

Voices From the Past:

Westward Expansion Primary Sources



8th Grade American Honors History

Mountain Men Explore the West

Source: 1841 Diary of Rufus Sage, Oregon Territory

“There are about three hundred men, who compose the roving, hunting parties in these regions, excluding those, who remain principally at the several forts or trading posts, on the east and west sides of the mountains. These men are usually hired by the company, and more or less of them accompany every party of trappers, in their excursions, or "hunts," for beaver.

The trappers on the contrary, are most of the time absent from camp in quest of game. They are divided into two classes; those engaged to the companies, to hunt for stipulated salaries; and those called "Freemen," who have horses and traps of their own, who rove at pleasure, where they please, and dispose of their furs to whom they please. They are never unhappy when they have plenty to eat. They collect skins to exchange for necessaries with the traders; their wants are few, and seldom extend beyond the possession of a few horses, traps, and a rifle, and some other little "fixens;" the attainment of these simple desires, generally constituting the height of a hunter's ambition. The purchase of grog and tobacco, and the practice of gaming, more frequently disperse their surplus funds, with a facility far greater than that in which they were obtained.

Many of these mountaineers have taken squaws for their wives, by whom they have children. These females are usually dressed in broad cloths, either green, scarlet, or blue. On their heads they wear nothing but handkerchiefs, and their feet are enveloped in moccasins.

The clothing of the hunters themselves, is generally made of prepared skins, though most of them wear blanket "capotes," (overcoats,) and calico shirts. Some of them however, make coats of their buffalo robes, which are very warm and comfortable in cold weather, but become rigid and useless, if they are exposed to rains, or otherwise get wet. Moccasins are worn universally by all the whites and Indians. One half of these men are Canadians, and Half-breeds, who speak French, and some both French and English; the remainder are principally Americans, from every part of the United States.”



Review Questions:

1. What is the difference between the two classes of trappers?
2. Describe the fur trapper's free time activities.
3. Why do you think that many mountain men married Native Americans?

Source: 1831 diary of Zenas Leonard, traveling in the Rocky Mountains

“On the 20th of Sept. we stopped on the bank of a small creek, to let our horses graze, at the junction of which we seen signs of beaver. We deemed it advisable to

encamp for the night, which we did.

About midnight we were alarmed by the report of two rifles. Supposing it to be hostile Indians, we put ourselves in an attitude of defense, as soon as possible by throwing up a fort of logs and brush, and keeping up sentinels until morning.

On the next morning, about sunrise the two hunters came in, and informed us that it was the report of their guns that had alarmed us, as they had fired them off near the spot where they had expected to find the camp, with the



hope of receiving some signal. They had meandered the creek till they came to beaver dams, where they set their traps and turned their horses out to pasture; and were busily engaged in constructing a camp to pass the night in, when they discovered, at a short distance off, a tremendous large Grizzly Bear, rushing upon them at a furious rate.

They immediately sprang to their rifles which were standing against a tree hard-by, one of which was single and the other double triggered; unfortunately in the hurry, the one that was accustomed to the single trigger, caught up the double triggered gun, and when the bear came upon him, not having set the trigger, he could not get his gun off; and the animal approaching within a few feet of him, he was obliged to commence beating it over the head with his gun. Bruin, thinking this rather rough usage, turned his attention to the man with the single triggered gun, who, in trying to set the trigger (supposing he had the double triggered gun) had fired it off, and was also obliged to fall to beating the ferocious animal with his gun; finally, it left them without doing much injury, except tearing the sleeve off one of their coats and biting him through the hand.

The Grizzly Bear is the most ferocious animal that inhabits these prairies, and are very numerous. They no sooner see you than they will make at you with open mouth. If you stand still, they will come within two or three yards of you, and stand upon their hind feet, and look you in the face, if you have fortitude enough to face them, they will turn and run off; but if you turn they will most assuredly tear you to pieces; furnishing strong proof of the fact, that no wild beast, however daring and ferocious, unless wounded, will attack the face of man.”

Review Questions:

1. Why were the trappers alarmed by the “report of two rifles”?
2. Explain why the trappers were not able to shoot the grizzly bear.
3. What strategy for surviving a grizzly bear attack does the writer suggest?

West on the Oregon Trail

Source: Journal of Elijah Turner Oliver

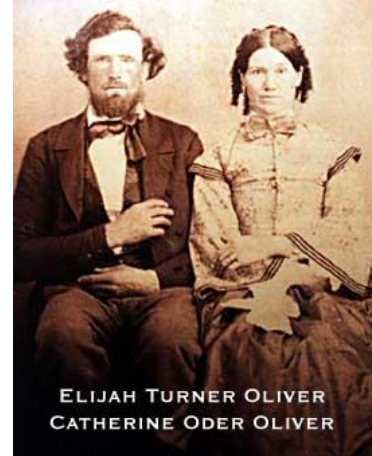
I was born in a one-room log cabin on a farm in Marion County, Iowa, March 10th, 1856.

