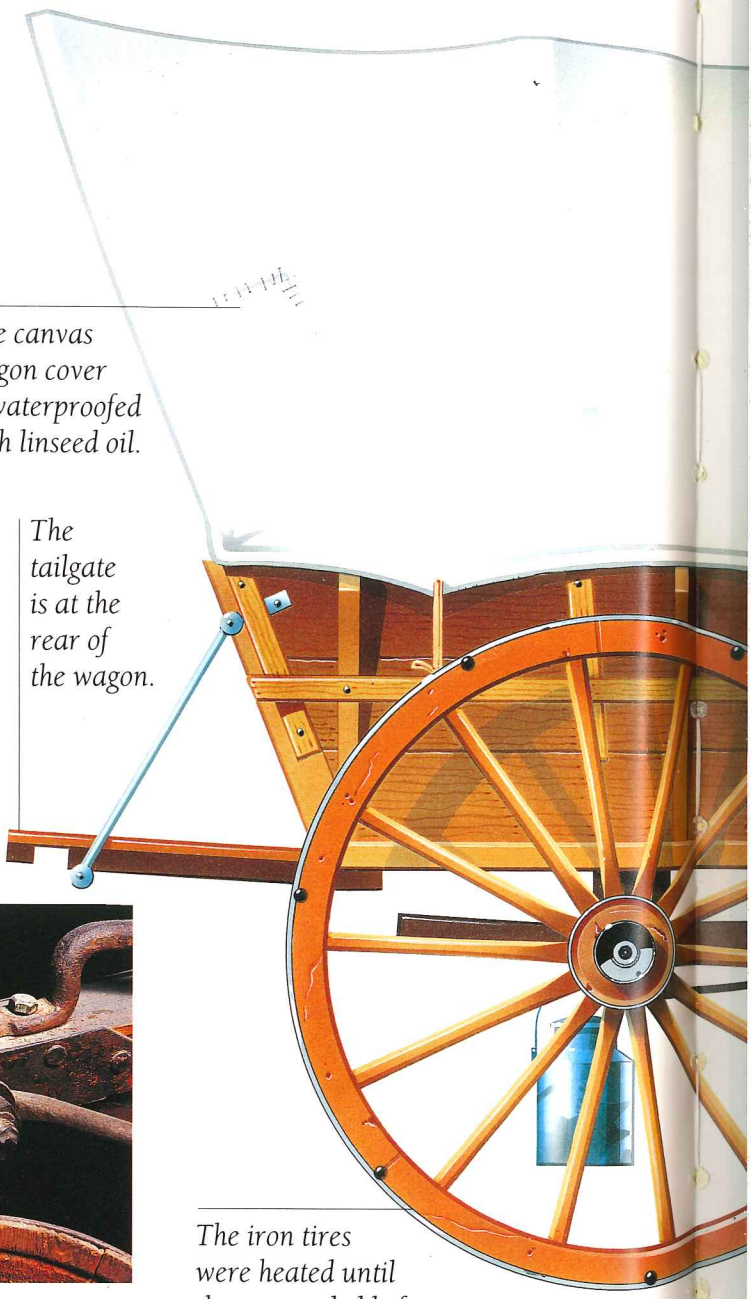
The Wagon

All Mr. Larkin's guidebooks say that the key to a successful journey to Oregon is a good wagon. It must be strong, in order to carry a load of perhaps 2,000 lbs. over rough and mountainous country, and light, in order not to strain the oxen pulling it. Rather than risk using the family's rickety old farm wagon, Mr. Larkin decided to buy a new wagon in Independence.

"The wagon looks so nice, with its white cover. It is plenty high enough for me to stand straight under the roof. Once it starts rolling, with everything packed away ship-shape, it will be a prairie schooner indeed!" Mrs. Larkin's Diary

Above: *Wagon trains waiting to begin the journey.*

At $110, it is the most expensive thing he has bought for the trip. Even Mrs. Larkin is pleased with it. She has decided to call it "Hoosier Home." This is because the Larkins came from Indiana, and people from that state are sometimes called "hoosiers."

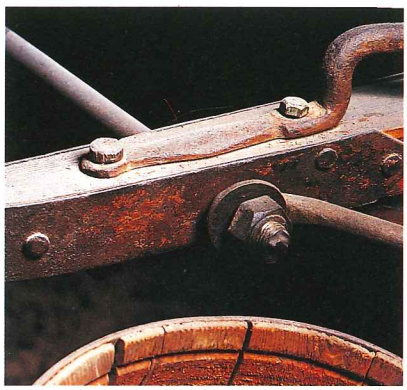


The canvas wagon cover is waterproofed with linseed oil.

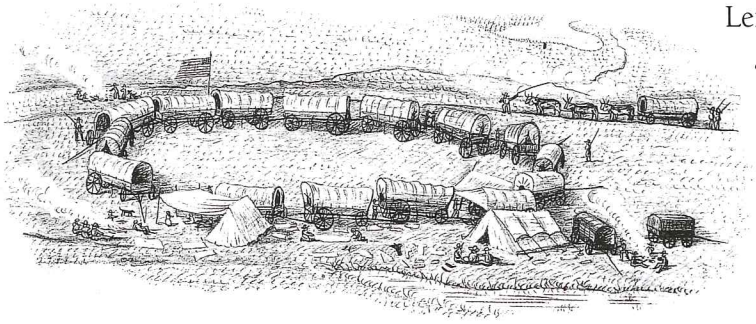
The tailgate is at the rear of the wagon.

The iron tires were heated until they expanded before being slipped into place.

Above: *The cover is threaded through with a "puckering string" at each end, so that it can be opened and closed.*



Above: *Iron is used to strengthen parts of the wagon such as the axles and wheels.*



Left: *The wagons were parked in a circle at night to give protection from wolves, cattle thieves, and the wind.*

Below: *The body of the wagon is a box four feet wide by ten feet long. The Larkins' wagon is of the "Murphy" type with slightly flaring sides.*

Bows made out of hickory wood are used to hold up the canvas.

The jockey box at the front of the wagon is used to sit on and to hold tools.

The oxen are harnessed to the wagon tongue.

The wheels have hubs of elm, spokes of oak, and rims of ash, all firmly bolted together. They are greased with tallow and tar to make them run smoothly.

Left: *The wheels are fixed to the axles with iron bolts and pins.*

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.

