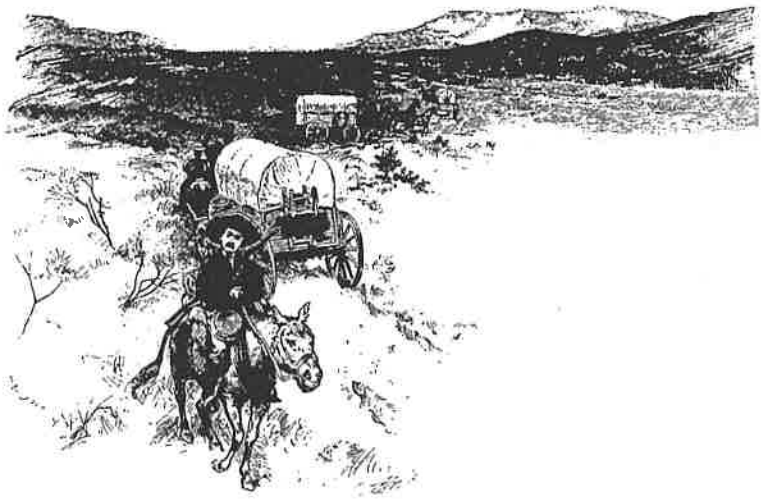
DAILY LIFE IN A COVERED WAGON



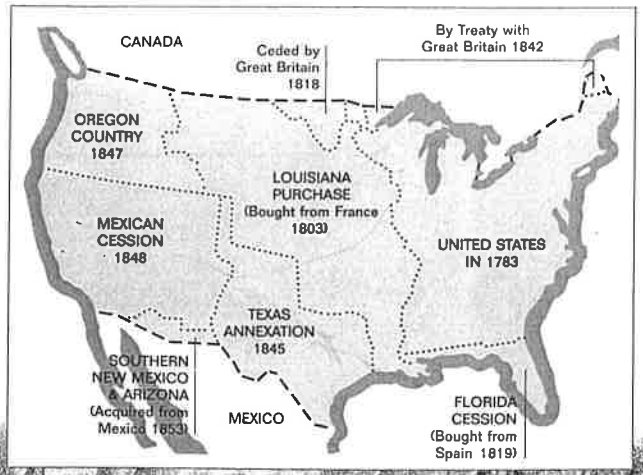
Paul Erickson

The Preservation Press
National Trust for Historic Preservation

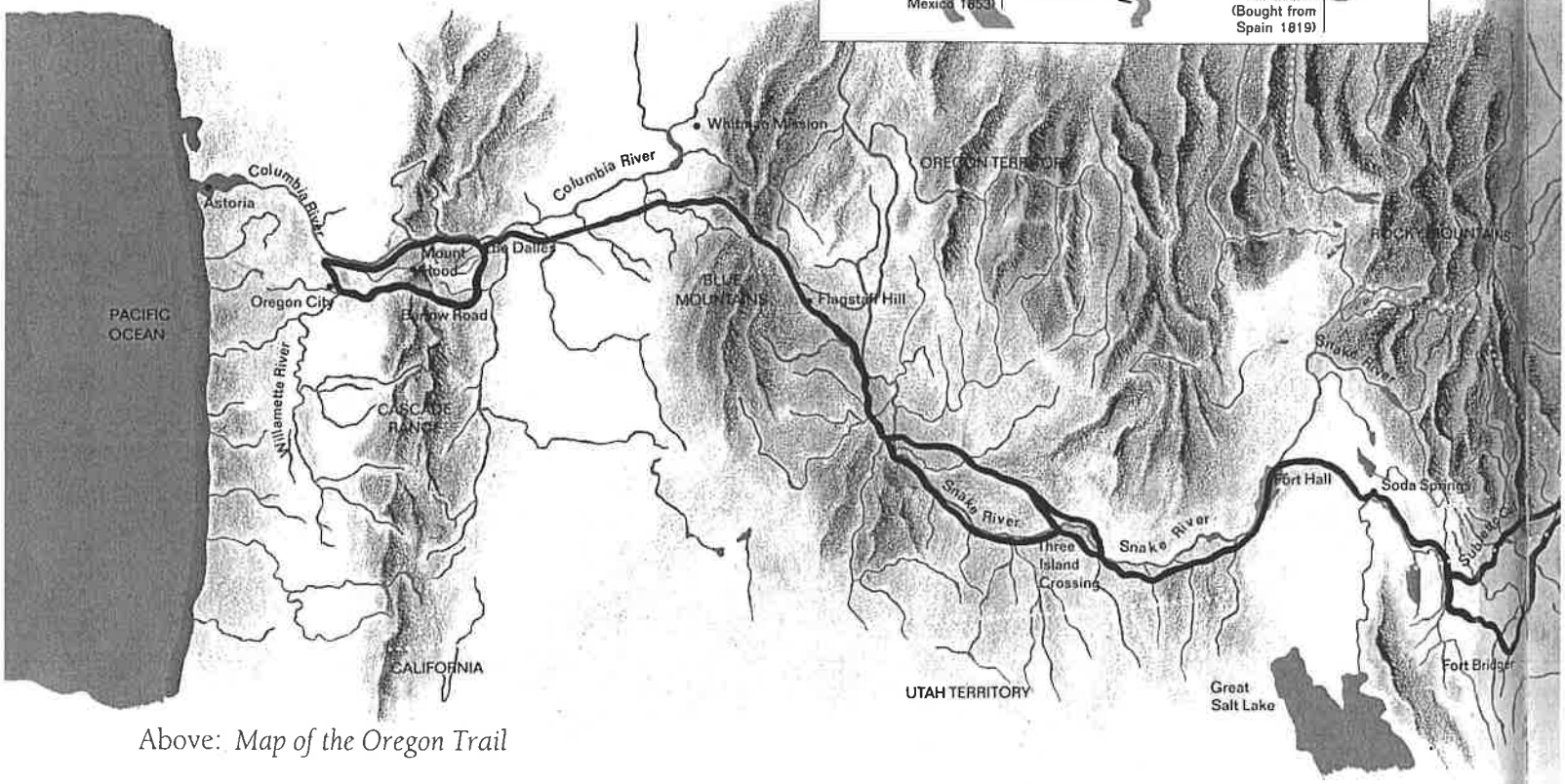
Contents

Going West

In the 1840s the United States doubled in size (*see map right*). By either negotiation, war, or purchase, it acquired most of Oregon, Texas, California and the American Southwest. There was a great desire to expand into these new and little known territories, and several



