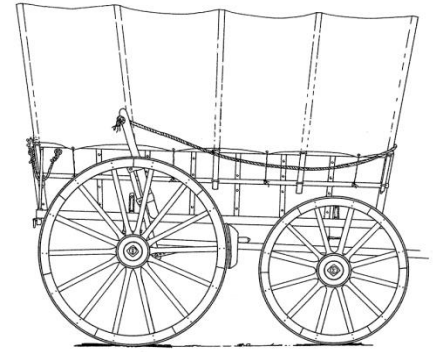


Wagons on the Oregon Trail

The wagon train was moveable community for four to six months along the trail. Each evening, the wagon encampment typically grouped into a circle, forming a temporary corral. Around the circle, tents and bedrolls provided the shelter for exhausted pioneers. A few guards kept an eye on the grazing livestock and watched for signs of trouble from wild animals or potential thieves. At sunrise, four o'clock or so, the guards called out or fired their rifles to wake the camp and start another day on the long and dusty trail.



Morning fires were kindled, coffee and breakfast prepared. The men and boys spread out to gather the grazing cattle and horses. Tents were struck, breakfast eaten, dishes cleaned, and wagons repacked. The oxen were yoked and the wagons pulled out of the circle into a caravan. Another day began on the trail west.

After five or six hours of travel, the wagon master looked for a noonday resting place. Wagons pulled to a stop and the oxen were unhitched to rest and graze. Families and friends gathered to eat a cold lunch, often leftovers from yesterday's supper. It was a brief time for the weary travelers to nap, visit, or write a few notes in their diaries, or to just sit and rest after hours of walking.

Depending on the weather, the wagon train might stay at the nooning spot several hours and choose to travel again in cooler evening temperatures. Most rested only an hour or so before plodding on. Women and children looked for wood to gather along the way. Hunters made forays searching for fresh game for supper. The wagon master kept his eye out for a suitable evening campsite... a place with water, fuel wood, and forage for the livestock.

As the sun became low, the lead wagon started a circle, followed by the others, about a wagon's length apart. As the wagons rolled into position and the animals were unhitched, the wagon tongue and chains were used to connect the wagons into a corral. Outside the circle, tents were pitched, fuel wood gathered, and campfires started. Guards were selected, and the livestock set loose to graze. Again, it was time for the evening meal, mending clothes, repairing wagons, washing dishes, resting. Friends gathered in small groups to visit and play cards. Some pulled out musical instruments to accompany singing and dancing. Weary after a day of traveling 15 or 20 miles, the activity soon quieted down. The music stopped, the campfires dwindled, and the encampment slept.

Did the pioneers sleep and ride in the wagons?

Rough roads and wagons without springs made for a very bumpy ride, and wagons were filled with supplies which left little room for passengers. Generally, travelers only rode in wagons when too ill or tired to walk, and slept most nights in tents or bedrolls outside the wagon.

Did they circle the wagons when they camped?

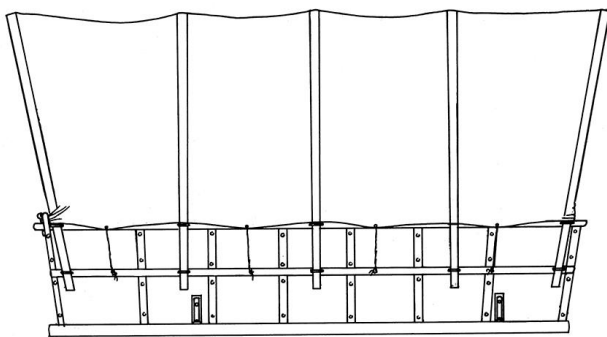
Large wagon trains formed corrals by circling their wagons, where animals could be herded if needed. Small wagon trains generally did not form circles.

Wagon Styles

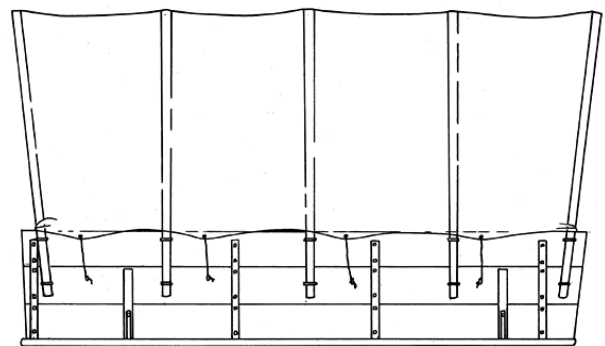
What kind of wagons did the pioneers bring west?

