



Section 3: Chores on the Oregon Trail

- Introduction to Gender Roles on the Oregon Trail Classroom Discussion
- Chores on the Oregon Trail Student Activity
- Boy Chores, Girl Chores, and Fairness Classroom Discussion

Section Guide: Chores on the Oregon Trail



Hey Teachers!

Thanks for making the Wyoming State Museum a part of your classroom! This guide will describe the activities in this section and how to use them with your students!

Introduction:

Life on the Oregon Trail was hard work – for everyone. Families traveling west in covered wagons had to take care of daily chores just to survive the long journey. These tasks included cooking, gathering firewood, fetching water, caring for animals, repairing wagons, and washing dishes. There was no time off, and children were expected to help as soon as they were old enough to carry a bucket.

This activity introduces students to the kinds of chores that children performed on the trail. It also opens up a conversation about gender roles in the mid-1800s. At that time, society had very different expectations for boys and girls. Most people believed that men and boys should do the heavy labor – like chopping wood or driving oxen – while women and girls were responsible for cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger children. These roles were based on societal beliefs of the time, not on what people were actually capable of doing.

While these ideas may seem unfair and outdated today, they were a big part of life in the 19th century. Understanding these roles helps students better imagine what daily life was like on the trail, for both boys and girls. It also gives them a chance to reflect on how ideas about work, fairness, and equality have changed over time.

This activity encourages students to think critically about history, ask questions, and make connections to their own lives. But, it will also require you to have a potentially difficult conversation about sexism and unfair expectations for students of any gender. The museum recommends thinking about how you will approach it beforehand. This document provides you with helpful guidelines for conducting these conversations.

Preparation:

As mentioned above, you'll be leading a classroom discussion about chores on the Oregon Trail and how they were influenced by the gender roles of the 19th century. Read through the step-by-step guidelines on the following pages to help prepare for this conversation.

The only other thing you'll need to do beforehand is to print off the chore worksheets for each student. There is a teacher answer key for you, as well.

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Activities:

Introduction to Gender Roles on the Oregon Trail Classroom Discussion:

Before students begin the Chores on the Oregon Trail activity, you should take time to lead a classroom discussion about gender roles in the mid-1800s. This conversation will help students understand why certain chores were considered “boy chores” or “girl chores” back then, and how those ideas have or have not changed.

Step 1: Set the Stage

Start by asking your students about the chores that they are responsible for at their homes. Try to pull some good examples of things that go against the stereotypical gender roles of the 19th century. Don't mention this part yet – we'll be referencing them after the student activity. Examples could be girls who help with yardwork, boys who wash dishes, girls who care for animals, or boys who help with cleaning.

Ask Questions Like:

- What chores do you have around your home?
- Why do you have chores?
- How do chores help your family?

Step 2: Chores on the Oregon Trail

Now, transition to the Oregon Trail. Ask your students to imagine what life was like on the Oregon Trail. Families were traveling for months in covered wagons, with no modern conveniences. Everyone had to help with daily chores just to survive. Ask your students to come up with a list of chores that would need to be done to help the family survive.

Ask Questions Like:

- What chores would need to be done on the Oregon Trail?
- What chores could children have helped with?

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Activities:

Introduction to Gender Roles on the Oregon Trail Classroom Discussion (Continued):

Step 3: Introduction to Gender Roles

Now it's time to introduce the concept of gender roles to your students.

Ask Questions Like:

- Do you think boys and girls on the Oregon Trail did the same chores?
- Were boys and girls even allowed to do the same chores?
- Why or why not?

Be careful to ask questions, but not give away the answers of the next activity. Explain that in the 1800s, people had very strong ideas about what boys and girls were “supposed” to do. These ideas were not based on what boys or girls were capable of; they were just based on how they thought children should behave and to prepare them for “accepted” adult roles of the time. These gender roles were the expectations society has for how boys and girls should behave, dress, and work.

Explain to your students that – generally speaking – boys were expected to do chores that included hard physical labor, animal care, and leadership. While girls – once again generally speaking – were expected to do chores that focused on household work and childcare.

Be sure to emphasize that these roles were based on tradition, not on what the children were capable of doing. But, once again, try not to give away any of the answers for the next activity.