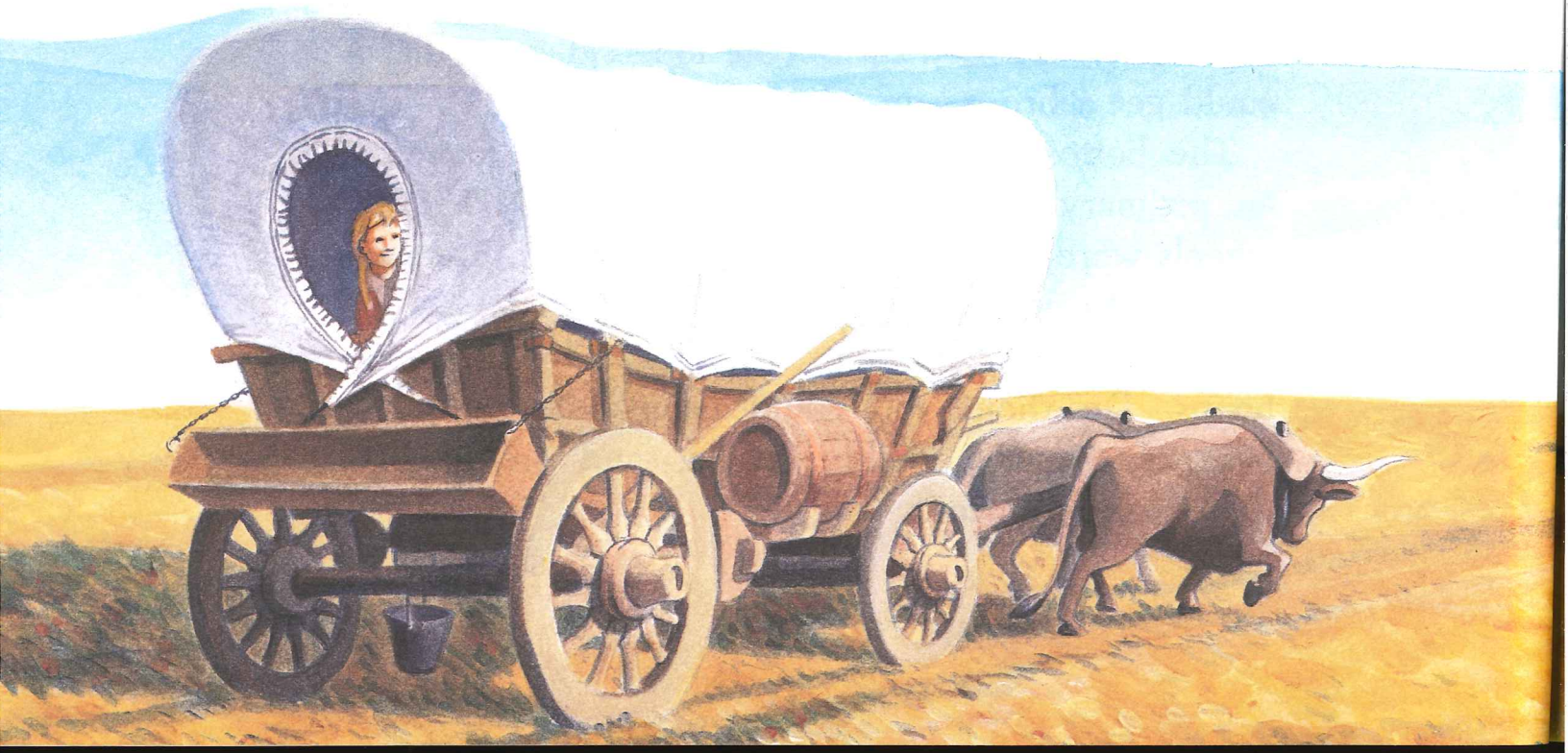
The bottom part of the covered wagon looked like an ordinary wagon with one difference: The front wheels were smaller than the back wheels. That made it easier to make sharp turns.

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.

Underneath the wagon between the back wheels there was a hook with a bucket full of grease hanging down from it. The grease was rubbed on the wheels so that they would turn smoothly.

In the front of the wagon there was a wooden board to sit on.

The covered wagon was pulled by oxen or mules or horses. Many pioneers used oxen because they were stronger than mules and horses.



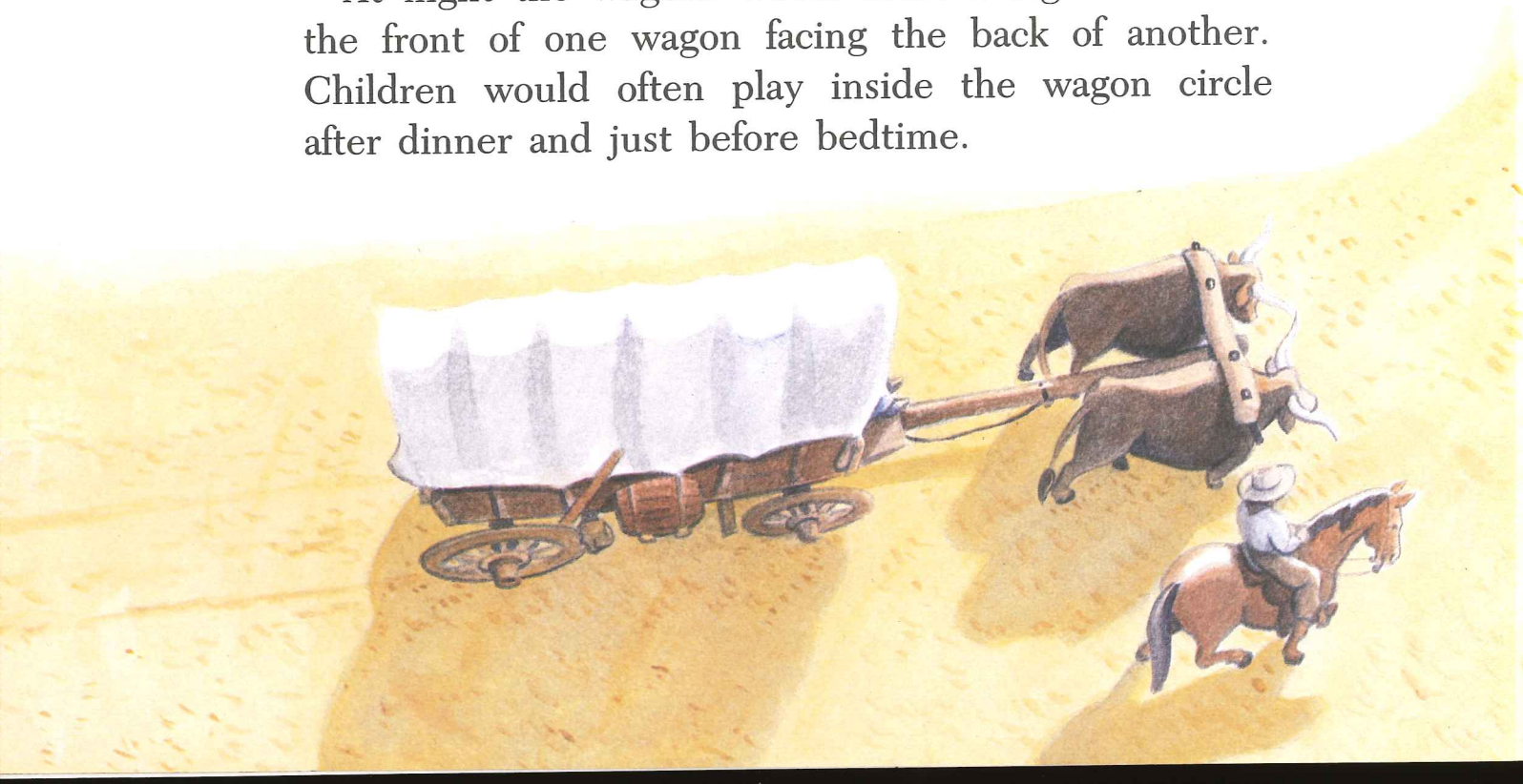
Covered wagons were also called prairie schooners. Can you guess why?

