

# OREGON TRAIL

## *Led Cattle Industry West*

More than 300,000 immigrants traveled the Oregon Trail between 1842 and 1860, making this the greatest peacetime migration in the history of the world.

Beginning in Independence, Mo., and ending in Oregon City, Ore., the Trail stretches 2,100 miles across six states. Its fascinating history is one of drama and hardship and signifies 19th century man's persistence to head west for a better life.

The pioneers faced huge obstacles — disease, violent thunderstorms, suffocating dust storms, mountainous terrain, swift rivers, intense heat and Indians. Motivated for reasons ranging from patriotism to fortune seeking, pioneers endured these struggles which molded and unified the United States frontier.

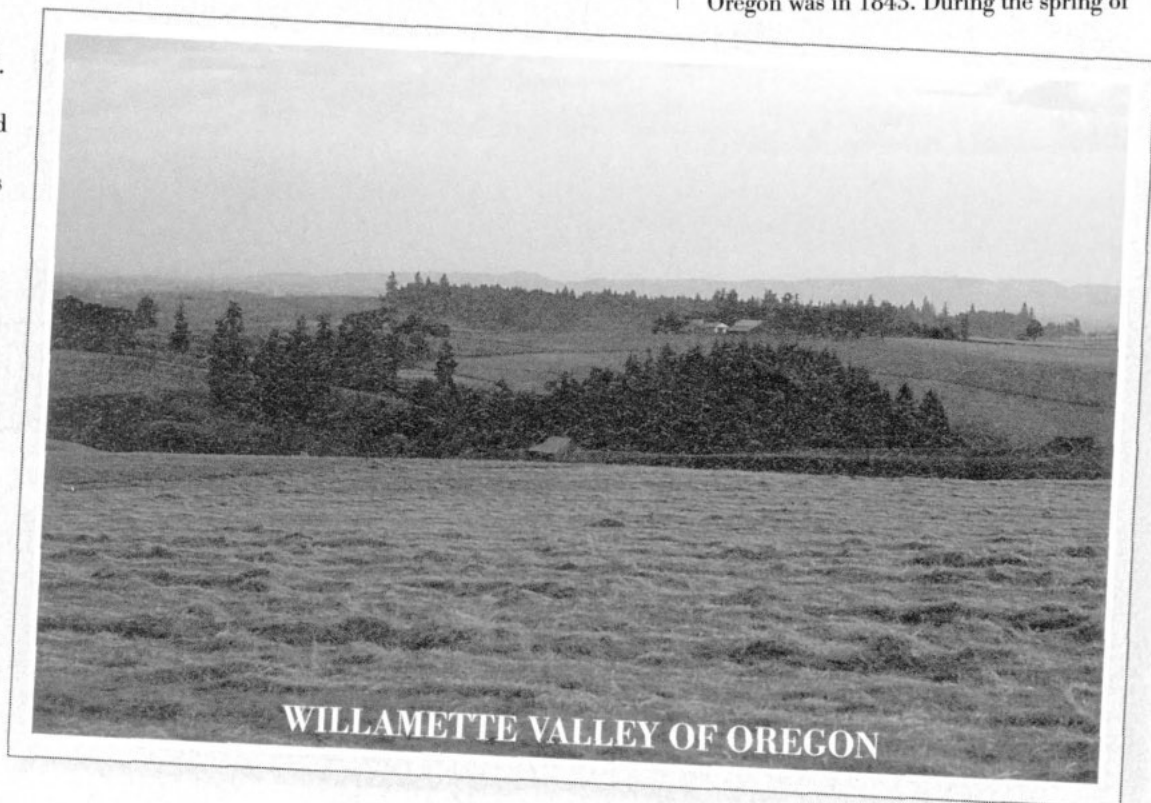
A timely departure was crucial for the well being of the pioneers and the livestock. Most trips occurred between May and September, taking advantage of better weather and adequate forage for livestock. In the early years, the trip took four to five months. But as transportation, communication and the number of settlements expanded, the nature of the journey changed. The thousands of people, wagons and livestock created an unmistakable road, as well defined as any modern highway. In many places, the

Oregon Trail is just as visible today as it was 150 years ago.

