

Essentials for the Oregon Trail

The Oregon Trail has a legendary place in the history of the United States. Originally built by fur traders and trappers in the early 19th century, by the mid-1840s it had become one of the most important routes for settlers moving out West. By the time the first transcontinental railroad opened in 1869 and use of the trail started to decline about 400,000 people had set out along it to build a new life on the frontier.



Taking the trail wasn't like setting out on a modern highway, though. From its beginning to the end in Oregon City the trail covered almost 3,000 miles, and a lot of it was rough country. The Trail passed through mountains, forests and arid plains. In some places lack of water was a danger; in others there were dangerous rivers to be crossed. Disease, wild animals and Indian attacks were threats. Migrants set out in early summer and aimed to reach Oregon before winter arrived, but early snowstorms in the mountains brought the risks of avalanches and hypothermia. At least 10,000 people, and possibly as many as 21,000, died along the Trail – up to five percent of those who set out along it.

In fact, considering how dangerous the Trail really was, what's remarkable is that 95% of the pioneers who headed west along it didn't die. They were tough people, of course. To set out on a journey like that you had to be determined, and they weren't going to give up and die at the first obstacle. They were also prepared people, though. They knew the dangers they would face, and they carried the best equipment they had to deal with them along the way.

The settlers weren't just carrying the 19th century equivalent of a first aid or survival kit; they had everything they needed to survive the Trail and build a new life at the end of it. Most people who took the Trail had at least one wagon with them and sometimes two or even more.



Nicknamed "prairie schooners", the wagons were usually twelve feet long and six wide, and could carry over a ton of supplies. They had high sides, waterproofed with tar so the wagon could be pulled through streams and rivers without flooding. A well-proofed wagon, even fully loaded, could float if deeper water had to be crossed. The

canvas canopies were oiled to keep the rain out. Each wagon was pulled by a team of eight to twelve oxen; these were slower than horses, but they could graze on the rough vegetation along the route.

In movies the settlers themselves often ride in the wagons. In reality, they walked alongside; space in the wagons was needed for their essential equipment. Here's some of what they carried:

1. Pioneer's Wagon Diet

Settlers would hunt and forage along the way, but if they wanted to reach Oregon before winter arrived they had limited time for that – and, as the numbers using the Trail increased, there was less food to be found anyway. The core of a settler's diet was what they carried with them, and that had to be energy-dense food that travelled well. The usual ration per person was 200 pounds of flour, 150 pounds of bacon, 80 pounds of lard, 20 pounds of sugar and ten pounds each of coffee and salt. Bacon was packed in barrels of bran to insulate it. Eggs were also carried, packed in cornmeal – as the eggs were eaten the meal could be turned into cornbread.

Many settlers brought a small herd of beef cattle with them, for slaughter along the Trail. Even more had a milk cow. They made butter along the way; creamy milk was put in covered buckets that were hung under the wagon. The bumping of the unsprung chassis churned it, and when they stopped for the night the fresh butter could be skimmed off.

2. Pioneer Defenders

Almost nobody headed out west without at least one gun. A rifle or shotgun was the most common choice, because its main uses were hunting and protection against wild animals. Guns were also needed for defence against Indian raids. These weren't as common as you might think from the movies, but they did happen – between 1840 and 1860 an average of twenty settlers a year were killed by Indians..

3. Dutch ovens

Many different cooking utensils were carried, but the Dutch oven was the main one. It could be used for cooking oatmeal, stews, soup or bread. The lid worked as a skillet. Nothing beats a Dutch oven for versatility, and being able to load it on a wagon made its weight irrelevant.

4. Water keg

There was no way the average settler could carry enough water to make the whole trip without resupply. That meant they had to collect water along the way. For most of the route there were plenty supplies close to the Trail, but there were also drier stretches. Stopping to collect water during the day also wasted time, so each wagon had at least one water keg. It would be refilled every time the settlers found a source of fresh water, and that meant there was always water available in the wagon.

5. Chopping Tools

Most settlers carried at least two chopping tools. An axe could be used to fell trees and split firewood; a hatchet worked for smaller jobs around camp, as a wedge for splitting logs, and even as a last-ditch weapon. Being able to cut timber was essential; wagon repairs, corduroy for tough sections of trail, and building shelters all needed wood.

6. Pioneer's Medical Chest

Minor injuries were common along the Trail, and most wagons had a medical chest to deal with them. Bandages, ointments and patent medicines covered most problems.

7. Surgical instruments

The idea of carrying out surgery on a family member – or yourself – is pretty horrific to us, but on the Trail there was sometimes no alternative. It could be a long way between forts and settlements, and often the choice was treat it yourself or suffer. Many settlers had the instruments needed to extract a tooth, suture a wound or lance a boil. Some also had the tools to extract a bullet or arrowhead, and even amputate a limb. Alcohol or opium was used as painkillers.

8. Pioneer's Repairing Tools

A broken wagon that couldn't be repaired might easily be a death sentence on the Trail. In later stages there might be room on someone else's wagon to load your food and maybe some other supplies, but if anyone had to abandon the bulk of their food they probably weren't going to make it. To avoid that, settlers carried spare parts, but there were limits. Luckily, many wooden parts could be made if you had the tools.

9. Lanterns

Settlers took the Trail in summer, but they still had to work in the dark sometimes. If wagon repairs needed done it could mean working into the night. Oil and candle lanterns gave enough light to work by.

10. Clothes

A really bad storm would persuade settlers to circle their wagons, shelter inside and wait it out, but in normal bad weather they'd keep going – too many delays on the Trail could result in running out of supplies or being caught by winter. To keep the wind and rain out as they walked beside their wagons, settlers would wear hats and woollen or canvas coats. Tarred, oiled or rubberized slickers went over the top. Hats also protected against the sun, and a bandana kept dust out of noses and mouths.

11. Bedding

A couple of blankets beside the fire is fine for an occasional night out, but settlers could be in the Trail for six months or more. To avoid fatigue it was vital to get a good night's sleep. Bedrolls were the most common option.