Right: *Western Expansion of the United States by 1853.*



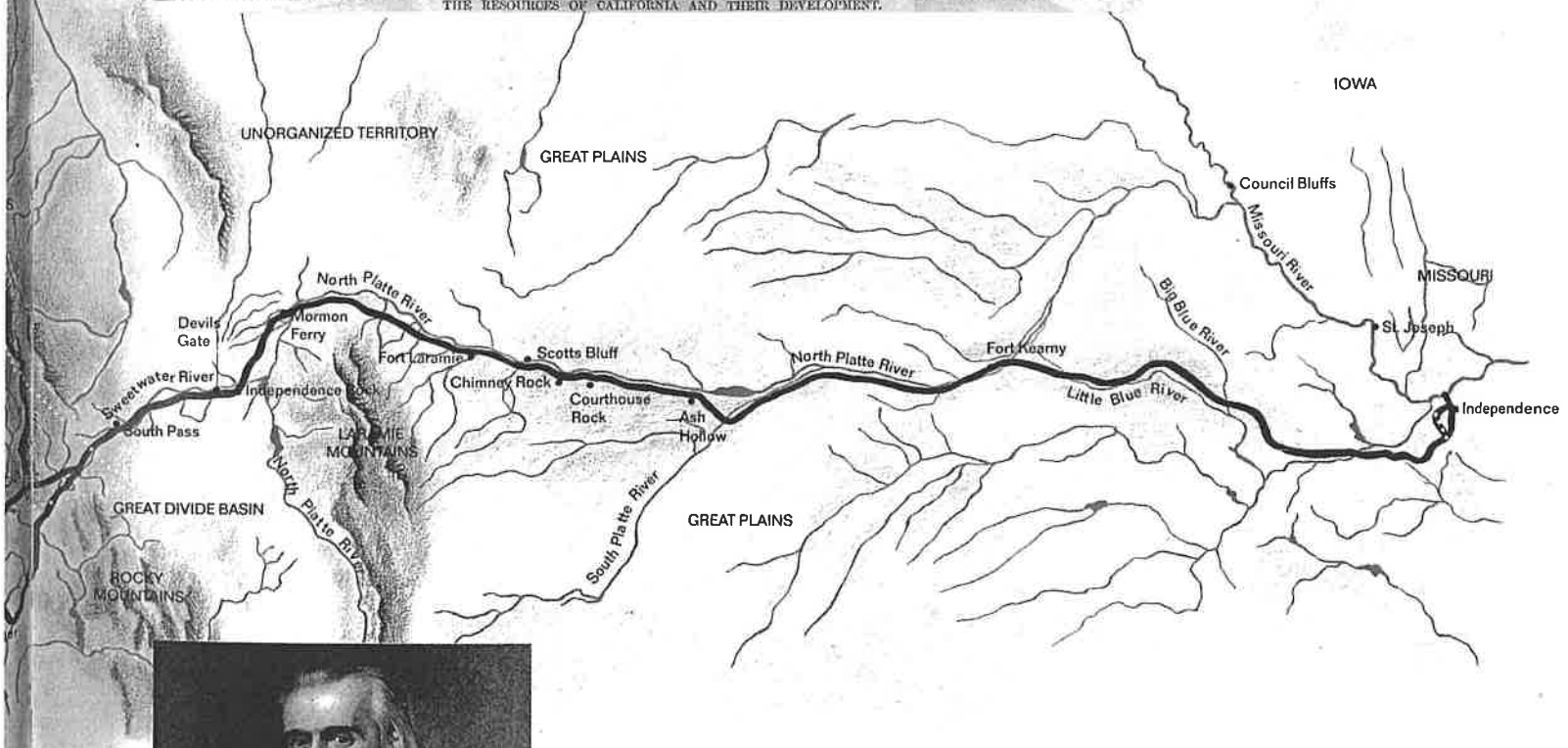
Above: *Map of the Oregon Trail*

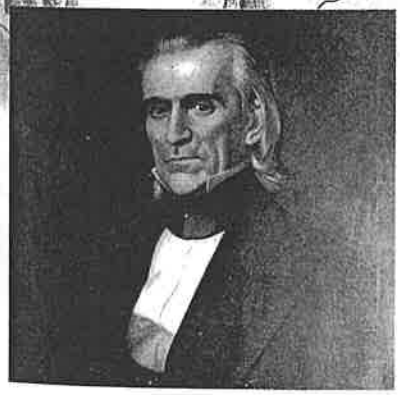
people went out to explore the region and came back with reports of rich soil and good opportunities for farmers. Interest in the west grew, until it was said that "if hell were in the west, Americans would cross heaven to get there." Newspaper editors spoke of the "Manifest Destiny" to make the United States stretch "from sea to shining sea." "Oregon Fever" was just one part of this western expansion. According to the "boosters" who encouraged people to move west, Oregon was a paradise "flowing with milk and honey." It was even said that pigs ran around ready cooked with knives and forks sticking in them so that anyone could have a slice.

Above: *The Three Main Trails West*

Above: *A gold pan.*

Left: *A "boosterist" poster showing California as a paradise.*





Above: *James K. Polk became President in 1844 because he promised Americans "All of Oregon or War!" In the early 1840s, part of Oregon still belonged to Great Britain.*

The journey west was very dangerous, and even Horace Greeley, the newspaper editor famous for saying "Go west, young man!" warned against making it. However, the success of the first wagon train in 1843 proved him wrong, and soon thousands were emigrating to Oregon. Despite the difficulties of crossing "the Great American desert," there were several reasons to go west. Some people, like the Mormons, wanted to be free to practice their religion; others, like the "Forty-Niners" of the 1849 California gold rush, hoped to find gold and get rich; and others wanted to make better lives for themselves farming on the fertile land.

Most of the pioneers wanted to bring "civilization" with them: Fashions and entertainments as well as laws, schools, and colleges. They wanted to stay in touch with what was happening back east, no matter how different their new lives were.

The Family

The year is 1853, and the Larkin family are on their way to Oregon. For a journey of over 2,000 miles, lasting nearly five months, a covered wagon will be their home. Like so many other Americans, they have made the momentous decision to "emigrate," that is, to leave the settled states east of the Mississippi for a new and better life in the West.

Hiram Larkin

Hetty Larkin

Above and right: *Books like Palmer's* Journal of Travels over the Rocky Mountains *and Horn's* Overland Guide *are Mr. Larkin's favorite reading matter.*

Mr. Larkin has considered very carefully before deciding to take the trip. On his 110-acre farm in Indiana, he is able to provide the basic necessities of life for his family. He is certainly better off than a laborer, who might earn only $100 a year, but he finds it hard to make a profit, and he is worried that the soil in Indiana is "worn out."

Hiram Larkin, age 35, is of Scots-Irish ancestry. Like his father and grandfather before him, he is a hard-working farmer. He did not get swept up in the first bout of "Oregon Fever" in the mid-1840s, but his views changed when he began to read reports of the trip and the richness of the Oregon soil. Now he has sold his farm and stock in Indiana and taken his family by steamboat to the "jumping-off point" of Independence, Missouri, where the overlanders meet up and make preparations before starting on their long overland trek.

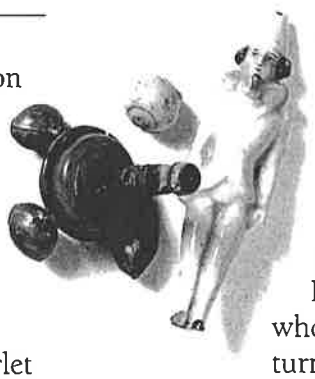
Hetty Gilkey married Hiram Larkin when she was 18 years old. Now she is 33. Like Hiram, she comes from a farming family. Hetty did not want to leave Indiana at first, but she changed her mind after the Donation Land Act was passed in 1850. This law cut the amount of land an Oregon settler could claim from 640 acres to 320 acres, but allowed him to claim 320 acres for his wife. Hetty liked the idea of owning land. She helped to save money for the trip, which could cost over $1,200. They sold their land for $5 an acre, but were still short, so Hetty borrowed $400 from her brother.

The Children

Rachel (14), Abraham (10), Rebecca (7), and Margaret (3)

At the time of their emigration to Oregon, Hiram and Hetty Larkin have four children – fewer than most farming families of that time. A fifth child (born between Rachel and Abraham) died of scarlet fever when he was two years old.

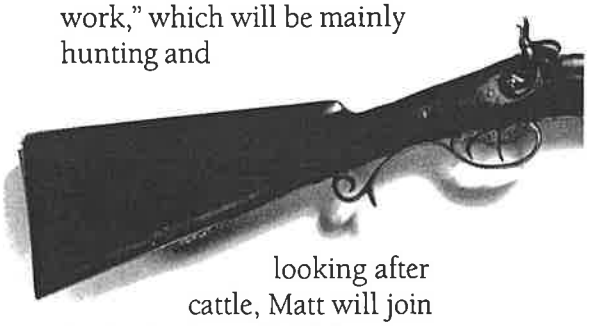
The eldest surviving child is Rachel, now nearly 15. Since having scarlet fever as a little girl, Rachel has been "sickly," and her mother worries that the trip to Oregon will be too much for her heart. Her father, however, points out that the trip west has restored many sick people to good health.



Abraham, or Abe, and Rebecca are both thrilled to be traveling to Oregon and cannot wait to get started. Little Margaret, who has just turned three, is too young to understand quite what is happening. She clings to her mother's skirts and seems completely bewildered by all the changes going on around her.

Matthew Belknap

Matthew, or Matt, Belknap is an 18-year-old orphan from St. Louis. After his parents died in a cholera epidemic, Matt lived with an uncle, but ran away to Independence because he was badly treated. Now Matt has been hired by Hiram Larkin. In return for "a man's work," which will be mainly hunting and looking after cattle, Matt will join the Larkin household for the trip to Oregon.



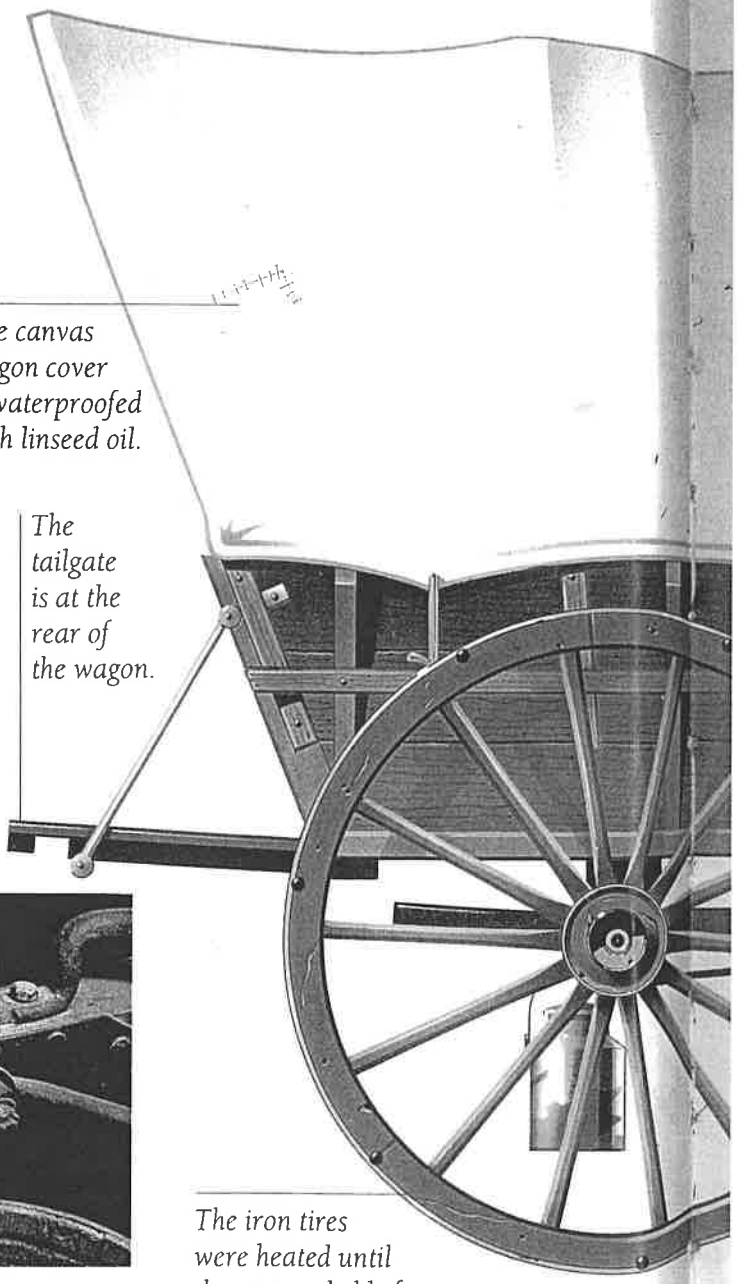
The Wagon

All Mr. Larkin's guidebooks say that the key to a successful journey to Oregon is a good wagon. It must be strong, in order to carry a load of perhaps 2,000 lbs. over rough and mountainous country, and light, in order not to strain the oxen pulling it. Rather than risk using the family's rickety old farm wagon, Mr. Larkin decided to buy a new wagon in Independence.

