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Dress of the Oregon Trail emigrants: 1843 to 1855

Maria Barbara McMartin
Iowa State University

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Dress of the Oregon Trail emigrants: 1843 to 1855

by

Maria Barbara McMartin

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF SCIENCE

Major: Textiles and Clothing

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

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INTRODUCTION

The study of the dress of the Oregon Trail emigrant contributes to an understanding of the social and cultural history of midwest America during the 1840s and 1850s. This historical study of costume provides an insight into the life and times of people as they migrated more than 2,000 miles across the continent to colonize a new land.

The clothing worn by these emigrating families is a topic of special interest to the National Park Service in conjunction with the living history program at Scotts Bluff National Monument in western Nebraska. The program directors are not only interested in portraying what these pioneers actually wore but also how clothing and accessories were worn, stored and cared for, and the effect that trail life had on dress. From this costume research, the Park Service at Scotts Bluff intends to make the historical interpretation of the trail life of emigrants crossing the plains via the Oregon Trail more nearly accurate.

Clothing plays a vital role in living history programs because it presents a visual image that sets the stage for an encounter with the past. By dressing the program participants in authentic costume, clothing becomes an interpretive tool to help the visitor better understand what life was like from 1843 to 1855. Costuming also helps the guides play their roles depicting how men, women, and children dealt with situations of everyday living while traveling with a wagon train.

The purpose of this research was to study the costume of the American family who traveled the Oregon Trail, passing Scotts Bluff on the way to Oregon between the years 1843 and 1855. This study dealt specifically with

those American emigrants going to settle in Oregon, although many groups followed this same trail. This limitation was stressed because it is probable that clothing may reflect a cultural influence of foreigners, certain religious practices of groups such as the Mormons (Bennett, 1976), or portray a different life style such as the men hurrying to the gold fields in California. The years 1843 to 1855 were selected because they represent the period when the Trail was most heavily traveled. Because the route along the Platte River was the major thoroughfare across the plains and Scotts Bluff was a natural landmark along the trail, most emigrants passed the site.

The objectives of the research were to study the way of life on wagon trains in order to define the clothing needs of the emigrants and examine ways these needs were met while traveling, to discover the methods of caring for and storing clothing while on the journey, to describe the costumes and accessories of men, women, and children, and explain how they were worn.

A variety of source material was investigated to relate an accurate interpretation of the costume of the Oregon Trail emigrant. The author made a systematic search through original diaries, manuscripts, ledgers, and journals at the Nebraska Historical Society and the Oregon Historical Society for information concerning the emigrant's mode of dress, clothing needs, and some clues as to how clothing was cared for while traveling. It was assumed that the information presented in these sources was accurately recorded by a reliable person and that personal interpretations of situations relating to clothing were not grossly exaggerated. Periodicals of the era were used as indicators of high fashion, but they contained no

information pertinent to pioneer life and dress. Secondary sources revealed little costume information but provided background information that was valuable in understanding the economic, social, and political conditions of mid 19th century America, the Westward movement, and the settlement of Oregon.

There were few actual garments of the Oregon Trail emigrant that could be used as primary sources because people usually did not save their everyday clothing. After traveling 2,000 miles, everyday clothing was often completely worn out by the original owners. If garments survived the migration, the "good parts" were salvaged, remade into children's clothing, or used in other ways such as for lining fabrics, patches for worn garments, or for pieced quilts. The garments which pioneers saved were their "best," usually kept for sentimental reasons such as a wedding dress and suit or a christening outfit.

The author carefully examined garments and accessory items from the Nebraska Historical Society (1976) and the Oregon Historical Society costume collections (1976). Some garments represented special occasion wear, but the majority was of an everyday variety as indicated by the inventory/acquisition information; some of these articles of dress may not have been worn during the actual journey, but they came to Oregon with these early settlers. These garments supplied evidence of the styles worn by pioneer men, women, and children, the construction techniques used in making the garments, and the types of fabrics, notions, and accessories that were used.

When using garments as primary source material, several assumptions were made. The researcher assumed that correct information was related to

and recorded by the costume historian of the collection at the time of acquisition. Items were frequently given by a relative, rather than the original owner, and in such instances care was taken to discern if ancestral pride interfered in such a way that the information supplied was inaccurate. Establishing the reliability of an article of dress as a primary source was further complicated by physical alterations to the garment itself. If a garment has been changed considerably and it was difficult to distinguish the original features, the items were not used as source material. Other garments with minor adjustments that obviously did not alter the appearance or style were used as evidence in this research.

In order to explain clothing needs and problems of the emigrants, several factors must be considered. It was necessary to investigate the economic, social, and political forces in the United States that resulted in a mass migration to Oregon in the middle decades of the 19th century. In addition, a description of the Oregon Trail will aid in the understanding of the type of clothing worn and how trail life affected appearance and clothing care.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE MIGRATION TO OREGON

The migration to the Pacific Coast in the 1840s and 1850s was an extension of the population movement into the upper Mississippi Valley that took place in the 1830s when settlers crossed the Appalachian Mountains to occupy Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and Missouri (Sale & Karn, 1962). By the 1840s moving was not a new experience for most pioneers. About forty percent of the population of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, and Missouri in 1840 was born in other states and moved into these states to establish new homes (U.S. Census, 1850, 1860). A wanderlust was part of their nature; many pioneers were inspired by a passion to blaze new trails, to accept difficult challenges, and to experience the thrills of opening new countries (Billington, 1949, p. 524).

Conditions in the Valley in the late 1830s and early 1840s encouraged these same wanderers or others like them to cross the American Plains and the Rocky Mountains even though there was still much unoccupied land in the Midwest. During the twenty years of this migration, 220,330 people or about seven percent of the United States' population in 1840 went West, but only about 21,000 of these emigrants settled in Oregon, representing less than one percent of the population (Ghent, 1929, p. 83; Mattes, 1969, p. 23).

The reasons for moving to Oregon were as numerous and varied as the emigrants themselves, however, several major motivations were evident in the writings of the pioneers. Some responded to an Oregon propaganda campaign, some responded because of poor crops and unstable financial conditions in the Midwest, and some had an unquantifiable wanderlust. These

reasons combined with others of a personal nature caused people to pack their belongings and go West.

The question of possession of the Oregon Territory occupied the minds of some Americans from the early years of the 19th century. At that time Great Britain, Russia, Spain, and the United States contested the possession of Oregon, but a series of treaties left the United States and Great Britain to decide the Oregon question (Ghent, 1929, pp. 27-30). In 1818 they agreed to the joint occupation of the Oregon country and renewed the agreement in 1827 for an indefinite term. The Oregon boundary continued as a matter of dispute for the next two decades, as both countries wanted to control the Columbia River, an important outlet for fur trading operations. The United States claimed land as far north as $54^{\circ} 40'$ and Great Britain claimed land as far south as 42° . They negotiated to settle at the 49° , the natural extension of the U.S. boundary east of the Rocky Mountains, and with this boundary agreement of 1846 Oregon became a Territory of the United States (Merk, 1967, chap. 2).

During the years after the joint occupation agreement of 1818, a nationwide propaganda campaign focused attention on "Americanizing" the territory. Literature, representing a variety of sources from journals of fur traders, accounts of missionaries, reports of government explorers and travelers, and letters of early emigrants, spread "Oregon fever" across the country. This propaganda, some of it a conscious effort and some not, appealed to Midwestern farmers who were inclined to escape agricultural and economic burdens and to the adventurers who were looking for the challenge of a new environment.

Although Great Britain and the United States agreed on the joint occupation of the Oregon country, several Americans made a special effort to ensure that interest in Oregon was kept alive. John Floyd, a Representative from Virginia and the leading Oregon promoter in the 1820s, first raised the question of the United States' "right" to settle the Columbia River area and eventually annex the Oregon Territory (U.S. Annals of Congress, 16th Congress, 2nd Session, 1820-1821, p. 679). Another propagandist, Hall J. Kelley, a Boston schoolteacher, also advocated the settlement of Oregon, going so far as to organize an emigration society to transplant a New England town to Oregon (Riegel, 1930, pp. 306-308). Plans of both men failed to materialize; nevertheless, they created enough interest to keep the Oregon issue in the public eye.

At the same time that Floyd and Kelley were advocating settlement, fur traders were publicizing the wonders of Oregon's natural beauty, excellent climate, and abundant resources when they brought their furs to St. Louis, the headquarters of fur trading operations in the United States. As the fur trade declined in the early 1830s, some trappers turned to agriculture and discovered that the land of the Willamette Valley in western Oregon was especially suitable for raising crops.

Missionary efforts in Oregon by a variety of denominations also increased American curiosity during the 1830s. The Methodist Mission Board, aroused by a letter published in the Methodist Christian Advocate describing the skull flattening methods of the Flathead Indians, sent the first group of missionaries to Oregon to investigate the "heathenish practice of bruising babies' heads" (Billington, 1949, p. 515). Because the Flathead country was inaccessible during the winter they arrived, the group

under the leadership of Jason Lee, established a mission to improve social conditions in the Willamette Valley; there was no further attempt on their part to establish a Flathead Mission. In the meantime, the American Board sent Dr. Marcus Whitman, the man who was to become "the most noted of all Oregon missionaries" on a mission to the Flathead Indians (Billington, 1949, p. 518). In 1836 with his wife, Narcissa, and the Reverend and Mrs. Henry Spalding, Whitman journeyed west in wagons that were the first to travel west of Fort Hall. Although these missionaries and others like them were not particularly successful in converting Indians to Christianity, they nevertheless publicized the agricultural potentials of Oregon and petitioned Congress to promote settlement. Their writings in eastern newspapers and personal letters created quite an interest and stirred many to consider settling in Oregon. To the emigrants this firsthand information offered advice on methods of transportation, recommendations for provisions necessary for such a trip, and warnings of problems that they would encounter along the way.

New publicity from explorers further stimulated the spread of Oregon fever. Lt. Charles Wilkes, commander of a government Pacific exploring expedition in 1838, surveyed the Columbia River area and reported a wealth of information regarding the mouth of the Columbia and adjoining coasts, emphasizing the agricultural and commercial advantages of the area (Merk, 1967, p. 211). Accompanying him on this expedition was J. K. Townsend, a Philadelphia naturalist, who wrote about the vegetation and beauty of the lands. J. C. Fremont's 1843-44 overland expedition as a lieutenant of engineers in the Topographical Corps of the United States Army added information to that compiled by Wilkes about the topography and natural

resources of Oregon (Fremont, 1845/1970). The joint surveys and the maps and reports of these two government-sponsored expeditions completed the first official survey of a transcontinental route to Oregon (Riegel, 1930, pp. 310-312). The findings were publicized and became popular with future emigrants as guidebooks.

