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THE PLAINS ACROSS

The Overland Emigrants and the
Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60

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The rapidity with which change now came to the West was illustrated only nine years later, when startled Indians began to speak of emigrating eastward, unable to believe that many whites remained east of the Missouri River.³ For in the twenty years between the time Joel Walker set his face toward Oregon and Abraham Lincoln was elected President, approximately a quarter of a million overlanders had worn the trails to Oregon and California so deeply that in places the ruts are still visible. In that same period over 40,000 Latter-Day Saints traveled portions of those same trails to their Salt Lake Valley refuge, and by 1860 thousands of expectant gold seekers were penetrating the Pike's Peak region. The magnitude and pattern of this westbound population movement are depicted in Tables 1 and 2. These tables graphically express the enormous South Pass trail traffic engendered by the California gold rush. Throughout the decade of the 1850s this overland movement continued, despite increasing Indian hostility, dwarfing, at least in numbers, the overlanders of the preceding decade.⁴

TABLE 1

OVERLAND EMIGRATION TO OREGON, CALIFORNIA, UTAH, 1840-48

Year	Oregon	California	Cumulative		Utah	Cumulative Grand Total
			Yearly Coast	West Coast Total		
1840	13	—	13	13	—	13
1841	24	34	58	71	—	71
1842	125	—	125	196	—	196
1843	875	38	913	1,109	—	1,109
1844	1,475	53	1,528	2,637	—	2,637
1845	2,500	260	2,760	5,397	—	5,397
1846	1,200	1,500	2,700	8,097	—	8,097
1847	4,000	450	4,450	12,547	2,200	14,747
1848	1,300	400	1,700	14,247	2,400	18,847
Pre-gold rush						
subtotals	11,512	2,735	14,247	14,247	4,600	18,847

These masses of westering overlanders do not coincide with the popular media image of widely scattered wagon trains traveling in relative isolation. Indeed, particularly between 1849 and 1853, most overlanders longed for privacy instead of the congested trails, crowded campsites, and overgrazed grasses they were experiencing. So many overlanders, for example, set forth from near St. Joseph on the same day in 1852 that teams traveled twelve abreast. Franklin Langworthy reported in 1850, from near South Pass, "The road, from morning till night, is crowded like Pearl Street or Broadway," noting also that fathers had actually become separated from their sons in the "endless throng" and did not meet again until their arrival in California.⁵ Bennett C. Clark's company, in 1849, traveled late into the night near Ash Hollow in a desperate search for a vacant campsite.⁶

TABLE 2

OVERLAND EMIGRATION TO OREGON, CALIFORNIA, UTAH, 1849-60

Year	Oregon	California	Cumulative		Utah	Cumulative Grand Total
			Yearly Coast	West Coast Total		
1849	450	25,000	25,450	39,697	1,500	45,797
1850	6,000	44,000	50,000	89,697	2,500	98,297
1851	3,600	1,100	4,700	94,397	1,500	104,497
1852	10,000	50,000	60,000	154,397	10,000	174,497
1853	7,500	20,000	27,500	181,897	8,000	209,997
1854	6,000	12,000	18,000	199,897	3,167	231,164
1855	500	1,500	2,000	201,897	4,684	237,848
1856	1,000	8,000	9,000	210,897	2,400	249,248
1857	1,500	4,000	5,500	216,397	1,300	256,048
1858	1,500	6,000	7,500	223,897	150	263,698
1859	2,000	17,000	19,000	242,897	1,431	284,129
1860	1,500	9,000	10,500	253,397	1,630	296,259
Grand totals,						
1840-60	53,062	200,335	253,397	253,397	42,862	296,259

Statistically inclined emigrants kept track of trail traffic during noon stops, on rare rest days, early in the mornings, and on particularly dusty days. James B. Persinger reported that their company passed 200 wagons early one 1850 morning, were passed by 100 another noon, and passed at least 500 more another day. Joseph Price wrote to his wife from Pacific Springs the same year that the 160 wagons which passed that point on June 27 was a smaller number than usual, a statement to which Reuben Knox's observations lend credence. Knox, writing from near Fort Kearny, reported that 1,000 wagons passed on the last day of May, 1850. On a Sabbath spent resting, one man in Knox's train noted that over 500 wagons trailed past their campsite. James Shields, in the vanguard of the 1850 emigration, climbed Independence Rock early in June and counted 150 wagons in view. Hugh A. Skinner, also in 1850, noticed 50 wagons in the water at the same time crossing the South Fork of the Platte River.⁷

The accuracy of these observations is borne out by a daily analysis of the numbers of men and wagons passing the Fort Laramie station, where the army endeavored to maintain an exact count of westbound travelers. Table 3 demonstrates that during the height of the 1850 emigration it was not unusual for several thousand overlanders to pass the fort on a single day.⁸ Such congested trail conditions occasioned frequent comments, such as "we are not at all lonesome" and "there is no lack of company."⁹ Indeed, several gold rushers found it so extraordinary when they were able to travel and camp out of sight of other wagons—generally in the later stages of the journey after the migration wave had partially spread out—that they recorded the strange phenomenon in their diaries.¹⁰

TABLE 4

ESTIMATED OVERLAND EMIGRANTS KILLED BY INDIANS, AND
INDIANS KILLED BY OVERLAND EMIGRANTS, 1840-60

Year	Emigrants	Indians	Year	Emigrants	Indians
1840	0	0	1851	60	70
1841	0	1	1852	45	70
1842	0	0	1853	7	9
1843	0	0	1854	35	40
1844	0	0	1855	6	10
1845	4	1	1856	20	15
1846	4	20	1857	17 (8) ^a	30
1847	24	2	1858	?	?
1848	2	2	1859	32 (13) ^a	10
1849	33	60	1860	25	10
1850	48	76	Totals	362	426

^aEmigrants presumably killed by "white Indians"; these twenty-one deaths are not included in the yearly totals.

Apart from 1847, which year's statistics are magnified by the apparent annihilation of an entire train of twenty-three or more persons at Tule Lake on the southern emigrant road to Oregon, the pre-gold rush travel pattern is one of essential safety with only scattered skirmishes and very few deaths. This is especially evident during the important first years of emigration. Had the Indians met the small precedent-setting caravans of 1840-44 with the same hostility they later demonstrated, it is doubtful that overlanders would have subsequently streamed westward in the numbers they did. The new era, which had been foreshadowed in 1847, dawned with the coming of the forty-niners. It is apparent that thereafter a much greater risk prevailed than had been the case during the previous decade.

The impression has long been current that the threat of death was most severe on the Great Plains.¹⁵⁴ Perhaps this is a legacy from the many army-Indian clashes fought in those regions, or maybe it is because the famed Fort Laramie was located there. It may also derive from the bad reputation the Pawnees had among the overlanders, or because this was the territory of the legendary Sioux, who were involved in some of the most-remembered battles of western history. Yet an analysis of the geographic regions where nearly 400 overlanders were killed between 1840 and 1860 indicates that approximately 90 percent of all emigrant killings took place west of South Pass, principally along the Snake and Humboldt rivers and on the Applegate Trail. Clearly, the first half of the overland journey was by far the safest, as well as the easiest. Moreover, in terms of actual deaths as well as percentages of the total numbers involved, it was much safer to travel overland to California—the Digger Indians along the Humboldt River notwithstanding—than to go overland to Oregon. And the southern, or Applegate, route to Oregon was probably the single most dangerous stretch of the overland trail, though by the late 1850s no trails west—or even east—of South Pass were as safe as they once had been.