Above: *Wagon trains waiting to begin the journey.*

At $110, it is the most expensive thing he has bought for the trip. Even Mrs. Larkin is pleased with it. She has decided to call it "Hoosier Home." This is because the Larkins came from Indiana, and people from that state are sometimes called "hoosiers."

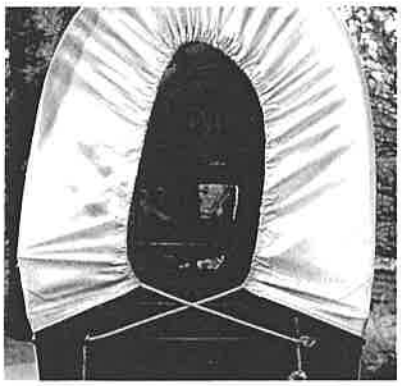
"The wagon looks so nice, with its white cover. It is plenty high enough for me to stand straight under the roof. Once it starts rolling, with everything packed away ship-shape, it will be a prairie schooner indeed!" Mrs. Larkin's Diary



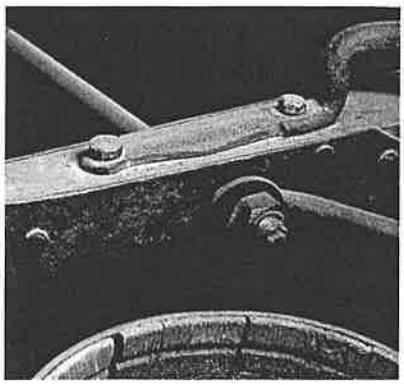
The canvas wagon cover is waterproofed with linseed oil.

The tailgate is at the rear of the wagon.

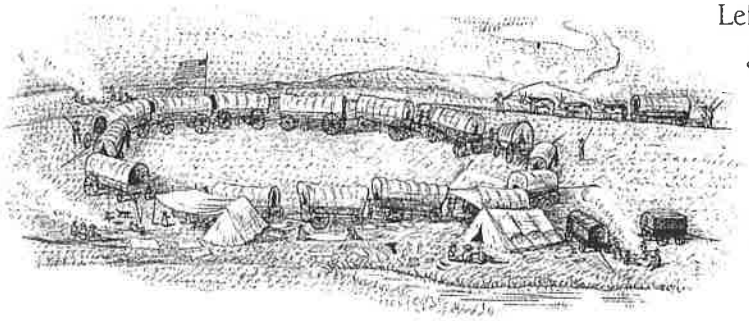
The iron tires were heated until they expanded before being slipped into place.



Above: *The cover is threaded through with a "puckering string" at each end, so that it can be opened and closed.*



Above: *Iron is used to strengthen parts of the wagon such as the axles and wheels.*



Left: *The wagons were parked in a circle at night to give protection from wolves, cattle thieves, and the wind.*

Below: *The body of the wagon is a box four feet wide by ten feet long. The Larkins' wagon is of the "Murphy" type with slightly flaring sides.*

Bows made out of hickory wood are used to hold up the canvas.

The jockey box at the front of the wagon is used to sit on and to hold tools.

The oxen are harnessed to the wagon tongue.

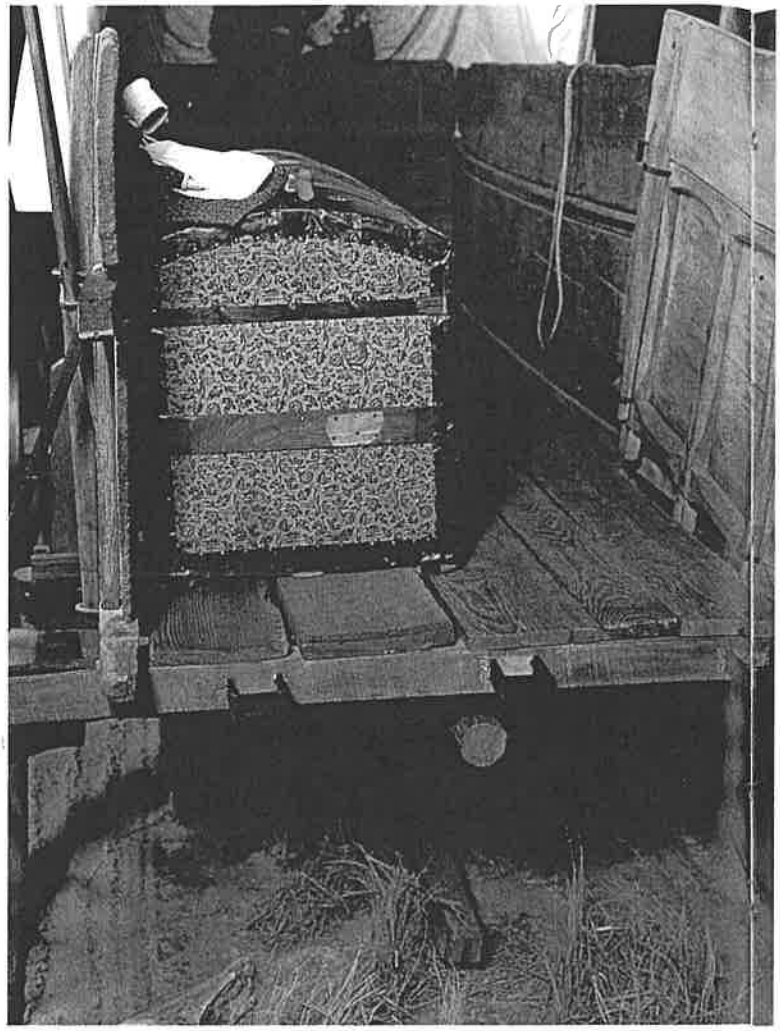
The wheels have hubs of elm, spokes of oak, and rims of ash, all firmly bolted together. They are greased with tallow and tar to make them run smoothly.

Left: *The wheels are fixed to the axles with iron bolts and pins.*

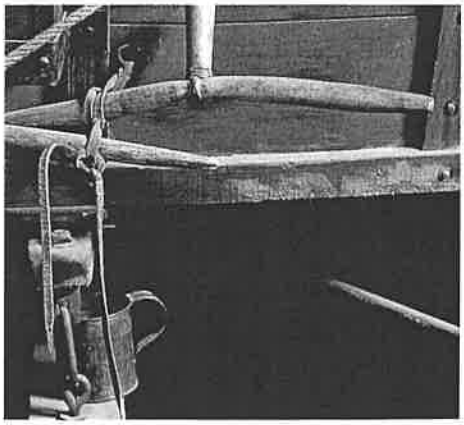
Inside The Wagon

The Larkins' wagon is not a traveling house like a modern caravan, it is more of a storage space. It is loaded with provisions for the long journey and for fitting out a new farmstead in Oregon. The tools that Mr. Larkin will need for farming are strapped to the sides, and spare parts for the wagon are slung underneath. Inside, there is a leather trunk filled with medicines, a bottle of matches tightly corked to keep out moisture, the big family bible, and other special treasures carried from Indiana. One wooden box contains the pots, pans, and cutlery that the Larkins will need for the trip. Another box, carefully stowed away, is filled with bolts of cloth, good linen, and the family's "best clothes," which will not be taken out again until the Larkins arrive in Oregon. Yet another box contains plant cuttings, since Mr. Larkin hopes to have an orchard on his new farm. Mrs. Larkin watches as the men load the wagon to make sure that the more precious things are tucked out of harm's way.

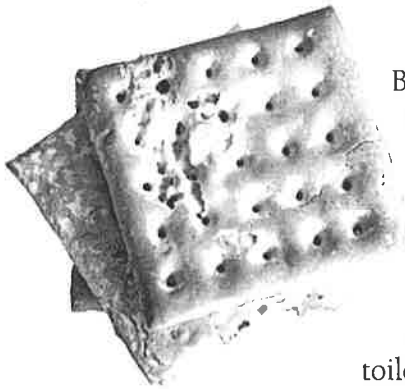
Above: *Barrels, rope, iron pots, tin plates, ladles, nails, a chair, and a rifle will all be needed in Oregon, as well as on the wagon train.*



Above: *A large trunk stowed in the bottom of the wagon keeps family treasures and good clothes safe during the journey.*



Above: *A scythe and hoe are tied to the side of the wagon. A tin pitcher holds grease for the axles.*



Above: *Hardtack or "pilot bread" could be kept for long periods of time. This dates from the 1860s!*

Blankets, pillows, and featherbeds are wrapped up in canvas ground cloths. Tents, poles, rope, and stakes are stacked to one side, propped in place by a few pieces of furniture.