We crossed the plains to Oregon in 1864 by ox team and covered wagon and were over six months on the road from Omaha to La Grande. An ox team is not geared for high speed and 1 1/2 miles per hour is about their limit. We stopped at Omaha several days for outfitting and the gathering of more emigrants as the Sioux Indians were on the warpath that summer and it was not safe for a few people to venture alone on the

trip. Many emigrants arrived daily and when we were ready to start there were more than 100 wagons in our train and twice that many men, all armed, mostly with single shot, muzzle loading rifles. We had a captain and other officer, all ex-soldiers. In fact, we had a regular military organization, guards at night and scouts by day.

The Indians never attacked our train but they tried to stampede the horses in two or three early morning raids, and did get away with nine horses in one raid.. For several weeks Indians were in sight every day, following along parallel to the road, hoping to pick off stragglers. Several parties in our train had good four-horse teams and a few had mule teams. They could travel much faster than the ox teams and consequently many became impatient and wanted to leave the main train, but our captain seriously objected on account of danger from Indians. Two or three families, however, decided that they knew more than the captain of the train and pushed on ahead. A few days after leaving our party we found their mutilated bodies and the remains of their wagons. None left the train after that until we got out of the Indian country.

After we reached the Rocky Mountains all danger from Indian raids ceased and somewhere in what is now Wyoming the road forked. One road led to California and the other to Oregon. There the train divided and most of the people went to California. We crossed the Snake River at old Fort Hall. After crossing the river we filled every barrel, bucket, and bottle with water for the trip across the lava beds. We traveled two days and two nights before we got to water on Lost River and the cattle by that time were about famished, and the men, women, and children were completely worn out. Women and children were crying, and even the dogs tucked their tails between their legs and looked pitifully at their masters, mutely begging for water. We laid over a day or so for rest and then proceeded again, fording the Snake River a second time near the mouth of the Owyhee River. The Snake River was very swift here and several mules were drowned in the crossing. There were no bridges on the road between Omaha and La Grande. All streams had to be forded.



Review Questions:

1. Why did the pioneers move as a group and what happened to those that went on their own?
2. Describe at least one hardship for travelers on the Oregon Trail.

Railroads West

Source: “Discomforts of Old Cars,” from The American Railway, 1889.

The railroad was a decided step in advance, compared with the stage-coach and canal boat, but, when we picture the surroundings of the traveler upon railways during the first ten or fifteen years of their existence, we find his journey was not one to be envied. He was jammed into a narrow seat with a stiff back, the deck of the car was low and flat, and ventilation in winter is impossible. A stove at each end did little more than generate carbonic oxide. The passenger roasted if he sat at the end of the car, and froze if he sat in the middle. Tallow candles furnished a “dim religious light,” but the accompanying odor did not savor of cathedral incense. The dust was suffocating in dry weather; there were no adequate spark-arresters on the engine, or screens at the windows, and the begrimed passenger at the end of his journey looked as if he had spent the day in a blacksmith-shop.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (LZW) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

There were no double tracks, and no telegraph to facilitate the safe dispatching of trains. The springs of the car were hard, the jolting intolerable, the windows rattled like those of the modern omnibus, and conversation was a luxury that could be indulged in only by those of recognized superiority in lung power. The brakes were clumsy and of little service. The ends of the flatbar rails were cut diagonally, so that when laid down they would lap and form a smoother joint. Occasionally they became sprung; the spikes would not hold, and the end of the rail with its sharp point rose high enough for the wheel to run under it, rip it loose, and send the pointed end through the floor of the car. This was called a “snake’s head,” and the unlucky being sitting over it was likely to be impaled against the roof. So that the traveler of that day, in addition to his other miseries, was in momentary apprehension of being split like a Christmas turkey.

Baggage-checks and coupon tickets were unknown. Long trips had to be made over lines composed of a number of short independent railways; and at the terminus of each of the bedevilled passenger had to transfer, purchase another ticket, personally pick out his baggage, perhaps on an uncovered platform in a rain-storm, and take his chances of securing a seat in the train in which he was to continue his weary journey.

Review Questions:

1. How would traveling on an early railroad train compare to traveling by wagon, canalboat, and steamboat?
2. Why do you think travelers would endure the hardships and inconveniences described above in order to travel?

Remember the Alamo!

Source: March 3, 1836 letter from American commander William Barrett Travis sent out from the besieged Alamo by a courier. This was the last letter Travis would ever write.



“From the twenty-fifth to the present date the enemy has kept up a bombardment from two howitzers. During this period the enemy have been busily employed in encircling us with entrenched encampments on all sides I have fortified this place, so that the walls are generally proof against cannon balls and I will continue to entrench on the inside, and strengthen walls by throwing up the dirt. At least two hundred shells have fallen inside our works without having injured a single man; indeed we have been so fortunate as not to lose a man from any cause, and we have killed many of the enemy. The spirits of my men are still high although they have had much to depress them. I sent an express to Colonel F. which arrived at Goliad on the next day, urging him to send us reinforcements; none have yet arrived. I will, however, do the best I can under the circumstances; and I feel confident that the determined valor and desperate courage heretofore exhibited by my men will not fail them in the last struggle We have provisions for twenty days for the men we have. Our supply of ammunition is limited. The bearer of this will give your honorable body a statement more in detail, should he escape through the enemy's lines. God and Texas—Victory or Death!”

