

# 5 Pioneers: Taking the Trail West

I've often been asked if we did not suffer with fear in those days but I've said no. We did not have sense enough to realize our danger; we just had the time of our lives. But since I've grown older and could realize the danger and the feelings of the mothers, I often wonder how they really lived through it all.

—NANCY HEMBREE  
SNOW BOGART,  
WRITING OF LIFE  
ON THE OREGON TRAIL

**Q:** I am food and will walk with the pioneers and fill their cups along the way. What am I?

**A:** A COW.



Camping under a cottonwood tree at the Missouri ford, Council Bluffs. Cottonwoods were important to settlers in the almost treeless prairie, because they grew very fast.

Their ancestors had hugged parents and grandparents, wiped away their tears, and set out for a New World. Now another generation of men, women, and children was heading out toward a little-known world. They, too, were leaving parents and grandparents—often never to see them again. They were heading west. For some it would be a great adventure; some would not live to finish the journey. They were going for the reasons that usually make people move: because they wanted a better life for themselves and their children, or because they were adventurous or restless.

They went in trim, wooden-wheeled wagons pulled by oxen or mules. The wagons were called "schooners," named after the fast two-masted ships that sailed out of New England's ports. These were prairie schooners, and they weren't fast. But, when the wind blew over the prairies and filled the canvas that roofed the wagons, they seemed almost to be sailing across the waves of prairie grass.

They called themselves "emigrants" because they were leaving the United States. The pioneers (for that is what we call them now) were going west to places they had heard about from wandering mountain men, or from traders, or from newspaper articles (many of which were written by people who had never left home).

They went due west. They were heading for foreign lands—Mexican

California, or the territory of Oregon. (Oregon was claimed by England and the United States.) Most had no intention of settling in the U.S.-owned Louisiana Territory; they all knew what Stephen Long had said about that region.

It was a depression that got many of them started. A depression is a time of economic hardship when money seems to disappear and jobs do, too. In 1837, the United States entered a terrible depression. In New York and Philadelphia and Baltimore, thousands had no jobs. Banks closed and people lost their savings.

The price of corn and wheat fell below the cost of growing it. Many farmers who had borrowed money to buy farming equipment and seeds couldn't pay back the loans, so they lost their farms.

What could they do? They could sell whatever they had left and use the money to head west (where land was free and fertile and opportunity seemed to be waiting). And, in 1843, that was just what some people began to do. They went west on the Oregon Trail.

Many of them never made it. They weren't prepared for the hard, hard journey: for rain that soaked through the canvas cover of the prairie schooner, for biting cold and burning heat, for hunger and accidents and disease. They brought the disease with them from the East. It was called "cholera" (KOL-er-uh), and it had come from Europe with the immigrants. It went west, as they did, and it was a killer. The trails became lined with graves; mothers and fathers buried their children—sometimes children buried their parents.

But they began the trip with optimism; they were looking for adventure. Cholera epidemics were common until Americans built sewage systems and understood the importance of a clean water supply.



A mule pack train crossing the Bitterroot Mountains on a route linking Fort Benton, on the Missouri River, and Fort Walla Walla, on the Columbia (in what is now Washington state). Even after a road was built, in 1862, pack trains took 35 days to travel the 624 miles.

**It is a 2,000-mile walk, over plains and mountains, from Missouri to Oregon. The pioneers set out in early spring and, if they make it on schedule, arrive before the winter snows.**

