



CALIFORNIA TRAIL HISTORY

Between the years 1841 and 1869, the United States witnessed the greatest peaceful migration in its history. Over 250,000 people headed west on the California Trail to a land of opportunity, freedom, riches, and adventure. Decisions were made, routes chosen, and supplies bought in preparation for migration west. With every step the emigrants took in pursuit of their dreams in the west, they helped to expand America from “sea to shining sea,” and changed lives and landscapes forever.

The decision to head west was difficult. On one hand, leaving meant saying goodbye to friends, family, the familiar, and the United States; on the other, emigrants would be experiencing new adventures and the allure of the west. After 1848, gold lured many, but it wasn't the only reason to venture to California. People came for reasons including economics, adventure, health, and ideas like Manifest Destiny. In the prosperity of the early 1830s, Americans speculated wildly in land, which ended in the Panic of 1837 and a subsequent depression. Many Americans lost their homes and fortunes, creating desire for new opportunities. California was just that; a land of opportunities, of milk and honey, where pre-cooked pigs ran with forks in their backs. California was new land in an ideal climate. Many thought that this climate would alleviate their afflictions or at least allow them to escape the rampant diseases in the east.

After deciding to leave, the emigrants faced the decision on how to travel. There were many routes west but most people traveled on overland trails, including the California and Oregon Trails. Both trails were roughly 2000 miles, depending on the various routes and cutoffs chosen and would take a typical emigrant family 3-6 months to make this journey. Although it is estimated that over 250,000 people traveled upon the California Trail, it is often overshadowed by the less-traveled Oregon Trail. Both trails follow the same route until Idaho, where the Oregon Trail heads west, and California Trail branches south. Emigrants encountered some of the harshest terrain after the divergence of the California Trail, traveling through the 40 mile desert, east of Reno and then, over the Sierra Nevada.

Most emigrants began their overland journey at “jumping off towns” along the Missouri River which, in 1841, was the United States frontier. People traveled from all over the United States and world to begin their journey across the California Trail at these jumping off towns. In the early years, the Missouri River frontier was the last place they could buy supplies for their journey. By crossing to the west bank of the Missouri River they were leaving the United States and entering unorganized territory. Popular jumping off towns were Independence, Kaynesville (Council Bluffs), and St. Joseph. These towns' economies depended on emigrants buying supplies in their towns, so each tried to get the competitive edge by promoting cheap goods and discrediting the competing towns.

The California Trail was in constant use between 1841 and 1869, peaking popularity in 1852. Prior to 1841, minor trails were in use. These began as animal paths, then Indian trails, fur trappers and mountain men routes, and finally an overland passage for the general American public. In 1841, the first emigrant wagon party, the Bidwell-Bartleson Party, established the

California Trail clearing the path for wagons and large scale travel. Trail use declined in 1869 with the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, providing a faster, safer, and sometimes a cheaper alternative to wagon travel.

During the 3-6 months journey on the California Trail, the wagon was the emigrant's home. Contrary to Hollywood's portrayal, wagons were not used to carry emigrants but were used to transport food and other necessities. Emigrants would not ride in the wagons because of comfort (wagons did not have suspension to absorb the jolts from the rugged terrain) and most importantly, because of weight. It was essential for the wagons to be as light as possible so that their draft animals did not become exhausted and give out.

Animals were vital to the survival of the emigrants – without them, emigrants would have had to carry their own goods. Mules, horses, and most commonly, oxen were used to pull wagons. Other animals, including cows, sheep, goats, and chickens, also traveled on the trail. While wagons were the most commonly used conveyance, during the Gold Rush many young men crossed the trail with mules or on horseback, to quicken the journey. Emigrants needed to pack enough to supply them for months on the trail, but also needed to pack for their future in California. Supplies were often too expensive or simply unavailable in California.

The importance of maintaining a light load forced emigrants to rely heavily on natural resources along the trail. They used native grasses to feed their animals, water in springs, rivers, and lakes, and wood and brush to fuel their fires. Not only did emigrants deplete these resources, but they also contaminated and disturbed the surrounding environment, causing strained relations with Indians.

During the years the California Trail was in use, relations with Indians changed. At the start of their journey, the greatest fear for many emigrants was Indians. After some time on the trail, most learned that there was little reason to be afraid of Indians. Instead of fighting, most Indians wanted to trade with the people on the trail for useful things like metal pots, beads, ammunition, and cloth. The emigrants often needed things the Indians had to offer too, like comfortable moccasins, warm buffalo robes, fresh food, and help crossing rivers. In later years when trail's popularity increased and emigrants began settling along the trail, relations between both groups became strained. Emigrants used resources, contaminated water supplies, and transmitted diseases. In the end it was Indians who had more reason to fear the emigrants. Within 50 years of the first wagon trails on the California Trail, whites put an end to most Indians' traditional ways of life.

The story of the California Trail is one of individual decisions. The individuals and families who decided to embark on the California Trail for the greatest adventure of their lives forever changed world history. By venturing west they pulled the boundary of the frontier with them, expanding America from sea to shining sea. Territories were organized around the towns they established, later to become states. The opening of the west granted the United States access to vast agricultural and mineral wealth, which in turned fueled America's growth into a superpower in the twentieth century. Grand changes were wrought between 1841 and 1869, but those changes began as modest hopes for better lives and broader opportunities.