

# Section 4: Music on the Oregon Trail

- Music on the Trail Classroom Discussion
- Musical Instruments of the Oregon Trail Online Exhibit
- Music of the Trail YouTube Videos
- *Uncle Sam's Farm* Student Activity
- Write Your Own Campfire Song Student Activity

# Section Guide: Music 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:

Music on the Oregon Trail was a vital part of daily life for children and families. After long days filled with walking, chores, and hardship, emigrants often gathered around campfires to sing, play instruments, and share stories through song. But music wasn't just reserved for the evenings – families also sang while walking along the trail to pass the time, lift their spirits, and stay motivated. These songs strengthened bonds and gave people a way to express joy, sorrow, hope, and humor.

Because radios and phonographs hadn't been invented yet, all music on the trail was sung or performed live. Emigrants brought portable instruments like fiddles, jaw harps, guitars, and concertinas. Many songs were passed down orally or adapted from popular tunes of the time. Music was homemade, heartfelt, and deeply personal – whether it was a lively tune to keep the wagon train moving or a quiet melody to soothe a homesick child.

This activity invites students to step into the shoes of young pioneers and become campfire composers. By listening to real Oregon Trail-era music and exploring historical instruments, students will gain insight into the role music played in daily life. They'll then write their own campfire songs, using familiar melodies and themes inspired by trail experiences. This creative process encourages empathy, historical understanding, and self-expression – while also being a whole lot of fun!

## Preparation:

There are two online resources that you'll use in this section, a museum online exhibit and a series of YouTube videos featuring music from the mid-1800s. Links to these items can be found on the Oregon Trail pages of our website. You'll want to familiarize yourself with them beforehand. This will help you guide students through the activity and answer any questions.

You'll also want to print off the class-ready worksheets that follow these teacher pages. You'll need one for each student.

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### Activities:

#### Music Classroom Discussion:

The first step to this activity is to talk with your students about music on the trail. One main point to discuss is the fact that there was no music recordings; all music (across the entire world) was played and/or sung live. You'll also want to talk about why music was important. The introduction to this teacher guide gives you a little information about that topic.

#### Oregon Trail Musical Instruments Online Exhibit:

After this discussion, you can open the link to the museum's Oregon Trail Musical Instruments Online Exhibit. This exhibit has 360-degree scans of many different instruments that were used during the mid-1800s – including instruments that were actually carried by emigrants on the trails. You can show these artifacts to your class on a large classroom screen or let the students explore them on their own classroom devices. The link is on the Oregon Trail pages on our website and listed as a QR code on the following page.

#### Music of the Trail YouTube Videos:

After looking at the different instruments that were played on the trail, your students will listen to some of the music from the trail. The museum has pulled together four different videos featuring songs that were actually sung by emigrants on the Oregon, California, and Mormon trails – although these are obviously modern recordings.

Each video is between three and five minutes. You can choose as many of these songs as you would like, and play them for your students. These videos are on our website and listed as QR codes on the following page. You'll be using *Uncle Sam's Farm* for the next part of this activity.

It's important to note that the museum hand-picked these songs to be appropriate for elementary school students. Other 1800s songs (or even older versions of some of these songs) can have racist, sexist, or other problematic words and concepts. **If you choose a different song for your class to listen to, make sure you listen to the entire song first.**

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### Activity (Continued):

#### Uncle Sam's Farm Student Activity:

After your students have learned about music, musical instruments, and listened to some historic songs, it's time for them to dive into one specific song to learn about the power of music and the structure of songs. The *Uncle Sam's Farm* worksheet pages will be used for this activity.

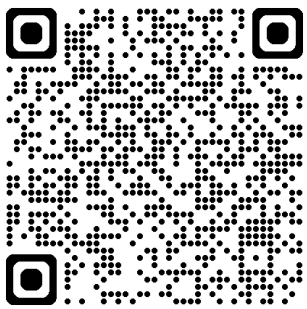
You'll play *Uncle Sam's Farm* (the version on our website) and have students follow along with the lyrics. Afterwards, have them answer the questions on the worksheet. You can have them work individually or in small groups. The museum recommends having a class conversation about the themes and parts of the song afterwards.