## CHOLERA

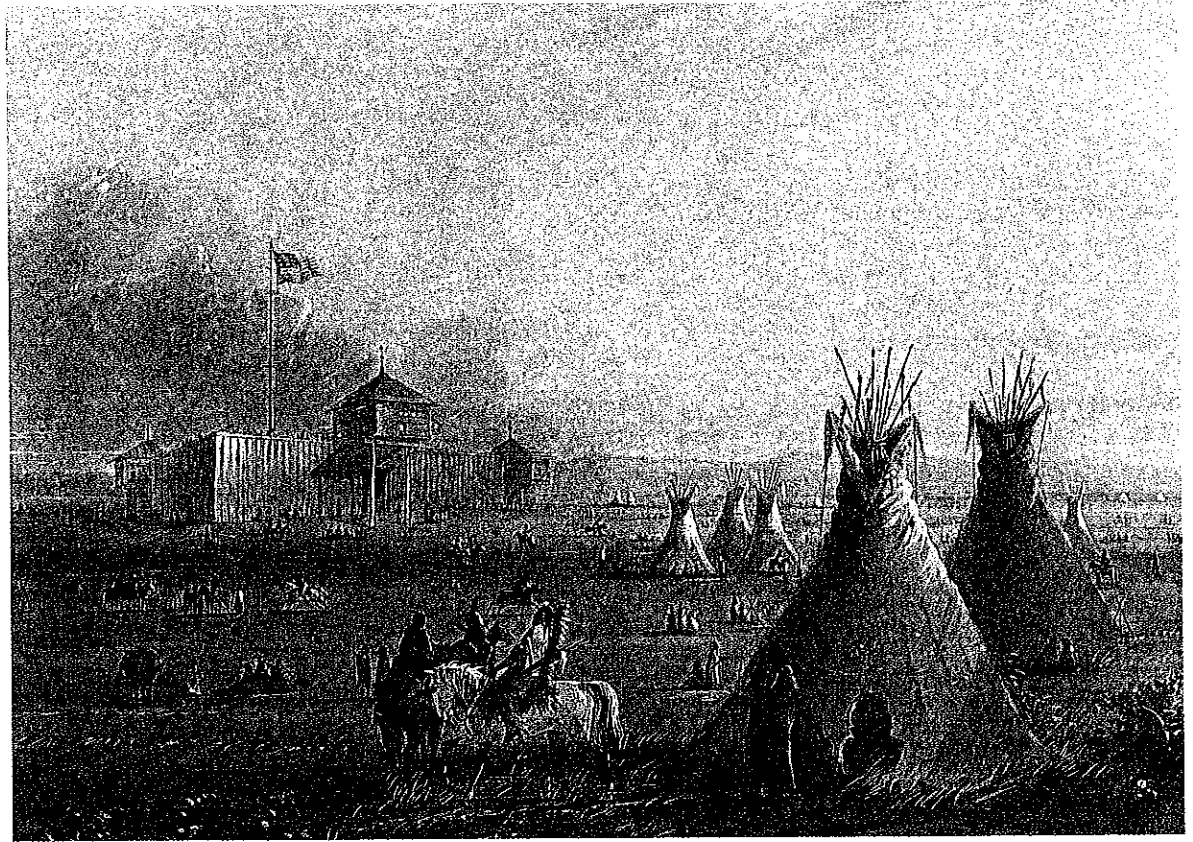
THE  
DUDLEY BOARD OF HEALTH,  
URGENTLY ADVISES, THAT IN CONSEQUENCE OF THE  
**Church-yards at Dudley**

Being so full, no one who has died of the  
CHOLERA will be permitted to be buried  
after **SUNDAY** next, (To-morrow) in either  
of the Burial Grounds of *St. Thomas's*, or  
*St. Edmund's*, in this Town.

All Persons who die from CHOLERA, must for the future  
be buried in the Church-yard at *Netterton*.

200 AINS OF SEVENTH, BOSTON,  
September 26, 1832.

W. VANDICE, PRINTER, 108B STREET, 1832.



Fort Laramie (in what is now eastern Wyoming) was founded by two of Ashley's mountain men. "Fort Laramie is a great place in the immigration season," wrote one man on his way to California. "A good many wagons are left at this point, many coming to the conclusion of getting along without them.... A hotel, store, and post office are located here."

**Deschutes**, in French, means "falls" or "rapids." The Deschutes River was filled with rapids and was very dangerous.

ture. Most were young—many of the mothers and fathers were still teenagers—and they added children as they went west. One in five of the women is said to have been pregnant on some part of the journey. Their babies were born in the hard-floored schooners, or in tents, or in the out-of-doors. Their children would remember the fun and the freedom of the trip. Martha Morrison went west to the Oregon Territory in 1844, when she was 13.