Source: Anonymous 1836 letter from a Mexican soldier at the Battle of the Alamo.

“The attack was made in four columns, led by General Cos, General Morales, Duque de Estrada, and Romero. I marched under the immediate command of General Cos and tell you what I saw. After a long wait we took our places at 3 o'clock A.M. on the south side, a distance of 300 feet from the fort of the enemy. Here we remained flat on our stomachs until 5:30 (Whew! it was cold) when the signal to march was given by the President from the battery between the north and east.

Immediately, General Cos cried "Forward" and placing himself at the head of the attack, we ran to the assault, carrying scaling ladders, picks and spikes. Although the distance was short the fire from the enemy's cannon was fearful; we fell back; more than forty men fell around me in a few moments.

One can but admire the stubborn resistance of our enemy, and the constant bravery of all our troops. It seemed every cannon ball or pistol shot of the enemy embedded itself in the breasts of our men who without stopping cried: "Long live the Mexican Republic! Long live Santa Anna!" I can tell you the whole scene was one of extreme terror ... After some three quarters of an hour of the most horrible fire, there followed the most awful attack with hand arms ... Poor things - no longer do they live - all of them died, and even now I am watching them burn.

Their leader named Travis, died like a brave man with his rifle in his hand at the back of a cannon, but that perverse and haughty James Bowie died like a woman, in bed, almost hidden by the covers. Our loss was terrible in both officers and men.”

In contrast to the traditional image of David Crockett going down fighting, this woodcut from an 1869 edition of Crockett's autobiography depicts stereotypical Mexicans falling on an unarmed Crockett with their swords while a haughty Santa Anna observes the summary execution. This illustration follows closely the details of Mexican officer Enrique de la Peña's account of the battle, which claims that Crockett was captured during the battle and put to death immediately afterward. His body was then burned along with those of all the other Alamo defenders. The two versions of Crockett's death-fighting to the end, and being executed were both popularized during the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Only after Walt Disney's wildly popular 1955 television movie about Crockett had him die fighting did the notion that Crockett might have been captured and executed arouse controversy.



Review Questions:

1. What are some ways that the American and Mexican accounts of the Battle of Alamo are the same? Different?
2. Do you think Travis was sending his commander an accurate depiction of the situation inside of the Alamo just before it was overrun? Why?
3. Why do you think that Texans and Americans made heroes out of the men who died at the Alamo, especially Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie?

There's Gold in Them Thar Hills

Source: 1849 Letter from Walter Colton describing the spread of the news of discovery of gold in California.

“My messenger sent to the mines, has returned with specimens of the gold; he dismounted in a sea of upturned faces. As he drew forth the yellow lumps from his pockets, and passed them among the eager crowd, the doubts, which had



lingered till now, fled. The excitement produced was intense; and many were soon busy in their hasty preparations for a departure to the mines. The family who had kept house for me caught the moving infection. Husband and wife were both packing up; the blacksmith dropped his hammer, the carpenter his plane, the mason his trowel, the farmer his sickle, the baker his loaf, and the tapster his bottle. All were off for the mines, some on horses, some on carts, and some on crutches, and one went in a litter. An American woman, who had recently established a boarding house here, pulled up stakes and was off before her lodgers had even time to pay their bills. Debtors ran, of course. I have only a community of women left and a gang of prisoners, with here and there a soldier, who will give his captain the slip at the first chance. I don't blame the fellow a whit; seven dollars a month, while others are making two or three hundred a day! That is too much for human nature to stand.”

Source: 1851 Letter from Daniel B. Woods, a gold miner in California

“This morning, notwithstanding the rain, we were again at our work. We must work. In sunshine and rain, in warm and cold, in sickness and health, successful or not successful, early and late, it is work, work, WORK! Work or perish! All around us, above and below, on mountain side and stream, the rain falling fast upon them, are the miners at work—not for gold, but for bread. Lawyers, doctors, clergymen, farmers, soldiers, deserters, good and bad, from England, from America, from China, from the Islands, from every country but Russia and Japan—all, all at work at their cradles. From morning to night is heard the incessant rock, rock, rock! Over the whole mines, in streamlet, in creek, and in river down torrent and through the valley, ever rushes on the muddy sediment from ten thousand busy rockers. Cheerful words are seldom heard, more seldom the boisterous shout and laugh which indicate success, and which, when heard, sink to a lower ebb the spirits of the unsuccessful. We have made 50 cents each.”

Review Questions:

1. Why were people so excited to leave their lives behind to join in the gold “rush”?
2. How does the optimism in the first letter compare to the reality in the 2nd letter? Which experience do you think was more common?