Chores on the Oregon Trail Student Activity:

You will put your students into small groups; this can be their wagon teams (for the field trip) or different groups. Give each student a copy of the chore worksheet pages.

Your students will go chore by chore, reading them and then discussing if the chore would have been a “boy chore,” a “girl chore,” or a “boy and girl chore” during the Oregon Trail years. They can just write their answer on their sheets. The teacher answer key tells you the correct answers and gives you a bit more information about each chore.

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Activities (Continued):

Boy Chores, Girl Chores, and Fairness Classroom Discussion:

After students complete the “Chores on the Oregon Trail” student activity, share the correct answers with them (see answer key). Then, take time to lead a classroom discussion that helps them reflect on what they learned, and how it made them feel. This conversation encourages students to think critically about fairness, equality, and how gender roles have changed over time.

Step 1: Revisit the Activity

The museum recommends you start the wrap up conversation by talking about what they learned and how it made them feel.

Ask Questions Like:

- What surprised you about which chores were considered “boy chores” or “girl chores”?
- Were there any chores you thought both boys and girls could do?
- How did this activity make you feel?

Let students share their thoughts freely. This is where you can refer back to some of their own chores, and how they may or may not fit within the strict gender roles of the mid-1800s.

Step 2: Talk About Fairness

Next, guide the conversation toward fairness and capability.

Ask Questions Like:

- Do you think it was fair that boys and girls were expected to do different chores?
- Were girls capable of doing “boy chores”? Were boys capable of doing “girl chores”?
- Why do you think people believed those roles were necessary back then?

Encourage students to think about how beliefs and traditions shaped daily life in the 1800s, even if the students don’t think they were always fair.

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Activities (Continued):

Boy Chores, Girl Chores, and Fairness Classroom Discussion (Continued):

Step 3: Compare Past and Present

Now, you'll help your students reflect on how things have changed since the 1800s.

Ask Questions Like:

- What are some things girls can do today that they couldn't do in the 1800s?
- What are some things boys can do today that they might not have been allowed to do back then?
- Do you think chores should be divided by gender today? Why or why not?
- Do you think there are any jobs today that some grown-ups still see as "boy jobs" or "girl jobs?" Why do you think that is?

This is a great time to reinforce that everyone is capable of helping, and that fairness means giving people equal opportunities – not limiting them based on gender. It's also a fun moment to mention that when they grow up, they may end up redefining what we consider "normal" today.

You can share something like "Back on the Oregon Trail, kids had to work hard every day – but they didn't always get to choose what kind of work they did. Today, we know that everyone can help, and everyone deserves a chance to learn and grow. You're a part of a generation that gets to make things even better for everyone."



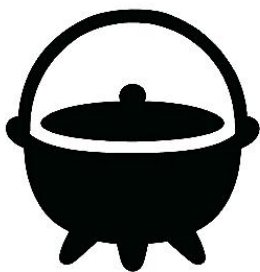
Fetch Water

Water was essential for drinking, cooking, and cleaning, and it often had to be carried from rivers, creeks, or springs back to camp.



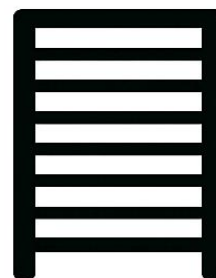
Collect Bison Chips

Bison chips (dried bison poop) were used as fuel for campfires, especially when wood was scarce on the plains. It had to be collected each day.



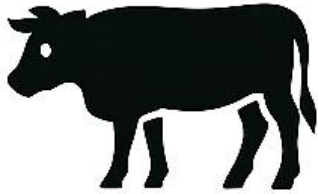
Help Cook Meals

Food had to be cooked for the entire family, for every meal – breakfast, lunch, and dinner.



Wash Clothes

Doing the laundry was hard work. It involved hauling water, heating it over a fire, scrubbing clothes on a washboard, and hanging them to dry.



Drive Oxen

Emigrants walked beside the oxen, guiding them in the right direction.



Hunt Small Animals

Small animals like rabbits, squirrels, and birds were hunted along the trail.



Care for Younger Siblings

Parents were often busy on the trail. The care of younger children often fell to older siblings.



