

America in the 1800s

By Karen Robuck

Unit 1—Westward Expansion before the Civil War

The Oregon Trail

Hello, and welcome to America in the 1800s. We will begin with early westward expansion on the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails. We will travel down the Erie Canal. We will visit gold miners in California and freedom fighters at the Alamo. We will also touch on a sad time in our nation's history—the American Civil War and Reconstruction. Then we will head west again, with the buffalo, the Indian Wars, and the transcontinental railroad. Throughout our study, you will not have tests or quizzes (you may jump for joy at that statement.) You will, however, have writing assignments. No, you will not be writing reports. I want you to imagine you are living in the time period you are studying. Then I will ask you to either write a journal entry or a letter related to the topic. Don't worry; I'll give you ideas as we go along.

Note to parents: Unless your state requires such assignments to be graded, don't worry about letter grades. Use the writing assignments as opportunities to teach editing and revision skills as part of your language arts. I will provide a rubric to aid in evaluating the writing assignments.

SchoolhouseTeachers.com note: Parents should closely monitor children's use of YouTube and Wikipedia if you navigate away from the videos and articles cited in these lessons. We also recommend viewing the videos on a full screen setting in order to minimize your students' exposure to potentially offensive ads and inappropriate comments beside or beneath the video.

What will we be reading? Most of your readings are from the World Book resources available here at SchoolhouseTeachers.com. I will also provide booklists for additional reading. Since each family has its own preferences and each library has its own unique collections, I will not be requiring specific titles.

- Let's begin by looking again at the area that Lewis and Clark explored.
<http://www.worldbookonline.com/student/media?id=lr004190&st=lewis+and+clark>.

If you would like to review Lewis and Clark's expedition before we start, go to this link:
<http://worldbookonline.com/student/article?id=ar321480&st=lewis+and+clark#tab=homepage>

You could also read:

- Any biography of Lewis and Clark
- Any biography of Sacagawea

Or try a book written from a dog's point of view:

Eubank, Patti Reeder. *Seaman's Journal: On the Trail with Lewis and Clark*.

https://www.amazon.com/Seamans-Journal-Trail-Lewis-Clark/dp/0824954424/ref=sr_1_10?ie=UTF8&qid=1522000299&sr=8-10&keywords=lewis+and+clark%27s+dog

Karwoski, Gail Langer. *SeaMan: The Dog Who Explored the West with Lewis and Clark*.

https://www.amazon.com/SeaMan-Explored-Peachtree-Junior-Publication/dp/1561451908/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1522000299&sr=8-2&keywords=lewis+and+clark%27s+dog

Myers, Laurie. *Lewis and Clark and Me: A Dog's Tale*.

https://www.amazon.com/Lewis-Clark-Me-Dogs-Tale/dp/0805063684/ref=sr_1_4?ie=UTF8&qid=1522000299&sr=8-4&keywords=lewis+and+clark%27s+dog

Pringle, Laurence. *Dog of Discovery: A Newfoundland's Adventures with Lewis and Clark*.

https://www.amazon.com/Dog-Discovery-Newfoundlands-Adventures-Lewis/dp/1590782674/ref=sr_1_5?ie=UTF8&qid=1522000299&sr=8-5&keywords=lewis+and+clark%27s+dog

Schanzer, Rosalyn. *How We Crossed the West: The Adventures of Lewis and Clark*.

https://www.amazon.com/How-We-Crossed-West-Adventures/dp/0792267265/ref=sr_1_6?ie=UTF8&qid=1522000299&sr=8-6&keywords=lewis+and+clark%27s+dog

Smith, Roland. *The Captain's Dog: My Journey with the Lewis and Clark Tribe*.

https://www.amazon.com/Captains-Dog-Journey-Lewis-Clark/dp/0152026967/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1522000299&sr=8-3&keywords=lewis+and+clark%27s+dog

Lewis and Clark's travels led them from Missouri through Oregon to the Pacific Ocean. That was over 1500 miles! Word of their discoveries led many to dream of moving westward. Let's join in that dream for a few moments.

➤ You may begin your reading about the Oregon Trail here:

- <http://www.worldbookonline.com/student/media?id=lr004199&st=oregon+trail>
- <http://www.worldbookonline.com/student/article?id=ar599870&st=santa+fe+trail#tab=homepage>, especially the section "Exploring and Settling the Far West."