*We did not know the dangers we were going through. The idea of my father was to get on the coast: no other place suited him, and he went right ahead until he got there.... We went down the river Deschutes in an open canoe, including all the children; and when we got down there was no way to get to the place where my father had determined to locate us, but to wade through the tremendous swamps. I knew some of the young men that were along laughed at us girls, my oldest sister and me, for holding up what dresses we had to keep from miring; but we did not think it was funny.*

For most pioneers, the journey west began in St. Louis. (The pioneer family might have already traveled from the East Coast on the Erie Canal, and then overland, and then down the Ohio River and on across the Mississippi.) St. Louis, where the Missouri River meets

the Mississippi, was now the gateway west. Pioneers who had money could take a steamboat from St. Louis, up the Missouri River, and head for a "jumping-off" town, like Independence, Missouri, or Council Bluffs, Iowa. There they could buy supplies and team up with other emigrants. Francis Parkman, who had come from Boston, described Independence in 1846:

*The town was crowded. A multitude of shops had sprung up to furnish the emigrants and Santa Fe traders with necessaries for their journey; and there was an incessant hammering and banging from a dozen blacksmith's sheds, where the heavy wagons were being repaired, and the horses and oxen shod. The streets were thronged with men, horses, and mules. While I was in the town, a train of emigrant wagons from Illinois passed through, to join the camp on the prairie, and stopped in the principal street. A multitude of healthy children's faces were peeping out from under the covers of the wagons.*

Usually, only the smallest children and the sick got to ride in the wagons. There was no room for anyone else. The wagons weren't as

O, Susanna,  
Now don't you cry for me,  
For I come from Alabama  
With my banjo on my knee.

—WORDS FROM A POPULAR CAMP-FIRE SONG WRITTEN IN 1848  
BY STEPHEN FOSTER

**In 1845,** Francis Pettygrove (from Portland, Maine) and Asa Lovejoy (from Boston, Massachusetts) were in the Oregon territory laying out a town. They couldn't agree on a name, so they flipped a coin. Pettygrove won and named the settlement after his hometown in Maine.

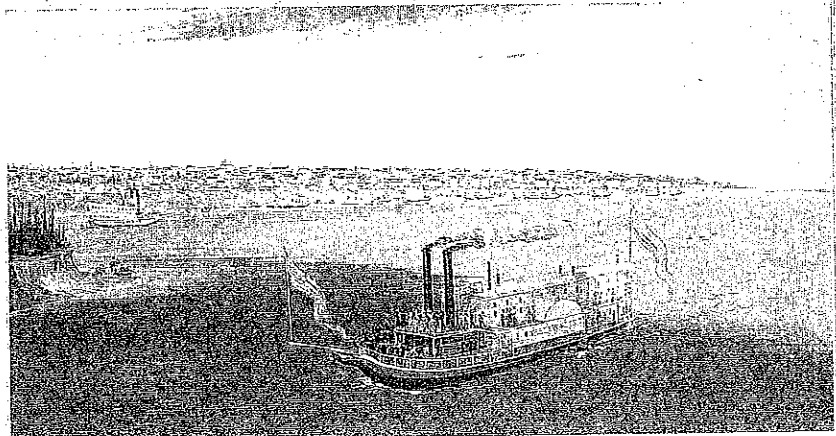
## St. Louis: Improving Considerably

*Charles Dickens visited St. Louis in 1842. This was what he found:*

In the old French portion of the town, the thoroughfares are narrow and crooked, and some of the houses are very quaint and picturesque: being built of wood, with tumble-down galleries before the windows approachable by stairs or rather ladders from the street. There are queer little barber's shops and drinking-houses, too, in this quarter: and abundance of crazy old tenements with blinking casements, such as may be seen in Flanders. Some of these ancient habitations, with high gable windows perking into the roofs, have a kind of French shrug about them; and being lop-sided with age, appear to hold their heads askew, besides as if they were grimacing in astonishment at the American Improvements.

It is hardly necessary to say, that these consist of wharfs and warehouses, and new buildings in all directions; and of a great many vast plans which are still "progressing." Already, however, some

very good houses, broad streets, and marble-fronted shops, have gone so far ahead as to be in a state of completion; and the town bids fair in a few years to improve considerably though it is not ever likely to vie, in point of elegance or beauty, with Cincinnati.



George Catlin's painting of St. Louis and the river in 1832

Joseph Henry Byington with his wives, Nancy Avery and Hannah Molland, and their children, on the trail in Cache Valley, Utah, around 1867.

**Nine miles** out of Independence the wagon trains cross the Missouri state line and are in land guaranteed to the Indians (later the Indian treaties will be forgotten, and this will be Kansas). Thirty-two more miles and the road forks. A small hand-lettered sign points northwest and says, "Road to Oregon." Those who take the other branch are going southwest, on the Santa Fe Trail.