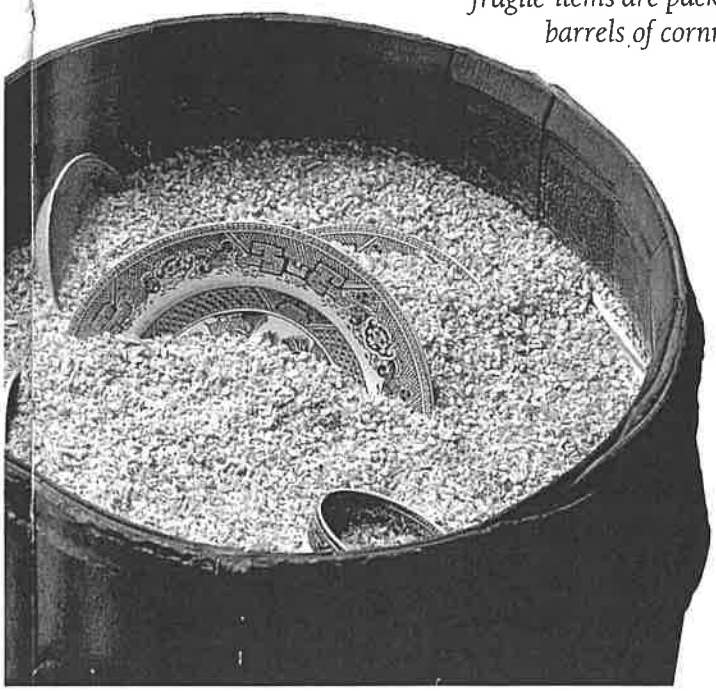
The Larkins' everyday clothing hangs from hooks fixed to the hickory bows, while pockets in the canvas walls hold cord, small arms, and Mrs. Larkin's sewing things and toiletries. Overhead a lantern is suspended, along with a ready shotgun.

Above: *A calico blouse, a cotton apron, and other finery will remain packed until arrival in Oregon.*

Food for the Journey

Stout double canvas sacks, their seams well stitched by Mrs. Larkin back in Indiana, are now filled up with the huge amounts of food recommended in the guidebooks – 100 lbs of flour for each adult, 70 lbs of bacon, 30 lbs of "pilot bread" or hardtack, beans, rice, coffee, sugar, dried fruits, baking soda, vinegar – all bought from the stores in Independence.

Below: *Eggs, china, and other fragile items are packed in barrels of cornmeal.*

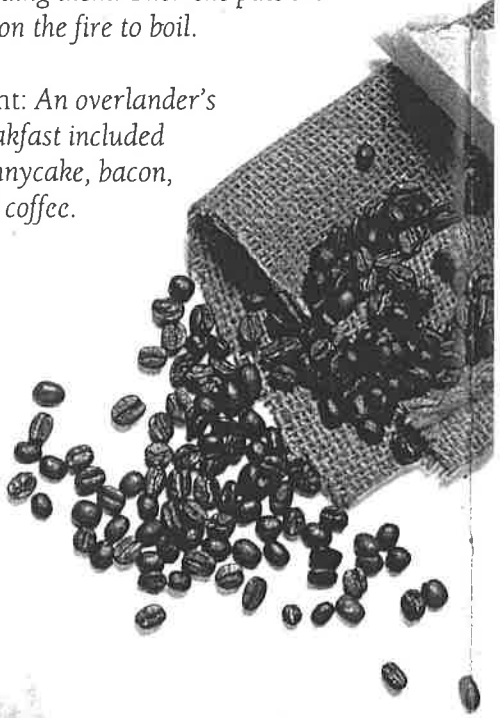


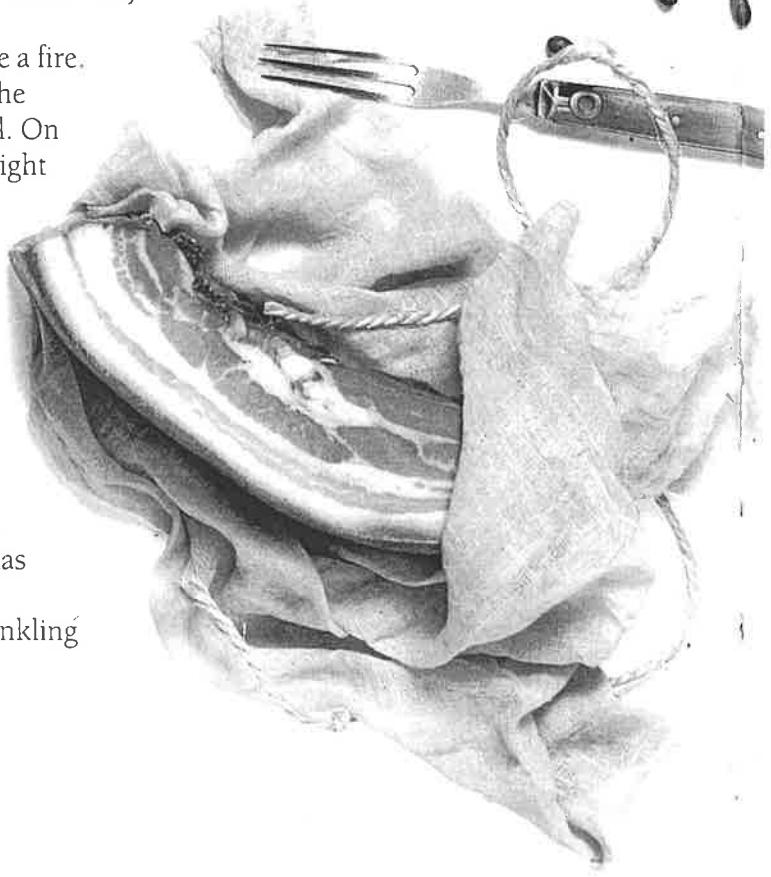
Communications

Mrs. Larkin packs her pen away carefully. Like many overlanders, she will keep a diary and write letters to relatives back East, which can be left for posting at various places along the way. For other messages, there is a "roadside telegraph" or "bone express": Messages are left for following wagon trains, posted on a cleft stick or scribbled on sun-bleached bones. Sometimes they gave good advice, such as "For God's sake do not taste this water. It is poisonous," but some pranksters left misleading messages to confuse other travelers.

Left: *Once the fire is lit, Mrs. Larkin roasts the coffee beans over it before grinding them. Then she puts the pot on the fire to boil.*

Right: *An overlander's breakfast included johnnycake, bacon, and coffee.*

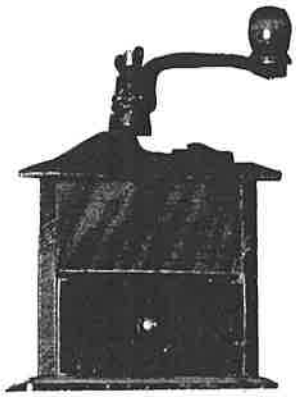




DAYBREAK

At 4 a.m. the night watch fire their guns to let everyone know that it is daybreak. Quickly, the overlanders pull on their boots or shoes, throw a few garments over the clothes they have slept in, and set about their morning tasks.

Mrs. Larkin cooks the breakfast. First, she has to make a fire. A steady wind is always blowing across the prairies, so she must dig a shallow trench. Then she must find some fuel. On the high plains a wagon train might travel for days without seeing a single tree, but the pioneers soon discovered that dried buffalo droppings, or "buffalo chips," made a clean, hot fire, with little smoke or smell. In the mountains, dead sage brush would do instead.



Above: *A mill for grinding coffee beans.*

Even with her trench filled with fuel, Mrs. Larkin often has difficulty lighting the fire. Sometimes she resorts to sprinkling the fuel with gunpowder.

Breakfast

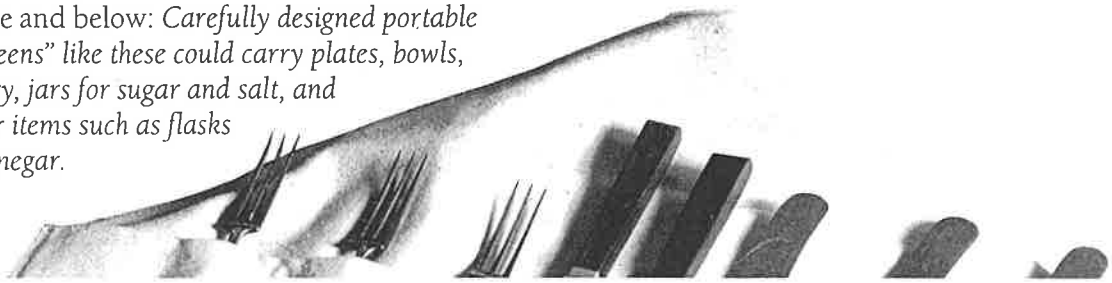
Pancakes are breakfast favorites as they require only flour, water, baking soda, and a skillet to cook them in, but Mrs. Larkin often bakes bread in a dutch oven, using risen dough that she prepares the evening before. On other days she makes soda biscuits, muffins, or cornmeal johnnycakes. Beans, well greased with slab bacon and slowly simmered through the night in the ashes of the fire, are a popular breakfast dish, as is fried meat, which is served with a gravy made of pan drippings and flour. The overlanders like to begin the day with a hearty meal.