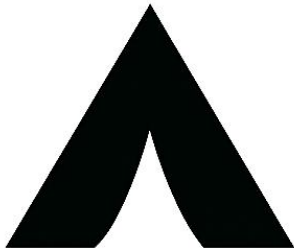
Feed the Animals

Feeding livestock (oxen, mules, horses, chickens, and more) was an important responsibility on the trail.



Chop Firewood

The emigrants usually used bison chips for their campfires – especially on the plains. But, when firewood was available, it had to be chopped.



Set Up Camp

Setting up camp involved tasks like circling the wagons, pitching tents, spreading out the bedding, securing the animals, and preparing the cook area.



Help Repair the Wagon

Wagons needed frequent repairs – broken wheels, loose bolts, damaged axles, or canvas tears. Older kids would sometimes help the adults fix them.



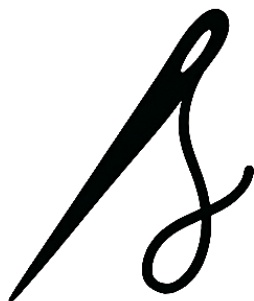
Tend to Sick Family Members

Caring for the sick, whether it was a sibling with a fever or a parent recovering from injury, was often a job given to older children.



Pack and Unpack the Wagon

Packing and unpacking the wagon involved lifting heavy items, organizing supplies, and securing gear to prevent shifting during travel.



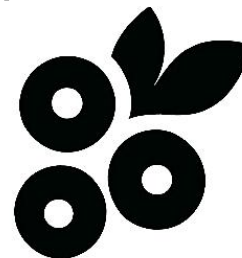
Sew or Mend Clothes

Clothing wore out quickly on the trail due to dust, weather, and lots of walking. Kids helped fix tears, patch holes, and reinforce clothing seams.



Make Butter

Butter was made by churning cream. Emigrants could use a butter churn or just place a bucket or jar of cream inside the wagon or under it – and letting the bumps do the work.



Collect Berries and Other Wild Plants

Foraging for berries, wild greens, and edible roots was an important chore. It was often done near camp or during rest stops during the day's hike.



Wash Dishes

Dishes had to be cleaned using limited water and basic tools. They often just used a tin basin, a rag, and some sand or ash for scrubbing.



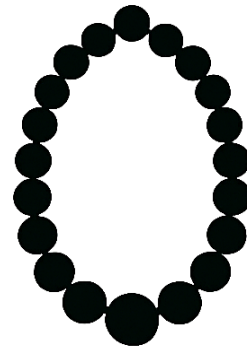
Shake Out Bedding

Emigrants slept on the ground, every night. Bed rolls were exposed to dust, insects, and moisture. Bed rolls were shaken out each morning.



Shake Out Clothing

The trail was super dusty and dirty. In the mornings and before bed, clothing was shaken out to remove dust, bugs, and debris.



Help with Trading

Trading and bartering were vital parts of life on the trail. Emigrants often exchanged goods with other families at forts or with local Native tribes.

Answer Key: Chores on the Oregon Trail

Fetch Water: Both Girls and Boys

Water was essential for drinking, cooking, and cleaning, and it often had to be carried from rivers, creeks, or springs back to camp – sometimes multiple times a day. Because it was a repetitive and time-consuming task, it was often delegated to children, especially those old enough to carry a bucket or jug. Girls might fetch water as part of their domestic responsibilities, while boys might do it alongside other outdoor tasks.

Collect Bison Chips: Girls (mainly)

Bison chips (dried bison dung) were used as fuel for campfires, especially when wood was scarce on the plains. It was a low-risk, repetitive task that didn't require strength or specialized skills. This chore was often assigned to children, particularly girls, as part of their domestic responsibilities. However, boys also helped with the task, especially in smaller families or when older siblings were busy.

Help Cook Meals: Girls

Cooking was seen as part of the domestic sphere, which was traditionally assigned to women and girls. Girls were expected to help their mothers prepare meals, especially as they got older. Boys might help with simple tasks (like gathering firewood or stirring a pot), but they were rarely expected to take on cooking as a regular responsibility.

