



## CHAPTER 17 | THE OREGON TRAIL

What was it like to be a pioneer on the Oregon Trail? How fast did people go? How far was it to the West, anyway? What kinds of things did they see as they travelled? Was it expensive to move west? What were the dangers and hardships of the trail? What did pioneers do for fun? These are the kinds of questions we are going to answer this week as we look at the everyday lives of the settlers and pioneers as they headed west.

### GEOGRAPHY

The Oregon Trail began in Independence, Missouri, and ran as far as Oregon City, Oregon. This was one of four major routes that pioneers used as they traveled to settle the West. The Oregon Trail was a rough, unpaved road that ran more than 2,000 miles through prairies, plains, deserts, and mountains. Prairies and plains are big regions where there isn't enough rain for trees to grow. But there is lots and lots and lots of grass! Famous animals that live on the prairie are buffalo, prairie dogs, rattlesnakes, and pronghorns.

The Spanish brought horses to the New World, some of whom escaped and ran wild across the plains. These wild horses are known as mustangs, and they were often captured and tamed by the native tribes. After crossing the vast grassland of the Great Plains, the pioneers had to climb up and over the Rocky Mountains. We've already talked this year about the Appalachian Mountains (in the east) and how they were an obstacle to settlers trying to move west. For example, it took the great hunter and explorer Davy Crockett more than a year to find a safe way across the Appalachian ridgelines.

Now the highest Appalachian Mountains are around 6,000 feet tall, but many Rocky Mountains peaks are over 10,000 feet, and the tallest is 14,000 high. Furthermore, geologists believe that the Rocky Mountains are much newer than some other ranges. That means that their sides and valleys are sharper and steeper than the gently rounded Appalachians. If it took Davy Crockett a year to find a way through the Appalachian Mountains, you can imagine how much of a challenge the Rocky Mountains must have been!