Coffee is the all-purpose trail thirst-quencher, served at every meal. The overlanders rarely drink plain water, since it is usually muddy or polluted, and tastes so disgusting that sometimes even the animals refuse it. Only disguised by the strong flavor of coffee does it become palatable to man – and beast.

Above: *Cast-iron skillets and a long-handled pan for making popcorn.*

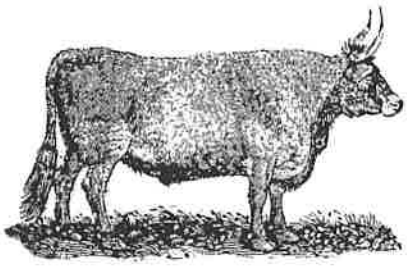
"There is a great scarcity of wood, and we are compelled to cook our food with buffalo chips. This has caused many of the ladies to act very cross, but necessity is a great leveler, and now we all must search for them." Mrs. Larkin's Diary

Above and below: *Carefully designed portable "canteens" like these could carry plates, bowls, cutlery, jars for sugar and salt, and larger items such as flasks for vinegar.*

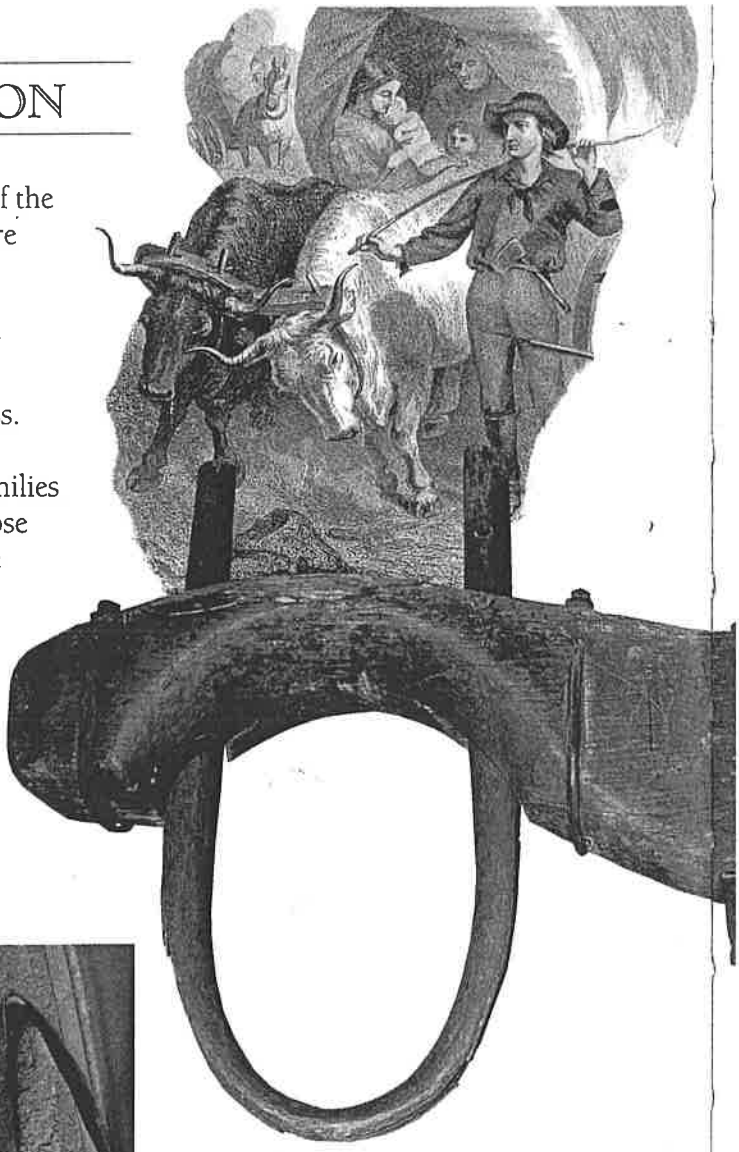


Hitching Up The Wagon

While Mrs. Larkin is preparing breakfast, the men of the party round up the livestock. The riding horses are close at hand. They have been hobbled to the wagons during the night in case they are stolen by Indians. The cattle, however, have been left free to graze where they like, and by dawn some have wandered far from the camp in search of the tastiest grass.



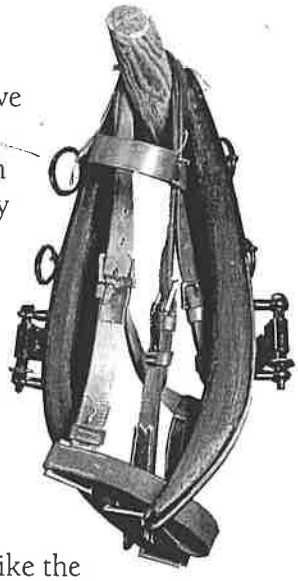
Overlanders traveled in different ways. Farming families like the Larkins usually chose oxen to pull the wagon the 2,000 mile journey, since these animals are very strong. However, men bound for the California gold fields often chose a pack-train of mules that could go faster than a covered wagon, even when carrying panniers (*see below*) filled with heavy supplies.



Left: *Overlanders bound for the gold fields would carry their supplies in a pair of panniers strapped over a mule's back.*

Right: *On hard or rocky trails iron shoes protected the oxen's feet.*

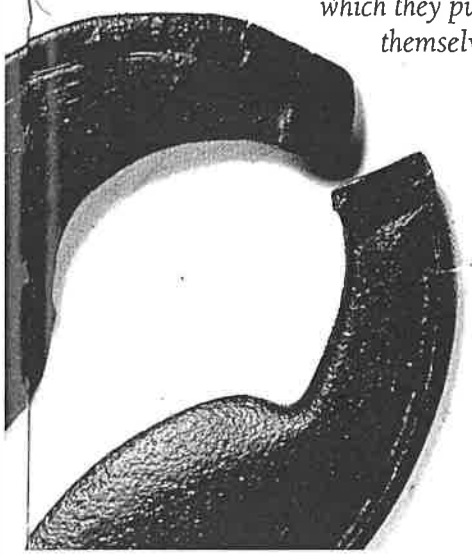
After the cattle have been driven into the corral of circled wagons and sorted out, Mr. Larkin yokes up his team of six oxen. While many overlanders used oxen from their old farmsteads, Mr. Larkin purchased these in Independence. He wanted them fresh for the journey, and he also knew from his reading in the guidebooks that oxen in Missouri were cheap and accustomed to eating the tough grasses of the prairie. Some overlanders did use mules, which were tough, relatively speedy, and could survive on cottonwood bark, but the vast majority preferred oxen. Although oxen were slower than mules, they fared much better in muddy conditions and could survive on little food. Most of the overlanders used oxen on their farms back east and were experienced at handling them. Besides that, oxen were relatively cheap. They cost only $55 to $65 per yoke (2 oxen), while mules might be as much as $110 each. Like the Larkins, most overlanders have one or two saddle horses. However, horses were not used to pull the wagons until the later years on the trail because they could not work well with such poor feed.



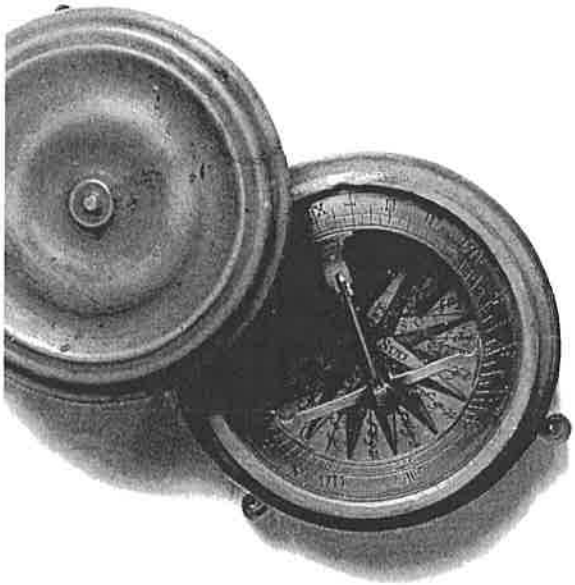
In addition to their oxen, the Larkins have two milk cows. Rachel and Abraham have the task of milking them every morning and evening. In the evening the Larkin family drink the milk fresh with their supper, but in the morning Mrs. Larkin puts the milk into a churn, which she hangs from the back of the wagon. On the trail she does not have time to make butter the way she did back in Indiana, but without it even her tasty biscuits and pancakes are too dry to eat. Fortunately, she has learned a shortcut. As the wagon bumps along, the milk is shaken so vigorously that large balls of butter will form with no hand churning at all.

Above:
Wooden ox yoke.