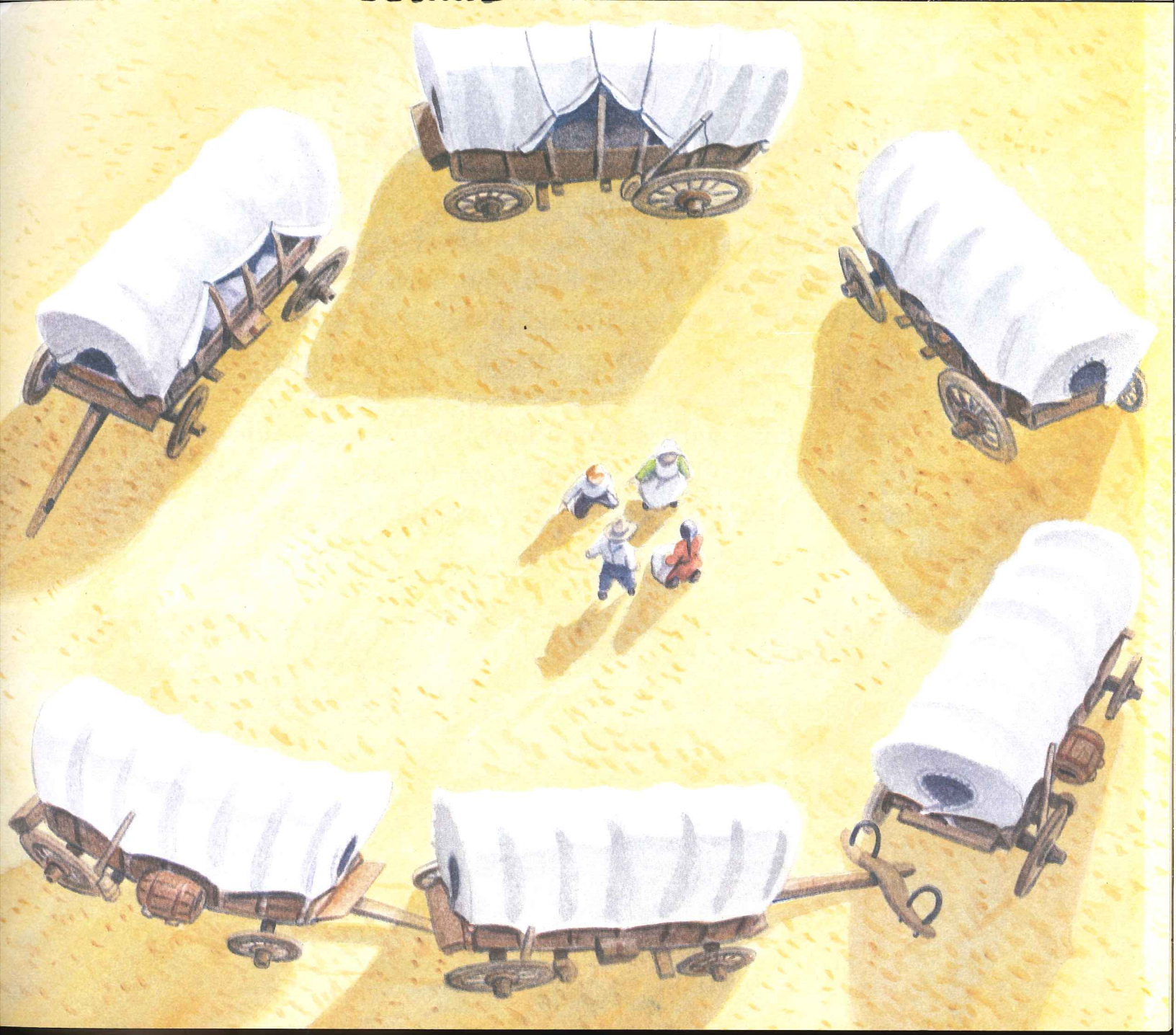
A schooner is a boat that sails on the seas. The big white canvas cover on the wagon looked like a huge sail. And if the grass was tall enough to hide the wheels, the wagon looked like a big boat sailing across the grassy green waves.

What was a wagon train?

A wagon train was a group of covered wagons that went together on the long trip West. The wagons would travel in a single line so that from a distance they looked like a slow-moving train. If the trail was wide enough, they would sometimes spread out to get away from each other's dust.

At night the wagons would form a big circle with the front of one wagon facing the back of another. Children would often play inside the wagon circle after dinner and just before bedtime.





Did anybody lead the wagon train?

Yes. When pioneers gathered their wagons together at the start of the trip, they elected a leader. This leader, or captain, would blow the horn or whistle to wake everybody up in the morning. He was also the one who decided when you would stop for lunch and at the end of the day.

The captain, with a few others, would often ride a little in front of the wagon train to see what was ahead on the trail. Then they would ride up and down the wagon line to make sure that everything was okay.

Usually there was a council of about six to ten people who would meet at night with the captain to talk about how the trip was going. Each person would report on different problems:

- A wagon wheel had broken and the family needed someone to help make a new one.
- Somebody's flour barrel had gotten all wet and muddy crossing the river, and the family needed to get some flour from anyone who could spare a little.
- A group of men had to be organized for the next day's buffalo hunt.

The captain and the council would plan who would stand guard at night to protect the animals and warn the people if anything was wrong.

What was a "trail guide"?

Some wagon trains hired trail guides. These were people who had made the trip before and knew the way. Usually they had been fur trappers and traders out West for many years. When they came back to the East, they had special knowledge that was very helpful to the pioneers.

The guides would know the best places to cross the rivers. They knew how far you had traveled and how much more you had to go. And they taught the pioneers some of the tricks of the trail, which you can read about in this book on page 73.

Some of the guides even wrote books about how to travel West. This meant that the captain and the council of a wagon train could study a guidebook and learn about the best way to go.

One of the most famous guides was a man named Dr. Marcus Whitman. He was a doctor and a missionary. He and his wife, Narcissa, built a home in the Oregon territory. If you look at the map on page 7, you will see where they lived.

Dr. Whitman was a trail guide for the first big wagon train to go to Oregon in 1843. It was made up of about 120 wagons. Because he had made the trip before, he was very helpful to the pioneers who were going for the first time.

Dr. Whitman believed that the wagons could go over the mountains in Oregon. No covered wagons had ever gone across those mountains before. But the pioneers trusted Dr. Whitman, and they made it!

Cooking over a camp fire.