In the early 1840s, Lewis F. Linn, Senator from Missouri, recognized the public's twenty-year interest in Oregon and worked with an insistent few in Congress to claim Oregon as a territory of the United States. In 1841 and 1842 he introduced several resolutions to authorize the annexation and settlement of the Oregon Territory, he proposed the construction of forts and supply posts between the Missouri and Columbia Rivers, and he campaigned for a free land bill giving homestead grants to settlers (U.S. Congressional Globe, 26th Congress, 2nd Session, 1841, pp. 89-90; and 27th Congress, 2nd Session, 1842, pp. 264-270).

Proposals such as Senator Linn's even though not passed by Congress and the reports of fur traders, missionaries, and explorers during the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s focused public attention on Oregon. In addition, the idea of Oregon appealed to the imagination of Midwest farmers partly because of agricultural and economic instability of the times and partly because of the "pioneer spirit" to seek the challenges of a new and different land. A combination of these factors encouraged the would-be emigrants to consider seriously resettling in Oregon.

Economic instability characterized the late 1830s and early 1840s. The collapse of the boom in land speculation and the banking crisis caused by the specie circular, contraction of foreign credit, and increasing state debts caused a financial panic in 1837 (Taylor, 1951, pp. 338-345). After

a minor recovery, a second banking crisis in 1839 brought a depression which persisted until 1843, particularly in the southern and western states (Morris, 1970, p. 178). The depression affected farmers as well as bankers and manufacturers, and everyone experienced "hard times." Although able in most cases to feed themselves and barter for some necessities, farmers were short of ready cash that was essential for paying taxes and entering land claims. Insecurity haunted some farmers as they learned that the paper bills they hoarded for such purposes had greatly depreciated in value or were no longer accepted. An itinerant preacher from Columbus, Ohio, described the currency situation as being in a state of

vast confusion. For instance, I had on Monday a quantity of Chillicothe paper, which I there exchanged at par for Indiana State Bank . . . scrip and was assured I had done well. But 'ere I reached home the state scrip had depreciated 50 percent (Bell, 1921, pp. 119-120).

Banking circumstances in the Mississippi and Ohio Valley improved little in the next few years. In addition farm prices dropped because of a wheat surplus in the area. Then, in the early 1840s heavy rains ruined crops in the uplands, and flooding devastated farmlands along the Mississippi and created breeding places for mosquitoes. The mosquitoes spread malaria throughout the Midwest states, and "chills and fever" or "ague," pioneer names for malaria, reached epidemic proportions in Iowa and Missouri (Bell, 1921, pp. 116-131).

Discontent encompassed the entire Mississippi Valley. Times were "bad," fields were overgrown with weeds or covered with flood water, sickness weakened spirits, "wheat was dirt cheap, [and] corn could not be given away." One dejected farmer, quoted in the New Orleans Daily Picayune, described the times:

The weather of late has been very wet. . . . Specie is scarce, honest men ditto. . . . Snuff is going up--juleps are going down. Mosquitoes are lively, and steamboat explosions are going off slowly. Some bank bills are beneath par, and others are beneath notice. . . . Times isn't what they used to was (Husband, 1966, p. 22).

Most Midwestern pioneers weathered the storm of hard times and waited hopefully for the return of prosperity, but for some the lure of Oregon proved more attractive. They could perhaps fare no worse by moving and might fare much better if the propoganda were indeed true. In addition to those hoping to escape the bad times, others were motivated by an ill-defined urge to wander.

Regardless of the motivation, those pioneers who elected to move their families to new homes faced two alternatives: they could relocate on unsettled land east of the Missouri River in the upper Midwest and hope for better times in that new location, or they could leave their present homes and hard times and go all the way across the plains and mountains to California or Oregon.

Legal expansion was restricted beyond the western boundaries of Arkansas and Missouri because preceding waves of settlement pushed the Indians onto these plains. This "arid wasteland" was "secured" for the displaced Indian in 1834 when Congress barred all whites, except licensed traders, from entering the reservation west of the Missouri River (Billington, 1949, p. 469). The pioneers were not particularly interested in this prairie land because legal settlement was not permitted, the land was not politically organized, and supposedly it was not suitable for agriculture.

The stigma of being useless to agriculturists was attached to the area west of Arkansas and Missouri to the Rocky Mountains by explorers. As

early as 1806 Lt. Zebulon Pike, on an army expedition, reported that the dry plains were uninhabitable and advised farmers to stay east of the Plains. Fourteen years later in 1820 Major Stephen Long's report reinforced those by Pike and others. In regard to this area in question, Long wrote in a report to Secretary of War John C. Calhoun

we do not hesitate in giving the opinion that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and, of course, uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence (James, 1966, p. 361).

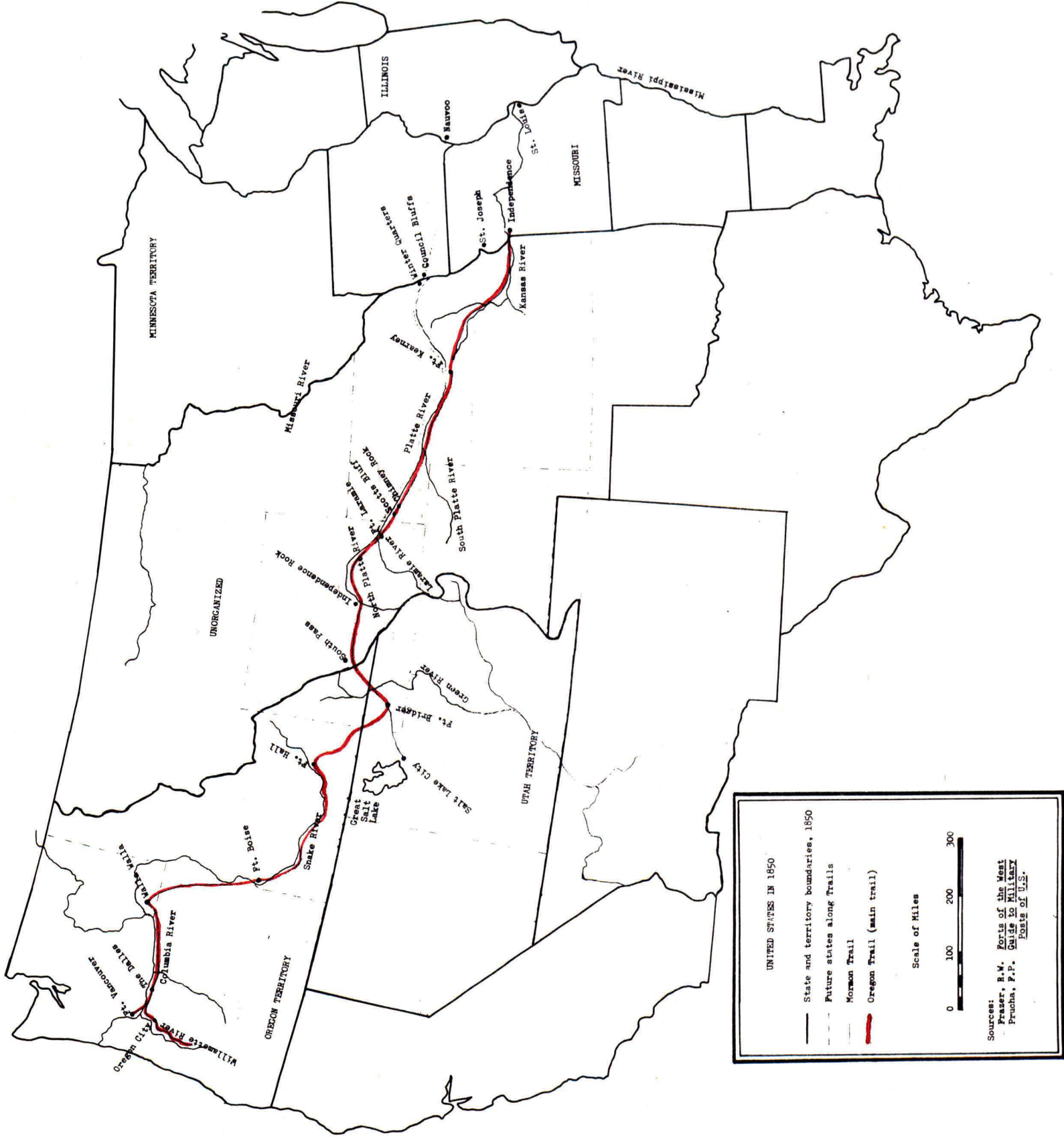
The map accompanying this report labeled the plains area as "The Great American Desert," a term that became a reality in the minds of the farmers.

A small fraction of the United States' population, stimulated by Oregon propaganda, encouraged to escape hard times, challenged by an unquantifiable wanderlust, or any combination of these motivations, chose the second alternative. The first sizable migration to Oregon left Independence, Missouri, in the spring of 1843. For the next twenty years, emigrant families followed the Oregon Trail across the Rocky Mountains to build new homes in Oregon.

THE OREGON TRAIL

There was no need for these pioneers to survey and build roads across the continent as parts of the Oregon Trail were first blazed by animals and other parts were trampled by Indians and trappers. Once South Pass was discovered, a continuous trail connected the paths east and west of the mountains. The trail was the easiest way around natural occurring obstacles and depended on such things as the contour of the country, drainage, herbage, and forestation (Ghent, 1929, p. 6). Slowly the trail evolved, and by 1843 when the first large migration organized, a route existed across the continent from Independence, Missouri, at the mouth of the Kansas River to the Pacific Ocean. The Oregon Trail became more defined throughout the next few decades as "footsteps of the Pioneer had worn a pathway six to 10 feet in depth, 50 to 100 feet in width" (Vanbuskirt, 1852, p. 1).

The description of the Oregon Trail that follows is that of the route used by homeseekers from the Mississippi and Ohio Valleys in the early years of migration; it does not describe the cutoffs and short cuts taken by later travelers (see Map 1). Rivers, forts, and obtrusive topographical features guided these early settlers along the trail and, according to travel diaries and journals, served as mileage markers (see Table 1). Most wagon trains traveled at a rate of fifteen to twenty miles a day (Ghent, 1929, p. 133), and the entire trip from the "jumping-off" towns to the Willamette River usually took four to six months depending on the weather, the conditions of the individual outfit, and the organization of the wagon train.



