogs, and millions of rattlesnakes. As the weather warmed, the air filled with songbirds and butterflies.





## *Why did people want to come to the prairie?*

In 1803, the United States bought most of the prairie from France as part of the Louisiana Purchase. With all this new land, people thought the government should give it away free.

That's what President Abraham Lincoln thought, too. So in 1862, he signed the Homestead Act. Now anyone could get 160 acres free if he was willing to farm it. Even foreigners could get free land, as long as they promised to become citizens.

People talked about all the wonderful things they could do if they moved west to the prairie. They could own their own farms. They could start a store or other business in a



When the United States became a new nation in 1783, it was much smaller than it is today. U.S. territory went only from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River. The land west of the Mississippi was claimed by Spain, which later sold it to France.

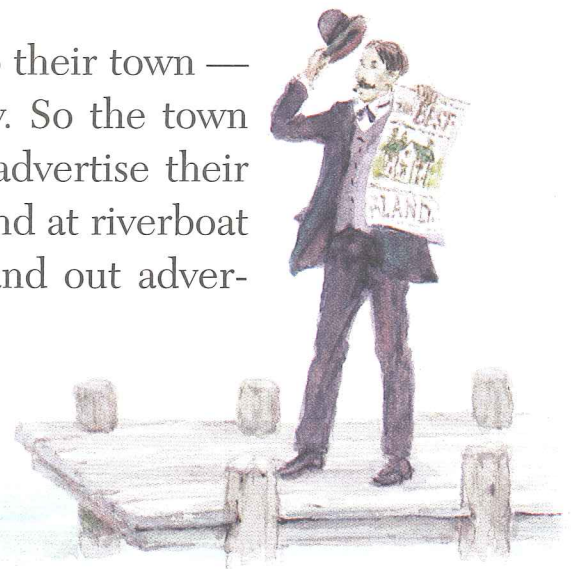
In 1803, the United States bought the land between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains from France for \$15 million. It was called the Louisiana Purchase, and it made the United States twice as big. Most of this new land was prairie.

brand-new town. Maybe they could even start a new town! Maybe they'd become rich or famous!

Some of the people who moved to the prairie were soldiers who had fought in the Civil War and wanted a new place to start over. Others were African-Americans who had been slaves before the war and wanted to find a place of their own. Farmers who had struggled to make a living in the East came. Poor families and religious groups came. The Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians came. All wanted a chance to make a new life on the great, wild prairie.

### *How did people learn about the prairie?*

Each new town wanted pioneers to come to their town — either to buy town land or to settle nearby. So the town owners printed up a lot of information to advertise their towns. Some towns even hired agents to stand at riverboat landings when the pioneers arrived and hand out advertisement fliers.



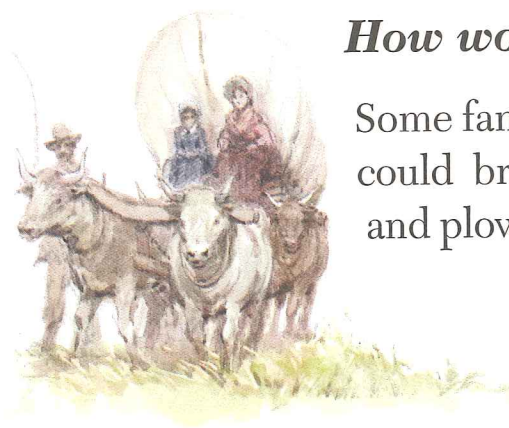


The advertisements had drawings of beautiful towns. Sometimes, though, those beautiful towns didn't really exist! In those early days, many families arrived at a place only to find that the "town" was nothing but a few shacks, a store, and a lot of prairie dogs.