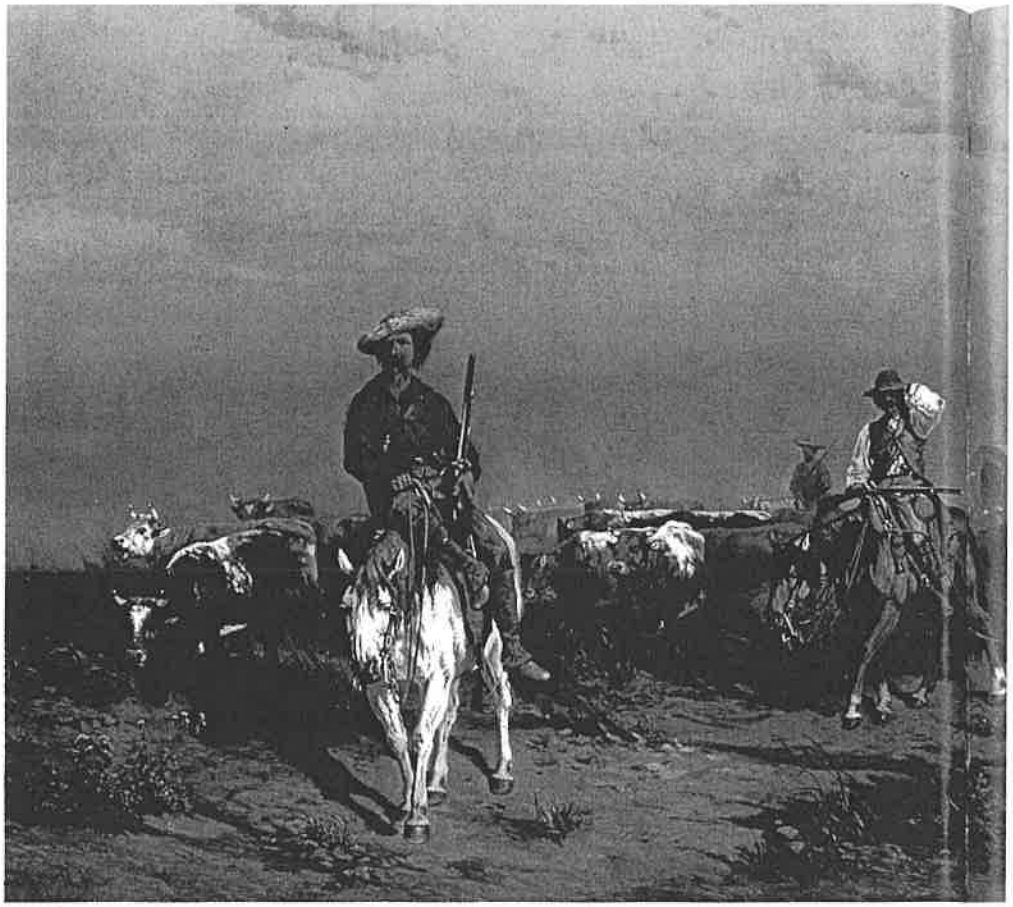
Right: *One company of Mormons traveled with two-wheeled handcarts which they pulled themselves.*



Right: *Otto Sommer's painting of the Oregon trail,* Westward Ho!



Above: *With this folding pocket sundial and compass, the Captain can tell both time and direction.*

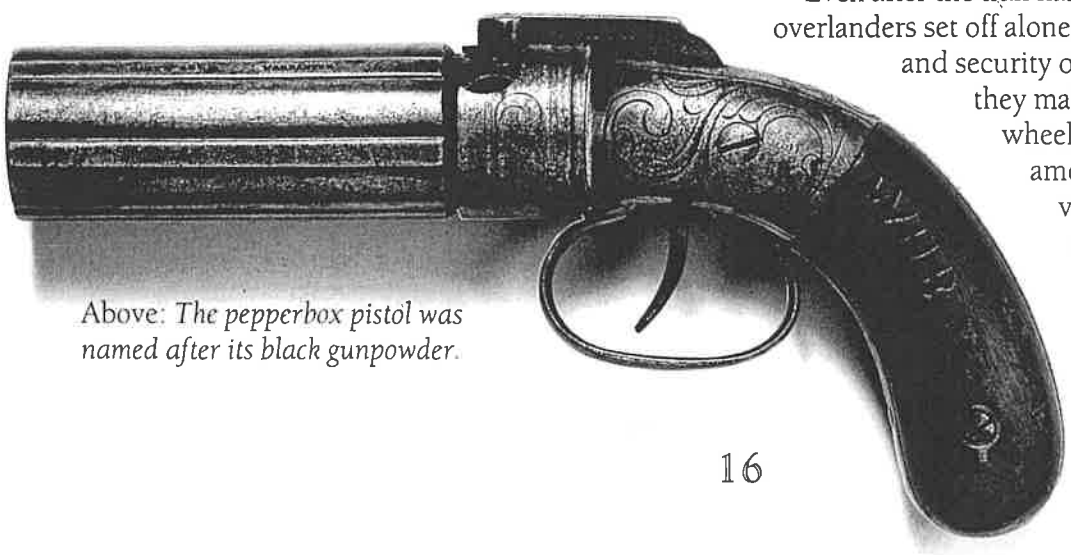


Rolling The Train

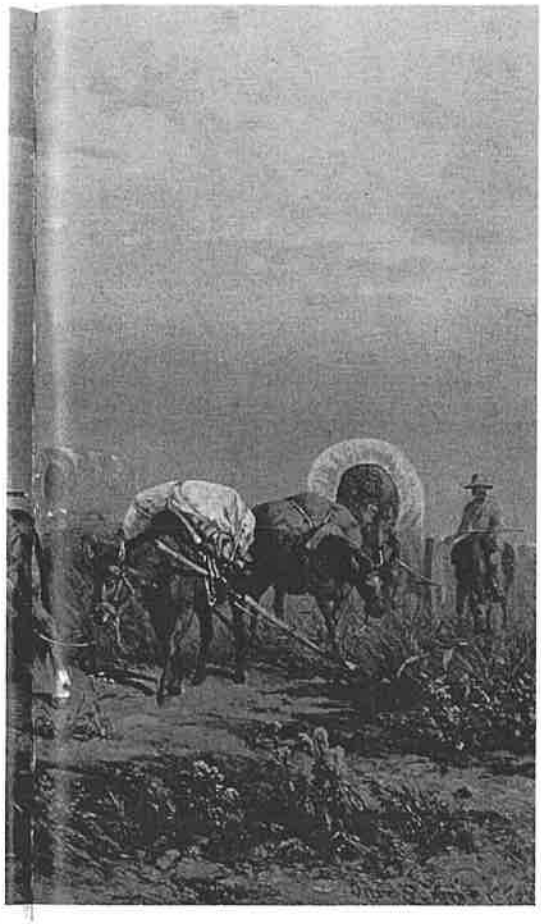
At 7 a.m. a bugle sounds. As the women bundle away the last of the cookware, the men shout commands to their teams. "Roll the wagons!" shouts the captain of the wagon train. The first wagon moves out of the camp, and soon the whole company has spread out across the prairie in a growing cloud of dust.

There are 60 families in the Larkins' wagon train. Some of these are old friends from Franklin County, Indiana, with whom the Larkins have been sharing travel plans for many months, and there is a larger party from Illinois. Finally, there are assorted smaller groups from Missouri.

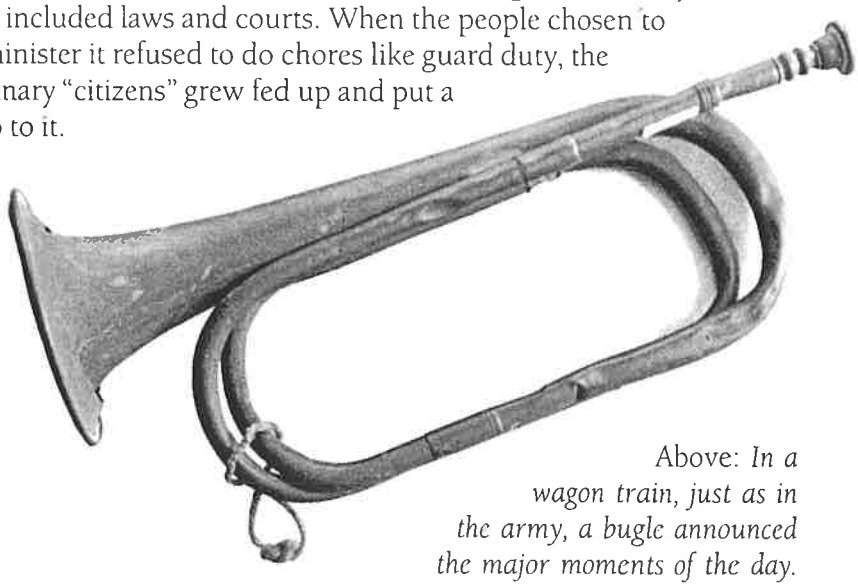
Even after the trail has become well worn, few overlanders set off alone, preferring the support and security of a large group. Together, they make up a sort of village on wheels, with men of all trades amongst the travelers. Like a village, the wagon train needed some sort of government, and meetings were held to elect a captain.



Above: *The pepperbox pistol was named after its black gunpowder.*



One early party even worked out a miniature government system that included laws and courts. When the people chosen to administer it refused to do chores like guard duty, the ordinary "citizens" grew fed up and put a stop to it.



