

Most accounts describing life on the trail indicate that accidents were an ever-present possibility. What kinds of accidents and their related injuries occurred most frequently?

According to Peter D. Olch, being runover by wagon wheels was the most frequent cause of injury/death. With some frequency, both children and adults apparently slipped while getting out of a wagon and fell beneath the wheels. Firearm accidents were the second leading cause of emigrant injury/death, and the third major source was stampeding livestock. Other causes of injury/death include attacks by emigrants on other emigrants, lightning, gunpowder explosion, and suicide.

["Treading the Elephant's Tail: Medical Problems on the Overland Trails." *Overland Journal*, Volume 6, Number 1, 1988. Pp. 25-31]

Many accidents marred the trip west. Do we know who any of the first accident victims were?

We know at least the following: Joel Hembree (six years old) was the first to be killed on the Oregon Trail by being run over by a wagon. ["July 18-A very bad road. Joel J. Hembree son Joel fel off the waggeon tung & both wheels run over him. July 19-Lay buy Joel Hembree departed this life about 2 oclock." [William Thompson *Newby's Diary of the Emigration of 1843*." P. 3, entries for July 18 and July 19.]

James Shotwell was the first emigrant firearms casualty. [John Bidwell (1841) reported "A mournful accident ... a young man by the name of Shotwell while in the act of taking a gun out of the wagon, drew it with the muzzle towards him in such a manner that it went off and shot him near the heart - he lived about an hour and died in full possession of his senses."

[John Bidwell, *A Journey to California*. Newberry Microfilm 1-12. Compiled by M.J. Mattes-1945. Transcribed by Louise Ridge-1/46; re-typed by R. Mackrill 1963. Pp. 4-5, entry for "S. 13th."]

What kind of medical problems afflicted trail travelers?

"The most common medical problem was gastrointestinal illness, ranging from chronic bowel complaints to unspecified diarrheas and dysenteries, and diseases such as cholera and typhoid fever."

"The most terrifying disease was cholera. Its sudden onset, rapid course, and high mortality rate were fearsome. Cholera's appearance on the trails coincided with its epidemic years in the United States. It was particularly prevalent on the Oregon-California Trail in 1849 and 1850 and on the first third of the trip from the Missouri River to Fort Laramie."

"Initially mountain fever was a 'catch-all' term applied to a variety of febrile diseases that happened to develop in the high altitude of the Rocky Mountain area. Eventually, however, a common pattern of symptoms began to be differentiated which separated mountain fever from other. . . cases. The disease occurred primarily in the spring and early summer with one to three episodes of fever lasting roughly forty-eight hours separated by two to eight days of seeming good health. Pronounced and prolonged chills were characteristic at the onset. Constipation, severe muscle and chest pains, particularly in the back and loins, joint pains, headache and retro-orbital pain were also common symptoms."

"Other medical problems mentioned at least once in the diaries examined include death in childbirth and infant death, rape, tuberculosis, insanity, cancer, laudanum overdose, rattlesnake bites, bronchitis, neuralgia, rheumatism, brain congestion, intestinal worms, boils, fever blister, blistered feet, felon, severe sunburn, head colds, headache, toothache and earache."

[Peter D. Olch, "Treading the Elephant's Tail: Medical Problems on the Overland Trails." *Overland Journal*, Volume 6, Number 1, 1988. Pp. 25-31.]

How many wagon train emigrants actually died on their way west?

A "conservative figure for the number of deaths which occurred in wagon train parties is 20,000 for the entire 2,000 miles of California Trail, or an average of ten graves to each mile." Between 1849 and 1853, Asiatic Cholera was the greatest killer on the trail. The disease continued to appear during the 1850s, but its appearance considerably diminished after 1853. [Merrill Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*, pp. 85 & 82]

"It has been estimated that the overall mortality rate on the Oregon-California Trail was 4 to 6 percent of those starting west."

[Peter D. Olch, "Treading the Elephant's Tail: Medical Problems on the Overland Trails". *Overland Journal*, Volume 6, Number 1, 1988. Pp. 25-31.]