Chapter 5

Stories of exploring new lands in the West excited many people in the eastern part of the United States. They read about great farmlands, and beautiful diaries of explorers made the West seem like a promised land. Over a long time, thousands of people moved west with their families.

Most early emigrants came west by wagon trains. Their wagon wheels carved paths through the hot, dry deserts of Nevada, similar to this modern desert trail.

1844
Chief Truckee shows the Stephens-Murphy-Townsend Party a route to California from the Humboldt River.

1844 1845 1846 1848 1849

1846
Donner Party leaves Missouri for California.

1848
Gold rush begins in California.

1849
Pioneers name Death Valley.

1849
A few prospectors begin searching for gold in Nevada.
A Fresh Start

For a long time, most people in our country lived east of the Mississippi River. When it became difficult to earn a living because of economic hard times, people began to move west. Farmers hoped to find rich farmlands where they could grow many crops. Others hoped to find jobs out west. Some people just wanted to live where there was more space and fewer people. Others were looking for adventure.

Wagon Trains

The earliest travelers from the east did not come west to live in Nevada. The land here was very dry, and water was hard to come by. Most emigrants were only passing through on their way to California. Emigrants are people who leave one country to settle in another. Most emigrants came west in wagon trains.

Wagon trains were made up of many people traveling together. Sometimes emigrants moving west were also called pioneers. Many pioneers were single men. Others traveled as families. Pioneers packed only their most important belongings into their wagons. They took clothes, food, and a few pieces of furniture.
Traveling by wagon was very slow. On a good day, a wagon train could travel about 10 to 15 miles. At night, the wagons were moved into a circle to better protect the pioneers and their animals from danger or attack.

**Covered Wagons**

Pioneer wagons covered with white canvas tops were sometimes called *prairie schooners*. The round, stretched canvas looked like the sails of ships from far away. The canvas protected the pioneers and their belongings from the dust, sun, wind, and rain. Prairie schooners were also much lighter and easier for oxen or mules to pull than other wagons.

*Imagine traveling by covered wagon during the winter months. How do you think the pioneers stayed warm?*
Activity

Packing Up

Pioneers had to be well prepared for their long journey. They had to make sure they took enough food and supplies. Here are some of the things they packed for their trip:

flour  bacon  axe
cornmeal  medicine  hammer
sugar  salt  water bucket
fruit  rifle  soap
butter  pots and kettles  clothing
lard  rope  extra bedding
vegetables  shovel  wheel grease

If you had to leave your home and go on a long journey, what things would you take with you? Make a list of at least ten things you would need. Then compare your list to the pioneers’ list. What things are the same? What things are different? How do you think the pioneers packed food items like butter and meat?

Pulling the Load

Emigrants used oxen or mules to pull their wagons. Oxen were the strongest, but the slowest of the two. They were cheaper to buy and could eat almost every type of grass along the trail. Mules were more stubborn than oxen. They ate mostly grains and some dry grasses. They were also better in the heat than oxen.

But, like horses, they sometimes wandered off. Pioneers who could afford horses usually rode them instead of using them to pull their wagon. Horses were the hardest to care for and the most expensive to buy and feed.

What do you think?

Which animals would you have chosen to pull your wagon? Why?
Dangers on the Trail

Moving west was an exciting adventure, but it was also very hard. Every day there were problems and dangers to face. Week after week, pioneers walked in the dust and heat. When it rained, wagon wheels were often stuck in the mud. Many pioneers died along the trail because of freezing temperatures and deep snows.

Weather was just one of the many problems people faced during their travels west. Some got lost because the trails they followed were not marked. Others drifted off course while trying to follow maps made by early explorers or traders. Pioneers also had to protect themselves from bear, mountain lion, or other wild animal attacks.

Another problem people faced was unfriendly Indian tribes. Most tribes were friendly at first. They traded with the pioneers for goods, food, or other supplies. But as more wagon trains came west, some Indians began to attack the settlers. They wanted to stop the settlers from harming the land and the animals the tribes depended on for food.

Indian tribes and pioneers lived very different lives. Their ways of life did not always work well together. Indian tribes believed their way of life was in danger.

“Mosquitoes were as thick as flakes in a snow-storm, the poor horses whinnied all night, from their bites, and in the morning the blood was streaming down their sides.”

—Margaret A. Frink, 1850
Emigrant Diaries

Many pioneers wrote about their experiences in their diaries. They wrote about problems they faced and what their lives were like. Their words have given us much information about the trails they traveled and how they felt as they traveled them. One pioneer woman wrote about meeting Indians while traveling west:

After looking in vain for water, we were about to give up as it was near night, when my husband came across a company of friendly Cayuse Indians about to camp, who showed him where to find water. The men and boys have driven the cattle down to water and I am waiting for water to get supper. This forenoon we bought a few potatoes from an Indian, which will be a treat for our supper.