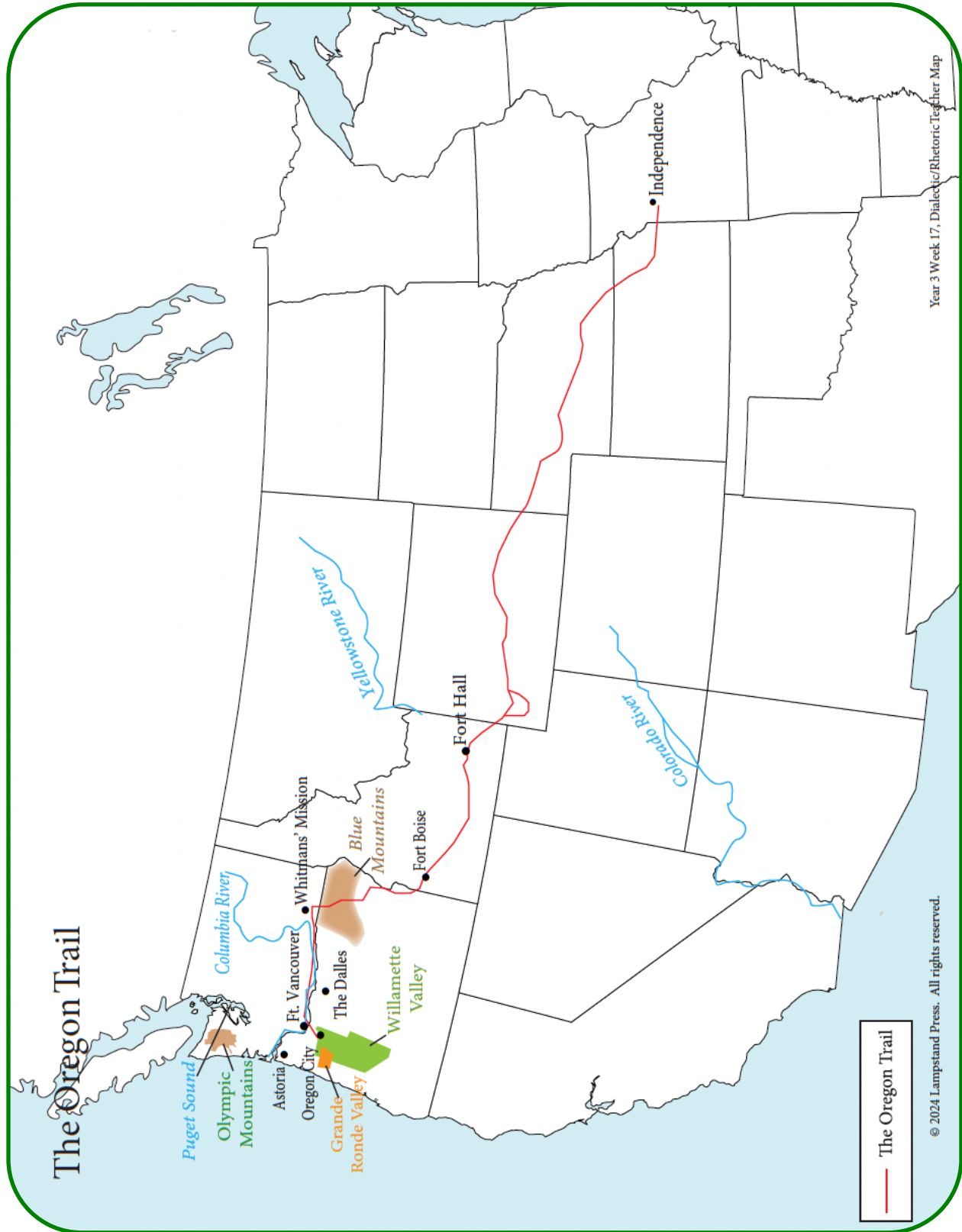
There isn't always a great deal of food to be found in the mountains. Hunters might find elk if they were lucky. Pioneers also had to watch out for bears, mountain lions, and rattlesnakes. Beyond the mountains was a dry stretch of wilderness, almost a desert, called the Great Basin. Whatever rain falls here doesn't flow back to the oceans because the area is ringed all around with mountains. Therefore, the water flows into several salty lakes, like the Great Salt Lake in Utah.

The Trail mainly follows the course of local rivers since finding water would be very tricky otherwise.

### THE JOURNEY

#### The Route and Schedule

The Oregon Trail began in Independence, Missouri, and ran as far as Oregon City, Oregon. As I have described, the trail wound over 2,000 miles of prairies, deserts, and mountains. Many families coming from the East might take a steamboat or train (or both) to Independence, Missouri, but the trip from Independence to Oregon or California usually lasted four to six months. The pioneers would start in the spring and try to make it over the Rockies before snow blocked the passes.





### Conestoga Wagons and Prairie Schooners

At first, the settlers used covered wagons to go west. The Conestoga was the most common; it was a wide, heavy wagon that could carry eight tons (sixteen thousand pounds) of goods. Four or more mules or oxen were needed to haul such a wagon. Unfortunately, the Conestoga wagons proved to be too heavy for the hard trail west. They did fine on the rolling and mostly flat prairie lands, but trying to pull that much weight up the steep sides of the Rocky Mountains often wound up killing off the oxen that hauled them, leaving the pioneers literally stuck in the middle of nowhere.

That was a problem, but the pioneers didn't just give up. Instead they invented a whole new kind of wagon called the Prairie Schooner. It was like a tiny house on wheels and only half the size of the Conestoga. The wagon beds were nine or ten feet long and just four feet wide. Most of them had a second floor twelve to fifteen inches off the bottom to make space for reserve supplies.

Little children, sick men, or pregnant women could rest on the second floor over top of the supplies. These wagons were covered with canvas which was first waterproofed with paint or linseed oil, then stretched over five or six curved hoops of bent hickory. A man could just stand up straight in the middle of the average wagon.

