

How would you build a fire if you didn't have any wood?

Out on the plains you would sometimes travel for days without seeing any trees or wood that you could use to build a fire.

And so the pioneers had to find something else that would burn easily. They discovered that dried buffalo droppings — called buffalo chips — made a hot, clean fire with little smoke and no smell.

Usually the children would take baskets and collect the buffalo chips before dinner. It could take three full baskets to cook a meal.



It often got very windy on the plains. So the safest way to make the fire was to dig a trench ten inches deep, six inches wide, and about two feet long. Then you would put the chips down in the trench and light them with matches or by setting off gunpowder.

When the wagon trains reached the Rocky Mountains, there were no more buffalo chips. And it was still sometimes hard to find wood. So the pioneers burned dead sagebrush branches and even the sage roots.

Children would gather the dead sage the night before so that you could have a fire for cooking breakfast.



What would you eat?

For the first part of the trip you would eat mostly what you brought in the wagon — biscuits, potatoes, bacon, dried meat, crackers, dried fruit, cornmeal, beans, and eggs.

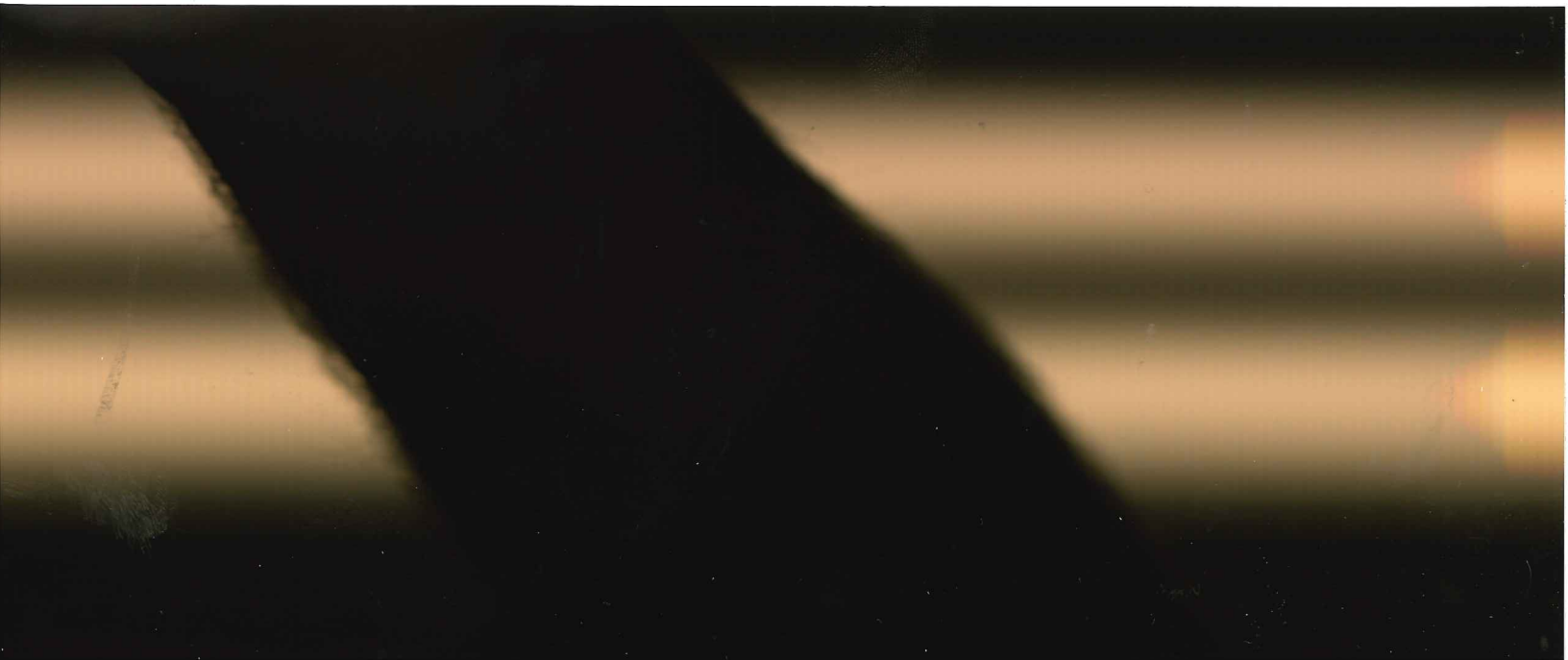
Then, just when there were no hard biscuits left, you would start eating “fried bread.” There were no real ovens to bake bread in. So your mother would mix dough and then fry it in a pan.