Wash Clothes: Girls

Laundry was a labor-intensive task that involved hauling water, heating it over a fire, scrubbing clothes on a washboard, and hanging them to dry. Girls, especially older ones, were expected to assist their mothers with this chore as part of their domestic training. Boys were rarely involved in laundry unless there were unusual circumstances (e.g., no sisters, mother was ill, or in very small family groups). Emigrants sometimes used natural springs or riverbanks to wash their clothes. One warm spring near Guernsey, Wyoming was known as the “Emigrants’ Wash Tub.”

Answer Key: Chores on the Oregon Trail

Drive Oxen: Boys

Driving the oxen was considered a boys' chore, especially for older boys. Driving the oxen (or mules) was a critical and physically demanding task. While most everyone walked alongside the wagons, the "driver" kept the animals moving in the right direction. Boys were often trained to handle livestock and drive wagons as part of their preparation for adult responsibilities. Girls were less commonly assigned this task, but there are documented cases of girls driving wagons – especially in families with no sons or when the father was injured or unavailable.

Hunt Small Animals: Boys

Hunting small game was considered a boys' chore, especially for older boys and teenagers. Girls were rarely expected to hunt, though there were exceptions in unusual circumstances. Hunting required knowledge of firearms, tracking, and field dressing animals. These skills typically taught to boys as part of their preparation for adult male roles. Small game (like rabbits, squirrels, or birds) was often hunted to supplement trail food, especially when supplies ran low. Fathers and older sons usually took on hunting duties, but teenage boys were trusted to hunt small game on their own. Hunting was strongly associated with masculinity and frontier survival. Girls were generally kept away from firearms and dangerous tasks, due to cultural expectations. In rare cases, girls might hunt if their family situation required it (e.g., no brothers, father incapacitated), but this was not the norm.

Care for Younger Siblings: Girls

Girls (older girls, pre-teens, and teenagers) were expected to help their mothers with domestic responsibilities, and childcare was a major part of that. Older daughters often acted as "junior mothers," watching over toddlers, entertaining younger siblings, and even helping with feeding or calming babies. Childcare was viewed as an extension of the maternal role, and girls were expected to learn these skills early. This chore reinforced the idea that girls were natural caregivers, preparing them for future roles as mothers. Boys were less commonly tasked with childcare, though younger boys might play with siblings.

Feed the Animals: Boys

Feeding livestock was part of the broader responsibility of animal care, which was generally assigned to boys. Boys were expected to learn how to handle animals, understand their needs, and assist with tasks like watering, feeding, and checking for injuries. Girls might help feed smaller animals like chickens, or assist in other ways if needed. However, this was not a primary responsibility for them.

Answer Key: Chores on the Oregon Trail

Chop Firewood: Boys

Wood was scarce in many regions of the trail, so emigrants often relied on bison chips or other fuel sources (like sagebrush) instead of firewood. When wood was available – near rivers, wooded areas, or mountain passes – it was gathered and chopped, though this was not a daily chore for most families. When it was chopped, it was considered a boys' chore, especially for older boys, as it required strength and skill with an axe. Boys were often trained to handle tools like axes and perform labor-intensive tasks. Girls were rarely expected to chop wood, though they might gather kindling or help stack it.

Help Repair the Wagon: Boys

Wagons frequently needed repairs for things like broken wheels, loose bolts, damaged axles, or canvas tears. These tasks required the use of tools, physical strength, and mechanical know-how, which boys were more likely to be trained in. Fathers typically led wagon repairs, but older boys were expected to assist and learn these skills. Girls were rarely involved in wagon repairs, though they might help in indirect ways – such as holding tools, fetching supplies, or occasionally helping with canvas repairs that involved sewing.

Set Up Camp: Both Boys and Girls

Setting up camp involved tasks like unloading the wagon, pitching tents or arranging bedding, securing animals, and preparing the cooking area. Boys were typically responsible for the more physical aspects – handling gear, tying ropes, and managing livestock. Girls might help with organizing household items, setting up cooking supplies, or preparing the fire area.

Tend to Sick Family Members: Girls

Caring for the sick, whether it was a sibling with a fever or a parent recovering from injury, was part of the domestic caregiving role assigned to women and girls. Girls were expected to help with tasks like preparing food for the ill, keeping them comfortable, and assisting with basic hygiene. Mothers often led this care, but older daughters were expected to step in, especially if the mother was busy or unavailable. Boys were generally not expected to take on caregiving roles unless there were no female family members available.