### Trail Supplies

The pioneers loaded their wagons with wooden barrels of food containing bacon, flour, salt, pork, corn meal, dried beans, fruit, or hardtack. Canvas bags held other foods, such as rice, coffee, tea, sugar, etc. Essential kitchen utensils for cooking and a gun for hunting game were vital for the long journey. Along with certain other tools, a sturdy axe was needed not only for the journey, but also for projects like building a new home once the family reached their destination. Sometimes children were allowed to bring a favorite toy or doll, while an adult might bring a fiddle or other musical instrument.

### A Day on the Trail

A typical day on the trail involved a ten-to-twenty-mile walk. The pioneer family got up before dawn, stopped for a rest near noon, and rounded up the wagons in a circle at night. Unless they were sick or very small, family members walked alongside the wagon most of the way. Mules, oxen, or horses usually pulled the wagon, and family members might take turns riding or driving these.

The pioneers ate the supplies they brought, supplemented as much as possible with game that their scouts and hunters shot along the trail. Sometimes, they would butcher an injured animal that could not go further. Fuel for cooking fires could quickly become a problem, but there was a solution: buffalo dung. The dried-out dung made reasonably good fuel (like clumps of hardened grass); it could be used in place of firewood, which was hard to find on the vast, treeless prairies. Collecting buffalo dung became a chore for most children on the trail. Sometimes the children used the dung in their games!

The evenings were probably the most entertaining and memorable for the pioneers. After a dinner of dry bread and bacon, or perhaps some fresh meat from a recent hunt, the pioneers often enjoyed the music of a fiddle or banjo, or perhaps a story was told around the fire.

A good day was an uneventful one, where there were no heights or rivers to cross, since long, flat stretches allowed them to go further in a day, but that was not saying a great deal. The Whitmans averaged only



thirteen miles per day when they went to Oregon. There were also days when men went hunting for game, or when natives approached the wagon train wanting to trade, or when sickness forced the wagon train to a halt.

### Challenges

Life was hard on the trail; many pioneers died before they reached their new home. Sicknesses like cholera, typhoid, and malaria were common and devastating causes of death. Accidents—being shot by mistake, falling under the wagon wheels, or being trampled by oxen—were also common. The pioneers weren't professional hunters or wagon drivers, so each new group was likely to make the same simple mistakes.

There were also dangers from animals, rivers, the weather, and Native Americans. Some were died after being bitten by rattlesnakes or trampled in a stampede of their own cows. Sometimes people drowned when their wagon rolled over or off a ferry at a river crossing. Native Americans of various tribes could and did attack for various reasons. Women also faced the dangers of childbirth along the way since many pioneer women made the trip while pregnant. Without doctors or a house or even a bed, having babies was that much more difficult than usual.

Settlers also faced emotional and spiritual challenges. Christian settlers routinely looked to Scripture for comfort. For instance, a Christian feeling lonely after leaving familiar surroundings, including his or her church friends and pastor, might look to Psalm 31:3, Psalm 48:14, and Psalm 139:1-12. There was also the challenge of giving up all worldly possessions except what was necessary and could fit into the wagon. For women, especially, sentimentally valuable articles were often left behind, such as wedding gifts, fine china, or larger musical instruments. They might have been comforted by Philippians 3:7-11, Luke 12:15, and Colossians 3:1-2.

Facing troubles on the trail such as broken wagons, flooded rivers, lost or forgotten belongings, and loss of life (disease, accidents, weather, and Native American attacks, etc), Christian pioneers took refuge in Isaiah 41:10, Psalm 9:9, and Psalm 32:7. Even without these disasters, they endured the daily hardships of life on the trail and in settling: long, uncomfortable days, little chance to bathe or rest, back-breaking labor using only hand tools to tame the prairie, and drought or flood that destroyed hard-won gains. Jeremiah 17:7-8, 2 Corinthians 1:3-7, Psalm 27:5, Psalm 59:16, and Romans 5:2-5, may have comforted them.

