

## The Great Western Migration

On April 30, 1803 Napoleon Bonaparte of France sold Thomas Jefferson, then President of the United States, 885,000 square miles of territory in North America for 15 million dollars. Soon congress sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to find out just exactly what the United States had purchased. On November 7, 1805 the Lewis and Clark expedition reached the Pacific Ocean and the way to the west was opened. Fur trappers, traders, and finally pioneer settlers would follow.

President James Polk stated that it was America's "Manifest Destiny" to settle North America from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, and the people of America showed their agreement by pushing the borders of the United States across the Mississippi River and ever westward. In 1841 the first group of 69 pioneers left Missouri and headed west, bound for Oregon. From 1841 until the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869 more than 350,000 emigrants traveled by foot, handcart, and wagon to reach Oregon and California. At the peak of this westward migration more than 55,000 pioneers would make the hazardous crossing in a single season.

The 2,000 mile journey from Missouri to Oregon was not something to be taken lightly. It was a grueling five to eight month ordeal with one in every 17 people that began the trip dying along the way. If graves were evenly spaced along the Oregon Trail's 2,000 mile length there would be a tombstone every 80 yards to mark the resting place of a pioneer that did not survive the journey. Starvation, accidents, hostile Native Americans whose land was being invaded, outlaws, and especially the dreaded disease cholera accounted for those who would not survive to see the lush farmlands of Oregon or the goldfields of California.

If the journey was so dangerous then why did they go? Why would pioneers risk their own lives and the lives of their families in order to make this migration? There are many reasons. Among the most common of them was the promise of something better out west than they could have in the east. In 1843 a trapper that had been to Oregon's Willamette valley told a group of prospective emigrants that "the pigs are running around about under the great acorn trees, round and fat, and already cooked, with knives and forks sticking in them so that you can cut off a slice whenever you are hungry." Popular publications and guide books of the time told of all of the virtues of Oregon and California. One of these books wrote that "As far as its producing qualities are concerned Oregon can not be outdone whether in wheat, oats, rye, barley, buckwheat, peas, beans, potatoes, turnips, cabbages, onions, parsnips, carrots, beets, currants, gooseberries, strawberries, apples, peaches, pears, or fat and healthy babies." Oregon seemed, from all accounts, to be paradise on Earth. All you had to do was get there and claim your little bit of heaven. It was that hope that made it worth the risks of the journey. In addition, the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in California in 1848 created a huge surge in the number of people choosing to emigrate to the west and try their luck in California.

These factors pulled people west while a number of factors pushed people out of the east. The first of these were a series of financial crises, the first in 1837, which brought about a Depression and ruined many farmers. In addition, a series of disease epidemics were sweeping many parts of the eastern United States: typhoid, dysentery, tuberculosis, scarlet fever, malaria and yellow fever. Perhaps the most devastating of all was cholera which had arrived from Asia in the 1830s and in 1850 accounted for more than 50,000 deaths in the United States.

Others choose to emigrate to the west for the same reason that many people came to the Atlantic shores of America two centuries before, religious freedom. The Mormon pioneers, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints left Illinois in 1846 to find a place to practice their religion without fear of persecution and settled in the Salt Lake valley of Utah.

Adventurers, missionaries, land speculators, and many others with a variety of reasons followed the reasoning of Henry David Thoreau when he said "Eastward, I go only by force, but westward I go free...the prevailing tendency of my countrymen."