*What is a chamberpot?*

**A Missouri** farmer explaining why he was going to Oregon:  
*Out in Oregon I can get me a square mile of land. And a quarter section for each of you all. Dad burn me, I am done with the country. Winters its frost and snow to freeze a body; summers the overflow from Old Muddy [the Mississippi] drowns half my acres; taxes take the yield of them that's left. What say, Maw, it's God's Country.*



big as the heavy Conestogas the Pennsylvania Dutch used back East. The prairie schooners had to be lightweight so they wouldn't exhaust the oxen on the long pull ahead. Besides, there was so much to take that they were always filled.

Pretend you are leaving home—perhaps forever. What will you take with you? You need food for your trip: flour, beans, bacon, coffee, dried fruit, sugar, salt, and vinegar. Sheep, goats, cows, and chickens will come along. You will need clothes. Your mother packs pants, shirts, dresses, and some cloth to make clothes for you children as you grow. Into the wagon go pots, pans, water kegs, teakettles, and chamberpots to use along the way, and axes, plows, and saws, for the new life that is ahead of you. There are books: a Bible, schoolbooks, and storybooks. Your parents are musical: your father has brought his violin (he calls it a fiddle); your mother has packed a harmonica. In the evening, around the campfire, they entertain the others. There is still more in the wagon: a favorite family portrait, a mirror, and a rocking chair. There



## A Letter From Iowa

**S**ome people were taking the Oregon Trail clear across the land, but others were settling in regions that bordered the Mississippi, such as Iowa and Kansas and Minnesota. Back East, everyone wanted to know: what were those far places like?

Well, it was frontier territory, and things weren't easy, but there was good land, and it was cheap and available. That was what mattered most. Jeremiah Fish traveled from New Jersey to the Iowa territory, and never regretted the move. This is what he wrote to the folks back home:

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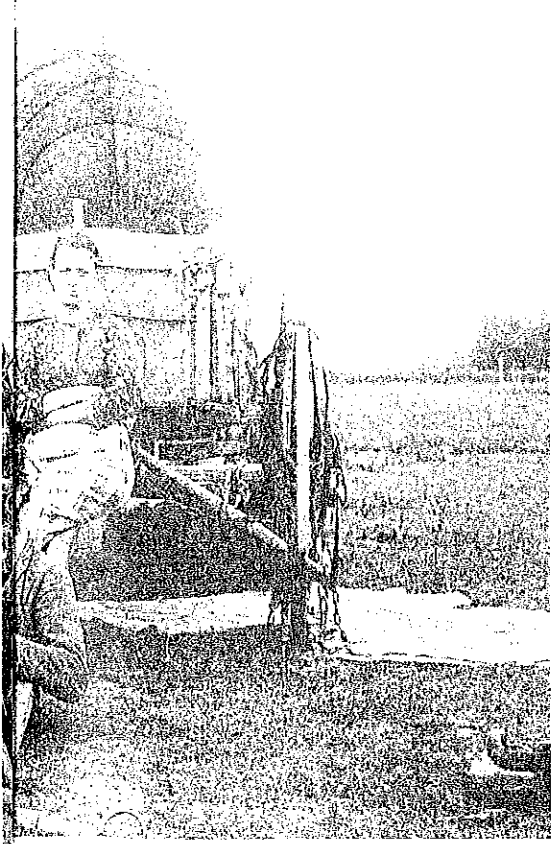
To: Mr. Samuel Rudderow  
 Pensaikin, near the city of Camden  
 New Jersey  
 From: Louisa County, Iowa Territory, April 25, 1843.  
 Brother and Sister,

It has been sometime since I wrote particularly to you, but you have heard from me frequent by letters to Rebecca Fish. I am in good health, but have had the hardest winter that I ever experienced. I got my feet badly frozen Dec. 8th and suffered more pain than I am able to describe, but my right foot has got well and I can wear my shoes but my toes are all stiff at the two outer joints and some of the bones came out of three toes. The toes of my left foot are all off and two of them healed over and the other 3 in a good way so that I will be but very little lame in a few more weeks....

When I wrote to you last I recommended this country to you and probably told you that it would be profitable for you to emigrate....I would be the last one to recommend such a thing to connections of mine if I was not positive, and I know NJ well, I understand Iowa well enough not to be mistaken, a man that pays rent or interest money in NJ had better be in Iowa, if he gets a farm paid for in a lifetime in NJ he had done well....here the land will produce at least 3 times as much to the acre, as it will there and with less labor....When I first came to Bloomington there was only 7 families there, now there is 15 good stores there and merchandise of all kinds and the cost has improved as fast as the town, but here with only \$80 you would be better off than you would be there in 200 years, even if you could live so long. We do not tell you this under any fake pretense but for the benefit of you and family, weigh the matter and write me and I will tell you more.