Then, after arrival, these pioneers braved the loneliness of living on the frontier, where the nearest neighbor or aid was miles away. They may have turned to Deuteronomy 31:8, Psalm 9:10, Psalm 23:4, and Psalm 94:14. Finally, for fears of sudden disaster, both on the trail and after settling, they could find hope in Psalm 37:18-19, Proverbs 3:25-26, and Psalm 34:19.



## Ingenuity

Once they claimed their land and began to build a home, pioneers faced the many difficulties of wresting a living from the wilderness. They had to be ingenious not only in packing wisely and using all of the resources that they had to survive, but also to use whatever was available and adapt to their new climates. For instance, those who settled on the prairies, where wood was scarce, learned to build "sod houses" made from strips of dirt held together with the roots of tough grasses. They also had to make and mend their own clothing, soap, butter, cheese, tools, toys, enclosures, etc.

## WHO WERE THESE SETTLERS?

### Reasons for Going

Given all these troubles and ways to die, and all the loneliness and hardship involved in carving a new life, why did so many people head west? There were, in fact, many reasons. First, there was the promise of land and a good life. This motivated many. For example, farm families back East were often large, with many children. As the population grew in the East, many wanted to move where there was more space, more land, and more opportunity.

In Oregon, a married couple could claim 640 acres of land for free. That much land in the East would cost them far more than they could afford, so the potential of this new life in the West must have seemed comparatively limitless. It certainly struck European immigrants to America that way. In addition to sons and daughters of Americans in the East, many of the foreign-born immigrants who arrived at port cities like Baltimore, Boston, and New York chose to settle in the West, seeking a better life.

The immigrants included German-Russians, Scandinavians, Italians, Portuguese, and Irish from Europe. Many Irish, in particular, immigrated to the United States as a result of the potato famine that ravaged Ireland between 1845 and 1848. (I will tell you more of this in a moment.) Finally, Native Americans, Mexican-Americans, and former African slaves, also moved to Oregon seeking a better life. Altogether, non-white or foreign-born immigrants made up a third of all the settlers going west between 1846 and 1880.

Second, beyond the simple promise of land upon which to build a future, there was the attraction of wealth and adventure bubbling out of the West. In 1848, reports spread that gold had been found. At that time, a multitude of people came to California in hopes of becoming rich. The West also offered an exciting and alluring sense of mystery and adventure that compelled many to leave their comfortable homes.

Thirdly, some journeyed on the Oregon Trail for religious reasons. For example, the Mennonites and Mormons had often experienced persecution in the East because of their unorthodox beliefs and practices. In many Americans' minds, Mormons in particular had become a threat to Christianity and the economy of the United States. They were forced out of several states before settling on the Great Salt Lake in Utah.

### Character of a Settler

The pioneers needed endurance (including endurance of loneliness), perseverance through trials, and an independent spirit to survive the harsh conditions and emotional stress of the long journey. They needed to be courageous. The settlers also had to be hard workers to keep up with the day to day tasks of caring for their animals, hunting, cooking, and keeping their wagons in good shape.



They needed physical strength in order to endure miles of walking so that they would not fall behind schedule and find themselves stuck on the trail during the harsh winter. They had to be willing to leave everything that was comfortable and familiar, including family, friends, and cherished possessions.

Of course, these gifts were evidences of the common grace of God, but not all pioneers would have acknowledged it. Others faced these trials with a deep faith in and reliance on God. As I told you before, and as many surviving pioneer journals attest, they found strength in their faith and in Scripture.

#### MISSIONARIES: WHITMANS

A few of the folks who headed west did so because they wanted to preach the Gospel to people that had never heard it before. Marcus and Narcissa Whitman barely knew each other when they got married in upstate New York in 1836, but they shared a single vision: evangelizing the natives in the Oregon Country.

Two months later, they were on the road west with another young Presbyterian couple, Henry and Eliza Spalding (there is some question about the spelling of their last name, but Narcissa spelled it "Spalding" in her diaries). They set out to start a mission to evangelize the natives near what is now Walla Walla in Washington State.