Map 1. United States in 1850

Table 1. Estimated mileage between landmarks along the Oregon Trail and Independence, Missouri

Landmark	Estimated miles from Independence
Pappan's Ferry	81
Platte River	316
Ford at South Platte River	433
Chimney Rock	571
Fort Laramie	667
Ford at North Platte River	794
Independence Rock	838
South Pass	947
Green River	1,014
Fort Bridger	1,070
Soda Springs	1,206
Fort Hall	1,288
Fort Boise	1,585
Grande Ronde	1,736
Columbia River	1,835
The Dalles	1,934
Oregon City	2,094
Fort Vancouver	2,020

People traveling either by wagon or steamboat convened at one of the several jumping-off places near the junction of the Kansas and Missouri Rivers. Independence was the popular starting point until the erratic river destroyed the steamboat landing, thereafter the steamboats churned about eight miles further upstream to the stable banks at Westport. Both towns became hubs of activity in early spring when emigrants poured in to make final preparations for their overland journeys. Once outfitted with a wagon, mules or oxen, and provisions for four to five months, travelers waited to depart until the grass across the river was long enough for grazing and the rivers ahead had receded past floodstage.

Leaving Independence about the first of May, the wagon trains followed the Santa Fe Trail for a short distance into the present state of Kansas until a signboard with the inscription "Road to Oregon" marked the place where the two trails branched (Chittenden, 1902, p. 464). Continuing west, they forded the Kansas River at several places, the most popular being Pappan's Ferry. After the hazardous crossing, most caravans rested on the north bank, settled grievances that might have arisen, and reorganized for the remainder of the trip. From the Kansas River, the wagons turned north, entered Nebraska, and crossed the low sandy ridges to the Platte River. At this point in 1848 Fort Kearney was built as the first military post along the Oregon Trail. Turning west the caravan followed the south bank of the unpredictable Platte River, a mere trickle of water during the dry season but a roaring current of muddy water in rainy spells. Here the prairies ceased and the plains began; they entered buffalo country where timber was so scarce that buffalo chips provided fuel.

The land on the approach to the South Platte River was sandy and dusty, but after the river was forded the land changed and strange conformations loomed ahead in the landscape. These were the famous landmarks of Chimney Rock, Courthouse Rock, and Scotts Bluff. Shortly after bypassing these landmarks in what is now western Nebraska, the travelers forded the Laramie River, having traveled approximately forty days from Independence and camped near Fort Laramie. Most wagon trains stopped for several days to rearrange provisions and overhaul the wagons since the next point for repairs and supplies was four hundred miles ahead at Fort Bridger (Chittenden, 1902, p. 469).

Leaving Fort Laramie the wagons entered the foothill country where steep hills, large boulders, and a scarcity of grass made travel difficult. For the fortunate traveler, the plentiful timber and beautiful scenery compensated for the hard work. After crossing to the north side of the Platte River, the Trail continued west and entered a sterile and barren country with little water; the few springs that were found were usually "so impregnated with alkaline salts as to be unfit to drink" (Chittenden, 1902, p. 471). As they came into the Sweetwater River Valley, the people sighted the isolated landmark Independence Rock upon which many inscribed their names. From here the Trail ascended the Sweetwater to its headwaters where they crossed the continental divide through South Pass. The broad valley of South Pass represented the halfway point of the two thousand mile trip and was the entrance to what was then known as Oregon Country.

From South Pass the wagons rolled southwest through dry barren sandy country to the Green River that was forded by "ferrying or floating the wagon beds" (Ghent, 1929, p. 140). They proceeded on to Fort Bridger, the first stopping place since leaving Fort Laramie. After resting their stock, repairing wagons, and replenishing meager supplies, the emigrants turned north to Fort Hall, located on the south bank of the Snake River. Because the fort was built at the junction of the roads to Oregon and California, it was a place where men changed their minds as to their destinations and made final preparations for the last stage of their journeys.

The wagon trail followed along the south bank of the Snake River, turning north after the crossing, left the river, and continued to Fort Boise. Traveling this stretch was extremely unpleasant and dangerous because the terrain was rocky and very hilly, forests were abundant, and

good water and grasslands were scarce. Relief from these conditions came after the Trail forded the Snake River again and headed north into the beautiful Grande Ronde Valley in the Blue Mountains. Here the emigrant's route depended on their final destination. Some stayed in what is now western Oregon, but the majority followed the Columbia River and settled at the Dalles, or continued to the mouth of the Willamette River, turned south to settle in the Willamette Valley, and the remaining settlers went on to Fort Vancouver.

Their overland journey to Oregon was complete. Although mileage was only estimated and varied from caravan to caravan, these emigrants had traveled over 2,000 miles, "every mile of which had been the scene of hardship and suffering, yet of high purpose and stern determination" (Chittenden, 1902, p. 460). They not only carried with them a great cultural heritage but also the material possessions and tools necessary for starting a new life. Garments and accessories of emigrants, as well as other possessions, were frequently preserved and serve as a record of pioneer life and fashion during the 1840s and 1850s.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE JOURNEY TO OREGON

Preparation for the two thousand mile journey was not an easy undertaking. Many families, after making the initial decision to go to Oregon, spent from six months to a year getting their affairs settled and making all the necessary preparations (Looney, 1853, p. 1; Ward, 1853, p. 3). They needed time to do such things as sell or settle farm or business affairs, decide on supplies, and then actually gather their provisions together.

It was essential that emigrants were at a jumping-off place early in the spring. Wagon trains started across the plains about mid-April as soon as the grass was long enough to provide feed for the cattle. Because the trip took five to six months, an early start was imperative so that the emigrants were beyond the mountains when the first snows closed the passes. In a letter written from the Oregon Territory, Samuel B. Crockett (1845) advised his friends to "start as soon as possible and travel as fast the whole rout [sic] as your teams can make it."

For those emigrants with wagons coming from the East, this meant they had to come to Missouri or Iowa the fall before their actual departure date; most spent the winter making their final preparations for the journey (Looney, 1853, p. 1). Another alternative for Easterners was to pack their possessions and come by steamboat, land at St. Louis, or one of the river cities on the Missouri River. Here they would purchase supplies to complete their "outfit" such as wagons, cattle, oxen, camping equipment and utensils, tools, and food. Buying supplies in these transient towns was expensive and often discouraging because of the limited selection in

supplies, especially if the traveler arrived late in the season. From March until mid-April these jumping-off spots were swarming with emigrants waiting to depart on their journey.

At the jumping-off towns, most emigrating families "signed on" or "joined up" with a "company," which usually consisted of no more than 100 wagons and was led by an elected captain and guide who had experience leading wagon trains across the country. Traveling in this manner had benefits that attracted many pioneers. Being part of a group offered: more protection from Indians; companionship during times of sickness, sorrow, and joy; and specialization of labor for such duties as hunting, herding cattle, fixing breakdowns, doctoring, and ministering. These benefits overruled the obvious disadvantages that such a large group would move at a slower pace. Riley Root suggested in his 1850 diary that "10 to 25 wagons is a sufficient number to travel with safety. The advance and rear companies should not be less than 20, but between, it may be safe to go with 6" (p. 42). Regardless of the size of a company, in order to join up the family made a down payment that covered the expenses of a leader and guide and agreed to the rules and regulations of the company's constitution.

The first emigrants in the early 1840s decided on the necessary provisions with very little guidance other than accounts of returned explorers, such as Fremont, Townsend, and Wilkes, who had limited knowledge of traveling with either wagons or families. Those families going in the later years collected more information concerning the kinds and amounts of provisions to take and problems with wagons and animals that they might encounter on the trail by reading the published guidebooks, such as Hasting's Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California (1945) and Ware's Emigrants'

Guide to California (1849). Letters from early Oregon settlers were often published in local newspapers and in church newsletters offering advice to family and friends who were considering making the journey west. Because the later emigrants had the knowledge of these forerunners, it was easier for them to plan more effectively for provisions.

One of the biggest decisions facing the pioneer starting for Oregon was the selection of the best mode of transportation. Emigrating families most often resorted to wagons, either modifying ones they had or purchasing wagons especially for the trip. Wagons needed to be strong, yet not so heavy as to wear out the oxen or horses before the trip was over. The Conestoga-type wagon with its curved bed and canvas cover was the usual choice (see Figure 1). Even so there was very limited space to store all the necessities for the trip such as wagon parts, food, clothing, household items, and basic farm implements. Depending upon their circumstances families might have more than one wagon. Often, the constitution of a company required that wagons meet certain characteristics, such as those specified in Article 15 of the Oregon Society Constitution (n.d.), "The wagons shall be capable of bearing one fourth more than their load, and the Teams able to draw one fourth more than their load."

Pioneers modified manufactured wagons to meet their own traveling storage and living needs or had them custom-made with special compartments built in for storage. Built-in features included storage boxes, sleeping berths, and false floors over large storage areas for items not needed daily (Fry, 1852, p. 14; Gay, 1851, p. 30; Looney, 1853, p. 1). Many convenient features were added to the exteriors of the wagons to facilitate the handiness of tools, utensils, water kegs, and the like. Because these



Figure 1. Model of Conestoga-type wagon on display in Oregon Historical Society exhibit

Photo taken courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society, Portland, Oregon.

wagons were to be "home" for the next six months of trail living, they had to be conveniently arranged for loading and unloading of the family's possessions.

The canvas top protecting the contents of the wagon from the elements could be purchased for about \$6 (Glen, 1852) but was often made by the women. It was usually made of a white canvas material like osnaburg (Hayden, 1915, p. 9) and attached to the wagon in such a way that the sides could be raised and lowered by tying or buttoning the sides to the wagon. Most outfits contained at least one tent used by the men for sleeping. Women made these of heavy canvas also, and some people mentioned in diaries a waterproofing method of boiling these canvas tops in oil to keep the rains and moisture out (Fry, 1852, p. 7).

Another debatable consideration was whether to use mules, horses, or oxen to pull the wagons; oxen were most frequently recommended by those who had made the trip. Other stock was selected or purchased, and each family started with their harness animals, horses, small herd of cattle, and the family dog trailing behind.

Space in the wagons was a primary concern, and the emigrant had to decide what to bring and what to leave behind. Room was allocated for additional yokes, metal wheel bands, wagon tongues, harnesses, saddles, bridles, leather, and the tools necessary to repair these parts because there was no place after crossing the Missouri River to buy new wagons or parts. Salt and animal feed also took up space in the wagons of those emigrants who started early in the spring before the grasses were grown enough to provide feed for the animals. As this was consumed, the wagon quarters became less cramped.