Above: *In a wagon train, just as in the army, a bugle announced the major moments of the day.*

"We have elected Captain Bonner, of Weston, Missouri, to lead our company. The Illinois men might have preferred one of their own, but even they must admit that he is an expert with a bullwhip and handles the cattle very well."
Mr. Larkin's Diary

Below: *The captain's spyglass, pipe, and a fold-away knife for carving and whittling.*

The Captain

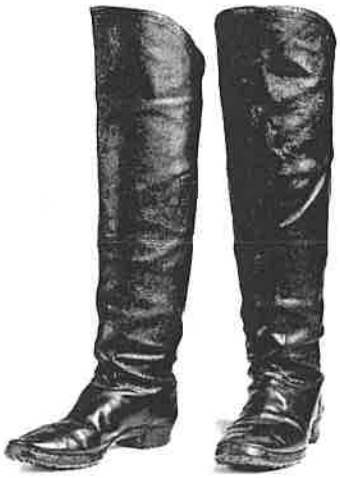
James J. Bonner is captain of the Larkins' wagon train. A man of great experience, he already has crossed the plains in both directions and knows the trail quite well, so the Larkins' party decided to hire him instead of a professional guide. Captain Bonner is responsible for all the major decisions about the wagon train: The route they will travel, the time for starting and halting each day, the site where they will camp for the night, the site for the midday "nooning" (*see page 29*), the posting of guards and the daily rotation of the wagons. Rotation was necessary because no one wanted to be at the end of a dusty wagon train every day!

Captain Bonner is worried because there has been a lot of rain. Although this means that there will be a good supply of grass for the animals, swollen streams and mud will slow down the wagons. The party will need to make good time to get to the mountain passes before they are blocked by snow. If they fail, they will have to spend the winter on the eastern side of the Blue Mountains.

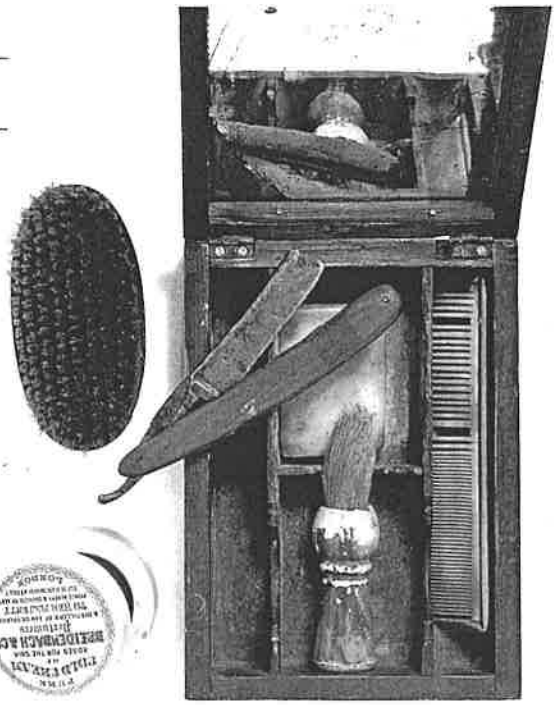
On The Trail

With no springs or cushioned seats, the Larkins' wagon was far too uncomfortable to ride in. Most of the pioneers traveled the 2,000 miles of the Oregon trail on foot. If it rained, they simply put on oilskin ponchos or unfurled umbrellas and marched on. They did not have to walk fast, however, since the wagons lumbered along at the rate of only one or two miles per hour. Children who got tired might hitch a short ride on the wagon tongue. Sick people who had to ride in the wagon were put on featherbeds and padded round with pillows to relieve the worst of the jolting.

Mr. Larkin walks alongside his oxen, shouting commands like "gee" ("go right") and "haw" ("go left"). He carries a bull-whip which he cracks over their heads to tell them which way to go, and sometimes he uses it to flick flies away from their ears, but he never hits them with it. The pioneers considered it very bad to strike the oxen. Like many pioneer farmers, Mr. Larkin has given his oxen names: Dick, Tom, Hob, Sam, Tip, and Dobie.

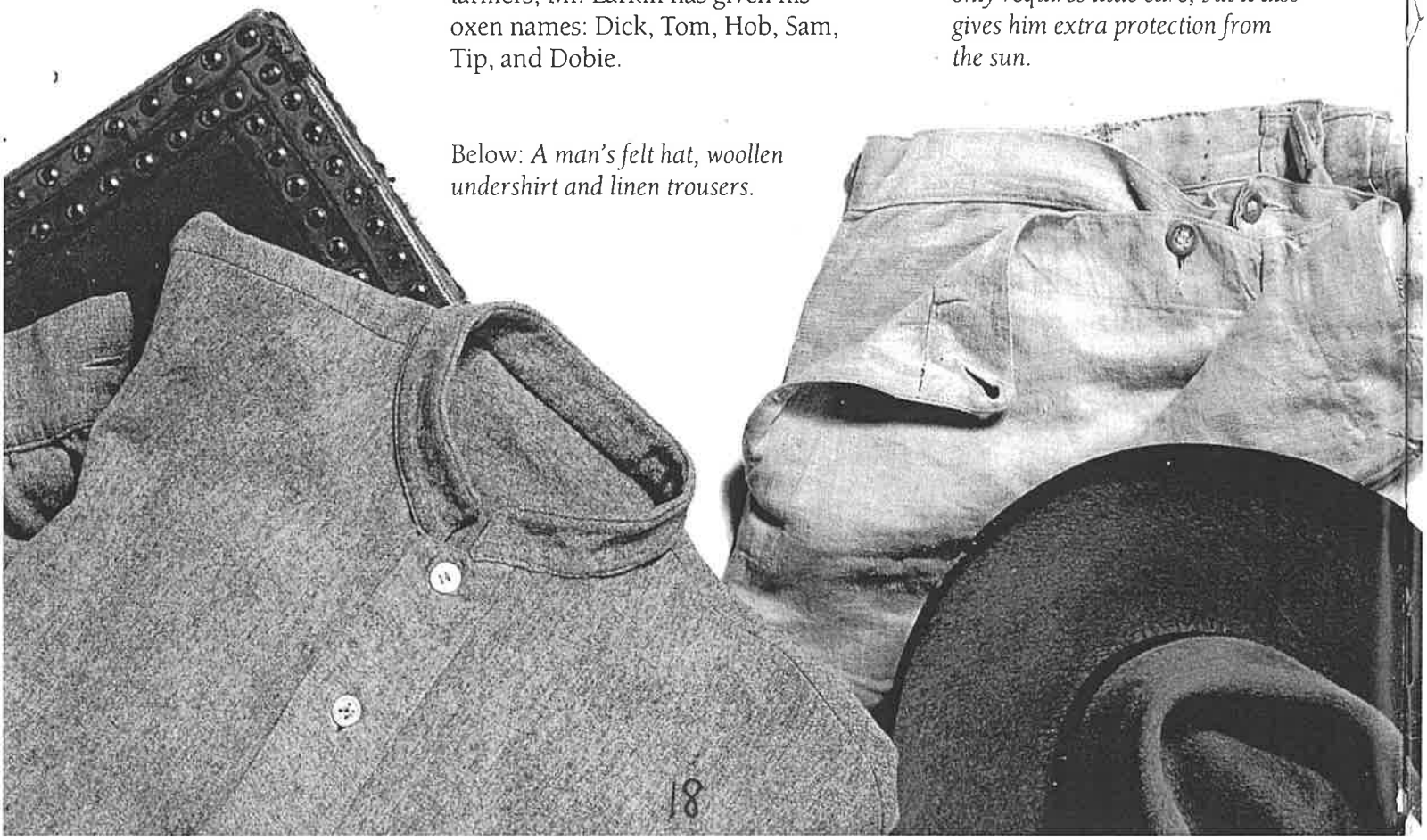


Above: *Men's boots were made with no distinction between right and left, so they were very large.*



Above: *Matt Belknap likes to shave whenever he gets the chance, in order to show off his dashing mustache. His shaving kit is very precious, as it was one of the few things left to him by his father. Mr. Larkin's beard not only requires little care, but it also gives him extra protection from the sun.*

Below: *A man's felt hat, woollen undershirt and linen trousers.*

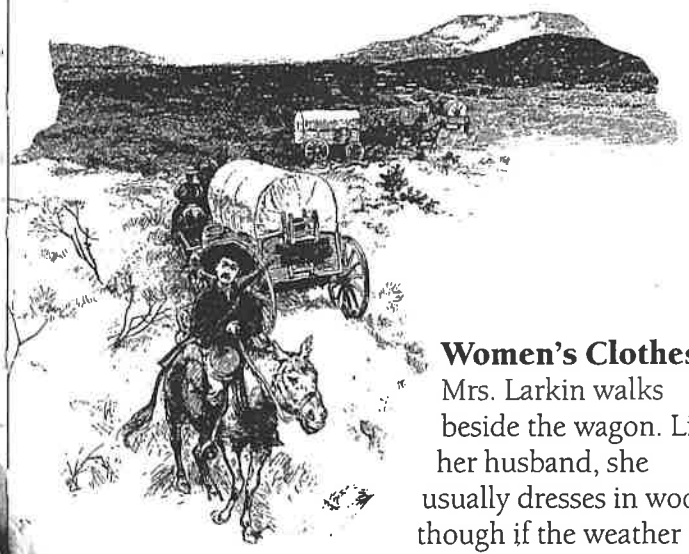


Above: *A woman's blouse and sunbonnet.*

Men's Clothes

Like most of the men in the wagon train, Mr. Larkin wears the same clothes day in, day out. Even though it is mid-summer, he wears a long-sleeved flannel shirt with a woolen undershirt beneath and trousers of wool or linen, or a mixture of the two called "linsey-woolsey." Wool, as the guidebooks noted, offered good protection against the midday sun, the rain or any sudden changes in temperature. Denim, which is often associated with the West, came into wide use only after Levi Strauss introduced it in San Francisco in the 1870s. On Mr. Larkin's feet are stout boots that give good protection against snakebite. He also wears a broad-brimmed hat to keep the sun off his head and face – with no sunglasses or sunscreen, this was very important.