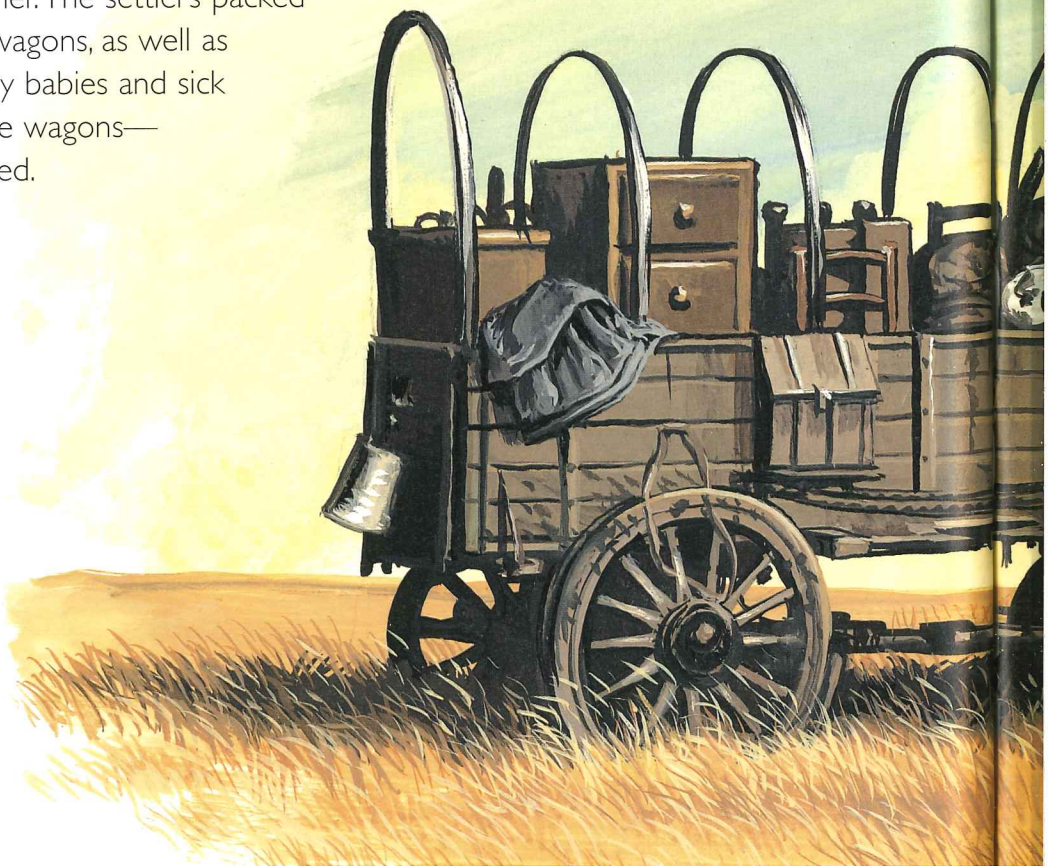
What was a "prairie schooner"?

OVER 1,000 PEOPLE SET OFF ALONG THE OREGON TRAIL IN 1843, THE start of the "Great Migration" to the West. They traveled in heavy wooden wagons called Conestoga wagons, pulled by horses, mules, or oxen. Later pioneers along the trail used lighter wagons which were known as "prairie schooners," because their white canvas tops looked rather like the sails on a ship called a schooner. The settlers packed their belongings into the wagons, as well as supplies for the journey. Only babies and sick people actually rode in the wagons—everyone else walked.

How many wagons were there in a wagon train?
Settlers traveled in groups along the trail for safety and for companionship, and there could be anything up to 100 wagons in a wagon train. The train traveled very slowly—at little over 1 mph (1.5 kph) and was on the move for nine or 10 hours every day.

Where did the Oregon and California trails go?
In 1840, there were fewer than 150 Americans living in the vast area in the American West known as Oregon. Only five years later, there were thousands of American settlers in the region. Most had traveled across the continent of America along the 2,000-mile (3,200-km) Oregon Trail. This trail usually started in Independence, Missouri, crossed the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains, and ended in the Columbia River region of Oregon. An alternative trail, the California Trail, followed the same route until Fort Hall, west of the Rocky Mountains, when it branched southwards, ending in the Sacramento valley.

Who wore bloomers?
Many pioneer women found that the heavy, full-length dresses that were the usual dress of the period were hopelessly impractical for life on the trail. Some women started to wear shorter dresses that did not reach all the way to the ground; others even dared to wear "bloomers"—a type of pants.



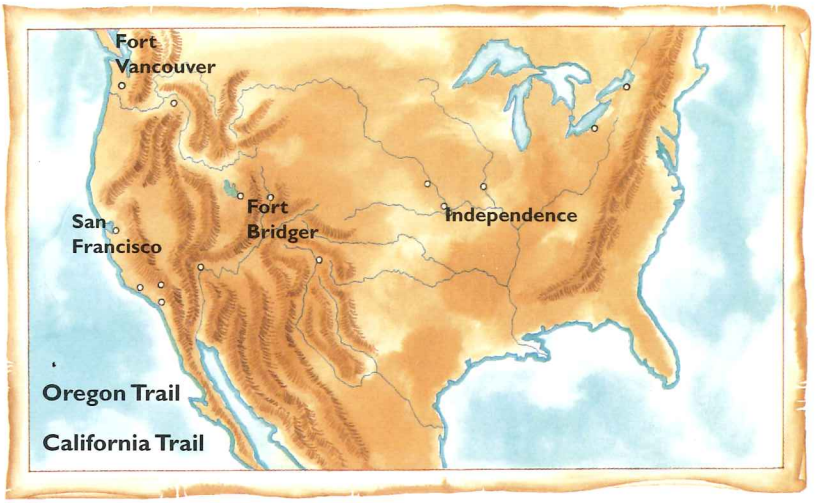
A pioneer wagon loaded with a family's possessions.

Who was in charge of the train?
In the spring, groups of pioneers met in rendezvous towns such as Independence or St Joseph, Missouri or Council Bluffs, Iowa. They formed wagon-train companies and elected a leader, known as the raid captain. They also employed guides to lead them along the trail.

What happened at night?
At the end of a long day on the trail, the wagons would draw up into circles and set up camp for the night. These wagon circles gave the settlers protection in case of attack from Native Americans.

What did the men do?
The men in a wagon train were in charge of driving and repairing their wagons and looking after their livestock. They also hunted for food, and took turns standing guard at night, keeping watch for hostile Native Americans.

What were the women's jobs?
During the long, arduous journey, the women on a wagon train were in charge of preparing food —rising before dawn to ensure that a fire was lit and food was ready. They also washed and mended clothes, and looked after the children and sick people.



The Oregon Trail and the California Trail both began in Independence, Missouri.

How long was the journey?
The journey from Missouri to Oregon took about eight months, usually starting in April. It was vital to get through the coastal mountain ranges (the Cascades and the Sierra Nevada) before the winter snows set in. But starting out too early was dangerous too—settlers ran the risk that there would not be enough grass for their livestock to eat.

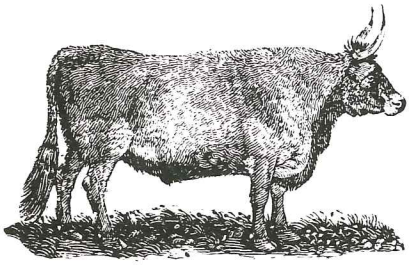
Why did so many pioneers die?

THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE DIED ALONG THE OREGON AND CALIFORNIA TRAILS.