There is no one answer to this question. It's estimated that more than 50,000 wagons came west in a variety of size and shapes

The wagon boxes, or beds, were generally of two styles. Straight plank sided boxes were typical of freight wagons and common farm wagons found on the Oregon Trail. These were constructed of two or three planks stacked and held together with metal straps and bolts. Paneled boxes with horizontal frames and vertical stiles were based on the famous Conestoga freight wagons, and were strong and flexible... an important consideration when traveling the rough terrain of the Oregon Trail.



Panel Style Wagon Box



Plank Style Wagon Box

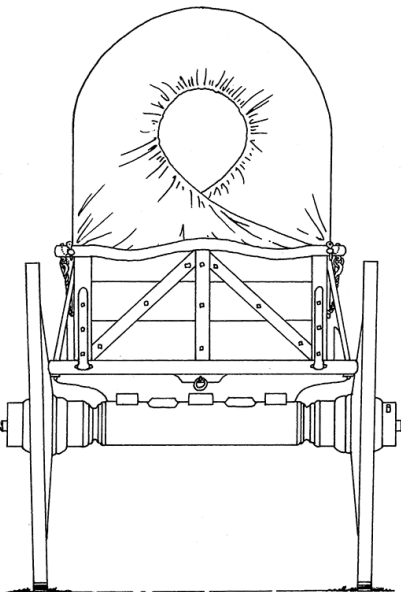
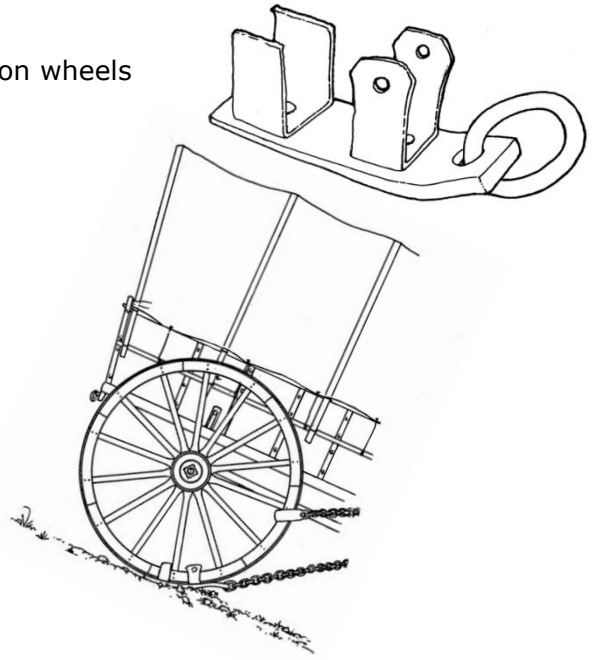
The undercarriage included axle assemblies, coupling pole, hounds and a cross arm. They generally did not have springs, but sat on bolsters. Though some wagons had simple axles of iron or wood, technology evolved over the years to favor clipping or encasing the axle to a strong wooden axle block. In 1857 the thimble skein axle was patented - a metal casing on the end of the axle which

Wheel Shoe

held the wheel with a "burr" - a threaded nut. Previously wagon wheels were secured to the axle with linch pins, an arrangement that required frequent greasing with animal fat or pine tar mixtures.

Some wagons had brakes operated by a long lever near the rear bolster, but this added weight and expense. Many wagons went without brakes, using rough locks, wheel shoes, or a tree tied to the back wheels to slow the vehicle on downward slopes.

Most emigrant wagons used a cover of cotton or linen canvas held over wooden bows secured to the wagons with staples. Traditionally, wagons were painted blue with the undercarriage and wheels painted red. Many emigrant parties opted for bright matching colors to show uniformity as a train. Some individuals painted their wagons and all their tools in matching colors, to better identify their original property in the shared atmosphere of wagon train travel. Some painted canvas covers with oil base paint for waterproofing, and some festooned the covers with slogans such as "For Oregon or Bust."



Mass production of wagons didn't begin until the 1860s when Studebaker Brothers Company developed and perfected standard interchangeable parts and faster production techniques. Most emigrant wagons were constructed by independent wagon makers, wheelwrights, and local blacksmiths, largely using hand-forged metal parts and hand crafted wooden components.

Why are the front wheels smaller than the back wheels?

Large wheels roll more easily over rough roads, pot holes, and rocks. Smaller wheels have a tighter turning radius. The combination of large and small wheels made a more maneuverable vehicle.