Respectfully yours,  
 Jeremiah Fish

LETTER REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION OF ALLEN AND CLAIRE RUDDEROW



are guns, medicines, and spare parts for wagon repairs. You have brought a hoop and some marbles; your sister has brought a doll; the baby, a rattle.

When the oxen are exhausted and lie dying by the trail, your parents will sell the plow, the axe, the books, and the teakettle, get two mules for them and be lucky. The cows will be gone—eaten when there was no game to be shot. The portrait and the rocking chair are gone also, left under a tree, perhaps for Indians to find. As you climb into the Rockies everything that adds unnecessary weight must be left behind—your lives may depend on that.

## “Another Fine Cow Died This Afternoon”

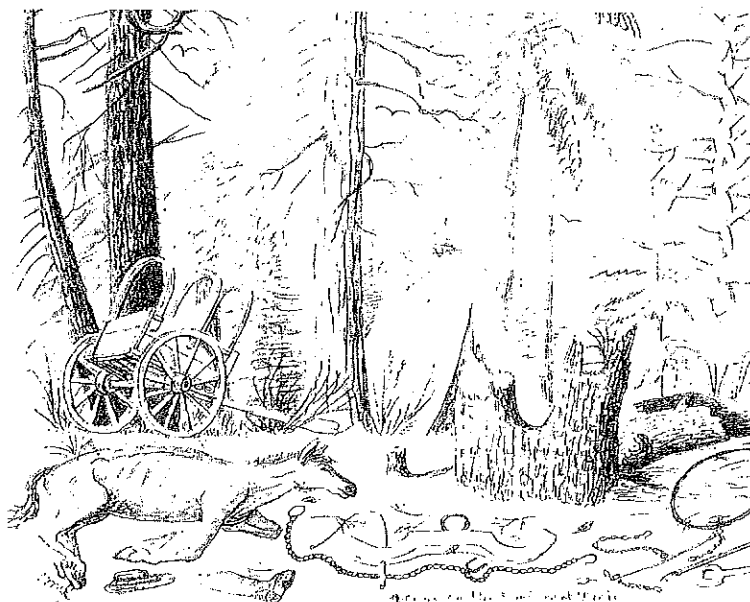
*Amelia Stewart was born in Boston. That was where she met Joel Knight, who had come from England and was studying to be a doctor. They got married and a few years later headed west, to Iowa. In 1853, after 16 years in Iowa, they packed their goods in a covered wagon and headed west again. By now they had seven children. Amelia Knight kept a diary of their five-month journey. The actual diary, in her handwriting, can be found at the University of Washington library. Here is some of it.*

WEDNESDAY, JULY 27TH—Another fine cow died this afternoon. Came 15 miles today, and have camped at the boiling springs, a great curiosity. They bubble up out of the earth boiling hot. I have only to pour water on my tea and it is made. There is no cold water in this part....

SUNDAY, JULY 31—Cool and pleasant, but very dusty. Came 12 miles and camped about

one o'clock not very far from Boise River....

MONDAY, AUGUST 1ST—Still in camp, have been washing all day, and all hands have had all the wild currants we could eat. They grow in great abundance along this river. There are three kinds, red, black, and yellow. This evening another of our best milk cows died. Cattle are dying off very fast all along this road.

