

I was sad to leave our home, but my father said it was better for us. I asked him what was so great about Oregon, and he said that there was lots of free land there and we could grow more crops and make more money. My mother agreed it would be best to leave Illinois, especially with all the recent drought, but she was unaware of the dangers we would face. So we began our journey west.

We packed only a few personal belongings for the train ride to Missouri, as we would buy most of our supplies once we got there. My parents let me bring a couple of my favorite toys and a hunting knife that my father gave me for my ninth birthday. We would need lots of room in the wagon for food and gear. I was excited to take a train for the first time. The ride was long, but I liked looking out the window at the scenery and exploring the cars. I asked the conductor a lot of questions, and he gave me a tour of the steam engine and told me how all the different parts worked.

After two days on the rails, we reached Independence. My siblings and I helped my mother collect the supplies, while my father went off to find a wagon train to join. The town square was noisy and bustling with travelers who were hurriedly gathering things for the journey. We bought a six-by-twelve-foot wagon and three pairs of oxen to pull it. The man who sold us the wagon tried to trick us into purchasing a bigger, more expensive one. However, my mother knew what size to buy, since a family friend and fur trader had already written to us about what we would need. Anxious to get on our way, we loaded the wagon with hundreds of pounds of food, water, tools, clothing, and spare parts.

When we met up with my father later that day at the inn, he told us about a large wagon train we could join. The caravan was mostly made up of families like ours, from Illinois, Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee. I was relieved that there would be other kids to play with on the trail. After a fitful night of sleep, I helped pack our wagon and we met the caravan on the outskirts of town to begin our journey. It was April 16th, 1843.

Our wagon train set out from Independence, hoping to reach Oregon City before winter. At first, my younger sister, Louise, my older brother, Tim, and I were excited for the journey. While we walked alongside the wagon, the three of us played games with the other kids and scanned the plains for animals. We saw our first herd of buffalo a week into our trip, and were in awe of their size. We didn't dare get too close. We weren't hunters. All we could catch were a few squirrels that we helped mom cook into a squirrel soup.

After two weeks of travel, we witnessed the true horror of the trail when a young boy in our caravan was run over by a wagon. The boy was chasing a mouse, when he tripped. Nobody noticed what had happened, until it was too late. The boy's parents were distraught, but knew the caravan had to keep moving, so they quickly buried him. My mother invited their family to share a quiet meal with us that night.

I soon got tired of life on the trail. We woke up before dawn every day and would travel until five in the evening. A couple of weeks after the young boy was killed by the wagon, my sister sprained her ankle. She was tired and not paying attention when she twisted it in a prairie dog hole. We were forced to set up camp at Chimney Rock and separate from the wagon train, so that she could heal comfortably. After a week, Louise was strong enough to walk. We hit the trail again, but now we were on our own.

“Why did the rest of the wagon train move on without us?” I asked my mother.

She told me the truth. “They're worried they won't be able to pass through the Dalles and reach Oregon before winter.”

“Do you think we'll make it?”

My mother paused. “I don't know.”

We quickened our pace after that, hoping to make up for lost time, but it was difficult for Louise. We reached Independence Rock 10 days behind schedule, having hoped to arrive by July 4th. Our plan had been to stop and celebrate the holiday, but we needed to keep moving.

When we got to the Rocky Mountains, Louise's limp was worse and she had to ride in the wagon, which only added to the load. The oxen struggled to pull the wagon along the steep and winding switchbacks. My legs were tired and I missed the company of our wagon train.

We finally made it to the Sweetwater River and paid \$50 to ride the ferry across, instead of taking the risk to ford it. We were cutting through the South Pass on our way to the Oregon Territory. It was exciting to know we had come so far, but our journey was long from over.

Disaster soon struck. While fording the Snake River, one of our oxen lost its footing in

the strong current. The wagon tipped over. Even though the wagon was in decent shape when we fished it out of the water, we lost a couple hundred pounds of food and spare wagon parts. We retrieved what we could, but many of our supplies were gone.

With food rations low, my father tried to hunt for game. This took time, as he was inexperienced and we had to stop more frequently. A few days after our failed attempt to ford the river, we spotted a herd of grazing buffalo, and my father decided to shoot one. Not realizing that the gun was already loaded, he accidentally fired and hit Tim in the thigh. We had no medicine to help. All my mother could do was tie off the wound. My brother died the next day and we buried him to the side of the road, so no Indians or animals would dig up his body.

I was shocked by Tim's death. We had seen lots of graves on the trail, but I never thought anyone I loved would be in one them. My father was stricken with guilt, and exchanged the gun and all of our ammunition for food at the next trading post. From then on, my mother walked beside the wagon in a haze of grief.

We picked up our pace, but about 10 miles outside Fort Hall, the axle on our wagon broke. We had lost our spare axle in the river and needed a new one. It was getting dark, so we set up camp to the side of the trail. I fell asleep quickly, but woke in the middle of the night to the sound of hushed and anxious voices. It was my mother and father, and they were arguing.

"I'll walk to the fort tomorrow morning and get a new axle" My father said.

"I won't feel safe without you," my mother said. "What if there are Indians around?"

"Then what do you suggest?" my father answered.

"Wait for someone to pass who's willing to trade with us."

"You know we can't afford to take our chances waiting." My father was getting frustrated. "We're already a week behind schedule."

"I'm tired of the trail!" My mother was shouting now. "We might as well just start our new life right here!"

“I’m going to get a new axle -- and that’s that!”

“No. I can’t keep going. Not after what happened to Tim...” My mother’s voice faltered.

My father stormed off, and my mother just sat there staring into the fire. I was stunned. I drifted off to sleep, uncertain of what was ahead.

When I woke up the next morning, I saw my mother cooking bacon for breakfast. I asked where father was. She told me she didn’t know, that he had left last night and not yet returned. When Louise woke up, my mother told the two of us to pack a sack full of supplies -- as much as we could carry. I did as she said, and remembered the time when we were packing our bags back in Illinois. We had been so excited for the journey, and now it had torn our family apart. With our bags ready, we abandoned our wagon and started walking toward Fort Hall.

We soon saw a figure approaching us on the trail. It was our father! Louise and I ran to him. He gave us both a big hug, and then told us how he had walked to the fort in the middle of the night and bought the axle first thing in the morning, using the last of our savings. My mother said nothing as we went back to the wagon. I could tell that she was still upset.

Once we had replaced the old axle, we were ready to set off again, but instead decided to spend the night at Fort Hall. The next day, before leaving, we traded for more food. The kind storeowner gave my sister and I a few precious pieces of candy. The next week was free of problems, as we traveled through the plains along the Snake River to reach Fort Boise. We continued our race against the clock. The weather began to change; it was colder and windier, and the days were getting shorter. It was the beginning of October, and we were about 100 miles from Oregon City. My mother and father had mended fences, and the whole family was anxious to pass through the Dalles gorge.

When we reached the Columbia River, we traded our wagon to a Wasco Indian for a small wooden raft. The river would take us through the heart of the Dalles, but the trip was dangerous. On several occasions, the raft nearly tipped over, and expelled us into the frigid water. We floated down the river for three days, and when we emerged, we were almost in Oregon City.

A week later, we had finally finished our journey. Oregon City was just how I had pictured it, and I cried tears of joy when we got there. After 2,000 miles on the Oregon Trail, we

were home again.