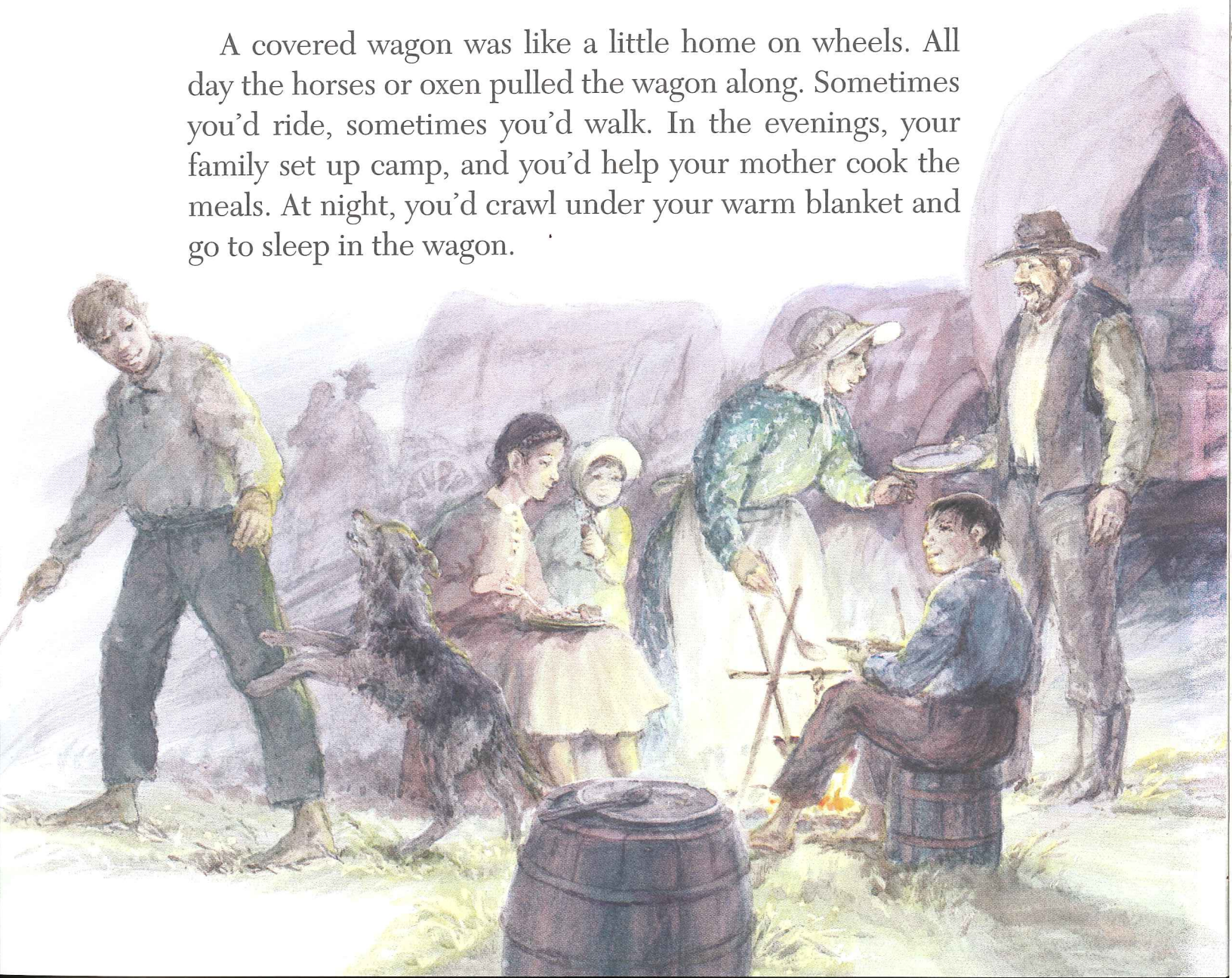
Railroad companies were big advertisers. The U.S. government had given them more than 150 million acres of free land as "payment" for building a railroad across America. Most of this land was very valuable because it lay next to the railroad tracks. The railroads wanted to sell the land, so they advertised in the East and in Europe. The railroads wanted pioneers to come to the prairie even if they *didn't* buy land. The more pioneers living there, the more customers the railroads had, and the more money they made!

### *How would you get to the prairie?*

Some families traveled in covered wagons. That way they could bring many things with them — even furniture and plows. Your family might even travel in two wagons.



A covered wagon was like a little home on wheels. All day the horses or oxen pulled the wagon along. Sometimes you'd ride, sometimes you'd walk. In the evenings, your family set up camp, and you'd help your mother cook the meals. At night, you'd crawl under your warm blanket and go to sleep in the wagon.



### *Could you go by train or boat?*

Yes. Every year the railroads built tracks farther and farther into the wild prairie. So if your new home was near a train station, you might go by train if your family could afford it.

Trains were much slower then. Rides were bumpy, and sometimes black smoke and ashes flew in the window and got all over your face and clothing. But nobody minded that much, because trains were the fastest and easiest way to go.



Traveling by riverboat was a lot of fun. There'd be bands playing tunes like "Oh, Susannah," and lots of delicious food to eat. Many passengers became friends during the long trip. One group decided to settle together when they got to Nebraska. They named their new town Beatrice, after one of their daughters.

Riverboats took you only part of the way, though. You'd have to take a stagecoach or wagon to your homestead.