At first it was nice to have something new. But then it got very boring to eat the same thing over and over again. You would be glad to travel into new territory where there were wild onions and berries of all kinds, and where you might catch catfish in the rivers and trout in the mountain streams.

If you were carrying eggs in a bumpy wagon traveling across rivers and up and down hills and over mountains, how would you keep them from breaking?

Some of the pioneers put the eggs in the flour barrel, making sure the eggs didn't touch each other. The only problem with this was that your hands would get all white whenever you reached in to dig out an egg!



Everybody wanted butter because it made the dry biscuits and fried bread taste better. The pioneers would get milk for making butter from the cows they brought. But after traveling all day, making dinner, rounding up the cattle, fixing broken things, and doing all the other chores, there wasn't much time left to make butter.

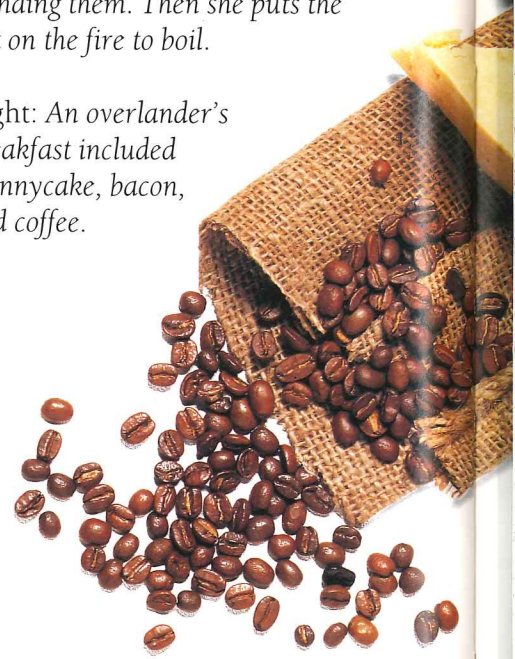
But the women discovered an easy way to make it. They would hang a milk can from the wagon hoops or tie it to the side of the wagon. As the wagon bumped along the trail, the milk bounced around so much that in a few hours when you opened the can there was a ball of butter at least an inch thick, and lots of smaller pieces. The butter had made itself!

After traveling for many weeks, the wagon trains moved into buffalo country. And that meant new and delicious food.



Left: Once the fire is lit, Mrs. Larkin roasts the coffee beans over it before grinding them. Then she puts the pot on the fire to boil.

Right: An overlander's breakfast included johnnycake, bacon, and coffee.



DAYBREAK

At 4 a.m. the night watch fire their guns to let everyone know that it is daybreak. Quickly, the overlanders pull on their boots or shoes, throw a few garments over the clothes they have slept in, and set about their morning tasks.

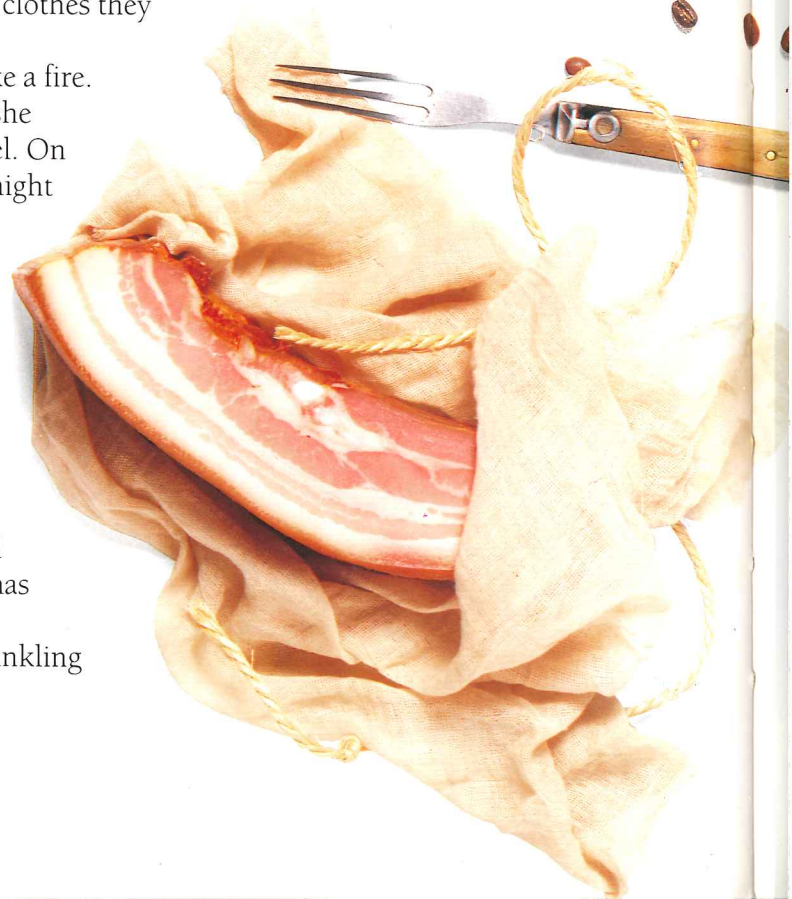
Mrs. Larkin cooks the breakfast. First, she has to make a fire. A steady wind is always blowing across the prairies, so she must dig a shallow trench. Then she must find some fuel. On