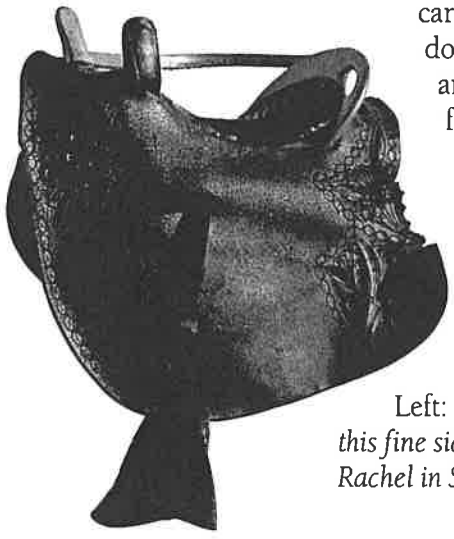
"Today mother became very angry with me for removing my sunbonnet. She pointed out to me some girls who did not wear bonnets, and as I did not want to look as brown as an Indian squaw, I put it on again, though it causes me no little discomfort."
Rachel Larkin's Diary



Women's Clothes

Mrs. Larkin walks beside the wagon. Like her husband, she usually dresses in wool, though if the weather is very good she may wear checked gingham. Her skirt is hemmed an inch or two higher than would have been thought proper back East, to make it easier for her to walk over the rough ground. Mrs. Larkin also wears an apron, partly to keep her dress clean, and partly because she, like everyone else at the time, considers the apron to be the right thing for a proper married woman – that is, a housewife – to wear. Although she does not have many clothes for the trip and has few chances for washing, Mrs. Larkin makes a point of wearing a neat, light-colored apron on special occasions (*see page 36*). Her only regret is that she cannot starch it properly, as she would have back in Indiana. She always wears a sunbonnet to protect her face.

Rachel's clothing is much like her mother's, but because of her delicate health she usually rides on horseback, sitting with her skirts carefully pulled down to cover her ankles. Rachel feels envious of the more daring women in the party, who are wearing "bloomers."

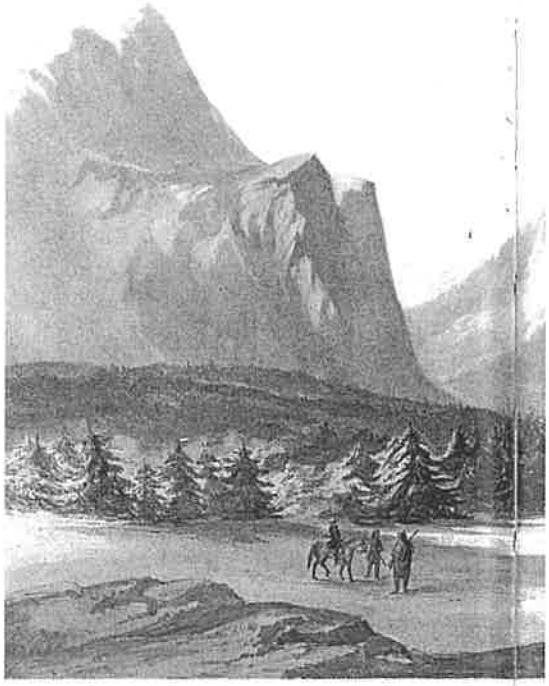


Left: *Mr. Larkin bought this fine side-saddle for Rachel in St. Louis.*

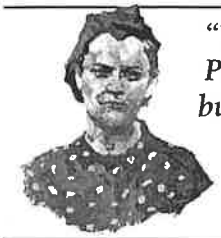
Landmarks On The Trail

For the most part, the "trail" was exactly that: A rough, unimproved track. On difficult terrain, the wagons might follow the well-worn ruts left by previous travelers, some of which can still be seen today, but on easier ground, the trail might spread out over a mile or more. There were a few places where army engineers or private businessmen had laid out proper roads by clearing away the trees and boulders. One of the best-known of these was a good road made by Sam Barlow, who charged the overlanders a toll to use it. Most of them paid up willingly, as it saved them having to take a dangerous trip down the falls and rapids of the Columbia.

Left: *A gulch or small valley. There were many of these along the wagon trail. This gulch originally had a stream running through it, but it has dried out.*



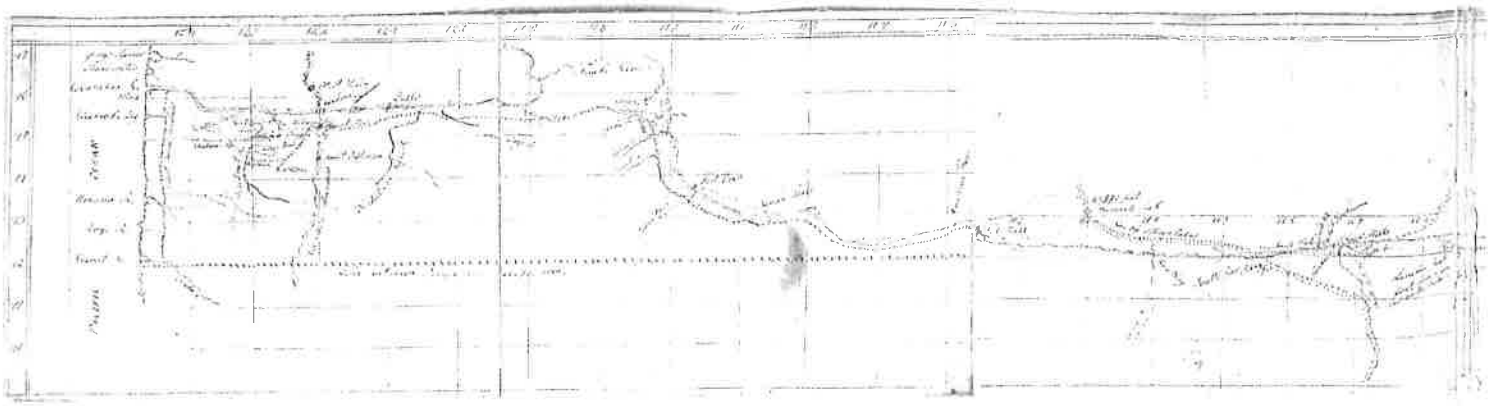
Above: *The Rocky Mountains.*



"Today we reached the foot of Chimney Rock. People say that it was thrust up out of the ground, but no one agrees how. One man, who had been a teacher back in Illinois, said that before the Flood the whole land had been as high as that rock." Rachel Larkin's Diary

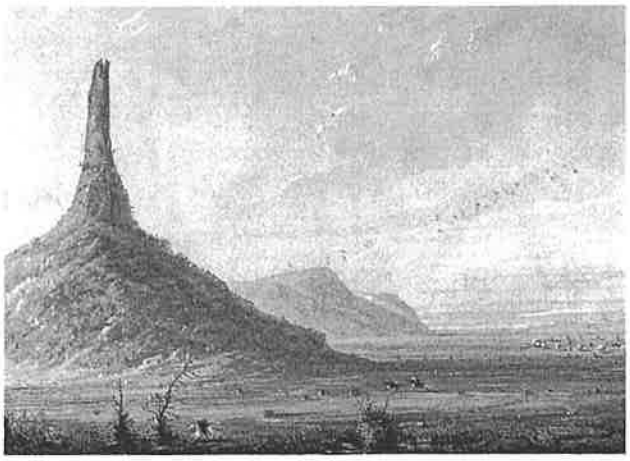
Right: *The Larkin children are intrigued by the underground cities of the prairie dogs, burrowing owls, and rattlesnakes, like the snake shown here.*

Below: *A hand-drawn map of the trail from an overlander's notebook, with the names of rivers, mountains, and stopping places such as forts.*



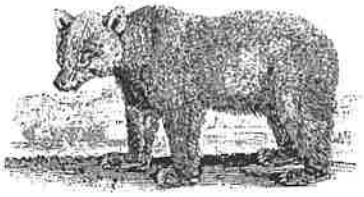
Left: *As the Larkins get farther west, they spot many porcupines. The Indians use porcupine quills to decorate buckskin.*

The Larkins eagerly await their first glimpse of the trail's best-known landmarks, made famous by guidebook descriptions, magazine illustrations, and paintings: the mountains at Scotts Bluff, Laramie Peak, the mountain called Devil's Gate which was almost split in two by a deep notch, and Courthouse Rock and nearby Jail Rock, so called because their shapes reminded some early overlanders of the St. Louis government buildings. There was also Soda Springs, where the bubbling waters tickled the travelers' noses and the bicarbonate deposits gave them new supplies of



Above: *Chimney Rock, painted in 1837.*

Right: *Brown bears were found throughout the Northern Rockies.*



baking soda, and Steamboat Springs, whose puffs and snorts reminded overlanders of river travel back East. Independence Rock was called the "great register of the desert," and travelers climbed it to paint or carve their names. But most famous of all was Chimney Rock (*see left*), a solitary 500-foot spire of sandstone and clay, rising above the flat prairie.