Narcissa and Eliza were two of the first white women to travel over the Rocky Mountains on their way to the Northwest. In 1837, they arrived and began building the Whitman Mission. Though the Whitmans went to the Oregon Country to evangelize the natives who lived there, the natives did not like them or the steady arrival of white people on their land.

Marcus and Narcissa's strengths include their courage, their faith in God, and their sincere desire and determination to take the gospel to Native Americans in the West. However, Narcissa was unfriendly towards the local Cayuse Native Americans, whom she considered rude, uncivilized, and uninterested in the gospel. Meanwhile, Marcus was rigid in demanding that the Native Americans conform not only to the gospel but also to his own cultural standards.

The Whitmans' strengths were a large part of why they traveled to the West in the first place. They trusted God and braved a long, dangerous journey. However, their weaknesses of prejudice, inflexibility, and lack of empathy for the people whom they came to evangelize made it difficult for them to reach the Native Americans effectively. Their attitudes probably contributed to the anger which led to the massacre that claimed their lives.

Their early efforts in evangelism failed, and the mission center became a stopping point, a sort of combination hotel and school, that served thousands of travelers on their way along the Oregon Trail. This, of course, would only have caused the local Cayuse people to resent the Whitmans more.

In 1847, an epidemic of measles ravaged the mission, probably spread from those on the wagon trains. The measles were hard on the white settlers, but deadly for natives who had never been exposed to the disease before. Although Dr. Whitman tried to help some of the sick tribe members, the natives could tell that many of them were dying from measles while most of the whites were not.

The Cayuse may have blamed the Whitmans for the deaths of those in their tribe, and there is some suggestion that they believed Dr. Whitman was poisoning members of their tribe to get them out of the way. For this and other reasons, tensions mounted until the natives attacked the mission. Marcus and Narcissa and twelve others were murdered during this sudden Native American raid.



### IMMIGRANTS: POTATO FAMINE

As families like the Whitmans and Spauldings moved west towards Oregon, fresh immigrants from Europe arrived to take their places in the East. A great many of these new arrivals were Irish. Ireland was part of the United Kingdom but most of the people living there were not happy about that. The English overlords made laws that kept Roman Catholics from owning land in Ireland, so most Irish farmers (who were Roman Catholics) had to rent their land from Scottish or English landlords.

Many other laws that the lords enacted were hard on poor farmers. Most Irishmen were on a one-way trip from poverty to desperation and starvation. Rather than take responsibility for their cruel laws and unfair treatment, the English often said it was because Irish people were lazy and drunk. This was a classic case of blaming the victim instead of making changes to help these desperately poor and suffering people. Rather than loving them, as Christians are commanded to do, most Englishmen simply despised the Irish.

Despite their hardships, the population of Ireland kept growing. There were more and more people, but only so much land! The price of land went up. The combination of a growing population and scarcity of land caused farmers to sell the grain they produced to pay their heightened rents. They used the rest of their land to grow potatoes because these were cheap and plentiful.

During this era, it is thought that one third of the Irish people ate nothing else but potatoes. The problem with growing so much of any one crop, however, is that it raises the risk of plant diseases jumping from field to field. Beginning in 1845, a series of potato blights—diseases of the plants themselves—destroyed potato crops. The bottom third of the Irish population faced a severe famine. Over one million Irish men, women, and children died of hunger, and millions of others emigrated to America.

The trip to America was hard. Starving peasants had no money for a place on a ship sailing overseas, so some landlords paid to ship their renters to America on what were known as “coffin ships.” These ships were crowded with sick, starving people. The ship captains only gave them the bare minimum of food and water. As many as three out of every ten people died on these voyages.

After the Irish arrived in America, they faced hostility and rejection for several reasons. First, they were Roman Catholic, and this separated them from the Protestant majority. Second, they were typically poor peasants from Europe, dressed in rags, dirty, and unlearned. They struck Americans as extra mouths to feed rather than contributing citizens.