The pioneers of the American West

pioneers pushed the long trail every year, a journey of about six months.

The first of the "Great Migration" to Oregon was in 1843. During the spring of



JIM PATRICO PHOTO

carried with them the tools essential to their new life. They brought seeds and carefully wrapped cuttings from which vigorous agriculture was to develop. Across the miles of alternately dusty and muddy trails they brought their cattle, horses, sheep, swine, other domesticated animals and fowl.

The Oregon Country was opened to settlement in the 1830s and the 2,100-mile Oregon Trail was blazed almost immediately to what would become new settlements along the Columbia River and the Willamette Valley. Beginning in 1841,

that year, 1,000 westbound home seekers came across the Oregon Trail. They used oxen for power, mostly steers, but also brought scores of cattle and other livestock.

Families with cattle, however, could hardly keep pace with the wagons of other immigrants. Jesse Applegate, who later attained considerable political prominence in Oregon, was made captain of the "cow column" that brought up the rear of the Great Migration. Applegate brought the cow column through to the Willamette Valley. Thereafter, the term was applied to

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the rear, or slower stock columns of the large wagon trains.

Almost every train that followed the road to Oregon during succeeding years added to the growth of the herds of the territory. As in earlier years of American history, these cattle were used for dairy as well as for meat. They also continued to serve for plowing and for hauling the wagons and carts of the pioneers.

The herds of western Oregon multiplied rapidly in the 1840s and by mid-century had grown large enough to supply beef cattle for hungry '49ers in California as well as their counterparts in mining camps of British Columbia.

In the 1860s, eastern Oregon began filling up and gold was the reason. It was to meet the needs of hungry miners that the first small ranches were established east of the Cascades. Here, cattle grew better on the bunchgrass of eastern Oregon. The animals had superior size and fleshing and became well known as "American" cattle.

By the 1870s, there was a decline in mining in the region and Oregon ranches found themselves with a mounting surplus of marketable cattle. Soon, there was a new movement on the trails, the eastward trek of tens of thousands of cattle from Oregon to new ranges in Idaho, Nevada, Utah, Montana, Wyoming, the Dakotas and Colorado as well as livestock markets in Omaha and Kansas City.

Back over the Oregon Trail the herds went. Beginning in 1875, thousands of cattle started their eastward trek from Oregon along the same ruts carved by the wagons and livestock of the pioneers more than 30 years before. Baker City and Oregon City became major cattle towns, and were two of the largest cities in the state. The railroad town of Winnemucca, Nev., rivaled contemporary Dodge City.

Cattle were driven down the Oregon Trail past Baker City, across western and southern Idaho in sight of old Fort Hall, then into Wyoming. Some drivers cut off the trail before reaching Fort Hall and worked their way northward along the immigrant trail to Montana; others entered Wyoming over the Lander cutoff and followed the Overland route to the ranches or winter pasture on the Laramie Plains.

After a season on the range, the cattle were shipped by Union Pacific Railroad from Cheyenne, Ogallala or Sidney to

Omaha and Chicago. Large herds trailed past Fort Laramie and were turned northward to become the foundation stock for ranches on the Powder River and in the Black Hills. Other herds made the more difficult eastward crossing over the old Mullan Road from Oregon into Montana and pushed east to ranches on the Madison, Gallatin, Yellowstone and other rivers.

Buyers from Omaha, Kansas City and Cheyenne made annual trips to Oregon in the late 1870s and early 1880s to buy Oregon cattle.

Some 60,000 cattle moved out of

Oregon in 1878 and more than 100,000 in 1879. The peak of the phenomenon was 1880, when 200,000 Oregon cattle trailed east. Montana continued to be a major market for Oregon cattle until hard winters in the late 1880s decimated Pacific Northwest ranches.

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