

West In a Wagon Train: Three Questions

Introduction

Each of these questions is designed to provide a starting point for thinking and learning about the overland emigrant trails. The principle behind them is that the most effective way to teach history is to start with a topic within the experience of the students. These questions were developed for elementary students but are also useful with older students. They may be combined with other activities as part of a lesson unit or used as stand-alone activity if time is limited.

Strategies and Tips

By starting with a question, the students become active participants in the learning process from the very beginning. They can compare their own experiences with those of others and look at the reasons behind people's actions and the consequences of decisions. Facts about trail travel can be introduced as the discussion moves along and may provide openings for other learning activities. Reading a pertinent quote or two from an emigrant diary is also useful. Examples are included with each question.

Additional questions may be asked as needed to keep the discussion going or to move it in another direction. The discussion may lead to ideas for further activities or ways to share what they learn with other people. As a discussion activity at least 20 to 30 minutes should be allowed. Each of these questions could also be posed as a writing and research assignment, with sharing and discussion after students have completed and shared their reports.

Question 1: What Chores Did Children Do When Traveling on the Trail?

Start by asking students what chores they do at home. They can compare their chores to those other kids do and the teacher or leader can begin to mention chores kids might do while on the trail. Other comparisons are between chores boys do and chores girls do, both now and on the trail; there are also comparisons between chores done by kids of different ages.

During the trail era in the mid-19th century gender roles were specific; this meant that boys assisted their fathers and girls helped their mothers. Most children were doing important household chores by age five to seven, and were doing adult work by the time they reached their early teens. Teenage boys might have the full care and feeding of livestock. Teenage girls cooked and cleaned, cared for sick relatives, and might have full responsibility for the welfare of their younger siblings. Girls as young as twelve might assist at the birth of a baby and many boys at that same age could help deliver a calf. At home and on the trail, everyone pitched in when circumstances required it.

On the trail, one 13-year-old girl walked almost all the way from the Missouri River to Oregon's Willamette Valley, herding the family's horses and cattle behind the wagons, seeing that none were lost and keeping the stragglers from falling too far behind. In another family, an 11-year-old boy drove the family wagon all the way from Missouri to Oregon.

A common chore for younger children was gathering fuel for the family's cooking fires; coming across the western prairies this usually meant collecting dried buffalo chips. Some children today will not know what a buffalo chip is; when it's explained that it's "like a cow-pie, only bigger," many will get it. Here is a wonderful quote on this subject, by Jesse A. Applegate, age seven, from his 1876 reminiscence, *Recollections of My Boyhood*:

I had quite an adventure one evening while gathering “buffalo chips.” Several of us boys were out from camp some little distance, picking them up and throwing them into piles. Our party had a pile and other parties had their piles, and as we were not far apart, it seems that we had claimed certain small districts adjacent to our respective stacks of chips, and we had to guard against trespassers. We were working hard and had become considerably excited, when I remember a boy about my size with yellow sun-burnt hair and a freckled face (at that time I thought he had scales or scabs on his face), came over into our district and attempted to get away with a large chip, but I caught him in the act and threw another into his face with such violence as to knock off a scale and make the blood come. I think I was urged to do this by the elder boys, for I remember they laughed, when I could see nothing to laugh about.”

From this can come some discussion about making chores fun by working together as a group or competing to see who could finish their chores first.

Question 2: What Will You Do If Your Shoes Wear Out?

Start by pointing out that the journey from the Missouri River to Oregon (or California) is about 2,000 miles and that it will take several months to make the trip.

Most emigrants, except those who were very elderly or ill and very small children, walked most of the time. Because space in the wagons was limited, people could take with them only what was absolutely essential. This did not include a lot of extra clothing. Until the later days of the trail, there were few places even to purchase food, let alone anything else. Many people, especially children, went barefoot much of the time, and diaries often mention that their shoes are worn out.

Ask the students to imagine they are making the trip “across the plains” (the phrase often used to describe the westward journey) and that their shoes are worn out. Ask them what they would do in these circumstances. This can generate lively discussion and some creative thinking, especially with reminders if necessary about the lack of any place to purchase another pair of shoes. One fifth grader, pondering this question, said he would try to find an Indian and pay him to make him some moccasins.

It may also be useful at this point to have students do some math to figure out just how many days it will take to get to the next place where they are likely to be able to replace the worn-out shoes with a new pair.

Worn-out shoes were evidently a common occurrence as they are mentioned often in diaries and reminiscences: Mary Jane Long, one of seven children accompanying her parents from Illinois to California, was helping her father search for water when her shoes wore out. She did not worry because her father was with her; he tore her apron into strips and wrapped them around her feet. Thirteen-year-old Georgia Norr, recalled that her shoes wore out, and her stockings burned when she dried them by the fire:

“I asked someone in the company for a pair, but they could not spare any, so I got some rags and tied them around my feet.”

Six-year-old Robert Sweeten remembered that:

“...children would play around the wagons and camp fires; after supper the older folks would get out the fiddles and have dances around the fires, some of them dancing in their bare feet, as they had no shoes...”