Amelia Knight

Forty-Mile Desert

Crossing western deserts in the summer heat was one of the hardest things pioneers had to do. Nevada’s Forty-Mile Desert was probably the worst. After leaving the western edge of the Humboldt River, wagon trains had to travel 40 miles before reaching water again.

Many pioneers knew the Forty-Mile Desert would be hard to cross. They knew their animals would not be able to pull heavy wagons that far without water. Many of them had to get rid of their belongings to make their wagons lighter. Sometimes they left things, like furniture, scattered along the desert trail.

Memory Master

Lesson 1

1. Name one reason people wanted to move west.
2. What is an emigrant?
3. Name two possible dangers pioneers faced on their journey west.
Blazing the Trail

Crossing the Sierra Nevada was never an easy task for early emigrants. Difficult weather conditions and narrow mountain passes made travel slow. Some people took their wagons apart so they could lower them down the steep granite cliffs.

One emigrant group, called the Donner Party, tried crossing the Sierra Nevada too late in the year. Snow drifts and freezing temperatures made it nearly impossible for them to reach California. Many of them lost their lives that cold, snowy winter.

PEOPLE TO KNOW
Bidwell-Bartleson Party
Chief Truckee
Donner Party
Thomas “Broken Hand” Fitzpatrick

PLACES TO LOCATE
California Trail
Death Valley
Humboldt River
Missouri
Old Spanish Trail
Oregon Trail
Sierra Nevada

WORDS TO UNDERSTAND
cholera
disease
smallpox

Emigrant parties began crossing the Sierra Nevada as early as 1840. Their wagon wheels left rust and scrape marks along many rocky, narrow passes.
To protect themselves from the cold, some members of the Donner Party built small brush shelters. Then they covered the brush with the hides from their wagons.
The Donner Party

It was late spring when the Donner Party left Missouri, headed for California. Near the end of September, the group of 87 reached Nevada’s Humboldt River. By mid-October they followed the Truckee River into the Sierra Nevada.

The party had already faced problems of every kind. But their problems soon got worse. Wagons began to break down, people in the group began to argue, and many worried about the coming snow.

As the party climbed toward the summit, heavy snow began to fall. In less than 24 hours, the group could not go on because of the huge snow drifts. Slowly, they made their way back to the lake to try to find shelter.

One family in the group moved into an old shack at the edge of the lake. Others built log cabins or rough lean-tos. When the food ran out, they had to eat their animals to stay alive. They even ate the hides and hooves of their cattle.

Twelve-year-old Virginia Reed and her family were members of the party. Virginia wrote to her cousin about the horrible event after she was rescued.

We had nothing to eat but ox hides. O Mary I would cry and wish I had what you all wasted... we had to kill little cash the dog and eat him....

A few members of the group got so hungry they ate the flesh of those who had died. Only 46 people survived that horrible winter. The hardships they faced caused many people to rethink their plans to go west.

Other problems, like finding good drinking water, caused problems for pioneers. Nevada’s Humboldt River was the area’s main source of water. Sometimes though, the water tasted bad, or was muddy, or nearly dried up.

Diseases, or illnesses, were another kind of problem. Things like cholera and smallpox spread very quickly. When one person got a disease, it didn’t take long for others in the group to get it too. Without doctors or hospitals nearby, thousands of people died along westward trails. One woman wrote about it in her diary:

We passed a new made grave today... [of] a man from Ohio. We also met a man that was going back [as] he had buried his wife this morning. She died from the effects of measles...we passed another grave to day which was made this morning... [it] stated that he died of cholera. He was from Indiana.

—Lydia Rudd

Go West!
The Bidwell-Bartleson Party

The Bidwell-Bartleson Party was one of the first groups to cross the Great Basin on the way to California. John Bartleson and John Bidwell were the leaders of the group. But neither knew how to lead a wagon train. They also didn’t know much about the land they would cross.

With only a few details from a newspaper, the group headed west. They joined a famous explorer and trapper by the name of Thomas “Broken Hand” Fitzpatrick. Fitzpatrick guided them only as far as the Great Salt Lake. The party then traveled the rest of the way on their own.

Shortly after leaving the Great Salt Lake area, the party ran into trouble. Water was scarce, and the dry land was covered with salt and sand. The wagons had trouble moving through the sand, and many of them broke down. Travel became so slow that Bartleson and other men in the party left the group and went on ahead. Bidwell stayed behind.

He took the group down Mary’s River, later called the Humboldt River, and across the Forty-Mile Desert to the Walker River. When they reached the Sierra Nevada, they decided to leave their wagons behind. They were too heavy to pull over the rugged mountains. Two weeks later the party reached California. It had been six months since they left Missouri.