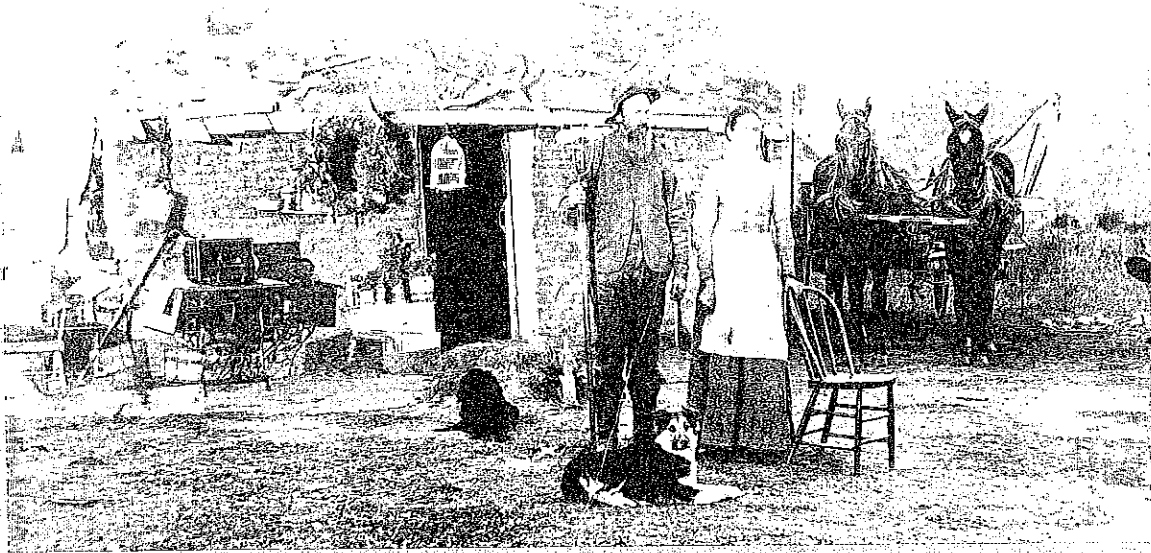


*“This is a land of wonders and of hardships; a land to be avoided or left behind as soon as possible. Saw many dead cattle on the road; the poisonous water and the great scarcity of feed begin to tell on the poor brutes.”*

We are hardly ever out of sight of dead cattle on this side of Snake River. This cow was well and fat an hour before she died. Cut the second cheese today....

FRIDAY, AUGUST 5TH—We have just bid the beautiful Boise River, with her green timber and rich currants farewell, and are now on our way to the ferry on the Snake River. Evening—traveled 18 miles today and have just reached Fort Boise and camped. Our turn will come to cross some time tomorrow. There is one small ferry boat running here, owned by the Hudson’s Bay Company. Have to pay three dollars a wagon. Our worst trouble at these large rivers is swimming the stock over. Often after swimming half way over the poor things will turn and come out again. At this place, however, there are Indians who swim the river from morning till night. There is many a drove of cattle that could not be got over without their help. By paying them a small sum, they will take a horse by the bridle or halter and swim over with him. The rest of the horses all follow and by driving and hurraing to the cattle they will almost always follow the horses, sometimes they fail and turn back.

MONDAY, AUGUST 8TH—We have to make a drive of 22 miles, without water today. Have our cans filled to drink. Here we left, unknowingly, our Lucy behind, not a soul had missed her until we had gone some miles, when we stopped a while to rest the cattle; just then another train drove up



*A pioneer daughter recalled: "When our covered wagon drew up beside the door of the one-roomed sod house that father had provided, he helped mother down and I remember how her face looked as she gazed about that barren farm, then threw her arms about his neck and gave way to the only fit of weeping I ever remember seeing her indulge in."*

behind us, with Lucy. She was terribly frightened and said she was sitting under the bank of the river, when we started, busy watching some wagons cross, and did not know we were ready....It was a lesson for all of us.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 12TH—Lost one of our oxen. We were traveling slowly along, when he dropped dead in the yoke....I could hardly help shedding tears, when we drove round this poor ox who had helped us along thus far, and had given us his very last step.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 18—Commenced the ascent of the Blue Mountains. It is a lovely morning and all hands seem to be delighted with the prospect of being so near the timber again, after the weary months of trav-

el on the dry, dusty sage plains, with nothing to relieve the eye. Just now the men are hallooing till their echo rings through the woods. Evening—Traveled 10 miles today and down steep hills, and have just camped on the banks of Grand Ronde River in a dense forest of pine timber—a most beautiful country.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 19TH—Quite cold morning, water frozen in the buckets. Traveled 13 miles, over very bad roads, without water. After looking in vain for water, we were about to give up as it was near night, when husband came across a company of friendly Cayuse Indians about to camp, who showed him where to find water, half mile down a steep mountain,

and we have all camped together with plenty of pine timber all around us....we bought a few potatoes from an Indian, which will be a treat for our supper.

*The last entry in Amelia's diary came on SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 17; they were in Oregon.*

A few days later, my eighth child was born. [Never, in the diary, had she mentioned being pregnant.] After this we picked up and ferried across the Columbia River, utilizing skiff, canoes and flatboat to get across, taking three days to complete. Here husband traded two yoke of oxen for a half section of land with one-half acre planted to potatoes and a small log cabin and lean-to with no windows. This is the journey's end.