



Pioneer Days of Oregon History Volume 1

S.A. Clarke

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The westward movement of Americans in the 19th century was one of the largest and most consequential migrations in history, and among the paths that blazed west, the most well-known is the Oregon Trail, which was not a single trail but a network of paths that began at one of four “jumping off” points. The eastern section of the Oregon Trail, which followed the Missouri River through Kansas, Nebraska, and Wyoming, was shared by people traveling along the California, Bozeman, and Mormon Trails. These trails branched off at various points, and the California Trail diverged from the Oregon Trail at Fort Hall in southern Idaho. From there, the Oregon Trail moved northward, along the Snake River, then through the Blue Mountains to Fort Walla Walla. From there, travelers would cross the prairie before reaching the Methodist mission at The Dalles, which roughly marked the end of the Trail. The Trail stretched roughly half the country, and hundreds of thousands of settlers would use it, yet the Oregon Trail is famous not so much for its physical dimensions but for what it represented. As many who used the Oregon Trail described in memoirs, the West represented opportunities for adventure, independence, and fortune, and fittingly, the ever popular game named after the Oregon Trail captures that mentality and spirit by requiring players to safely move a party west to the end of the trail. Perhaps most famously, the game that helped popularize current generations’ interest in the Oregon Trail highlighted the obstacles the pioneers faced in moving West. Indeed, as all too many settlers discovered, traveling along the Trail was fraught with various kinds of obstacles and danger, including bitter weather, potentially deadly illnesses, and hostile Native Americans, not to mention an unforgiving landscape that famous American explorer Stephen Long deemed “unfit for human habitation.” And while many would look back romantically at the Oregon Trail over time, 19th century Americans were all too happy and eager for the transcontinental railroad to help speed their passage west and render overland paths like the Oregon Trail obsolete. From the preface: “A FEW words will explain the conformation of the region known, from the earliest time, when the far Northwest had a history, as Oregon. It embraced all the territory of the United States north of the 42° of latitude, and west of the Rocky Mountains. This region is naturally divided by the Cascade Range, that is a continuation of the Sierra Nevadas of California, reaching to the Arctic Circle. Their summits average about an hundred miles from the ocean, presenting a barrier that retains to the coast valleys the warm breath of the ocean currents of the Pacific, also holds back the colder conditions that prevail in the Inland Empire, to the eastward. East of the Cascades much of the country is arid, or semi-arid, with fertile valleys that are immensely productive, producing to-day the tens of millions of bushels of wheat that the Inland Empire sends to the world’s markets. There are also extensive ranges—too dry for cultivation—where graze the immense flocks and herds that form the wealth of that region.”

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