

A New Map of
TEXAS OREGON



Daily Life *in a* Covered Wagon

**PAUL
ERICKSON**



GOING WEST

In the 1840s the United States doubled in size (see map right). By either negotiation, war, or purchase, it acquired most of Oregon, Texas, California and the American Southwest. There was a great desire to expand into these new and little known territories, and several

Right: *Western Expansion of the United States by 1853.*



Above: *Map of the Oregon Trail*

people went out to explore the region and came back with reports of rich soil and good opportunities for farmers. Interest in the west grew, until it was said that "if hell were in the west, Americans would cross heaven to get there." Newspaper editors spoke of the "Manifest Destiny" to make the United States stretch "from sea to shining sea." "Oregon Fever" was just one part of this western expansion. According to the "boosters" who encouraged people to move west, Oregon was a paradise "flowing with milk and honey." It was even said that pigs ran around ready cooked with knives and forks sticking in them so that anyone could have a slice.



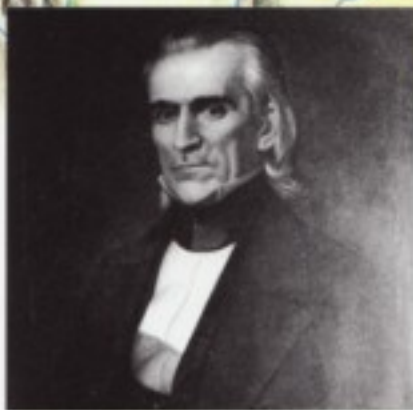
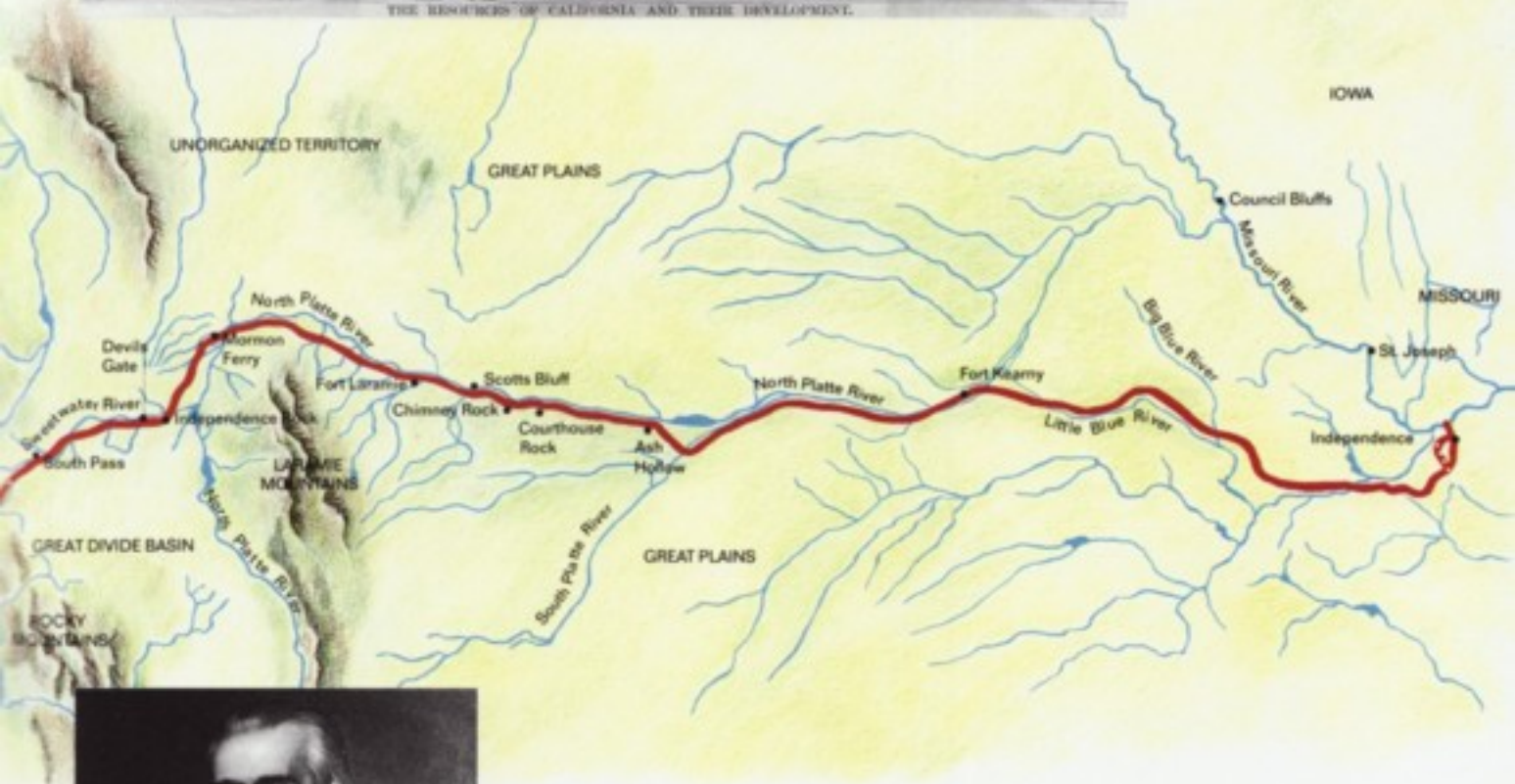
Above: *The Three Main Trails West*