Food for the pioneers also filled considerable space at the beginning of the trip. The amounts of commodities varied, but the standard was to "lay in plenty . . . for at least five months" (Looney, 1843). Hastings in The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California (1845) suggested that the emigrant provide himself with at least 200 pounds of flour or meal; 150 pounds bacon, 10 pounds coffee, 200 pounds sugar, and 10 pounds salt (p. 143). Some companies wrote regulations dealing with provisions to be taken. For example, the following is Article 14 from the Oregon Society Constitution (n.d.) of the wagon trail that Fred Lockley and family joined: "The necessary outfit shall consist of 150 pounds of flour or 100 pounds of flour and 75 pounds of meal and 50 pounds of bacon for every person in the Company excepting infants." Other Oregon settlers advised friends and relatives to take rice and dried fruit to provide the nutrients necessary to prevent scurvy. Jesse Looney (1843) strongly urged the emigrant to pack plenty of provisions and not to count on game.

The list of supplies to be packed into the wagons also included a variety of goods that were used for paying Indians to return strayed cattle and help ferry the wagons across rivers. Hastings (1845) highly recommended that objects such as beads, tobacco, handkerchiefs, blankets, cheap ready-made clothing such as summer coats, pantaloons, vests, and coarse shirts, butcher knives, fishhooks, powder, and lead be taken for Indian trade goods (p. 146). Of these things clothing was the item most in demand, especially calico shirts. Elizabeth Geer reported being taken across a river by two Indians "which cost a good many shirts"; she suggested that

Anybody preparing to come to this country should make up some calico shirts to trade to the Indians in case of necessity. . . . By the time we got here [Oregon] my folks were about stripped of shirts, trousers (Oct. 24, 1847).

Indians frequently appeared in James Raynor's camp crying "shirt, swap shirt" (Oct. 12, 1847). Over the years many Indians had collected "almost a complete suit of clothes, which they have got of [sic] the emigrants. They will trade a very good pony for a good rifle or a coat" (Adams, Sept. 15, 1852).

Other items on the highly recommended list included guns, pistols, ammunition, trade tools, medicine, cookware and utensils, candles, soap, bedding, and clothing. Strong functional clothing and shoes were essential for trail living because vegetation, topographical features, and the physical work of trail life caused much wear and tear on the emigrant's clothing. A letter from Stephen and Mariah King (1846) recommended starting with "clothing a plenty to last you one year after you get [to Oregon, especially] if you have nothing to buy with; [because] after that you will raise a plenty to get clothing."

Getting clothing ready for a family was no small matter. Harriet Palmer (1852) remembered that relatives came to help sew all the clothing for her family about a year in advance of their departure. The reminiscences of Martha Gay (1851) included the following description of sewing preparations for her trip across the country:

The bolts of heavy canvas was in the house being measured off for the 4 immense wagon covers, and also the great tent was cut out and a dozen or more were working on it, and dozens of garments of all sizes and colors were in progress . . . for more than a year the sewing was being done. There were no sewing machines in those days, everything was sewed by hand. The neighbors would come in crowds and make sewing bees. There were so many garments to make, and so much work to be done (p. 29).

Of the variety of packing materials used, trunks and wooden boxes were the most common means of storing bedding, linens, books, good clothing, personal memorabilia, and camp goods, as well as doubling as camp chairs (Peace, June 3, 1849; Thomsen, 1852, p. 21). Everyday clothing was often packed in sacks (Fry, 1852, p. 12; Hawn, 1843). Food items were stored either in sacks or in tin containers to protect the food from moisture, dirt, and insects (Thomsen, 1852, p. 7).

Emigrant after emigrant mentioned in their daybooks, journals, and memoirs taking only what was absolutely essential. They housecleaned their wagons regularly, throwing away "every empty sack and everything else that we could spare, in order to be as easy on the teams as possible" (Fry, 1852, p. 17). Samuel Crockett's (1845) advice was "You should not start with a pound of anything that can be done without for it is much better to throw away an unnecessary article [before you start the journey] than to haul it. . . ."

Despite all the warnings not to bring too much, many people packed loads that were much too heavy. Consequently animals died, wagons broke down and could not be repaired, and many possessions, prized heirlooms as well as the necessities for trail living

had to be abandoned and left behind forever. . . . Wagons, furnitures, clothing, guns, plows, bedding, in fact everything that could be thought of was left by the road side (Reasoner, 1852, p. 2).

On the other hand, it was necessary that the emigrant plan to take enough of all needed supplies and provisions because as Jesse Looney (1843) wrote home "if you get-out-on the way, you will have trouble to get any till you get here."

Once the pioneer was on his way west, there was no place for him to replenish supplies. Several forts along the route reported having supplies, but they could not be depended upon because amounts of provisions were limited, items were very expensive, available in limited amounts, or sold by the time late-coming emigrants arrived at the fort. Cutting down quantities or sharing among families were usually the only ways to remedy the problem of diminishing supplies. Occasionally, needy emigrants picked up items that were abandoned by graves or along the trail. This behavior was the exception rather than the rule, particularly in the case of clothing and bedding because these articles may have been exposed to cholera. This contagious disease was dreaded more than Indian attacks because "if we were attacked by that dreadful disease it meant almost certain death" (Bozarth, 1852, p. 1).

CLOTHING AND ACCESSORIES OF EMIGRATING FAMILIES

The type or style, the quality, and the quantity of clothing worn and taken to Oregon by the emigrants depended on many things: taste and style of the home region; wealth and social class of the family; family composition; interest in fashion apparel; availability of fabrics, notions, and ready-made garments; and the tailoring skills required to construct the various garments. It was necessary to look at the emigrants going to Oregon between 1843 and 1855 as a collective group to discover the common elements of their clothing needs and choices. The following descriptions of the costumes are based on examination of garments in the Nebraska and Oregon Historical Societies' costume collections and on references to clothing in manuscript or published diaries, journals, and reminiscences.

Fashion played a role in these people's lives, but fashion features were modified to correspond to the durability and functionality of a pioneer's clothing. Fashionable dress was popular in the large eastern cities and important river cities for those who could afford it. Periodical sources of high fashion news like Godey's Lady's Book and Peterson's Magazine were widely circulated and may have been available to some midwest communities, although several months late due to slow communication and transportation. Consequently, there was a "time-lag" between what was being shown as high fashion and what the middle-class working person and his family actually wore. During the 1840s and 1850s, the fashion silhouette changed slowly over a period of several decades, although the details of sleeve and neckline design varied every few years.

The first sewing machines were patented in 1846 but were not commonly a part of households until the 1860s. Garments, especially women's, were almost exclusively homemade or made by professional seamstresses. A few ready-made women's garments trickled onto the market before 1900, but the general store was not a source for women's clothing until after 1910. Men's wear was sewn at home, professionally tailored, or purchased ready-made. The men's ready-to-wear industry developed after the War of 1812, producing crudely made shirts, pantaloons, and suits. Some emigrants listed ready-made garments in their account books. Medorem Crawford's (1842) accounts show that gloves were purchased at \$.31, pantaloons at \$3.50, and a cap at \$.35. William Pattison (1849) paid \$3.00 for a waist-coat (July, 1851) and William C. Findley's (1845) list of purchases for June included:

1 pair boots	\$2.37
1 hat	.75
1 pair children's shoes	.50
1 pair pants	3.40
1 handkerchief	.50
1 pair of suspenders	.80
1 silk handkerchief	2.00
1 pair pants	5.00

Because commercial patterns were not introduced until the 1860s by the Butterick family, women made their own garment patterns by taking apart old garments and using the pieces as patterns for new items. Consequently, there was little variation in the style of clothing; variation in the appearance of a costume resulted from the skill in selecting fabrics, notions, accessories, and in the process of construction.

Fabric used in the pioneer's clothing of the 1840s and 1850s was mostly domestically manufactured in the United States or home produced.

Popular fabrics included cotton calicoes, osnaburg, jean, wool, linen, and linsey-woolsey, a combination of wool and linen yarns. Silk, fine woolens, and expensive cottons were seldom affordable for everyday clothing by the middle-class family, but limited amounts were imported from Europe for home furnishings.

By the 1840s textile mills in Eastern United States produced cotton cloth varying in width from 25 to 32 inches and woven in plain weaves, stripes, plaids, and white muslin sheeting. This popular inexpensive white cotton fabric of plain weave was machine printed with an all-over pattern and called calico (Wingate, 1967, p. 95). Calico designs were usually composed of three to four colors with white or black outlining the design. Popular designs in the 1840s and 1850s were vertical stripes of stippling set off by floral sprays, all-over small geometrics, and mazes of tiny flowers and leaves. Colors fashionable at this time were drab, usually blue, dark green, tan, dull gold, brown, purple, red, and black (Pettit, 1970) (see Figures 2, 8, 16, and 18).

Most clothing was handmade, and the quality of construction varied. Some garments displayed skilled workmanship in the construction and decorative details, whereas other vestments were crudely worked by less skilled seamstresses. Women spent many hours making clothing for their families, incorporating into the designs time-consuming details such as piping and cording. Some techniques involved much time but were the only means available to the pioneer, such as creating fullness by cartridge pleating the waistedge and protecting buttonholes from raveling by using the buttonhole stitch to surround the cut space. The pioneer women wasted neither fabric nor old garments; all fabric was literally "used up." For more efficient

use of yardage, patterns were arranged on the fabric with little or no regard to the grain, and if the pattern still did not fit onto the fabric, sections were pieced. Scraps remaining after cutting out a dress or a skirt were used for children's garments, for lining and facings (see Figures 2 and 18), for mending, and in pieced quilts.

Women either purchased notions used in the construction and decoration of garments or made their own. Dry good stores sold fasteners such as hooks and eyes, buttons, belt buckles, laces, trims, and braids. Occasionally garments were decorated with handcrafted lace, knitted or crocheted edgings, tatting, self-fabric, ruffles, ruching, and corded piping.

Women's clothing

During most of the trip, women wore everyday dresses made of calico, a type of cotton print with an all-over printed design (see Figure 8). The style typical of 1840s and 1850s had the following features: narrow collar band; fitted bodice with shoulder seam set back and slanting down from the neck to the armhole; full sleeves gathered to the dress and to a narrow band at the wrist; center front opening that buttoned; corded piping applied to the neckline, armhole, and waist for strength and decoration; and a full long cartridge pleated skirt attached to the bodice (see Figures 3 and 9). Several variations on this basic style bodice seen in the Oregon Historical Society Costume Collection (1976) are pictured on the following pages: the dropped shoulder line was a style line popular in 1830s and carried into dresses of the 1840s and 1850s (see Figures 4 and 5); a variety of princess seams controlled the amount of fitting in the back (see



Figure 2. Three calico prints used to face dress hem, c. 1850
(Oregon Historical Society Costume Collection, garment 65-402)

Photo taken courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society, Portland, Oregon.