Answer Key: Chores on the Oregon Trail

Pack and Unpack the Wagon: Boys

Packing and unpacking the wagon involved lifting heavy items, organizing supplies, and securing gear to prevent shifting during travel. Older boys and teenage boys were more likely to handle the lifting of crates, barrels, and tools. The task required strength and was often paired with other labor-intensive responsibilities like wagon repair or animal care. Boys were expected to learn how to manage gear and logistics, especially if they were being trained to take on leadership roles in the family's journey.

Make Butter: Girls

Butter was made by churning cream, which could be done manually with a butter churn or on the trail by placing a bucket or jar of milk underneath or inside the wagon. The constant jostling of the wagon over rough terrain acted as a natural churn, and by the end of the day, families might have a lump of butter ready to collect. Even with this passive method, someone (usually a girl or the mother) still had to strain, shape, and store the butter. Boys were rarely involved, unless there were no girls in the family or the task was part of a larger food prep effort.

Sew or Mend Clothes: Girls

Clothing wore out quickly on the trail due to dust, weather, and physical labor. Mending tears, patching holes, and reinforcing seams was a constant need. Sewing was part of the domestic skill set tied to femininity and future roles as wives and mothers. Girls were expected to learn sewing skills early, often helping their mothers with repairs and even making simple garments. Boys were rarely involved in sewing unless there were no female family members or in exceptional circumstances. Even in frontier settings, sewing remained firmly in the “women's sphere” and was considered an essential survival skill for girls and women.

Collect Berries and Other Wild Plants: Girls

Foraging for berries, nuts, wild greens, and edible roots was part of food gathering, often done near camp or during rest stops. Girls were more commonly tasked with this chore, especially when it was seen as an extension of cooking or food preparation. Girls were also expected to learn which plants were safe and useful – knowledge often passed down from mothers or other older women in the family. Boys might help if the task involved climbing or navigating rough terrain, but were not usually responsible for gathering wild plants.

Answer Key: Chores on the Oregon Trail

Wash Dishes: Girls

Dishes had to be cleaned using limited water and basic tools – often just a tin basin, a rag, and some sand or ash for scrubbing. This chore was part of the daily domestic routine and was almost always assigned to girls, especially older daughters. Water had to be fetched and heated, making the chore more time-consuming. Dishes included tin plates, cups, cooking pots, and utensils, and were often reused for multiple meals. Dishwashing was typically done after each meal. Boys were rarely assigned dishwashing unless there were no girls in the family or in exceptional circumstances.

Shake Out Clothing: Girls

The Oregon Trail was incredibly dusty, especially across the plains. Fine dust from wagon wheels, livestock, and dry terrain settled into clothing, bedding, and hair. Shaking out clothes helped remove dust, bugs, and debris before wearing or packing garments. It was often done in the morning before dressing or in the evening before storing clothes for the night. This chore was typically handled by girls, especially older daughters, as part of their domestic responsibilities. It was often paired with folding, organizing, or preparing clothing for laundry. This helped extend the life of clothing, which was difficult to replace on the trail. Boys might shake out their own clothes, but it wasn't considered part of their regular chore list.

Shake Out Bedding: Girls

Bedding on the Oregon Trail – blankets, quilts, bison robes, and bedrolls – was exposed to dust, insects, and moisture daily. Shaking out bedding helped remove dust, bugs, and debris before repacking or laying it out again at night. Girls, especially older daughters, were most often tasked with shaking out and folding bedding. This was typically part of their morning routine, especially before loading the wagon. Boys might help in small families, or if bedding was heavy, but it wasn't a regular responsibility for them.

Help with Trading: Boys

Trading and bartering were essential parts of life on the Oregon Trail. Emigrants often needed to exchange goods with other families in the wagon train, Native American tribes, and fort traders. While adults usually handled the actual negotiations, older boys and teenagers were often brought along to observe, assist, or carry goods. This was seen as a way to teach boys negotiation, value assessment, and social interaction in male-dominated spaces. Girls were rarely involved in trading unless they were with their mothers at a fort or in a family with no sons.