the high plains a wagon train might travel for days without seeing a single tree, but the pioneers soon discovered that dried buffalo droppings, or "buffalo chips," made a clean, hot fire, with little smoke or smell. In the mountains, dead sage brush would do instead.

Even with her trench filled with fuel, Mrs. Larkin often has difficulty lighting the fire. Sometimes she resorts to sprinkling the fuel with gunpowder.



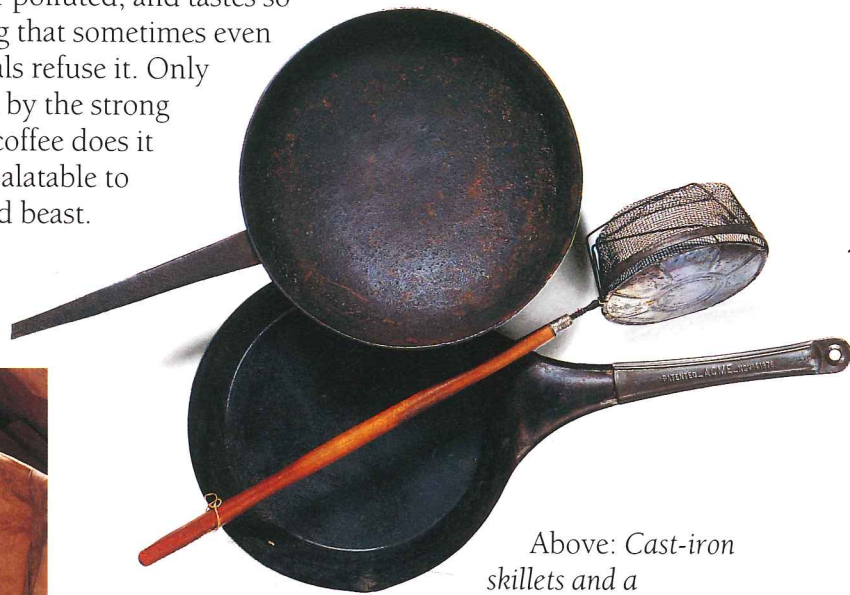
Above: A mill for grinding coffee beans.



Breakfast

Pancakes are breakfast favorites as they require only flour, water, baking soda, and a skillet to cook them in, but Mrs. Larkin often bakes bread in a dutch oven, using risen dough that she prepares the evening before. On other days she makes soda biscuits, muffins, or cornmeal johnnycakes. Beans, well greased with slab bacon and slowly simmered through the night in the ashes of the fire, are a popular breakfast dish, as is fried meat, which is served with a gravy made of pan drippings and flour. The overlanders like to begin the day with a hearty meal.

Coffee is the all-purpose trail thirst-quencher, served at every meal. The overlanders rarely drink plain water, since it is usually muddy or polluted, and tastes so disgusting that sometimes even the animals refuse it. Only disguised by the strong flavor of coffee does it become palatable to man – and beast.