Figure 3. Woman's everyday dress, c. 1850

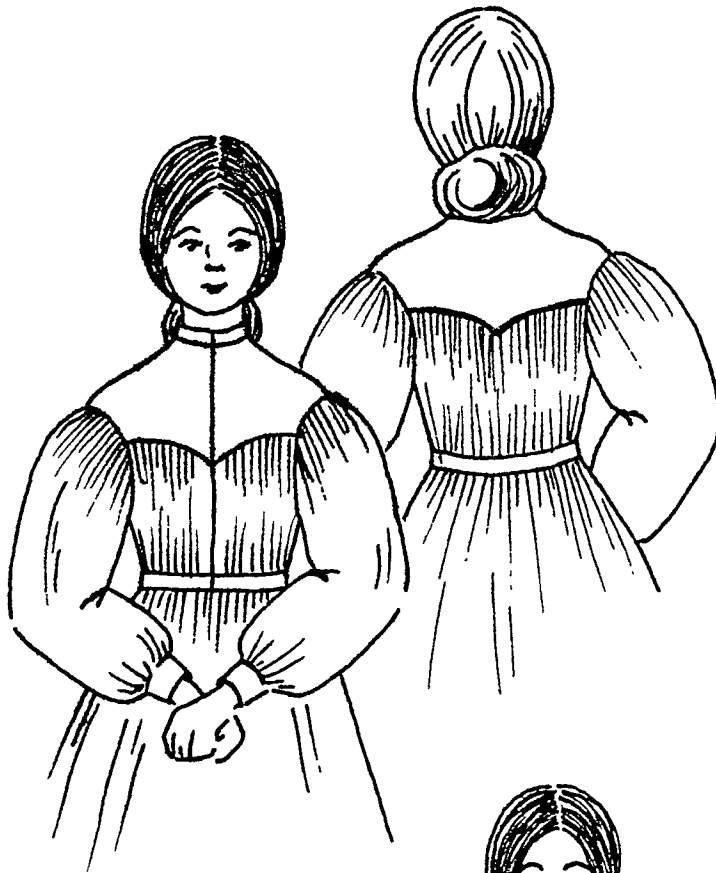


Figure 4

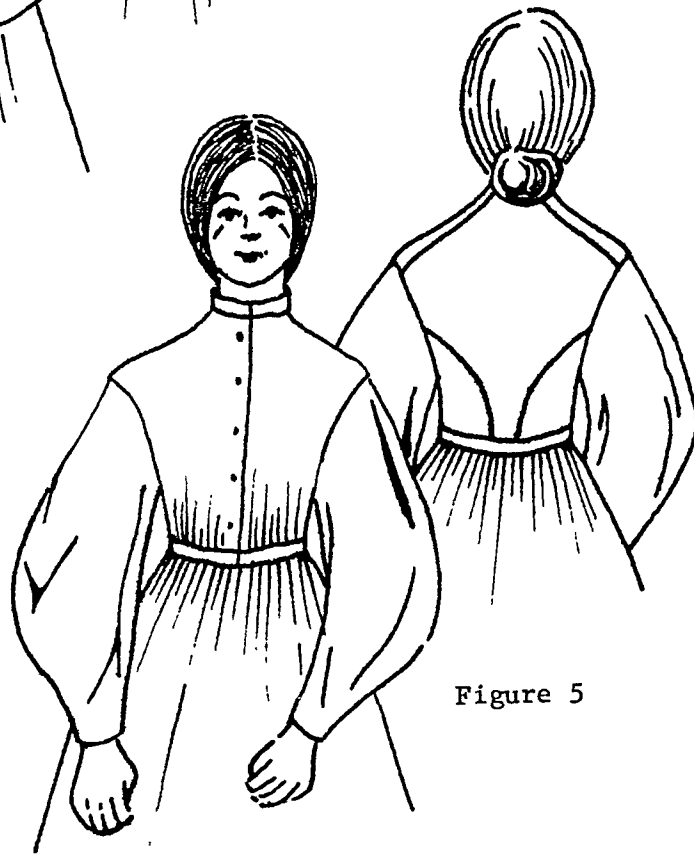


Figure 5

Figure 4. Variations in woman's dress, c. 1850
Figure 5. Variations in woman's dress, c. 1850

Figures 5 and 6); back and front yokes and gathered bodices altered the style in other dresses (see Figures 4 and 7); small brass hooks and eyes occasionally replaced buttons and handmade buttonholes (see Figure 4).

Darts were not common in the dresses but were used in the bodice lining to control the fullness. The lining was usually a cambric fabric or muslin sheeting (see Figure 10). Some garments showed evidence that stays were part of the bodice at one time, but no boning remained intact.

The skirts of these dresses were very full, usually made of five to six widths of fabric, varying from 25 to 32 inches wide, making the skirt 125 to almost 200 inches in circumference. Hems were faced with four to six inches of the same fabric used in the skirt or pieces of other calico prints sewn together; the skirt was not lined (see Figure 2).

Some women transported their "good" dresses, and Cecilia Adams (1852) described in her diary an anecdote about a wool dress she was taking to Oregon, "June 6: Last night my clothes got out of the wagon and the oxen ate them up, so I consider I have met with a great loss as it was my woollen dress." These garments were not worn unless the weather was very cold or other garments wore out and these had to be substituted.

Pioneer women took skirts with them. Sarah Hill (1843) used her linsey skirt as a wrap to protect her from the rain (p. 16). No one mentioned blouses; E. W. Conyers (1852) referred to a jacket, but it was undefined whether it was a man's or woman's. The July 3rd entry in his journal concerned the problem of:

manufacturing old glory' to wave over our festivities. Some one asked the question, "Where are we to obtain the material" but this question was quickly settled, one lady brought forth a sheet for the white stripes, this put a new and unique idea into their minds, and a red skirt was donated for the red stripes. Another

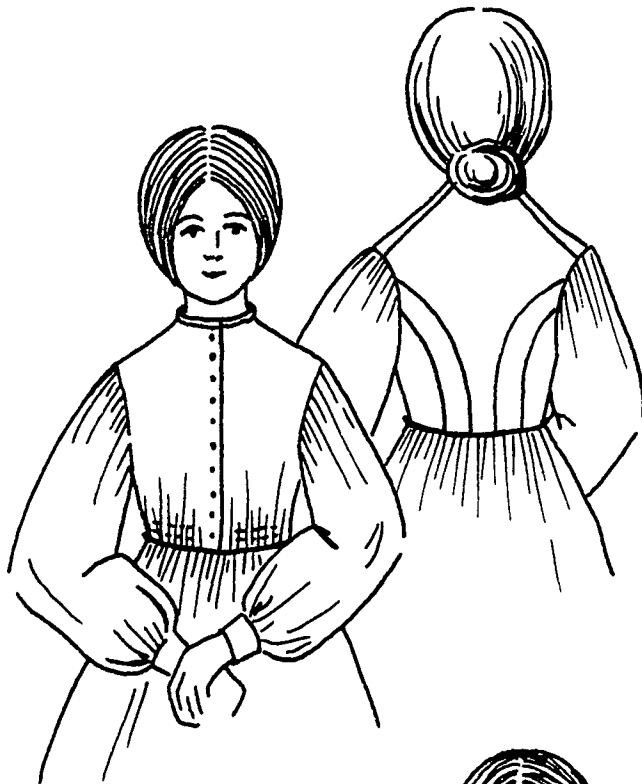


Figure 6

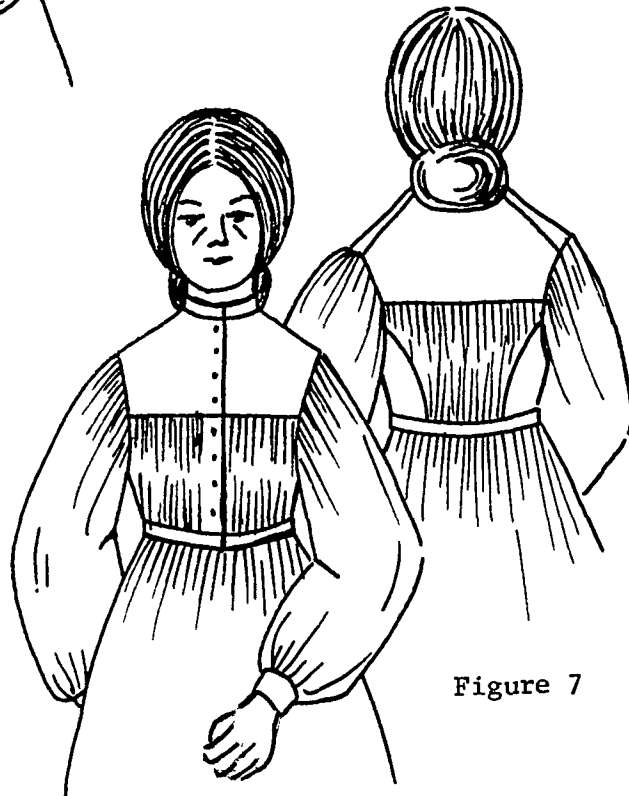


Figure 7

Figure 6. Variations in woman's dress, c. 1850

Figure 7. Variations in woman's dress, c. 1850

Figure 8. Woman's everyday calico dress, c. 1850
(Oregon Historical Society Costume Collection, garment 69-195.5)

Figure 9. Woman's everyday plaid dress, c. 1850
(Oregon Historical Society Costume Collection, garment 69-195.3)

Photos taken courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society, Portland, Oregon.





Figure 10. Bodice lining in woman's everyday dress, c. 1840
(Oregon Historical Society Costume Collection, garment A71-100)

Photo taken courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society, Portland, Oregon.

lady donated a blue jacket to make the field. Needles and thread was quickly secured, and the ladies went at their task with a will.

The apron was an essential part of a woman's costume, fulfilling several purposes: to protect fabric from dirt, ash, and grease while preparing food, saving the appearance of the dress when worn without the apron, and to carry items such as wood and buffalo chips (Hixon, 1947, p. 24). Apron styles were functional rather than decorative, usually made of calico remnants or a cheap white sheeting fabric. The pattern consisted of a rectangular panel six to twelve inches shorter than the skirt length and as wide as the manufactured fabric. This panel gathered onto a waistband, and ties were attached that fastened the apron in the back.

