



ECONOMIC AND HISTORY ACTIVITY 11

The Cost of Moving West

In the 1800s, the great number of people journeying west to find better lives affected the cost of travel. As the need for supplies increased, prices rose. Inflation, or a general rise in prices, was often dramatic when there was a critical lack of supplies. For example, flour that cost \$4 a barrel at the start of the trail rose by \$2 a barrel farther along the trail. With this inflation and many tolls to pay along the trail, travel westward was an expensive adventure.

The Oregon Trail, which many pioneers took west, began at Independence, Missouri. The 2,000-mile trip usually took six months. Often the trail was so clogged with wagons that travelers sometimes waited hours for boats to carry them across the many rivers.

Here are parts of a pioneer's diary written along the Oregon Trail.

The Diary of Amelia Stewart

Starting from Monroe County, Iowa, on April 19, 1853, and ending near Milwaukie, Oregon Territory, September 13, 1853.

Wednesday, April 19 We are creeping along slowly, one wagon after another . . . out of one mud hole into another all day. . . . Came 18 miles . . .

May 1 Still fine weather; wash and scrub all the children . . .

June 9 It has been very warm today. Thermometer up to 99 at noon . . .

July 28 Chat [my son] is quite sick with scarlet fever . . .

August 5 (Snake River Ferry) Our turn to cross will come sometime tomorrow. . . . Have to pay three dollars a wagon . . .

September 4 Ascended [climbed up] a long steep hill this morning, which was very hard on the cattle, and also on myself. [Amelia gave birth to her eighth child 12 days later.] . . .

September 13 Butter 1 dollar [per pound], eggs 1 dollar a dozen, onion 4 and 5 dollars a bushel . . . so we have treated ourselves to some small turnips at the rate of 25 cents per dozen.

September 17 We . . . ferried across the Columbia River. . . . Here husband traded two yoke of oxen for a half section of land with one-half acre planted to potatoes and a small log cabin and lean-to with no windows. This is the journey's end.

Source: Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, Schocken Books, 1982, pp. 199–216.



ECONOMIC AND HISTORY ACTIVITY 11 (continued)

The Cost of Moving West

Directions: A family needed to purchase supplies, a wagon, oxen, and other items before venturing west. Here is a list of some of the supplies and their costs. Use the chart to answer the questions.

1. How much did it cost for one person to travel west?

2. How much would supplies cost for a family of six traveling in one wagon?

3. How did the need for supplies affect the prices of goods as settlers moved west?

4. How much weight would be added to a wagon for the food supplies of just one person?

5. What other items might be needed for traveling along the Oregon Trail?

6. Why do you think pioneer families were willing to take on the challenges and expense of traveling to the Oregon country?

7. **Predicting Consequences** What impact do you think westward travelers had on the economic development of towns along the westward trails?

The Cost of Travel		
Item	Cost	Amount needed per person
1 pound flour	2 cents	200 pounds
1 pound sugar	5 cents	25 pounds
1 pound coffee	8 cents	5 pounds
1 pound bacon	5 cents	75 pounds
1 pound rice	5 cents	10 pounds
1 pound salt	4 cents	10 pounds
1 pound beans	8 cents	50 pounds
1 pound hardtack	3 cents	30 pounds
1 pound lard	6 cents	50 pounds
1 wagon with oxen	\$390	1 set

Source: Bureau of the Public Debt, United States Department of the Treasury