➤ Download the map of the United States here:

- http://worldbookonline.com/kids/home#outlinedetailmap/outlinemap_us. You will need it later. (Click on "United States (map)" in the list to access a PDF.)

It is 1841. It has been almost forty years since Lewis and Clark returned from their expedition. Your family lives on a farm in eastern Virginia, or maybe upstate New York. The last few years have been hard on your family. Crops have been good, but prices have been low. Your father has had to borrow money to pay taxes, and now he is concerned that he cannot repay the loan. He has just returned from town with a newspaper, the first your family has seen in months. Few of the stories interest you, until Father reads about a local family looking to sell their farm so they can go to Oregon. Perhaps your family should do the same, Father says. He can sell the farm for more than enough to repay what is owed and still have money for the trip. It will be a way to start over.

First your family would sell almost everything you own—the farm, most of the furniture, the farm animals. Then your family would make its way over the Appalachian Mountains and down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, to Independence, Missouri.

Find and mark Independence on your map. Mark Oregon on your map. Can you figure out the route?

There you would join hundreds of other families waiting for a wagon train to form. Many of the families are living in boarding houses, but your father decides that your family will camp out instead. He will need as much money as possible to buy supplies for the trip. Your father would buy:

- A wagon—Conestoga wagons were the largest and best for such trips.
 - <http://worldbookonline.com/student/article?id=ar128960&st=conestoga+wagon#ab=homepage>
 - <https://www.britannica.com/technology/Conestoga-wagon>
- Four oxen
- A cow and possibly a calf
- Possibly a coop of chickens
- Possibly mules
- Possibly sheep
- 300 pounds smoked meat
- 25 pounds coffee
- 600 pounds flour
- 90 pounds sugar
- 25 pounds salt
- 4 pounds soda
- 4 boxes bran
- 1 bushel dried beans
- 3 bushels dried fruit
- 25 pounds rice
- 3 kegs vinegar

- 2 bushels cornmeal
- Farm tools
- Ammunition
- Seed potatoes

Most general stores would not have this much on hand at one time; however, since Independence was the beginning of the route, merchants would make sure they had the supplies on hand in the spring and early summer, when the wagon trains left.

➤ For more information about food and supplies taken on the Oregon Trail here:

- <http://traveltips.usatoday.com/supply-list-traveling-oregon-trail-101684.html>
- https://preparednessadvice.com/food_storage/foods-carried-on-the-oregon-trail/
- <http://www.oregonpioneers.com/FoodChoices.htm>
- <https://www.oregontrailcenter.org/HistoricalTrails/Supplies.htm>

How much space does that take up? If you're curious, the next time your family shops for groceries, figure out how much of each of these items your supermarket usually carries.

In addition to the supplies your father has bought, you have brought a few things from the home you have left behind: your family's Bible; cooking utensils, including a bean pot; a mattress or some type of bedding; blankets; a butter churn; a spinning wheel; a speller; an arithmetic book. You notice another family packing heavy furniture into their wagon. Papa has warned them about mountain crossings, but they are from western Tennessee. They do not believe him about how hard crossing the mountains will be.

Finally, after weeks of waiting, thirty families have gathered. A wagon train can be formed. Families traveled in wagon trains for protection and to help each other. The crossing would take two months and could be dangerous at times. Before leaving Independence, the men of the wagon train would elect a captain and other officers. The captain's word would be law as they traveled. Your father has been elected captain. You are proud, but also a little scared. Since he is captain, he will not be able to travel with your family often.

Now it's time to be off. It's a slow start. The wagons have to be divided into four columns. Mules, sheep, and cattle have to be herded behind the wagons. Papa and the other officers are on horseback at the head of the train. Finally, you are off! You are looking forward to the adventure.

But it's not much of an adventure after the first few days. The oxen move slowly, covering only about twenty miles a day. The days are long and soon fall into a pattern. The man on guard duty sounds a wakeup call at 4 a.m. Some days you don't want to get up, but you have to. Everyone, even the children, have a job to do. The men and older boys round up the oxen that had been left to graze overnight. They unchain the wagons. A work detail takes down the tents you had slept under the night before. Children who are too young for other jobs gather fuel for fires. (At first, this was easy, as there were plenty of trees. But the farther West you go, the harder this will be. At some point along the trail, the only fuel supplies will be dried grass and dried buffalo dung.)