Women of all ages wore sunbonnets while outdoors. Although they may have appeared differently and have been called by different names, most bonnets were drafted in three sections: the brim extended forward from the crown section and framed the face to protect the complexion and eyes from the sun, dust, and wind; the crown covered the back of the head and was either a separate piece or part of the apron; the apron fell from a line even with the end of the brim, varying in length from about three to four inches to about 12 inches, falling across the shoulders. It was the apron of the bonnet that protected the woman's long hair. Ties fastened the bonnet under the chin; also a pair of ties pulled the apron in at the back to fit close to the head (see Figures 11 and 12). Small wooden or cardboard slats were inserted in the cases between the bonnet brim and the lining to stiffen the brim and keep "our bonnets from that wilted appearance that many had, where only pasteboard had been used" (Hixon, 1947, p. 12). The bonnet was entirely lined, even the apron in the very dressy bonnets.

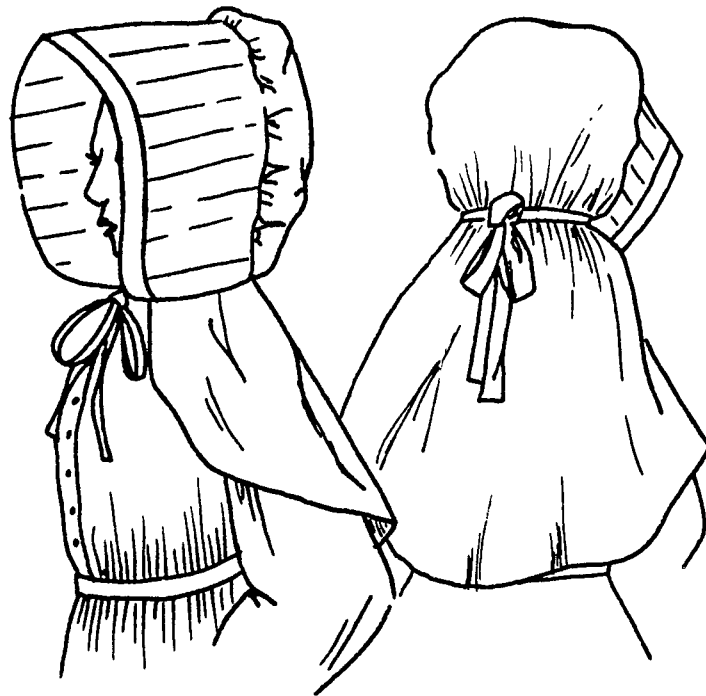


Figure 11. Woman's poke bonnet, c. 1850

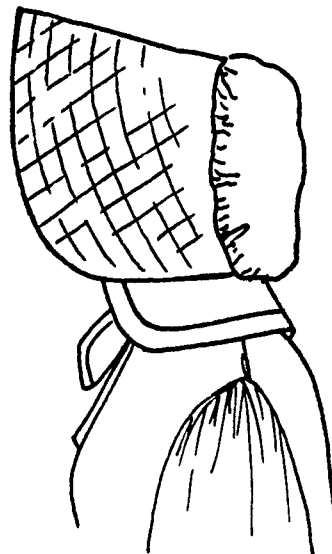


Figure 12. Woman's sunbonnet, c. 1850

Ruching, ruffles, pintucking, piping, and braid added a decorative touch to the bonnet brims and the edges of the apron.

A variety of accessories complemented the costume of the pioneer woman. Women's undergarments were available to the pioneers, and it is assumed worn, but no mention was found in any primary source that substantiates this fact. Gloves or half-mitts, ending at the first knuckle, were worn to protect a woman's hands from becoming rough and brown from exposure to the wind and blowing sand. During cold spells, particularly at the onset of the journey and in the mountains, the migrants unpacked their shawls, knitted mittens and hats, and warm cloaks (Adams, 1852; Farrington, 1853; Hanna, 1852; Peace, 1849). Very little descriptive information appeared in any of the sources about women's shoes. When their shoes wore out, women went barefoot or wore Indian moccasins. Cecilia Adams (1852) wrote about fording rivers barefoot, and the August 3 entry in Harriet Clarke's (1851) diary read "Sue and I took off our shoes, and walked up the shallow pebbly [sic] bottom of the noisy Weber creek."

Men's clothing

Men usually wore pants, vests, and coats (see Figure 13). Pants were called pantaloons or breeches during the 1840s and 1850s, as done by Thomsen (1896) on August 14th when he described seeing a dead man floating down the river "dressed in jean pantaloons." Farrington (1853) also spoke of finding a "gold watch and a key in an old pantaloons pocket" (July 8). Cotton, jean, and wool homespun were fabrics used to make men's pants (see Figure 14). Some style features included: a fly opening at the center front, which was fastened by buttons either on the inside of the fly or the

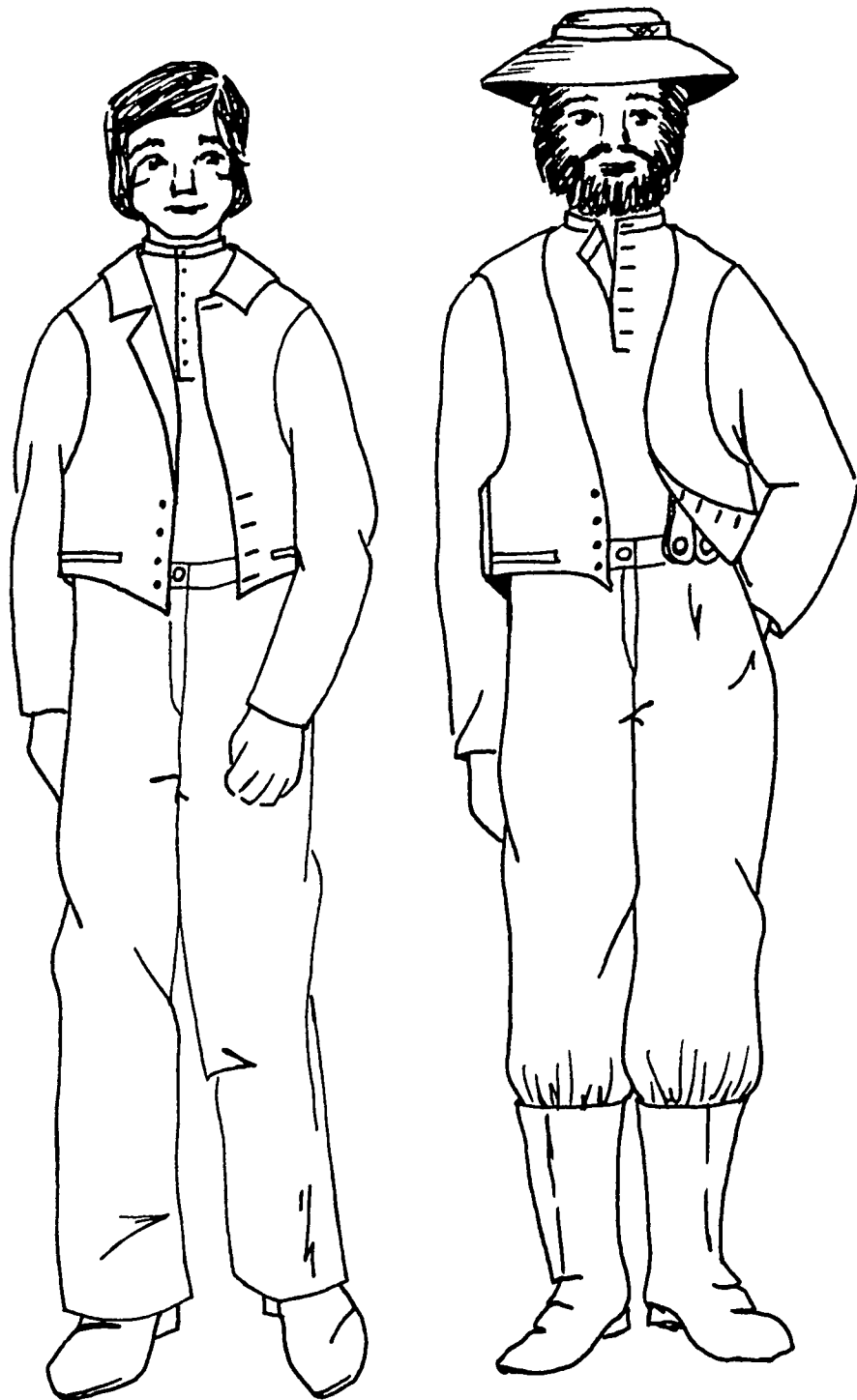


Figure 13. Man's costumes, c. 1850



Figure 14. Front opening of man's pants, 1849
(Oregon Historical Society Costume Collection, garment 1959-
25-135)

Photo taken courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society, Portland, Oregon.

outside; a yoke at the back waistline which could be tightened by adjusting a buckle; buttons on either side of the center front to which suspenders were fastened; very baggy crotch area; semi-fitted pant legs; and deep side pockets. Suspenders and belts were used to hold up the pants.

Shirts were made of cotton calicoes, linen, and flannels. A narrow neck band, partial front placket opening with buttons, dropped shoulders, and gussets under the arms were features of shirts during the 1840s and 1850s. Men worked in shirt sleeves (Hadley, 1851; Thomsen, 1852) and put on vests and coats in the evenings or when the temperature was low. Thomsen (1852) reported nearly freezing on July 1st when he was scouting ahead of the wagons and got caught in the rain "having neither coat nor vest."

Vests were worn over shirts, either alone or topped with jackets (see Figures 15 and 16). Special features found in vests of this period included: a pointed center front extending one to two inches below the natural waistline; shallow welt pockets; deep armholes; shoulder line slating toward the back; and a convertible or roll-type collar. The vest fastened at the center front with four to five small buttons, and a back buckle adjusted the circumference of the vest around the waist (see Figure 17). The front of the vest was cut from one fabric and the back from another fabric such as a printed calico (see Figure 16). The vest was completely lined and featured pockets of a variety of sizes and shapes.

Trail diaries frequently mentioned that coats were worn when the weather got damp and cold, and heavy overcoats were donned when the weather was particularly cold (Farrington, 1853; Peace, 1849; Wigle, 1852). The

Figure 15. Man's vest front, 1846
(Oregon Historical Society Costume Collection, garment 1305)

Figure 16. Man's vest front and calico back, 1846
(Oregon Historical Society Costume Collection, garment 1440)

Photos taken courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society, Portland, Oregon.





Figure 17. Buckle at man's vest back, c. 1850
(Oregon Historical Society Costume Collection, garment 876)

Photo taken courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society, Portland, Oregon.

overcoats were lined to provide warmth, and John Taylor (1854) found a special function for the lining in his coat. He "cut a piece of red flannel out of my overcoat and part of a skirt. Mrs. Molder gave me a piece of blue cloth, and she and I made it [flag] and raised it in front of our tent" (p. 12). One diary contained a reference to finding an oilcoat in the belongings of a dead man (Sutton, April 26, 1854). This may have been similar to a rain poncho oiled to keep out moisture.