Above: A gold pan.



Left: A "boosterist" poster showing California as a paradise.



Above: James K. Polk became President in 1844 because he promised Americans "All of Oregon or War!" In the early 1840s, part of Oregon still belonged to Great Britain.

The journey west was very dangerous, and even Horace Greeley, the newspaper editor famous for saying "Go west, young man!" warned against making it. However, the success of the first wagon train in 1843 proved him wrong, and soon thousands were emigrating to Oregon. Despite the difficulties of crossing "the Great American desert," there were several reasons to go west. Some people, like the Mormons, wanted to be free to practice their religion; others, like the "Forty-Niners" of the 1849 California gold rush, hoped to find gold and get rich; and others wanted to make better lives for themselves farming on the fertile land.

Most of the pioneers wanted to bring "civilization" with them: Fashions and entertainments as well as laws, schools, and colleges. They wanted to stay in touch with what was happening back east, no matter how different their new lives were.

THE FAMILY

The year is 1853, and the Larkin family are on their way to Oregon. For a journey of over 2,000 miles, lasting nearly five months, a covered wagon will be their home. Like so many other Americans, they have made the momentous decision to "emigrate," that is, to leave the settled states east of the Mississippi for a new and better life in the West.



HIRAM LARKIN



HETTY LARKIN



Above and right: Books like *Palmer's Journal of Travels over the Rocky Mountains* and *Horn's Overland Guide* are Mr. Larkin's favorite reading matter.



Mr. Larkin has considered very carefully before deciding to take the trip. On his 110-acre farm in Indiana, he is able to provide the basic necessities of life for his family. He is certainly better off than a laborer, who might earn only \$100 a year, but he finds it hard to make a profit, and he is worried that the soil in Indiana is "worn out."

Hiram Larkin, age 35, is of Scots-Irish ancestry. Like his father and grandfather before him, he is a hard-working farmer. He did not get swept up in the first bout of "Oregon Fever" in the mid-1840s, but his views changed when he began to read reports of the trip and the richness of the Oregon soil. Now he has sold his farm and stock in Indiana and taken his family by steamboat to the "jumping-off point" of Independence, Missouri, where the overlanders meet up and make preparations before starting on their long overland trek.

Hetty Gilkey married Hiram Larkin when she was 18 years old. Now she is 33. Like Hiram, she comes from a farming family. Hetty did not want to leave Indiana at first, but she changed her mind after the Donation Land Act was passed in 1850. This law cut the amount of land an Oregon settler could claim from 640 acres to 320 acres, but allowed him to claim 320 acres for his wife. Hetty liked the idea of owning land. She helped to save money for the trip, which could cost over \$1,200. They sold their land for \$5 an acre, but were still short, so Hetty borrowed \$400 from her brother.



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WESTWARD HO!

In 1853, the Larkin family loaded up their wagon and headed west in search of a new life. But how did they do it? What did they eat? How did they survive sickness, and attacks from cattle thieves? Drawing on diaries and letters, and illustrated with photographs of actual objects from the past, *Daily Life in a Covered Wagon* explores what life was really like on the wagon trail.



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