The women cook breakfast; dig up their bean pots, which had been buried next to the fire to cook overnight; scour kettles with sand instead of washing with water; and fill water kegs for drinking. The men yoke the oxen to the wagons. By 7 a.m. the bugle sounds, and you begin again.

Wagons took turns in the lead. Whichever wagons were in the lead one day would be last in line the next. As the wagons plodded down the trail, a few of the men on horseback would ride ahead to hunt antelope, prairie chicken, or buffalo. At noon, the train would stop for about an hour to rest the animals. The women would prepare a simple meal, then take over the driving so the men could rest. In the late afternoon, the riders would begin scouting for a good campsite.

The work at night was just as hard as in the morning. The wagons were driven into a circle and chained together. This arrangement protected both people and animals from wolves and other predators. Your family isn't concerned about Indians; in the early days of the Oregon Trail, the Indians were still friendly. The oxen are turned loose to graze; the horses and mules are tied to picket posts to graze; children again gathered fuel for fires; the women started fires and cooked supper, then scoured the dishes, and filled and buried their bean pots.

You like the time after the work is done best. Now is the time for fun. One of the men has a fiddle. He doesn't need much urging to play for everyone. As he plays, some of the women sing along. Others grab their husbands' hands and dance until they can't stand anymore. Then the fires are banked (covered with ashes) to burn low all night. One man is given guard duty. Everyone else goes to bed. The morning will be here before you know it.

Although most days are the same, Sundays are a break in the routine. You do not travel, for it is a day of rest. This time the fiddles play hymns. If there is a lay preacher in the wagon train, he will preach. The rest of the day you rest.

Another way the routine breaks is when you reach a river. A week and a half into the trip you are crossing the Kansas River; before you get to Oregon, you will also cross the Platte and South Platte Rivers. To cross the river, the wagons regroup into a single line and are chained together for safety reasons. Any cracks in the wagons are filled with tar. The wagon covers are tightened. The men who can swim guide the oxen. The wagons float across, and the animals swim.

If the rains came right before a river crossing, you might be stuck for days or weeks until the river goes down. If that happened, your days may look much like they had back home. Your mother would finally be able to do a load of wash. Your father would go hunting. You and the other children would have more time to play between chores. You can go exploring, as long as you don't go too far. If you have to wait long enough, your mother may find time for lessons. But all too soon the river goes down and you can cross.

You can read more about the rivers you will cross here:

- Kansas River (map only)
<http://worldbookonline.com/student/media?id=mp000110&st=kansas+river>
- Mark the Kansas River on your map.

- Snake River
<http://worldbookonline.com/student/article?id=ar516360&st=snake+river#tab=homepage>

➤ Mark the Snake River on your map.

- Platte River
 - <http://worldbookonline.com/student/article?id=ar434460&st=platte+river>
 - <http://worldbookonline.com/student/media?id=mp000155&st=platte+river>

South Platte River

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Platte_River
- <http://worldbookonline.com/student/media?id=mp000049&st=south+platte+river>

➤ Mark the Platte and South Platte Rivers on your map.

➤ Connect the dots from Independence to these rivers.

Let's stop for a moment. What might a river crossing sound like? Would the animals be protesting? What would the people be saying? Imagine that for a moment.

OK, now back to the Oregon Trail. You've been traveling for a month and a half. You really need a break. Fortunately, you've reached Fort Laramie, in what is now Wyoming. Here you will rest for about a day and a half. The soldiers welcome you warmly; after all, they don't get many visitors. First, you take a bath. After not having had a real one for six weeks, the warm water and soap are welcome. Then you put on your best clothes and have a real meal with the soldiers. The adults dance. Some of the wagon train members have unmarried daughters. Perhaps one or two catch the eyes of the soldiers. The second night you return the favor by inviting the soldiers to the wagon train. After two days, the wagon master says it is time to go on, so you leave the soldiers behind.

➤ You can read more about Ft. Laramie here:

- <http://worldbookonline.com/student/article?id=ar749670&st=fort+laramie#tab=homepage>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_Laramie_National_Historic_Site
- <https://www.wyohistory.org/encyclopedia/fort-laramie>
- <http://www.historyglobe.com/ot/ftlaramie.htm>

➤ Mark Fort Laramie on your map. Draw a line from the Platte River to the fort. What current states have you gone through so far? (They weren't states at the time).