Accessory items such as hats and boots were frequently mentioned in the diaries, but the author saw no physical evidence that could be used for detailed descriptions. Only one description of a hat was found. Harriet Clarke (1851) told of one adventurous young man who climbed into a tree to go after an eagle's nest when the mother eagle swooped down and took his "old black hat" (May 25). The trail was very hard on boots and shoes, and some men, like Origen Thomsen (1896) reported started "ahead, barefoot, too as I usually went on good roads" (p. 59, July 3), especially through Kansas and Nebraska before getting into the areas of rough vegetation and rocky roads. Boots and shoes were items that completely wore out, and emigrants found it necessary to replace them in order to trudge the rest of the way to Oregon. Indians often clustered around forts and sold moccasins to the travelers. E. Amelia Hadley (1851) "bought some mocassins of [sic] them [Indians] which are made very nice" (June 6). Occasionally the emigrant purchased boots and shoes at a trading post along the trail. The following was Thomsen's tale of buying boots at a trading post near Devil's Gate:

I bought me a pair of coarse shoes, for 3 dollars. They wore pretty well, but as it afterwards turned out . . . the heels were

stiffened with pasteboard and the middle soul was pine (June 6, 1852).

Children's and infant's clothing

There were no outstanding features of children's clothing at this time period; they more often than not wore garments similar in style to adult clothing, probably somewhat simpler in design and construction. Most infants' clothing was remade from the "good parts" of worn out adult clothing or pieces left over after cutting out adult garments. The infants' shirts were constructed from a variety of calico prints, all used on the same garment; for example, Figure 18 was made from four different prints. Styles were very simple with pleats and tucks that could be let out to prolong the garment life for a growing child (see Figures 19 and 20). Drawstrings at the neck or several buttons were usually the only means of fastenings (see Figure 22). No primary evidence was available in the costume collection or from reading diaries to document other infant garments, such as diapers, dresses, and hats.

Children's clothing was also leftovers, although Hixon (1947) reported that her mother made all three girls in the family

some real nice Sunday dresses and some white bonnets having ruffles on them. My dress was blue and white calico, and Louvina's was red and white, and little Cynthia's was pink and white (p. 6).

With their dresses, girls also wore aprons and sunbonnets (see Figures 21 and 23). Drew (1853) reported passing "a tiny new made grave with a little pink sun-bonnet on the crude wooden cross at the head" (p. 5). Warren's (1853) story is not quite as poignant; she remembered:

Somewhere along the trail I found a little pink sunbonnet. As we boarded the Dalles boat a little girl came up to me and said I



Figure 18. Infant's shirt made of four calico prints, 1857
(Oregon Historical Society Costume Collection, garment 76-
13.54)

Photo taken courtesy of Oregon Historical Society, Portland, Oregon.

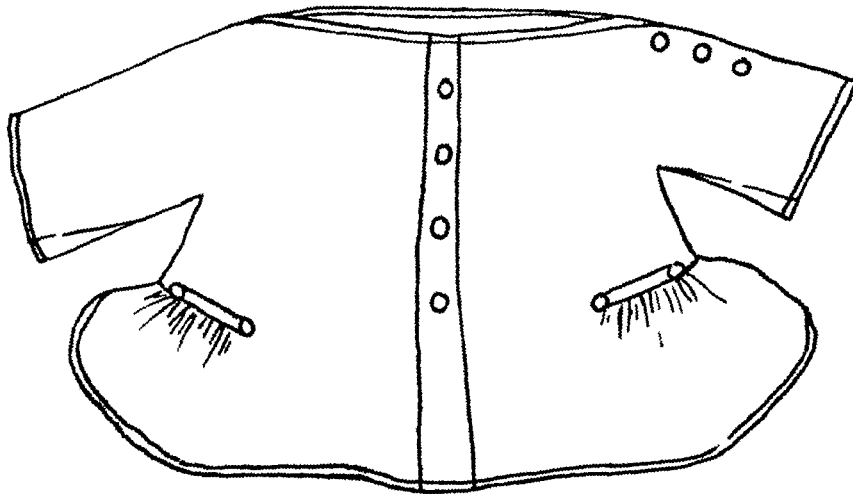


Figure 19. Infant's shirt, c. 1850

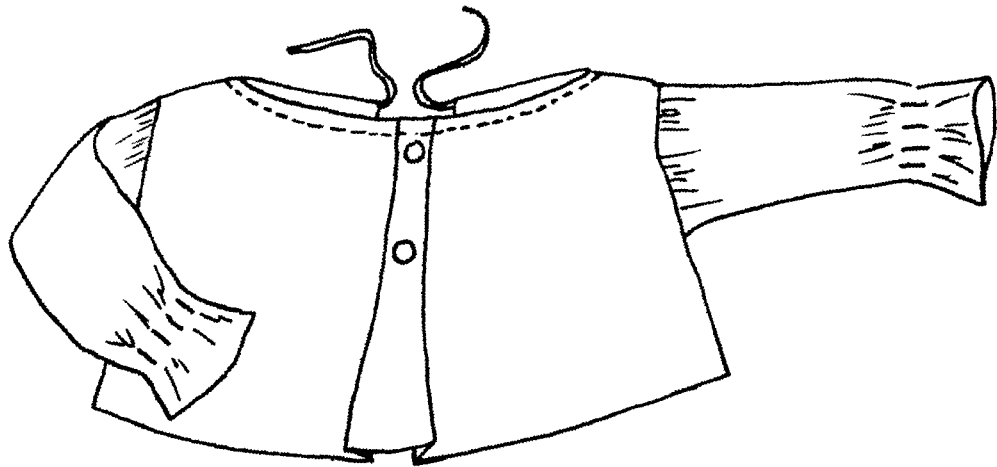


Figure 20. Infant's shirt, c. 1850

Figure 21. Girl's dress front, 1849
(Oregon Historical Society Costume Collection, garment 3691)

Figure 22. Drawstring fastening at back of girl's dress, 1849
(Oregon Historical Society Costume Collection, garment 3691)

Photos taken courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society, Portland, Oregon.





Figure 23. Young girl's costume,
c. 1850



Figure 24. Young boy's costume,
c. 1850

had her sister's sunbonnet and that she was crying for it. I gave it to her at once (p. 7).

Mothers were often particular about their girls wearing sunbonnets and long mitts while traveling:

in order to protect our complexions, hair, and hands. Much of the time I should like to have gone without that long bonnet poking out over my face, but mother pointed out to me some girls who did not wear bonnets, and as I did not want to look as they did, I stuck to my bonnet, finally growing used to it (Hixon, 1947, p. 12).

Girls' bonnets were constructed similarly to those made for adult women.

Boys' clothing emulated that worn by older men, their outfits consisting of pantaloons and shirts (see Figure 24). They did wear vests and coats but only when necessary. Wigle (1852) wrote an episode in his diary about some mischievous young men betting his son to lay down in the cactus and roll over. The boy "had neither coat nor vest on. The next day Dennis gave one of the boys 10¢ to pick the thorns out of his back" (p. 22). Shifts, vests, and jackets were styled after the men's mode, the only difference being the greatly reduced size.

Pants, pantaloons, or breeches were constructed with a front flap that buttoned on either side or with the newer method of fly front opening, like the man's pants. They, too, were held up by suspenders or a belt.

THE EFFECT OF TRAIL LIFE ON CLOTHING

The emigrant's general mode of dress did not change, but the condition and number of garments changed radically from the time they crossed the Missouri River, traveled some 2,000 miles, and reached their final destination in Oregon. At the onset of their journey, people wore "presentable" everyday clothes; garments might not have been all new, but they were at least clean and mended and shoes were in good walking condition. Even though some emigrants were better dressed and prepared than others according to their social class and personal values related to dress, most arrived in Oregon looking tattered and torn. Dillis Ward's (1911) account of his personal appearance upon arriving in Oregon in 1853 was typical of most emigrants, "Having reached the end of our long and trying journey, we were footsore and weary, every thread shred of our clothing begrimed and filled with the alkali dust of the plains" (p. 53). James Longmire (1853) described his appearance in even greater detail:

my arrival in this country Oregon with torn and ragged pants and coat, my cap tattered and torn, and with one boot on, the other foot covered with an improvised moccasin made of a piece of cow hide from one of the animals we had killed. . . . In this garb I was to meet a party of well dressed gentlemen from Olympia. . . . My dress was a fair sample of that of the rest of our party, and when together we felt pretty well, all being in the same fashion; but when brought face to face with well dressed men I must confess I felt somewhat embarrassed (p. 16).

Why should he be embarrassed? What hardships of the trail caused persons to arrive in Oregon in such a disheveled state of dress?

Traveling clothes were subjected to unusual treatment simply because the migration took from five to six months. In the first place, the emigrant took with him a limited amount of clothing so he wore things

frequently; the quantity of his wardrobe diminished as clothing was discarded to lighten the load, wore out, was lost or stolen, and used for emergencies. In addition, daily chores such as hauling wood, gathering buffalo chips, hunting, cooking, and even crawling in and out of the wagons, riding the horse, or walking were responsible for abrading clothing. The condition of the emigrant's clothing was further complicated by the vagabond life style that limited the opportunities for regular amounts and methods of care.

During the long migration, emigrants experienced several changes of seasons and lived through a variety of weather from freezing cold to blistering hot. When the cold set in, families wrapped themselves up in cloaks, overcoats, hats and mittens, quilts, bedding, or anything that would keep them warm. In summer months emigrants covered their bodies to protect their skin from the rays of the sun but sometimes worked in short sleeves.

Water in many forms, or the lack of it, posed a problem affecting the clothing of the emigrant. Early in the trip, especially in June, severe thunder, lightning, rain, and hail storms caught the emigrant off guard, soaking him and all his belongings. Personal belongings also got a good soaking when rivers were forded. Usually the wagons crossed a river without upsetting, but there was no guarantee that they would make it across without some water damage. Whether from rain or river water, possessions often got wet, had to be unpacked, and took several days to dry out. Emigrants could not afford the time to "lay over" to dry things, so resumed travel with possessions still damp, conditions conducive to mold and mildew.

Another enemy of the emigrant was the dust that rolled across the plains or was kicked up by churning wagon wheels and plodding animal hoofs.