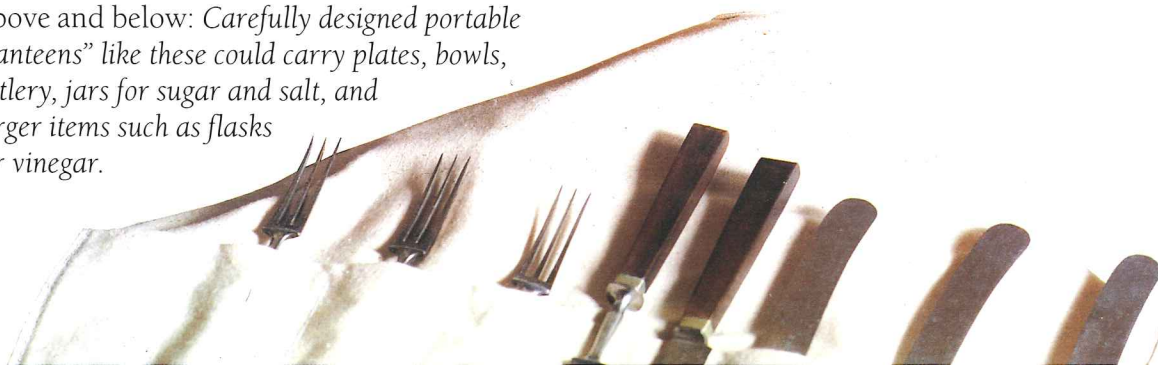
Above: Cast-iron skillets and a long-handled pan for making popcorn.



Above and below: Carefully designed portable “canteens” like these could carry plates, bowls, cutlery, jars for sugar and salt, and larger items such as flasks for vinegar.

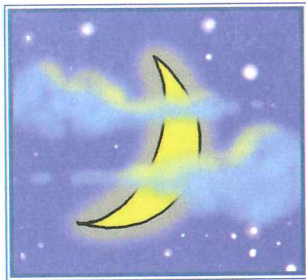


“There is a great scarcity of wood, and we are compelled to cook our food with buffalo chips. This has caused many of the ladies to act very cross, but necessity is a great leveler, and now we all must search for them.” Mrs. Larkin’s Diary