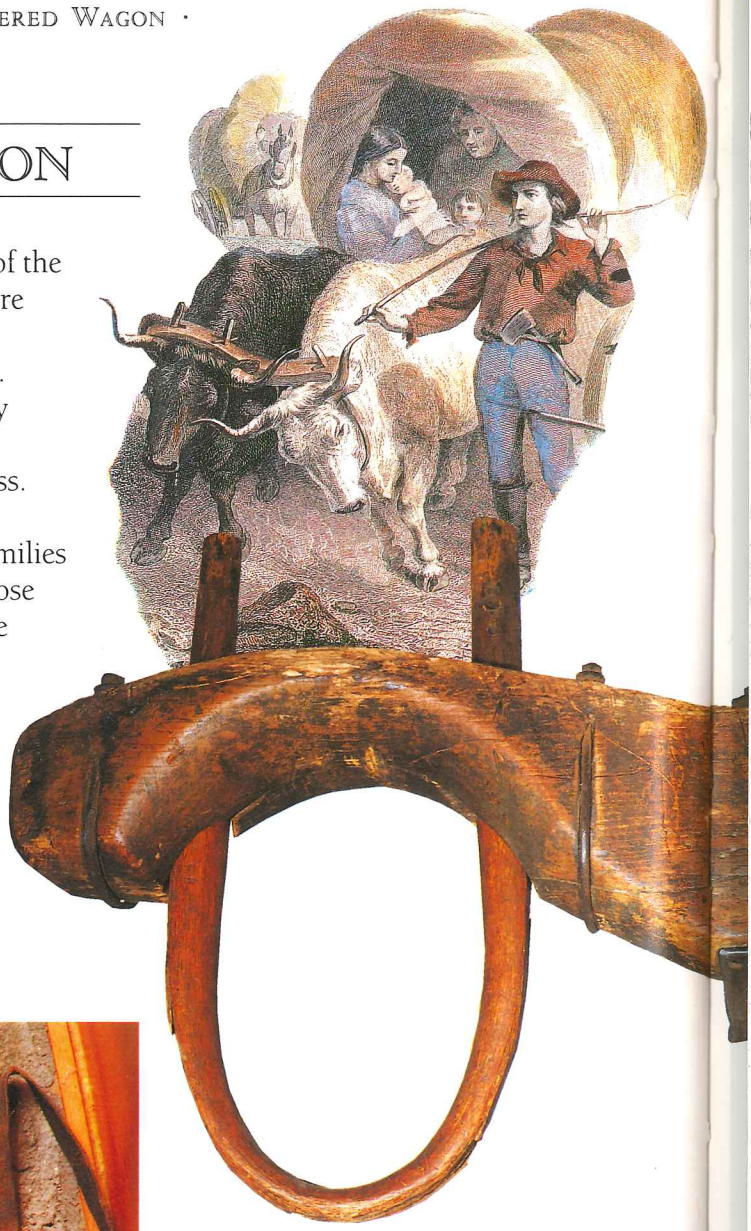
One estimate is that seven people died for every mile of the route. The biggest killer was disease, particularly cholera. However, the greatest fear for the pioneers was attack from Native Americans. In fact, very few people died as a result of such attacks.

Hitching Up The Wagon

While Mrs. Larkin is preparing breakfast, the men of the party round up the livestock. The riding horses are close at hand. They have been hobbled to the wagons during the night in case they are stolen by Indians. The cattle, however, have been left free to graze where they like, and by dawn some have wandered far from the camp in search of the tastiest grass.



Overlanders traveled in different ways. Farming families like the Larkins usually chose oxen to pull the wagon the 2,000 mile journey, since these animals are very strong. However, men bound for the California gold fields often chose a pack-train of mules that could go faster than a covered wagon, even when carrying panniers (*see below*) filled with heavy supplies.

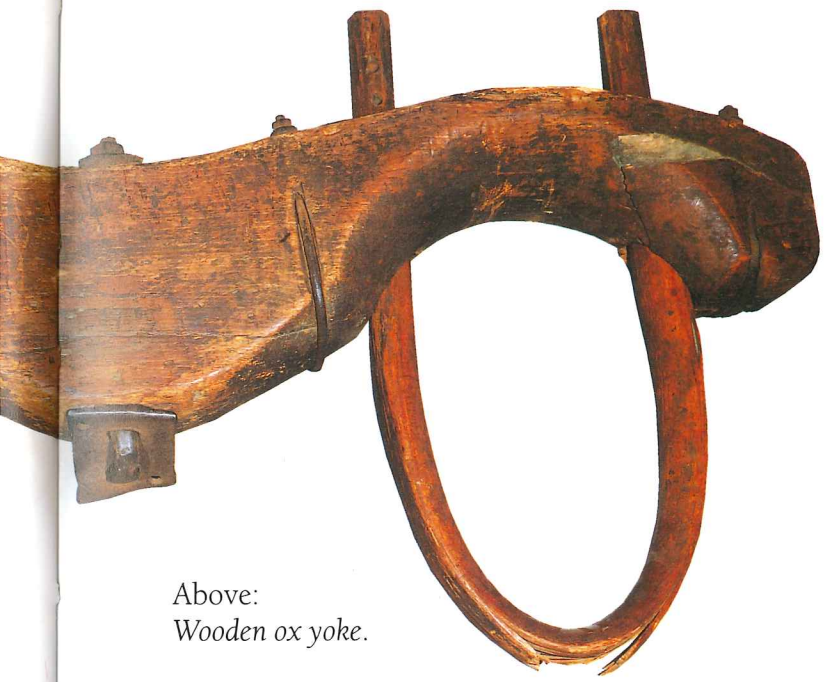


Left: *Overlanders bound for the gold fields would carry their supplies in a pair of panniers strapped over a mule's back.*

Right: *On hard or rocky trails iron shoes protected the oxen's feet.*

After the cattle have been driven into the corral of circled wagons and sorted out, Mr. Larkin yokes up his team of six oxen. While many overlanders used oxen from their old farmsteads, Mr. Larkin purchased these in Independence. He wanted them fresh for the journey, and he also knew from his reading in the guidebooks that oxen in Missouri were cheap and accustomed to eating the tough grasses of the prairie. Some overlanders did use mules, which were tough, relatively speedy, and could survive on cottonwood bark, but the vast majority preferred oxen. Although oxen were slower than mules, they fared much better in muddy conditions and could survive on little food. Most of the overlanders used oxen on their farms back east and were experienced at handling them. Besides that, oxen were relatively cheap. They cost only $55 to $65 per yoke (2 oxen), while mules might be as much as $110 each. Like the Larkins, most overlanders have one or two saddle horses. However, horses were not used to pull the wagons until the later years on the trail because they could not work well with such poor feed.

In addition to their oxen, the Larkins have two milk cows. Rachel and Abraham have the task of milking them every morning and evening. In the evening the Larkin family drink the milk fresh with their supper, but in the morning Mrs. Larkin puts the milk into a churn, which she hangs from the back of the wagon. On the trail she does not have time to make butter the way she did back in Indiana, but without it even her tasty biscuits and pancakes are too dry to eat. Fortunately, she has learned a shortcut. As the wagon bumps along, the milk is shaken so vigorously that large balls of butter will form with no hand churning at all.



Above:
Wooden ox yoke.