Third, Irish immigrants seemed almost purposefully isolationist and belligerent, so much so that most historians have written that the Irish carried their bitterness and resentment (and fierce but injured pride) with them to the New World, and were often “spoiling for a fight” as they stepped off the boat.

The Irish immigrants' attitudes offended established Americans and helped to turn society against them. It often happened that when Americans put up a sign saying that they needed someone to work a job, they added a line that said, “No Irish need apply.”

Still, the Irish didn't give up; instead, they banded together and helped each other out. Once they found a place to live, many others joined them there. Irish men and women were willing to take any kind of work, even difficult or dangerous jobs. The women often found work as servants and men worked for construction crews on roads and railroads. Eventually, many found work in factories and with the police. It took many years and much suffering, but in the end, they did build better lives for themselves.



## MORMONS

Let me briefly recapitulate what I have already told you in the last two chapters: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints was established by Joseph Smith in New York state in 1830. In many American's minds, the Mormons were a threat to both Christianity and the economy of the United States. They were thus sadly forced out of several states before settling on the Great Salt Lake in Utah.

Smith and his followers moved first to Ohio and then to Missouri, but they were driven out in 1838 after the Governor of Missouri signed an executive order calling for all Mormons to be killed or driven out. The Mormons moved across the border to Nauvoo, Illinois, where they built a city that grew bigger than Chicago at that time (15,000 people). In 1844, their leader, Joseph Smith, was murdered by an armed mob, and two years later, in 1846, the government of Illinois ordered them out of the state.

The Mormons went west to Utah, where they settled near the Great Salt Lake. Things were hard in their first year in the Great Salt Valley. For example, a plague of black crickets attacked the Mormons' crops, and it seemed there was nothing they could do to save their harvest.

Then, one day, seagulls from the islands in the Great Salt Lake began to arrive. For days they flew in by the hundreds and stuffed themselves on the crickets. There was then enough of the harvest remaining to keep the Mormons alive through the winter. To this day, the seagull is the state bird of Utah.

Despite hardship and trials, the Mormons held on, and they built a new community by the shores of the Great Salt Lake.

## UTOPIAN SOCIETIES

So far, I have told you about people who went West for a better life, wealth, adventure, or religious freedom. However, there were also many families who remained in the East and isolated themselves in closed communities called "utopian societies." They did this for the much the same reason as those who moved West: they wanted to make a better life. In their cases, the goal was to achieve a perfect social community.

You may recognise the adjective "utopian" from Book Two of the *Warp* series. Sir Thomas More, a Roman Catholic courtier of King Henry VIII whose disagreements with his lord and master eventually led to his death, published a book called *Utopia* in 1516. More's book was a political and social satire that explored ideas about the nature of government, justice, and societal structures.

The title word, "Utopia," comes from the Greek words "ou" (not) and "topos" (place), meaning an ideal place that does not exist in reality. Ever since the days of More, "utopia" has come to mean an ideal but nonexistent (and perhaps impossible) society.





There were a number of utopian communities populating America in the mid-to-late 1800s. A historian named Phillip Jenkins explains it this way: “[The] American people began to explore the implications of their radically democratic society and the weakness of state or ecclesiastical [church] controls on thought and behaviour. As in politics, the spirit of the time was marked by a sense of limitless opportunity and a thoroughgoing challenge to established or traditional elites, a Biblical casting down of the mighty from their seats.”<sup>1</sup>

With this sort of popular feeling alive at the time, and remember also how idealistic the era was, it is not surprising that several utopian communities arose in America. (After all, America is a nation made up largely of people who had the courage of their convictions and the hope of their ideals, and were willing to take tremendous risks as a result. Americans were, arguably, “born and bred” for this kind of action.)

I should pause here for a moment to differentiate between a utopian community and a sect. I have described a utopian community already. A sect is a specifically religious group that has (typically) developed beliefs which the main religious body considers heretical or unorthodox, and consequently the sect has broken off from the larger group to form its own community.