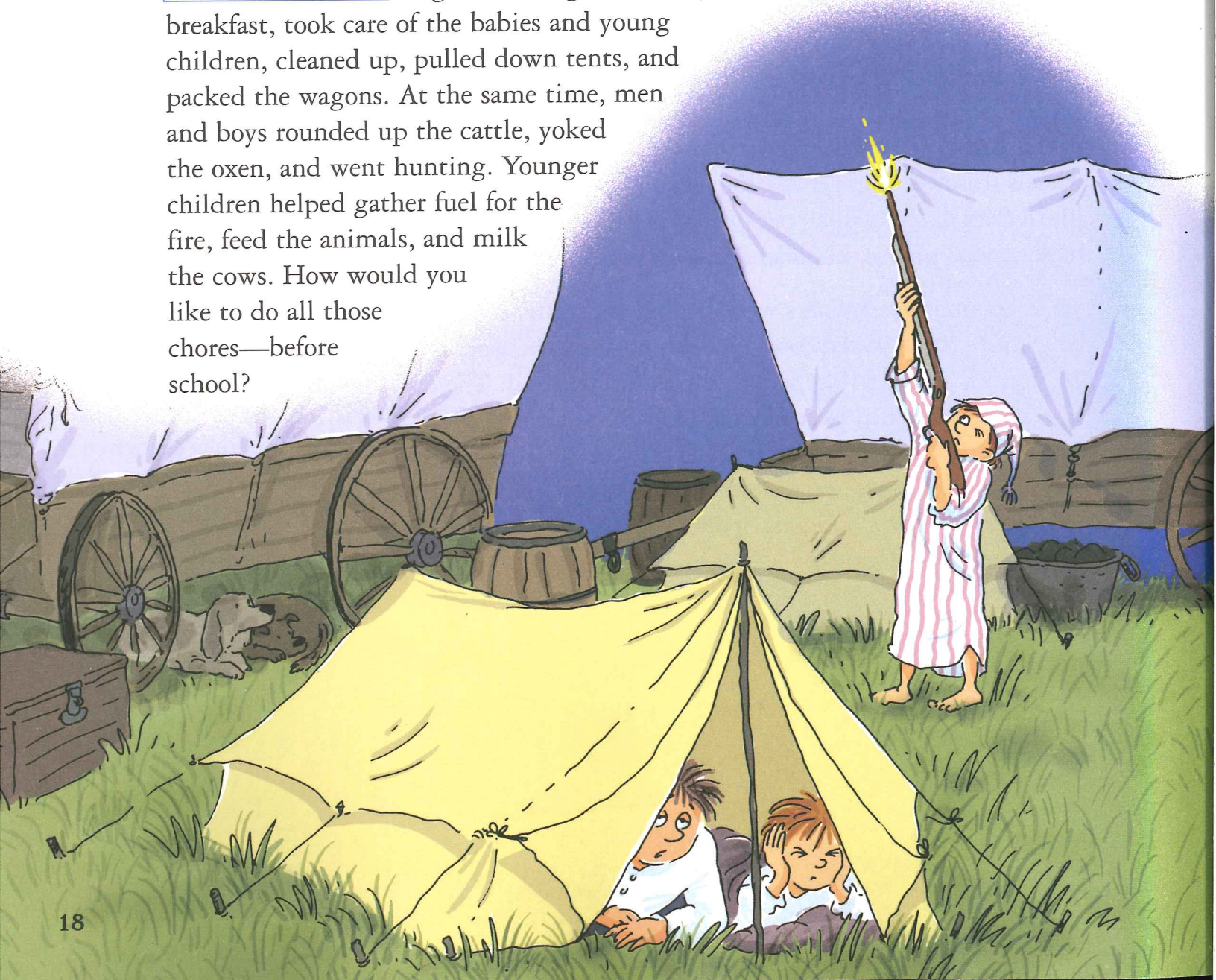
A DAY ON THE TRAIL

What served as an alarm clock on the trail?



Rifles shot into the air—at 4 A.M.! If you were a pioneer, your day started before sunrise. Before the wagons were on their way at 7 A.M., there was much to do. In the darkness, the women and older girls began building fires. They cooked

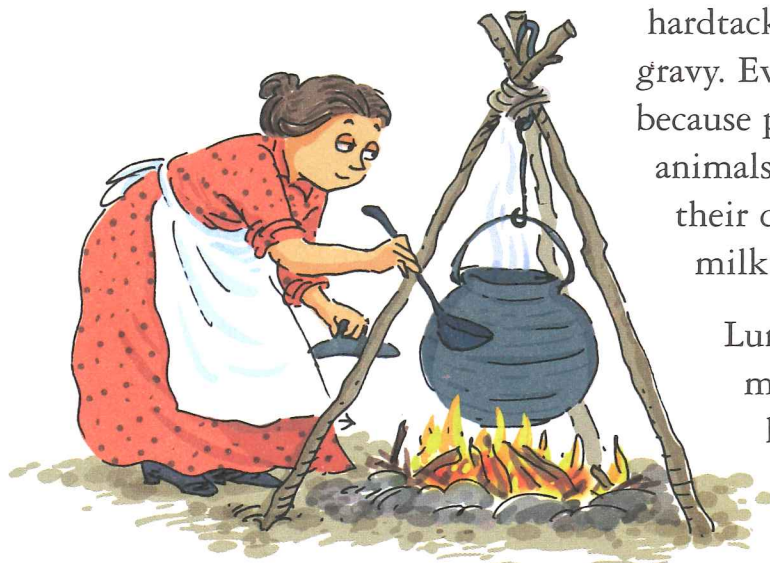
breakfast, took care of the babies and young children, cleaned up, pulled down tents, and packed the wagons. At the same time, men and boys rounded up the cattle, yoked the oxen, and went hunting. Younger children helped gather fuel for the fire, feed the animals, and milk the cows. How would you like to do all those chores—before school?



Have you ever had a breakfast of “slamjohns and sowbelly”?

If you’ve had pancakes and bacon, you have. The pioneers liked to start the day with a hearty breakfast. They usually had some combination of bacon and cornmeal cakes, pancakes, or hardtack; sometimes with beans, fried meat, and gravy. Everyone, including children, drank coffee because plain water often tasted so bad that even animals would not drink it. Some families drove their cattle along with them, so they had fresh milk to drink.

Lunch meant cold leftovers, and the evening meal brought more of the same if the men had bad luck hunting. Fresh meat, fish, and wild berries were favorite trail meals.



**TRUE
OR
FALSE**

Buffalo chips were a trail treat.

Pioneers liked these chips, but not as snacks! *Buffalo chips* were dried buffalo droppings. Because they burned well, the chips were handy for lighting cooking fires on the treeless plains. Children found other uses for the chips as well, such as throwing them at one another or seeing who could make them sail the farthest. How would you like to toss that kind of Frisbee?



When the wagon train stopped for the night, the wagons parked in a big, closed circle. This created a kind of fort, with the pioneers and their livestock staying inside for protection from wild animals and Indians. Men took turns keeping watch through the night.