

# The Oregon Trail



LINDA FAIRFIELD

*Throughout most of North America, golden-rod (Solidago), above, with its deep yellow flowers, signals that the height of summer has passed. For wagon trains on the Oregon Trail, it was a warning to hasten their pace, lest they be caught by snow in the western mountains. There are almost 100 species of this herb and most are native to North America. It may be that footsore emigrants used this herb as a soothing ointment, as Britons did in Tudor times.*

*The trail ruts can be seen in many places along the lengthy route, including here, at Flagstaff Hill in Oregon. As the travellers toiled up the hill, they caught their first glimpse of the Blue Mountains, and knew their journey was nearly at an end.*

For almost 30 years, between 1841 and 1869, the Oregon Trail was synonymous with American desire, dreams of destiny and death. Lured by the promise of a new life, prompted by economic depression and unemployment east of the Mississippi River and provoked by fears that Britain would expand her North American empire to include what is now the Pacific Northwest, the first of an eventual 350,000 emigrants left Independence, Missouri, in 1841 to tackle the 2,170-mile journey to Oregon.

This initial group of 70 had little idea of what lay ahead. Some had been spurred by the glowing tales of Jason Lee, a Methodist missionary to Oregon who toured the eastern U.S. in 1838 promoting the idea of western settlement. Lee had travelled west in 1834 and established a mission in the Willamette Valley. Presbyterian missionaries Marcus and Narcissa

Whitman and Henry and Eliza Spalding made the trip two years later, establishing missions farther east and proving, among other things, that white women could make the journey

west. All these early parties received substantial assistance from the trappers and fur traders who had preceded them.

The would-be trekkers who gathered in 1841 were another matter. Many of them underestimated the difficulties in store, and the group lacked a knowledgeable guide to take them across the plains and parched deserts, over the mountains and down the treacherous rivers. More than half soon abandoned the journey and only 30 actually reached Oregon, having been rescued and guided by fur trappers and missionaries.

This considerable lack of success

did little to dampen enthusiasm, however, and in the spring of 1842 a hundred people under Dr. Elijah White set out from Independence led by a guide from Fort Hall (see page 277). Travelling a route used by John Jacob Astor's traders and trappers, they reached Oregon's Willamette Valley, proving that the apparently impossible could in fact be

accomplished.

In 1843, the Great Migration - 900 men, women and children, 100 wagons and 700 oxen and cattle - encouraged thousands to follow.



JERRY KAUTZ



*The Columbia River Gorge, with all its breathtaking beauty, was a deadly obstacle for many trekkers, for the river claimed many emigrants almost within sight of their final destination.*

Over the next five years, nearly 14,000 people completed the trek, but it was the conjunction of faith and fortune hunting that opened the floodgates of western emigration. Seeking religious freedom, Mormons began heading west in large numbers in 1847, veering southwest at Fort Bridger (Mile 1026) to what is now Utah. And in 1849 a tidal wave of more than 30,000 would-be gold miners headed west, mainly for California.

This wave of opportunists was accompanied by a wave of death, for cholera swept through St. Louis in 1849, killing more than 5,000, and quickly spread among the wagon trains on the trail. Strong men would

develop a fever in the morning and be dead by nightfall.

Others died in droves of thirst or cold or the hundreds of dangers that lurked around every bend. In the end, at least 20,000 deaths were recorded on the trail, an average of 10 per mile. Most of the graves are unmarked.

Today's trekkers can explore many of the sites and much of the trail by automobile, for highways trace most of the route from the Missouri River to Oregon City. The trail corridor contains nearly 300 miles of discernible ruts and 125 historic sites. What follows are just some of the highlights.

### On the Oregon Trail

*The Oregon Trail crossed landscapes of almost every description, from grasslands to mountain passes and presented challenges ranging from a severe lack of water to thundering rivers to be crossed. Today, it winds through portions of six states; in most of those the ruts left by the great wagons can still be seen, while its history can be traced in a number of fine museums and interpretive centres.*