Shortly after leaving Fort Laramie you reach the Rocky Mountains. Now the trip becomes dangerous. Only the old and sick can ride in the wagons now. Everyone who is able walks in order to lighten the load. Wagon wheels often broke and had to be repaired. Those who had carried heavy furniture with them now realize their mistake and leave it all behind. Sometimes an ox stumbles and has to be put down. If a family loses both oxen or a wheel cannot be repaired, they have to abandon their wagon. They take only what they can carry and walk the rest of the way. If that happened to you, what would you take?

The mountain crossing is very slow, but once you cross them, you are almost in your new home. Unfortunately, you have also reached the most difficult part of the journey. First you see Fort Bridger, inside what is now Wyoming. You spend some time at the trading post.

- You can read more about Ft. Bridger and its founder, Jim Bridger, at these links:
 - <http://worldbookonline.com/student/article?id=ar076465&st=fort+bridger#tab=homepage>
 - <https://www.wyohistory.org/encyclopedia/fort-bridger>
 - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_Bridger
 - <http://wyoparks.state.wy.us/index.php/places-to-go/fort-bridger>
- Mark Fort Bridger on your map. Draw a line from Fort Laramie to Fort Bridger. What other current states have you gone through?

Now summer has begun. It is a hot, dry summer. There is no grass to burn for fuel or for the animals to graze. There are no animals to hunt. The water is not safe to drink. But at last you make it to Fort Boise on the Snake River. Here you take a day or two to catch salmon.

- You can read more about Ft. Boise here:
 - <http://www.historyglobe.com/ot/ftboise.htm>
 - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_Boise
 - <https://web.archive.org/web/20180317233239/https://www.idahoptv.org/outdoors/shows/pathwaysofpioneers/oldfortboise.cfm/>
- Mark Fort Boise on your map. Connect it to Fort Bridger. In what state are you now?

Now you are in the Willamette Valley on the Columbia River in Oregon. Here the land is lush and green and good for farming. At this point, some of the families begin dropping out of the wagon train to stake their claims. Your father is among them. Your family will settle in eastern Oregon. Your family was fortunate. You have made it to Oregon with all your seeds and farm equipment. You will share what you can with the others who are leaving the trail at the same time. Others will travel until they reach the Pacific Coast.

- Find and mark the Willamette Valley on your map. Draw a line from Fort Boise. Now that you have marked the Oregon Trail, go over your markings with a colored pencil, pen, or marker.

If you want to read more about the Oregon Trail, try one or more of these books:

- Chambers, Catherine. *Wagons West: Off to Oregon*. Troll Communications, 1984.
 - Gregory, Kristiana. *Across the Wide and Lonesome Prairie* (Dear America series)
 - Hermes, Patricia. *Westward to Home* (Dear America series)
 - Levine, Ellen. *If You Traveled West in a Covered Wagon*. Scholastic, 1992.
 - Levine, Ellen. *The Journal of Jedediah Barstow, an Emigrant on the Oregon Trail* (My Name is America series)
 - Mullin, Penn. *Trailblazers Series: Off to Oregon*
 - Murphy, Jim. *West to a Land of Plenty* (My Name is America series)
 - *The Story of the Oregon Trail*. (Cornerstones of Freedom Series). I am not listing authors because there have been several editions with different authors. I prefer the older series, as the most recent ones have been divided into chapters and are written on a slightly younger level.
 - *The Story of the Conestoga Wagon* (Cornerstones of Freedom Series)
 - Van Leeuwen, Jean. *Bound for Oregon*
 - Any biography of Jim Bridger
 - Any biography of Narcissa or Marcus Whitman
- Now for your writing assignment. Choose one of the following ideas:
1. Your family is traveling west. You must pack carefully; the journey will take several months. You are taking only one wagon, and it must hold enough food for the journey. What will you take with you? Why?
 2. You have already begun the journey. You are currently in Jefferson City, Missouri, while your father buys supplies and looks for a wagon train to join. What are your feelings about the journey? You are not allowed to give your opinion; after all, you are only a child. But you have a journal. What would you tell your journal about the trip?

3. You are in Jefferson City waiting to leave. You want to send one last letter to your best friend. You may not get to write him or her again for at least a year. What would you include in your letter?
4. You have arrived in Oregon. You want to write a letter to your best friend or to a relative. The wagon master will take it with him when he returns East. What will you say in this letter?

SAMPLE