Right: *One company of Mormons traveled with two-wheeled handcarts which they pulled themselves.*

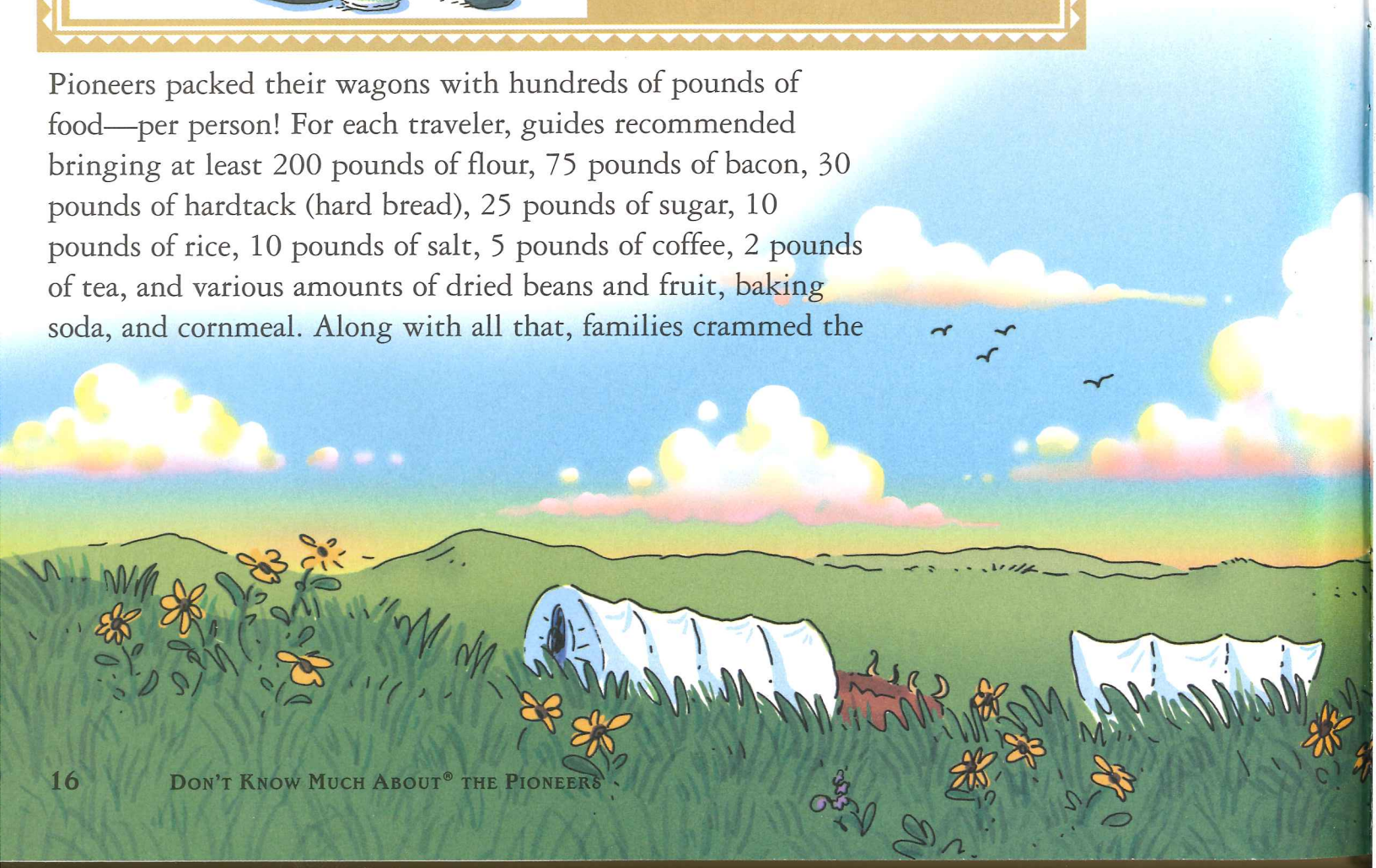
PACKING THE WAGONS

So what was inside all those wagons?

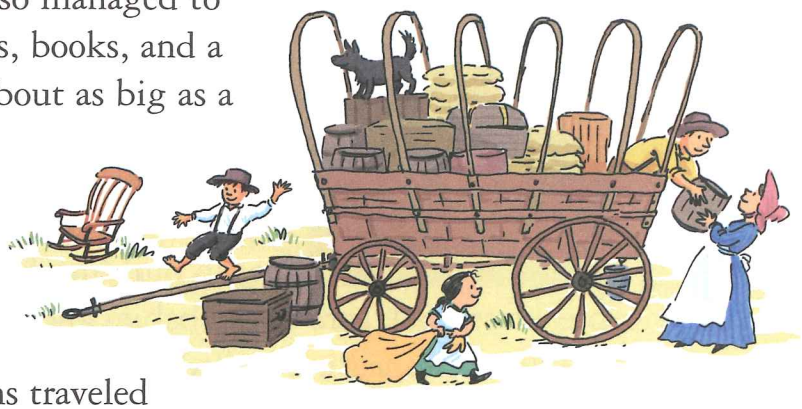
Everything that would fit. Anything you needed on the trip, or would need when you arrived, you had to take with you. There weren't any real stores out west. There were a few forts, but if they had any extra supplies when you got there, they'd be wildly expensive.

Can you guess how the pioneers kept their eggs and fragile dishes safe in the bumpy wagons? They packed them in their barrels of flour and cornmeal!

Pioneers packed their wagons with hundreds of pounds of food—per person! For each traveler, guides recommended bringing at least 200 pounds of flour, 75 pounds of bacon, 30 pounds of hardtack (hard bread), 25 pounds of sugar, 10 pounds of rice, 10 pounds of salt, 5 pounds of coffee, 2 pounds of tea, and various amounts of dried beans and fruit, baking soda, and cornmeal. Along with all that, families crammed the



wagons with pots and pans, dishes, extra clothing, tools and spare wagon parts, medicine, sewing supplies, and cash (for toll bridges, ferries, and the purchase of replacement wagon parts or food along the way). Pioneers also managed to squeeze in pieces of furniture, cookstoves, books, and a few keepsakes. All this in a space only about as big as a minivan!

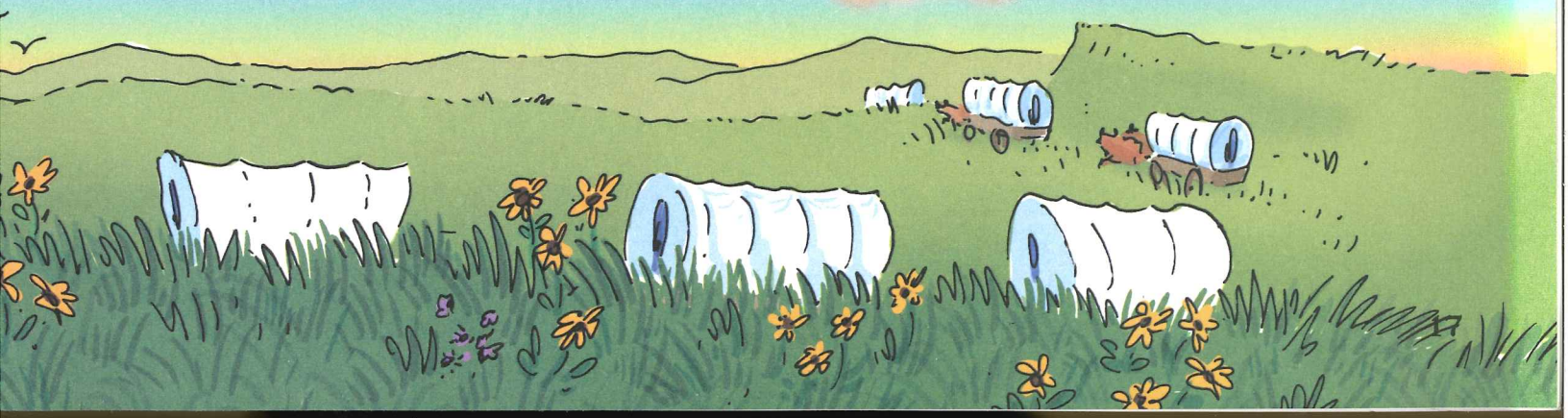


Why were wagons called "prairie schooners"?