Thus, a utopian community may also be a sect or not, depending on whether the utopian community is a religious group. In either case, most utopian or sectarian expressions that *were* unorthodox departed from biblical teachings about the sinfulness of man and his depravity while on the earth. To some degree or other, utopians were working to perfect mankind in the here and now, and in that sense, they were based on unorthodox (and unbiblical) religious ideals just as the unorthodox sects were.

- ❑ New Harmony (1825-1827): Founded by Robert Owen, located in Indiana, and based on socialist principles, New Harmony aimed to create a community where wealth and property were shared collectively. The experiment faced internal conflicts and financial challenges, leading to its dissolution by 1827.
- ❑ Oneida Community (1848-1881): Founded by John Humphrey Noyes and located in New York, the Oneida Community practiced a form of communal living known as “complex marriage,” where all members were considered married to each other. They also embraced “mutual criticism” sessions. The community thrived economically through the production of silverware (you can buy the Oneida brand of silverware even up to this day) and lasted until 1881.
- ❑ Brook Farm (1841-1847): Founded by George Ripley and located in Massachusetts, Brook Farm was inspired by transcendentalist ideals. It aimed to combine intellectual pursuits with manual labor, so members worked at both education and farming. Despite early enthusiasm, financial troubles led to its closure in 1847.
- ❑ Amana Colonies (1855-1932): Founded by German Pietists called the Members of the Community of True Inspiration, the Amana colonies were located in Iowa. Colonics wanted to create a communal society based on religious principles. The community prospered through agriculture and crafts. In 1932, however, economic pressures led to a shift to a more individualistic lifestyle.
- ❑ Fruitlands (1843-1844): Founded by Amos Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane, and located in Massachusetts, Fruitlands aimed for self-sufficiency, vegetarianism, and a rejection of materialism. However, internal disagreements, harsh living conditions, and financial difficulties led to its collapse within a year.

1. Philip Jenkins, qtd in *Antebellum America: 1784-1850*, edited by William Dudley (New York: Thomson Gale, 2003), p. 272.



- ❑ The Shakers (Founded in the 18th century, but prominent in the 19th century) were founded by Mother Ann Lee and had communities across several states, including New York and Kentucky. The Shakers practiced strict celibacy (holding that sex was the root of human sin) while waiting for the imminent (they believed) Second Coming of Christ, communal living, and an industrious work ethic. They were one of the most successful sects and became known for their fine furniture craftsmanship. As with the Oneida community, their brand of furniture is still a respected American style to this day. The Shaker communities thrived in the 19th century but gradually declined in the 20th century.
- ❑ Unitarianism was a sect that attacked trinitarian orthodoxy (belief in the Trinity), and was strongest by far in New England. These pastors stressed the reliability of human reason and the brotherhood of all men.
- ❑ Universalists, also a religious sect centered in New England, denied that some would be damned. They believed that since God is love, all would be saved.
- ❑ Transcendentalists taught that the “only authentic reality [was found] in the world of the spirit, a realm that could be interpreted through reason.”<sup>1</sup> The most famous leaders were Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. “Emersonian ideas stressed individual liberation, autarchy [absolute rule], self-sufficiency and self-government, and strenuously opposed social conformity.”<sup>2</sup>
- ❑ The Mormons, the Amish, and the Mennonites might also be considered sects, though they are rarely described as utopian communities.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, what we see this week is how several different groups took big risks to build new lives for themselves. Some, like the Irish immigrants, crossed oceans and started all over. Others, like the Oregon pioneers, left behind the relative peace and safety of the Eastern states to cross prairies, mountains, and deserts for the sake of new land.

There were many different people on the trail out west, who went for many different reasons. Wherever they started from, the people who made it out to Oregon, Utah, or California were stronger and tougher for the experience. We can be grateful, as Americans, that our country was settled by people who were full of hope and courage, who were ready to risk everything to build a better life for themselves and their children.

1. *Antebellum America: 1784-1850*, edited by William Dudley (New York: Thomson Gale, 2003), p., 273.

2. *Ibid.*, 273-274.