This picture of pioneers camping along the Humboldt River was drawn by Daniel Jacks in 1859. Can you tell what kinds of activities are going on in camp?
More Emigrant Groups

Other wagon trains soon followed the trail across Nevada along the Humboldt River. Once they reached the river, groups took off in many different directions. Some traveled across the Black Rock Desert into northern California, Oregon, and Washington. Others followed the Carson River through the Sierra Nevada toward California. Some, like the Donner Party, took their wagons along the Truckee River route.

Not all groups that traveled the same route as the Donner Party had serious problems. The Stevens-Murphy-Townsend Party was one of the first groups to get their wagons safely to California. When they came to the Sierra Nevada, they took their wagons apart. They pulled and lifted the wagon parts over the mountains piece by piece.

Early Emigrant Trails

Many early emigrants followed the Old Spanish Trail, which cut across the southern tip of Nevada. One group of emigrants split off from this trail in search of a shortcut. They were led by a man named Lewis Manley. He led them into the hot, dry desert of Death Valley. They almost didn’t make it out alive. After sending some of the party ahead to get supplies, the rest were finally able to get out of the area. It was this group that gave Death Valley its name.

Just as we were ready to leave and return to camp we took off our hats, and then overlooking the scene of so much trial, suffering and death [we said]...“Good bye Death Valley!”....

—William Lewis Manly
More Trails

The Oregon Trail was the most popular wagon train route heading west. Winding from Missouri to Oregon, the trail was 2,100 miles long. More than 350,000 people made their way along the trail.

Splitting off from the Oregon Trail was the California Trail. It cut through Nevada into the Sacramento Valley of California. In ten years, more than 70,000 settlers traveled this route.

Both the Oregon and California trails were a series of trails, not just one trail. Many of our railroads and highways today follow these trails.
Gold Fever!

It didn’t take long for the word to spread that gold nuggets had been found in California. Suddenly there was a new reason for people to come west. People came by the thousands to search for gold. Most fortune seekers were men who left their homes and families hoping to strike it rich.

Once they reached the Great Basin, they followed the main route to California along the Humboldt River and the Oregon and California Trails. Most didn’t waste time looking for gold in Nevada. Only a few people stopped long enough to search our rivers and streams.

Gold seekers were excited to reach California. They had heard many stories claiming large nuggets of gold could be picked up off the ground. But few people ever found enough gold to get rich. Some people found they could make more money by selling food, tents, clothes, and other supplies to gold seekers.

Serious gold seekers didn’t return to Nevada until gold fever in California began to die down.

Memory Master

1. How did early emigrants get their wagons down steep cliffs?
2. What happened to the Donner Party?
3. How long did it take for the Bidwell-Bartleson Party to reach California?
4. Who was Chief Truckee?
5. What other major emigrant trail branched off from the Oregon Trail?
Consider Character

Can you imagine what it would have been like to travel on trails for weeks at a time with no stores or shelter in sight? What character traits do you think these pioneers had? Review this chapter. Identify one character trait you see in the pioneers. Find examples of people in the text showing this trait. Then act out one of these examples for your classmates. See if they can guess which character trait you are showing.

Geography Tie-In

Today we have maps, roads, and sidewalks to help us get where we are going. Pioneers had rough trails, or made their own trails, through mountains and deserts. Look at the map on p. 91 and pick a trail. On a piece of paper, make two columns. On one side, list all the physical features along the trail that helped pioneers. On the other side, list all the physical features along the trail that made travel difficult for pioneers. Remember to think about the kinds of foods they ate and the types of weather they had!

Nevada, Our Home
Gold Fever!
Where was gold found in Nevada? Do you know how much gold has actually been found in Nevada? Are there any gold mines in Nevada today? Research these questions in an encyclopedia or on websites your teacher recommends. Then make a chart or graph to show where gold was found in Nevada. A pie chart would be an interesting way to show where gold was found. You would have the biggest slice of pie show the place where the most gold was found. Can you name other natural resources in Nevada? Look them up if you don’t know!

Activity
Pioneer Games
What if you were a pioneer child? What would you do for fun? Pretend you are on the trail and that you’ve been traveling for weeks. Make up a game you would play while you are walking along or when you have stopped to set up camp. Think about what physical objects might be nearby. What kinds of things would you use to create your game?
Making a Place in Nevada

"At a small, rude cabin beside of the crevice I'd fed it with canvas, a corner open to the air, a chimney, through which the cattle used to occasionally at night blow on our furniture and warm our sleep."
—Mark Twain, Roughing It

Timeline of Events

1850
- The Utah Territory is created.
- Gold is discovered at Gold Canyon.
- The first trading post is built at Mormon Station.

1851
- Mormon settlers form a community at Mormon Station.
- Settlers form the first government.

1853
- First school opens in the Carson Valley.