Because they had tall white canvas tops that looked like ships' sails. When wagons traveled across the Great Plains (the wide open *prairies,* or grasslands, of the American Midwest), tall prairie grasses hid the wagons' wheels from view and made the wagons look, from a distance, like a fleet of ships in an ocean of grass. So wagons were nicknamed "prairie schooners" or "ships of the plains."

The best prairie schooners were strong, yet lightweight. To help make them waterproof, pioneers covered the wooden bottom with tar and the white canvas top with oil. The top, which was stretched over five or six U-shaped bows, could be closed in the back using a drawstring if the weather was bad. Hooks on the inside and outside of the wagon held milk cans, tools, and women's bonnets. Spare wagon parts were stored underneath the flooring.

Many families turned their canvas wagon covers into moving billboards that announced their names or destinations, or carried determined slogans like "Patience and Perseverance" or "Oregon or the Grave."



What kinds of people traveled West?

Many different kinds of people went to live in the new place called Oregon.

Farmers wanted to go to find good new land. Storekeepers wanted to go to set up new shops. There were carpenters and bakers and blacksmiths. There were missionaries and shoemakers and artists and lawyers. There were doctors and teachers and almost anyone else you can think of who might want to try something new.

You were especially lucky if people who knew many of these different things were in your wagon train. Then it was like carrying your whole town with you on the trip.

Sometimes people who didn't start out with you on the trip were there when you arrived at your new home. That's because babies were born on the trip!

If you had a new sister or brother on the trip, the wagon train would stop for a day or two. Usually several of the women knew how to help when babies were born. And there in the middle of a new country would be a new person.

The travelers, including the new babies, were called pioneers because they were the first group of people to move into a new land and make a new home.

What would your family bring in their covered wagon?

As much as you could pack in. It was necessary to leave behind everything that you didn't really need, especially if it was heavy.

The oxen and horses pulling the wagons had a hard time just walking across the country. If the wagons were too heavy, the oxen could die from exhaustion.

It was very important to try to figure out how much food you would need for the five or six months you would be traveling. There was no supermarket you could go to when you ran out of supplies. So you would bring flour and yeast for baking bread. Your family would also bring crackers, cornmeal, bacon, eggs, dried meat and dried fruit, potatoes, rice, beans, and a big barrel of water. They might even have some chocolate for special treats.

If your family had cows, you would bring them along for milk and meat.

Your family also knew they would be able to hunt for more meat on the trail, and that they would find wild berries and honey and some vegetables along the way.

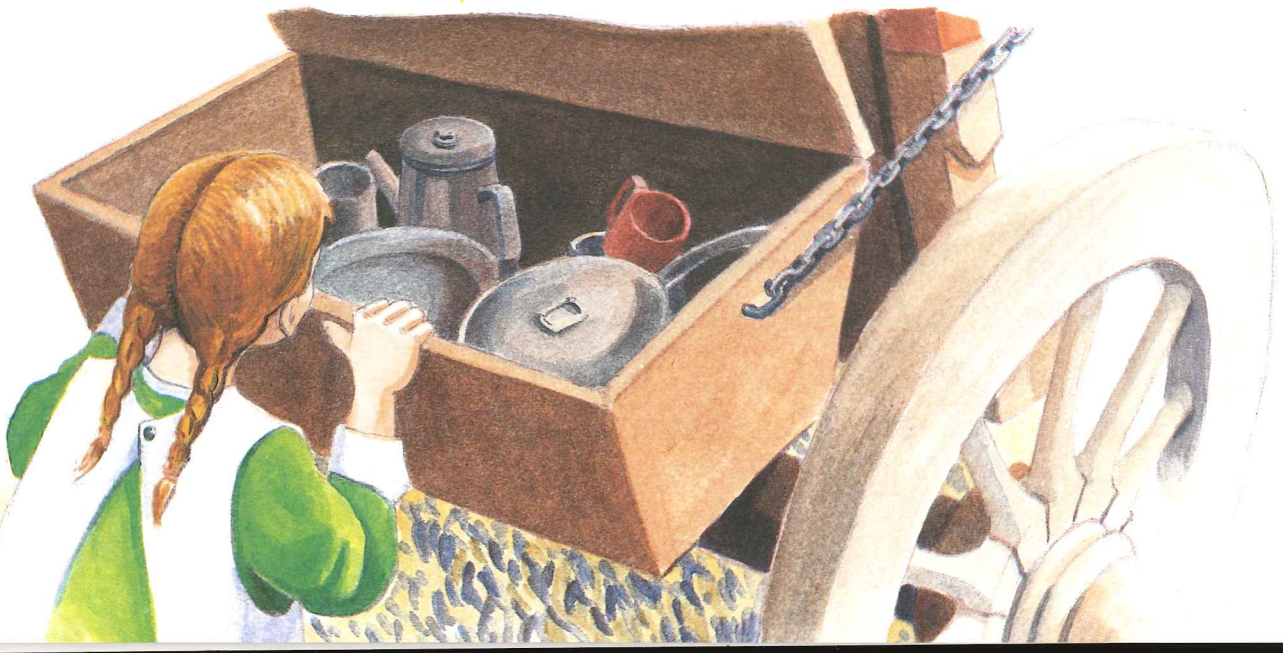
Pioneers made their own clothing, so your family brought along cloth to sew with, needles, thread, pins, and scissors, and leather to fix worn-out shoes. You had to make your own repairs, so you brought saws, hammers, axes, nails, string, and knives.

For daily chores you would bring things like soap, wax for making candles, lanterns, and washbowls.

Many people brought tents to sleep in outside the wagons. If they hunted buffalo on the trail, they would often use the skins for making blankets. With the fur on the inside, a buffalo skin was warm and soft.

It was also important not to forget medicines, in case somebody got sick on the trip.

Nobody forgot plates, knives, forks, spoons, cups, and pots and pans. They were kept in a special box attached to the back of the wagon.



What was the best time of year to start the trip?

This was a very important question. The answer had to be just right or there might be many problems on the trip.

The answer is that you had to start from Independence, Missouri (or nearby), in May because of the oxen and cows and the weather. Can you guess why?

If you started *too early* the spring rains would have made so much mud that the wagon wheels would get stuck. Then you might have to spend days digging yourself out.

Also, if you started too early, the grass would not have grown tall enough and thick enough to feed all the cattle along the way. After the pioneers ran out of the hay they had brought with them in their wagons, the cattle would grow weak and might even die from hunger.