Some barefoot experiences were more painful. For example, Benjamin Franklin Bonney, age seven, remembered that

“After two weeks of traveling we struck a desert of sand and sagebrush. On this Brush plain we found lots of prickly pears. We children were barefooted and I can remember yet how we limped across the desert, for we cut the soles of our feet on the prickly pears...they also made the oxen lame, for the spines would work in between the oxen’s hoofs.”

One of the most interesting early emigrant stories is that of Nancy Kelsey, the first white woman traveling in an emigrant wagon train to cross the Sierra Nevada, in 1841 with the Bidwell-Bartleson party. She was the only woman in the party, married, with a year-old baby daughter and pregnant with her second child. She recalled:

“We crossed the Sierra Nevada at the headquarters of the San Joaquin River...[and] camped on the summit. It was my eighteenth birthday.”

She further remembered:

“ We were then out of provisions, having killed and eaten our cattle. I walked barefooted until my feet were blistered and lived on roasted acorns for two days....My husband came very near dying with cramps, and it was suggested to leave him, but I said I would never do that, and we ate a horse and remained over till the next day, when he was able to travel.”

Although Nancy Kelsey does not mention it, other diarists fairly often also mention frostbitten feet as a hazard of trail travel.

Question 3: What One Toy or Personal Possession Will You Take With You on the Journey? Give Your Reasons

Start by reminding students that the journey was a long one and that there would not be room in the wagons for items that were not essential. Not only did the emigrants have to take enough food and supplies for the long journey, they also had to take enough to get started in the new place. That often meant, at the very least, a few essential tools and sewing and cooking equipment, some seeds, and sometimes even some plant starts—fruit trees or lilac or rose bushes for example. This could be a starting point for further discussion of what “essential” meant. However, it was very difficult for people to leave behind everything that was familiar. Even if they were willing to take only one cooking pot and cook their meals over an open fire, or tie rags over their feet when their shoes wore out, they might still take at least some small familiar thing with them to remind them of the home they were leaving. People also had to be aware of carrying too much weight, which could cause their oxen to wear out more quickly; in the best of circumstances, some of the oxen or other animals were likely to not be able to endure the entire trip.

Many people in the mid-19th century valued education, for both boys and girls, so books—at least a few favorites or classics—were often carried along. Most people were religious, so the family Bible was often taken on the journey. A rocking chair was a common item of furniture that people took with them. If there were a few valued family photographs—of the “home place” they were leaving or of family left behind, these would go with the travelers. A fiddle or some other small musical instrument was likely to be taken along, perhaps to accompany familiar hymns sung on the Sabbath or to provide music for evening dancing. Children might take one or two small favorite toys—dolls were a favorite with girls, and whistles or jacks or perhaps some stones for juggling, for the boys. Sometimes a family pet—a dog, possibly a cat, or a favorite

pony—would accompany the travelers. Sometimes small toys were made along the way- a whistle carved or a small hand-tied rag doll constructed. These were small enough to be carried in a pocket and of course added very little weight.

One of the most famous dolls in the history of the overland trails migration is probably the small doll carried all the way to California in 1846 by eight-year-old Patty Reed of the Donner Party. The little wooden doll was only four inches tall, with a painted face and a knob of painted hair on top of its head and rosy painted cheeks. When Patty's family left Illinois in the spring of 1846 to begin their journey to California, Patty also had two larger, fancier dolls and a little trunk for the dolls' best clothes. Through all the troubles of the Donner Party's trip Patty kept the little doll hidden in her dress. After the disastrous snows in the Sierras trapped the Donners and the Reeds and others of their party in the mountains, and people were dying of starvation, there were several attempts for rescuers to reach them and for survivors to hike out to safety. Patty Reed was rescued by the Second Relief party, which included her father. Patty's older half-sister Virginia tells of Patty's rescue:

“...Patty thought she could walk, but gradually everything faded from her sight, and she too seemed to be dying. All other sufferings were now forgotten, and everything was done to revive the child. My father found some crumbs in the thumb of his woolen mitten; warming and moistening them between his own lips, he gave them to her and thus saved her life, and afterward she was carried along by different ones in the company. Patty was not alone in her travels. Hidden away in her bosom was a tiny doll, which she had carried day and night through all of our trials. Sitting before a nice, bright fire at Woodworth's Camp, she took dolly out to have a talk, and told her of all her new happiness.”

Today the doll is on display at Sutter's Fort State Historic Park in Sacramento, California.

Sources

These books are all useful for information about children's experiences on the overland trails, and for pertinent diary quotes:

Palmer, Rosemary Gudmundson. *Children's Voices from the Trail: Narratives of the Platte River Road*. Arthur H. Clark Co., 2002

Peavy, Linda, and Ursula Smith. *Frontier Children*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1999

Werner, Emmy E. *Pioneer Children on the Journey West*. Westview Press, 1995

Two books about the Donner Party include information about the children of the party and their experiences:

Johnson, Kristin, editor. “*Unfortunate Emigrants,*” *Narratives of the Donner Party*. Utah State University Press, 1996

Laurgaard, Rachel K. *Patty Reed's Doll*. Tomato Enterprises, 1989

The Donner Party story as told by the little doll.