Covered Wagons and the Oregon Trail

In 1843 Oregon fever swept the Mississippi frontier and thousands of settlers moved toward the fertile Willamette Valley. They gave us our first image of covered wagons (1745) crossing the plains. The best known of these wagons was the Conestoga wagon or prairie schooner:

the Conestoga wagon. The Delaware Indians called the famous Pennsylvania river Susquehanna, the Hurons called it Kanastoge (both meaning “muddy water”); Kanastoge became Conestoga, the name of an Iroquois tribe living along the river near Lancaster, which gave us the Conestoga Valley, Pennsylvania, which gave us the Conestoga wagon—the wagons being built there by the late 1740s. The Conestoga was a heavy, Pennsylvania Dutch freight wagon; but it proved ideal for carrying families, their furnishings and supplies across the continent. It was first seen on the Oregon Trail in 1843.

prairie schooner, meaning any large wagon or coach on the prairie, as a stagecoach in Iowa, 1841; meaning a covered wagon on the Oregon trail, mid 1840s. The cloth-topped covered wagons seen above waves of wind-rippling grass did look like distant sailing ships, and some wagons even had a sail to help their progress. The image of the vast western prairie as an ocean of grass and the prairie wagons (1855) as ships also gave us prairie ship (1851) and prairie clipper (1870). The prairie itself was called the prairie ocean (1844) and forts and towns on the prairie, especially Independence, Missouri, were often called prairie ports (1848). For more prairie words see The Prairie.

The covered wagons traveled in wagon trains (1849) in charge of an elected wagon boss (1873), and followed a paid guide or scout who knew the trail, the country, and the Indians. Each wagon had its own teamster (1777), wagoneer (1830s), or wagon boy (1836)

An Ohio to Oregon wagon train is depicted in this 1830 painting by W.H. Jackson.
to drive or lead its horses, mules, or oxen over the trail (1807), which was soon worn to a wagon trail (1848). In rocky places and over mountain passes the trail might be as narrow as one wagon; on the prairie it might be ten miles wide, as wagons spread out for better grazing and to avoid each others’ dust. The most famous of the western trails was:

the Oregon Trail, 1820s as a trail for trappers, traders, and missionaries, early 1840s as a wagon trail. The persistent popularity of the name is due to Francis Parkman’s 1847 classic The Oregon Trail, describing his travels over the eastern third of it while living with and studying the Sioux Indians (for the derivation of the name Oregon see The States).

The Oregon trail was a 2,000-mile trail crossing plains, deserts, mountain passes, and dangerous rivers. It took a covered wagon four to six months to travel from the jumping off place (1830s) near Independence, Missouri, “across the wide Missouri,” through Kansas and Nebraska to Fort Kearney, then along the Platte and North Platte to Fort Laramie, over the Continental Divide through the 7,500-foot high South Pass, to Fort Hall, and along the Snake River to Fort Boise and into the Columbia River Valley to the Willamette.

The first party of 32 migrating homeseekers traveled the Oregon Trail in 1841, a party of over 100 traveled it in 1842, and then in 1843 the dam broke when the physician, missionary, and pioneer Marcus Whitman helped guide a Great Migration of over 900 persons to the Columbia River Valley. Whitman had President Tyler’s promise to aid the immigrants once they reached Oregon: they were actually going into territory claimed by Britain’s Hudson Bay Company (see 54-40 or Fight!—Manifest Destiny). By 1848 enough Americans had reached Oregon to warrant organizing the Oregon Territory and by 1850 12,000 settlers had gone over the Oregon Trail.

In the 1850s, too, 500,000 more travelers were on the eastern half of the Oregon Trail, turning off to the California Trail (1847) beyond Fort Hall, on their way to the California gold fields. For, although the Oregon seekers had started it all in 1843, within a few years they had been joined on “the way West” by settlers and gold prospectors going to California and by Mormons going to Utah. Within 50 years such American settlers and prospectors, plus ranchers and cowboys, would tame and populate the West, absorbing what had once been Indian land, Mexican land, Hudson Bay land, and wilderness into the United States.

When the covered wagons reached their destination in California, Oregon, or elsewhere each farm family would either buy land or settle as squatters (1788) on a homestead (1638, a tract taken from the public domain and the house and farm on it). The word homesteader didn’t appear until after 1862, when the Homestead Act was passed, encouraging such settling by saying that any-

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O, Susanna,
O, don’t you cry for me,
I’ve come from Alabama,
Wid my banjo on my knee.
“O, Susanna,” Stephen Foster, 1848. This song caught the public fancy at the time when many were on the way to the California gold fields or to Oregon to settle and was heard around many campfires. Often the words were changed to “I’ve come to California” or “O, Susan . . . I’ve come to Oregon.”
one could have 160 acres (a quarter of a square mile and called a quarter section, quarter, or section by 1804) of public land by working and producing a going crop on 40 acres of it for five years.

**Cowboys**

Franciscan missionaries used mounted Indians and Mexicans to herd cattle in California by 1767, and Americans were herding cattle in Texas by 1820. But *cowboy* began to take on its legendary meaning in the spring of 1867 when the as yet uncompleted transcontinental railroad put a spur into Abilene, Kansas, and a 29-year-old livestock trader, Joe McCoy, bought most of the town for $4,250 and then advertised for ranchers and cowboys to bring the half-wild, scrawny Long Horns from Texas up the Chisholm Trail to the railhead. His lure was $40 a head, ten times the going rate for the tallow-and-hide cattle, which were to introduce plentiful beef to the East. By summer’s end the first herds of 2,000–3,000 head had made the trip and McCoy was the first cattle king (perhaps even the original *The Real McCoy*). Soon he was shipping half a million head East a year—and there were over 5,000 cowboys on the trail.

The dry summer and severe winter of 1886–87 wiped out almost 90% of the ranchers’ herds, helping the homesteaders’ fences and *barbed wire* (1860s) end the short 20-year rein of the cowboy. But cowboys and their legend persist, and we still talk about them often.

*Cowboy* may have once been a disparaging term for a colonial settler who let his cows roam or preferred raising cows to plowing. It was a Revolutionary War term for Loyalist guerrillas, who ambushed patriot farmers by ringing cowbells. Later it meant a Texan who rustled Mexican cattle. Thus the disparaging connotations we use in calling a reckless driver a *cowboy* or in the term *drugstore cowboy* (1925) are very old.

*Douglas Avenue, Wichita, Kansas, 1878. The first White settlers came to Wichita in 1868, the railroad was extended there in 1872, making Wichita a principal shipping point for Texas Long Horns; and in 10 years, by 1878, it was a bustling town of 5,000 people.*