Elizabeth Geer wrote on August 23, 1847:

You in "The States" know nothing about dust. It will fly so that you can hardly see the horns of your tongue yoke of oxen. It often seems that the cattle must die for the want of breath. And then in our wagons--such a spectacle--beds, clothes, victuals and children, all completely covered.

Dirt was embedded in everyone's clothing, and it was difficult to remove because of poor laundry conditions. The vegetation along the trail caused lots of wear and tear, particularly on dresses and pants. Elizabeth Geer described the shrubs as being

prickly and beiry. The sage is dreadful on ones clothes. It grows from one to six feet high, has a stalk like our tame sage or sedge. . . . Then there is the prickly pear. Step on it any and everywhere. Look out for bare feet (July 9, 1847).

To combat this problem, women shortened their skirts and walked along "with their dreeses [sic] up to the knees" (Taylor, Sept. 29, 1853), and men tucked their pantaloons into their boots. Emigrants discovered the Indian moccasin, and some men even resorted to wearing Indian buckskin to protect themselves and their clothing and shoes from the thorny plants (Geer, Oct. 17, 1847).

The physical distances traveled over hot sands and rocky roads wore out many boots and shoes. Martha Garrison (1845) reported that she walked over so much rough ground that she soon wore out her new shoes (p. 28). E. W. Conyers (1852) related a heartbreaking episode about a mother tending her child by removing

the rags from those little feet, and also those of her own. It would of softened even the savage heart of Dionysios, the tyrant of Sicily. The sole of each little foot was covered with sores, and swollen to nearly twice their natural size, caused by their

long and continued walk over the rocks and hot sands of the plains. Their shoes having given out, the mother had swathed their little feet in rags, and also her own feet to protect them. . . . A very poor substitute indeed for shoes (August 23).

Several unusual demands modified the costumes or garments of the emigrants. Some patriotic emigrants used various clothing items such as jackets and skirts to make flags for celebrating Independence Day. Often times petticoats and shirts were torn into strips for binding wounds and swollen feet. In another unusual instance by Slater (1852), women "were called upon to sacrifice apart of their clothing. This they tore into strips and caulked the box as best they could" to keep provisions in the wagons dry when crossing rivers.

CARING FOR CLOTHING ALONG THE TRAIL

Caring for the family's clothing was a complicated task for pioneer women, especially as they traveled across the country in covered wagons. Mending was the simplest part of clothing maintenance. Sewing equipment such as thimbles, scissors, and needles were kept in a place that was easily accessible so that garments could be mended when the need arose. The washing and drying of clothes were complicated by several factors: it was often difficult to find time to wash and dry clothing; it was necessary to be located near a water supply, and wash-day equipment had to be adopted to trail life.

As time was essential to the traveler, stops were not made unless absolutely necessary. Sometimes the migration was held up because of weather, breakdowns, or sickness, but occasionally layovers were arranged. This delay in progress was usually for one day or often just part of the day. In such cases emigrants looked for a camp site near a river or spring so cattle could be watered and washing could be done. James Field described finding a suitable location for laying over, "having an excellent camp for wood, water and grass and plenty of dirty duds in the wagons to keep the women out of mischief for one day so we concluded to lie by" (June 23, 1845).

Once the wagons stopped, many activities took place in the emigrant camps. Men repaired wagons and yokes, mended tents and harnesses, tended the weary cattle, and hunted game. Women attended to the domestic chores of baking, cleaning and airing out the wagons, washing and drying the

family's clothes. Everyone was busy; the children had their chores outlined and worked alongside their parents.

The source and condition of the water influenced the selection of a camp site and affected the methods of laundry. Rivers and springs provided most laundry water; sometimes it had to be carried in kegs on parts of the trail that did not follow a river. The emigrants watched for signs of water and the lack of it, and in some areas when "our camp master thought we should not come to water again for 19 miles we encamped. . . . In the afternoon we washed" (Cranstone, June 6, 1851).

The waters of the Missouri and Platte Rivers were extremely muddy and not conducive to washing clothes. For example, C. E. Adams reported getting "a pint of mud out of every pail of water" (June 25, 1852). Pioneers had home remedies to settle the mud from the water so it was usable for drinking and laundry. Kahler (1852) and Warren (n.d.) used cornmeal and bran to clarify water from the Platte River; Hadley settled the dirt from water "by throwing in a little alum, and let it stand a while" which made the water "as soft as rain water" (May 9, 1851).

As caravans progressed further west, muddy water ceased to be a problem, although they encountered areas of alkali water and soda springs which were not good for washing clothes. Other areas in the mountains such as along the Sweetwater River were reported as having "good water as soft as snow water which it is [,] coming from melted snow from the mountains" (Hadley, June 15, 1851). These clear waters eliminated only some of the laundry problems.

Regardless of the water problem, washing remained a chore. Clothes dirty from the mud and dirt of traveling were accumulated until the

location of the camp site and other conditions were suitable for washing. Some women washed nearly everyday, others every week or so, depending on family composition, the amount of clothing they had, and the location of the wagon train along the trail. Chambers (1851) remembered having "no small amount of soiled and more than dirty clothes, after so long a trip, although we had washed every time we had an opportunity" (p. 31).

The physical description of washing differed from diarist to diarist; some reported details and others simply mentioned that they "washed." Emigrating women used a variety of methods and equipment for laundering, from very simple means to a very complicated routine. The simplest method reported by C. E. Adams (1852) was to "do our washing by taking our clothes down to the river" (June 17). Others hauled water in Indian rubber water sacks (Kahler, 1852, p. 25) or buckets back to the wagons where they washed in some sort of container. Esther Hanna washed clothes "without either tub or board, but [got] along very well with a large bucket and pan set on an ox yoke" (April 29, 1852) but complained of back aches because it involved so much stooping. An even more sophisticated method was employed by M. E. Warren (1853); her description of wash day follows:

About every 2 weeks it was necessary to have a family wash day. This was quite a chore as all water had to be heated in camp kettles. . . . My mother had a new zinc washboard and 2 wooden tubs at the start. The board she carried through but the tubs were lost on the route. They dried out so in the day time and when camped at night the tubs had to be filled first thing (p. 2).

Soap was included in most emigrants' provisions. It was most often made before leaving because the process was lengthy and not adaptable to trail life. Many families soaked garments in strong disinfectants because

of the outbreaks of cholera. Hixon (1947) remembered how her father tended to the recovery of her sister from a case of cholera:

Cynthia was well enough to take out, only she must first be thoroughly cleansed and have fresh disinfected clothing and bedding. In doing our washing, father would take the clothing and bedding down to our tub below the tent, put them into it and pour hot disinfected water on them, stirring them about and adding more water until they were cleansed; then he would rinse and hang them out (p. 26).

Clothing and linens were not only dried after washing, but many emigrants reported laying over, unloading their wagons to dry things after bad storms or hard river crossings. Drew (1853) was once so wet that "we had to stay several days until bedding and garments were dry" (p. 4). The sun usually provided the drying element, but John Fry's (1852) group

built fires by which to get warm and dry the things. We made huge log heaps. About noon the train came up, the sun came out bright, and the things from the leaky wagons were spread out to dry (p. 7).

Some wagon trains laid over for whole days; others took off partial days in which to take care of these domestic tasks. Nevertheless, the process of laundry was an inconvenience to the emigrant but so much a part of their life style that it was not a novelty about which to write in their diaries other than the few casual notations as previously cited.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

Conclusions

The study of the dress of the Oregon Trail emigrants revealed a variety of facts concerning mid 19th century costume. By studying the acquisition, style, use, and care of clothing, a greater appreciation for the emigrating pioneers' life style was gained. Traveling across the continent in ox-drawn wagons presented special problems and considerations to the women concerned with their families' clothing.

Clothing and its production were an integral part of a pioneer's life. Women's garments were most often homemade of commercially produced fabric; most men's clothing was also homemade, although some garments such as suits and overcoats were tailor made or available from ready to wear markets.

Garments were purchased or made before departing on the long trek to Oregon not only for the family but also for use as Indian trade goods. There was little possibility for acquiring articles of dress along the way. The type and style of clothing taken reflected what emigrants had, what they expected to need, what they made, what was available for purchase, and what they could afford to buy. Most clothing worn, especially during the first stages of the trip, was simple and functional. Yet the long journey caused even stout fabric to wear so that emigrants arrived in Oregon looking worn and ragged. Many pioneers had to unpack their "best" dress to replace worn out ordinary garments.

Women, more than men, had charge of clothing care and repair during the trip, and their diaries had many entries concerning the effect of the trail on clothing care and storage. Men seemed more concerned in their

trail journals with activities in which they were more closely involved such as dealing with the cattle, problems of repair and maintenance of the wagons and equipment, and maintaining good relationships with their traveling companions and Indians.

Summary

This research was conducted to determine the costume of the American family group who emigrated to Oregon from 1843 to 1855 via the Oregon Trail. The findings were used by the researcher to develop patterns for men, women, and children's garments and a handbook to explain how these garments could be replicated today. The National Park Service will use this documented costume information to develop a more accurate living history program at Scotts Bluff National Monument in western Nebraska. (The handbook and patterns are available from the Textiles and Clothing Department at Iowa State University.)

Family groups from the upper Mississippi and Ohio River Valleys migrated to Oregon in the early 1840s and 1850s. Regardless of the many reasons for going, all emigrants traveled from early spring to late fall across 2,000 miles of plains and mountains. It took about a year to gather provisions, make all the preparations for the trip, and pack all their supplies into covered wagons. It was essential to carry enough provisions because places to resupply along the trail were limited. On the other hand, many belongings were left back home or were abandoned along the way to lighten the load.

Pioneers wore homemade garments that were simply constructed of inexpensive or home-produced fabrics. Functionality was of prime importance,

especially as they encountered severe weather, serious disease, and the hardships of the physical trail. These elements altered the appearance of the pioneer as his clothing began to wear out. The aspects of the physical trail also affected the amount and kind of care given to garments; the water supply and washing equipment carried in the wagons determined the laundry procedure.

Only a few actual garments survived the rough life of the trail during this migration. Because of the limited number of items transported, the hardships encountered by trail life and their effects on clothing, and the limited access to new supplies, clothing was worn out when the emigrants finally arrived and settled in Oregon. Pioneer women remade worn adult garments into children's clothing or used the good parts of worn fabric for mending, for linings and facings, and for quilt blocks. Those garments that were saved for sentimentality found their way into costume collections along with many other garments having acquisition notes listing them as coming to Oregon with families who emigrated at this time. After studying the garments, other primary sources were consulted to present a more complete overview of the clothing and problems related to its acquisition and care. Trail diaries, journals, manuscripts, and reminiscences provided valuable information about trail dress and its care.

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