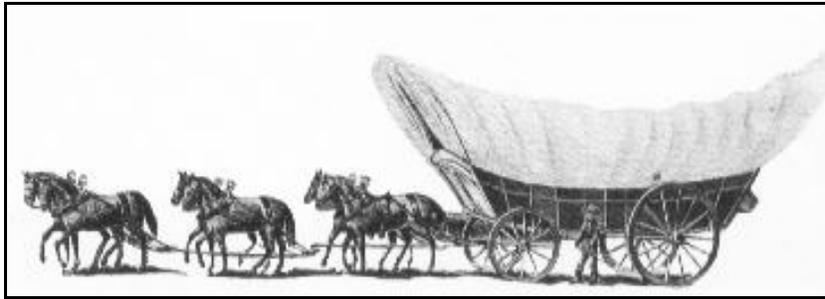


Westward Ho! The Early Pioneers

Americans moved west in three great waves

The first took place from the 1760's to the early 1800's. People moved across the Appalachian Mountains and settled the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys. Many moved in search of cheaper farmland as cities and towns on the East Coast became more crowded and farmland scarce and costly.

In 1775 Daniel Boone and 30 woodsmen set out to connect some of the Native Indian trails that reached from North Carolina across the Appalachians into Kentucky. The road they made is called the Wilderness Trail and lasted for many decades. By 1800 this road had taken over 200,000 pioneers west. Once woodsmen had blazed trails wide enough many pioneers headed west in wagons called Conestogas. Named for the Conestoga Valley in Pennsylvania where they were made, these large, heavy wagons hauled the first waves of settlers over the Appalachian Mountains. Pioneers could take the wheels off their Conestogas and float the wagons across rivers on rafts.



A Conestoga wagon

Where no trails or roads existed local rivers served as highways. Larger rafts were built, some capable of carrying not only the family and their wagon but several horses and other animals. Once they reached their new home they took the raft apart and reused the wood. The early pioneers depended on the rifle and the ax. The rifle was their protection and the ax their tool to build their log cabins. Clearing the land was not an easy task. First the trees were girdled. (Girdling is cutting a ring around a tree causing it to die). Burning removed the stump and then the roots were dug up. The logs were then cut to shape for the cabin and then filled with moss and mud.

Corn was the easiest Vegetable to grow and store so it became the staple of their diets. Families ate cornbread, corn mush and cornmeal pancakes. Leftovers were fed to the hogs, sheep and chickens.

The Second Movement came between the 1840's and 1860's when Europeans and residents of the east coast of America moved across the prairies to the fertile valleys of Oregon and the goldfields of California. In 1849 miners found gold in California and Americans caught gold fever. Only a handful of people "got rich quick" but many went back east and told friends about the vast, unsettled country they had seen. Some sought fortunes in timber, fur or precious metals, others hoped for better health in the mild Pacific climate. Between the 1840's and the 1860's more than 300,000 people crossed the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains to reach the Pacific Coast. The route they took was the Oregon Trail. Their covered wagons became known as "prairie schooners" or ships of the plains because their canvas tops billowed in the wind like a ship's sail. For safe travel wagon trains were formed. These consisted of 30 to 200 wagons moving together for safety from robbers and Indians.

Most wagon trains left in late spring to pass through the mountains before the snow blocked the passes and in time to make homes before the winter came. Most managed to travel between 12 to 20 miles per day but some days, due to the difficult terrain, they only moved one or two miles at best. They could not leave much earlier than April or May because they needed the grass to grow on the plains which served as food for their livestock. Between 1835 and 1855 more than 10,000 people died on the Oregon Trail. Most died from accidents or diseases such as cholera, measles, or smallpox.

Contrary to popular belief only a few pioneers died because of Native American attacks. In fact between 1835 and 1855 only about 400 died this way.



The final movement westward began in the 1860's when pioneers settled the Great Plains. For many decades the Great Plains attracted few settlers – most thought the area too dry for farming. Some of the early maps showed the Great Plains as deserts because they were so dry that there were no trees!

In 1862 the U.S. Government passed the **Homestead Act** which offered 160 acres of land to any adult who built a house on the land and lived on it for five years. Although most of the land had poor soil and harsh weather, families were eager to have their own farms.

Natural resources, especially for home building, were scarce. Settlers resorted to building their cabins from sod – the top layer of soil that had thickly matted roots and was often 15 feet deep. They cut out square sections of sod and used them as bricks for their cabins. These settlers became known as **“sodbusters.”** They jokingly called these sod blocks “Nebraska Marble.” Building a sodhouse (or soddie) was easy and cheap. It took about one acre of turf to make an average size home. For a roof they used hay and grass. Strangely enough, in spring the roof bloomed!

Early pioneers made fires with twigs, grass, corncobs and most of all buffalo or cow chips (the dried droppings of buffalo or cattle). One of the best known settlers was Laura Ingalls Wilder, the author of the nine *Little House* books. She brought the life of the plains pioneers to generations of young readers.



A Kansas woman collecting cow chips

Many of the farmers were from Northern Europe, cold-weather countries such as Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Russia. It was a family affair, children and women worked just as long and as hard as the men. The invention of John Deere's cast-iron plough helped the settlers slice right through the sod, making life somewhat easier but life was still extremely difficult.

The Perils of the Great Plains

Rainfall – In Western Kansas and Nebraska annual rainfall is less than 20 inches. This is too little to grow most crops. The first wells had to be dug by hand, some as deep as 200 feet. Later on farmers used the constant blowing winds to power windmills for water pumps.

Snowstorms – During the winter blizzards came up so quickly that some sodbusters lost their way walking between their houses and barns and froze to death.

Dust Storms – In the hot, dry summer months, long periods without rain turned the soil to dust. High winds brought dust storms that blackened the skies. To protect themselves settlers built temporary underground shelters.

Tornadoes – whirling winds and funnel clouds quickly formed causing settlers to find cover; few areas were safe.

Locusts – In the 1870's swarms of grasshoppers, also called locusts, blanketed the plains. They destroyed everything including all of the crops, leather boots and harness straps. The only cure was to gather the infested grass and crops and burn them before the insects could do more harm.

Small communities and then towns grew on the plains. Neighbors came together for square dances, corn husking contests and quilting bees for the women. Barn and House raisings were common and became known as building bees. On the Fourth of July even the smallest town had a communal picnic and fireworks. Wedding were a joyous occasion. Friends might first “kidnap” the bride or groom and then release them just in time for the ceremony.

After the Civil War ended, many former slaves decided to live as free people on the plains. Many followed Benjamin Singleton who was born a slave in Tennessee and founded the first all-black community in Kansas in 1877. Singleton led many African-American pioneers in an exodus from the Deep South. These pioneers became known as Exodusters, taking their name from Moses who led the Israelites out of Egypt.



Benjamin Singleton