Oregon Trail

Definition: Oregon trail from Collins English Dictionary

n
1 an early pioneering route across the central US, from Independence, W Missouri, to the Columbia River country of N Oregon: used chiefly between 1804 and 1860. Length: about 3220 km (2000 miles)

Summary Article: Oregon Trail

From The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide

Major westward migration route in the USA used by pioneer settlers in the 19th century. The Trail, which covered some 3,200 km/2,000 mi and took six or seven months to travel, came into being as a result of ‘Oregon fever’, a rush for land stimulated by rumours of easy farming in the vast Oregon Country. Its heyday was in the 1840s–70s.

The Oregon Trail ran from Independence and Westport Landing (modern Kansas City), Missouri, to the fertile Willamette Valley of west Oregon. Settlers travelled in trains of canvas-covered Conestoga wagons, commonly known as ‘prairie schooners’. Especially in the early years, when the Trail was less well developed, they would then transfer their belongings onto pack mules for the journey through the mountains, and finally travel by boat down the Columbia River. In the first three years of its use, it is estimated that around 4,000–5,000 people went west on the Trail. From the 1870s onwards, it fell into disuse, as railways crossed the Plains, available land in the west became scarcer, and other destinations beckoned. On dry terrain, traces of the Trail are still visible, and interstate highways follow its route in places.

The Trail had many alternative routes, connections with other trails, and varying destinations. However, its main route, in detail, was as follows. From Missouri, it ran for a short distance with the Santa Fe Trail, to Gardner, Kansas, then cut west to Lawrence and continued along the Kansas River, before striking out northwest along the Big Blue River. It crossed southern Nebraska to the Platte River near Fort Kearney, and ran along the south bank to North Platte, where it followed the South Platte River to near Julesburg, Colorado, then turned briefly northwest along Nebraska’s Lodgepole Creek and north-northwest to the North Platte River. Continuing in a northwesterly direction, it passed the great landmarks of Chimney Rock and Scottsbluff and entered Wyoming, where Fort Laramie was a major rest stop. The Trail then stayed with the North Platte River, before turning southwest to the 59 m/193 ft-high Independence Rock, on the Sweetwater River just northwest of the modern Pathfinder Reservoir; groups who had left Missouri in the spring might hope to arrive here by 4 July. Following along the Sweetwater, the Trail crossed the Continental Divide at South Pass, then joined the Big Sandy Creek and traversed rough, mountainous country to Fort Bridger, in Wyoming’s far southwestern corner. This was another major rest stop and the point at which the Mormon Trail diverged for Utah. From Fort Bridger, the Oregon Trail wound north-northwest along the Wyoming–Utah border and entered southeastern Idaho through the Bear River valley. Soda Springs was the first of several places at which the California Trail diverged after 1849. The Oregon Trail then proceeded to Fort Hall on the Snake River, and followed the great arc of the dry Snake River Plain across southern Idaho to Fort
Boise. After entering Oregon, it struck northwest through the Blue Mountains by way of the Grande Ronde Valley past La Grande, then cut west along the Umatilla River and across the plateau south of the Columbia River, to reach The Dalles. Here travellers could finally take to boats for the trip down to the mouth of the Willamette. A party that left Independence in May, might, with luck, be able to celebrate Thanksgiving at their final destination.