#### Write Your Own Campfire Song Student Activity:

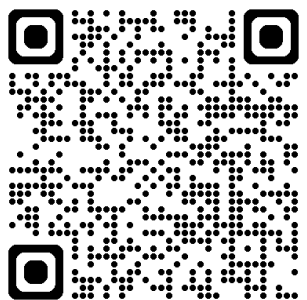
After they've completed all the other parts of this section, your students will be able to make their own campfire song. The Write Your Own Campfire Song worksheet walks students through the steps of this activity.

After they complete their songs, you can have some of the students share or perform their songs for the class.

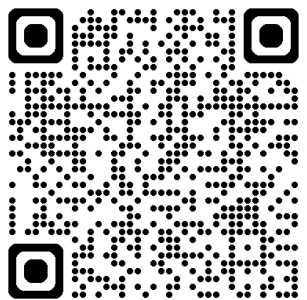
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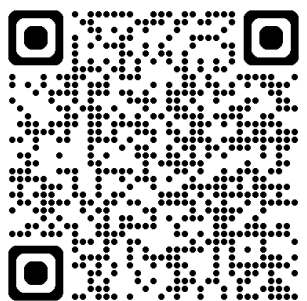
Title: *Musical Instruments of the Overland Trails*  
Format: Wyoming State Museum Online Exhibit  
Note: This online exhibit has 360-Degree scans of mid-1800s musical instruments.



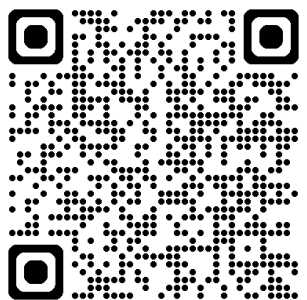
Title: *Wait for the Wagon*  
Format: YouTube Video  
Note: This is an upbeat song that features many wagon references.



Title: *Oh! Susanna*  
Format: YouTube Video  
Note: This video shows off the amazing plucking skills of the banjo player.



Title: *Hard Times Come Again No More*  
Format: YouTube Video  
Note: This is a slower, more somber song about hardships of 1800s life.



Title: *Uncle Sam's Farm*  
Format: YouTube Video  
Note: This is a positive song about inviting immigrants to the United States. You'll have your students listen to this song during the Uncle Sam's Farm activity.

# Uncle Sam's Farm

## Music on the Oregon Trail

Families on the Oregon Trail faced long days of walking, hard work, deadly diseases, extreme weather, and death. But at night, when the wagons stopped and the campfires were lit, music helped bring everyone together.



*Independence Rock on the Mormon Trail*  
Painting by William Henry Jackson

The emigrants played instruments like fiddles, jaw harps, guitars, and concertinas. They sang songs to cheer each other up, share stories, and feel less lonely. Music was a way to relax, have fun, and feel connected – even when life on the trail was hard.

## Campfire Songs

In this activity, you will examine the different parts of campfire songs and learn about what makes them special.

Some campfire songs tell a story of life along the trail. They might tell of a long-lost love, a family member who died, the daily life on the trail, or even a funny, made-up story. Other campfire songs are songs that lift the spirit, help keep people moving, or just celebrate life. Campfire songs can be slow, fast, quiet, or loud – but they were always memorable.

Most campfire songs have multiple **verses** but only one **chorus**. Each verse in a song is different. They help tell the story of the song. The chorus is usually sung after every verse, and is easier to remember and easier to sing.

To help us understand this, let's look at one very popular song from the 1800s – *Uncle Sam's Farm*.





# Write Your Own Campfire Song

Now that you've listened to a real song from the Oregon Trail, you're going to become a campfire composer and write your own song!

You'll be creating a song that you'd want to sing around the campfire. Your song can be funny, sad, hopeful, or something else! You can talk about the daily life on the trail, create a story about an emigrant, talk about ideals you think are important, or something completely different. You can choose to have your song rhyme or not.



Woman with Banjo – 1880s

## Directions

Pick one of the songs below to be the tune of your campfire song, or pick a different tune you know.

- *Oh! Susanna*
- *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*
- *This Land is Your Land*
- *Yankee Doodle*
- *Home on the Range*
- *Camptown Races*
- *Skip to My Lou*
- *London Bridge is Falling Down*
- *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*
- *She'll Be Coming Round the Mountain*

Tune for My Song: \_\_\_\_\_

What emotion do you want your song to make people feel?

\_\_\_\_\_

Use the space on the next couple of pages to create at least two verses for your song, and one repeating chorus.