The whole trip took about five or six months. So if you started *too late* you might be caught crossing mountains in a heavy winter snowfall. This happened to some wagons. On one trip some of the pioneers had to camp in the mountains through the winter until spring, when the snows melted. Then they were able to travel on. Some died from cold and hunger during the long wait.

The perfect time of year to start was in the spring after the rains, when the sun was shining and the grass was growing tall.

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.

Go West and Get Rich!

You will not be the first to go west over land. A few explorers and fur trappers have made the trip already. They say it is tough but possible. What you need is a good strong wagon, packed with everything for the journey. You fill your wagon with enough goods to last at least five months: sacks of beans, flour, and dried fruit; barrels of bacon, coffee, and sugar; clothes, bedding, tents, tools, guns, cooking equipment, medicine, soap, and candles. With all that on board, there is hardly room for people. It is important not to take more than your animals can pull. If they get worn out, you will never make it to your destination.

Decisions, Decisions...

DEVELOPERS visit towns to tell of the wonders of Oregon, the West Coast paradise where farming is "easy."

POLITICIANS tell you to go west for your country's sake — if Americans don't settle in Oregon, the British will. You have to sell your farm to finance the trip.

NOT EVERYONE thinks that traveling over 2,000 miles (3,200 km) through the unknown is a good idea. Relatives weep as you set off.

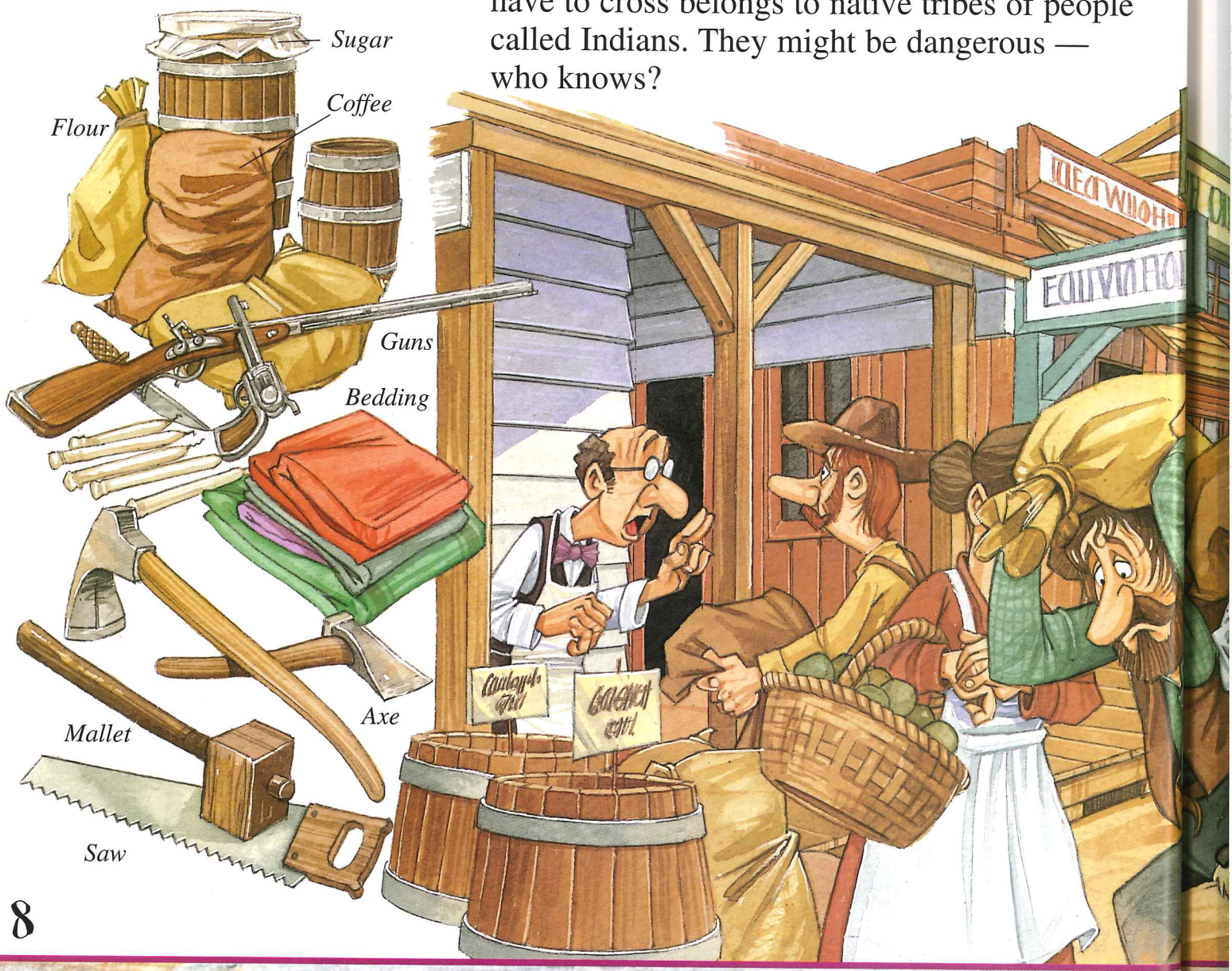

Six months cooped up in that wagon! You wouldn't see me going.
Handy Hint
Although it is big and heavy, don't leave your plow behind. You'll need it at your journey's end.
If my ma's clock can't go, neither will I.

Ganging Up – Don't Travel Alone!

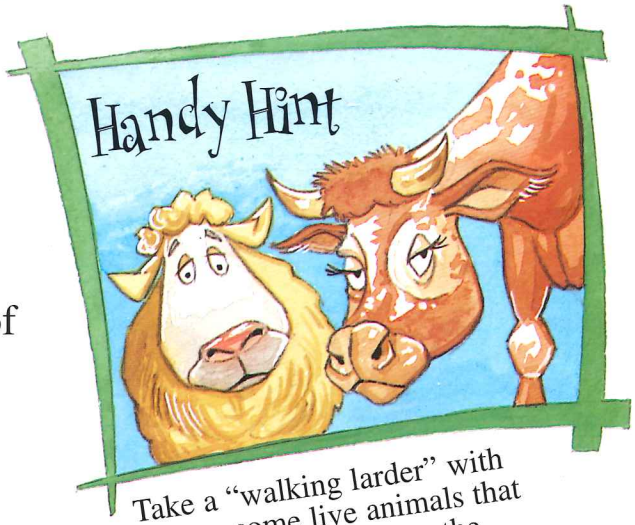
Stock Up on Supplies

THE TOWN OF INDEPENDENCE specializes in equipping wagon trains. If there is anything you forgot to pack or did not realize you would need, you can buy it here. Prices are high, though.

Pioneer families take their wagons and meet at a convenient point: Independence, Missouri, the westernmost U.S. town. The pioneers form "trains" of wagons traveling together for safety. The land they have to cross belongs to native tribes of people called Indians. They might be dangerous — who knows?



Spring is the only time to start the long journey west, so the town is packed with people. Everyone is excited, and no one knows what to expect. You hear all sorts of rumors about lack of water in the rivers, floods, and Indian attacks. Most wagon trains hire a guide, such as a fur trapper who has been west and knows at least part of the route.



Take a "walking larder" with you — some live animals that you can kill and eat on the journey. Buy them at Independence.

Are you sure you know the way?

Better than you, that's for sure!