

Section Guide: Packing Your Wagon



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:

Before setting out on the Oregon Trail, emigrants faced one of the most important decisions of their journey: what to pack. With limited space in their wagons and thousands of miles ahead, families had to carefully choose supplies that would sustain them for months. Food, tools, clothing, spare wagon parts, and medical supplies were all essential – but overpacking could slow the journey or break a wagon axle. Underpacking, on the other hand, could mean going hungry or being unprepared for emergencies. The success of the entire trip often depended on how wisely a family packed.

Most emigrants purchased their supplies in towns along the Missouri River, such as Independence, St. Joseph, or Council Bluffs. These “jumping-off points” were bustling with outfitters, blacksmiths, and general stores that catered specifically to westward-bound travelers. Some families spent weeks in these towns preparing their wagons, buying livestock, and gathering last-minute advice from other emigrants or guides. It was also common for travelers to form wagon trains here, joining with others for safety and support on the trail.

Outfitting a family for the Oregon Trail was expensive. A typical wagon and team of oxen could cost over \$300, and supplies for a family of four might add another \$500 - \$900. That’s the equivalent of \$32,000 - \$48,500 in 2025 dollars! Many families sold their homes, farms, or belongings to afford the journey. Despite the cost, the promise of free land, new opportunities, and a better life in the West made the risk (and the careful packing) worth it.

You’ll need to do this entire section if you plan on attending the museum’s *Travel the Oregon Trail* field trip – either at the museum or virtually.

Section Guide: Packing Your Wagon

Preparation:

First and foremost, you'll need to separate your students into groups of four or less. These will be their wagon teams; we'll use these teams for all the "Packing Your Wagon" activities and for the museum's *Travel the Oregon Trail* field trip. You may have your students in groups of four. You may have them in groups of three plus one imaginary friend. For small classes, you may even have them in groups of two plus two imaginary friends. **No group should have more than four students.**

The only other preparation you'll need to do, is to print out one set of this section's worksheets for each student. If you need to save paper, you can print out one set of the General Store for each group instead of each student. But, teachers have told us that the students read more (and thus learn more) when they have their own copy.

Activities:

Packing Your Wagon for the Oregon Trail Video:

After you have watched the "Five Big Questions" video, it's time to have your students begin working on packing their wagons! The museum made a short video that walks your kids through what a wagon train is, what type of wagons were used by the emigrants, what animals were brought along the trails, and gives them three very important tips for packing their wagons.

This video was created to help students pack their wagons better and to increase the chance that their wagon group will get through the entire game/program without having their characters die. It can be found on any of our "Oregon Trail" pages on our website. The QR code at the end of this teacher guide will also take you there.

An Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California Reading Activity:

Next, your students will read a guidebook to learn what to pack on their journey. This guide was written by the museum and is based on three original texts from the 1840s-1860s. While some of the language has been updated for modern students, it still reads very similar to how the original primary sources were written. You may choose to use the vocabulary sheets (details below) alongside this reading activity.

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Activities (Continued)

Vocabulary Sheets for the Reading Activity:

This is the only optional activity within this section. There are three vocabulary pages that focus on words from the guidebook. You may give these to your students and have them use computers, tablets, dictionaries, or other resources in the classroom to define the chosen vocabulary terms.

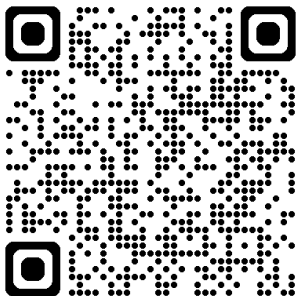
Packing Your Wagon Student Activity:

This activity may take a little time, but it is required before your students have their field trip and play the live action Oregon Trail game with the museum.

Give each student a copy of the “Packing Your Wagon” worksheet and a copy of the “General Store” pages. The “General Store” pages show every item that is available at the general stores in Independence, Missouri. They also tell students some great information about each item and list how much each item weighs.

Your students will use the information they learned from the guidebook and the video to decide what to bring with them on their long journey west. They may take as many copies of each item as they want, but their total wagon load must not exceed 2,500 pounds.

The “Packing Your Wagon” worksheet is where they’ll put the names of each emigrant in their wagon. They’ll also list each item they are bringing with them and add up their total weight. Each student should fill out their own worksheet – to give each student a chance to practice the math. However, each group will need to pick one student’s worksheet to be the “official” one for their team. We’ll use this one for the field trip and game.



Title: *Packing Your Wagon for the Oregon Trail*

Format: YouTube Video

Note: This is a video made by the museum to help your students pack their wagons.

An Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California



Hey Kids!

This guide will help you and your wagon team know what to bring with you on the long journey to Oregon. Pay close attention to what it tells you to pack. If you don't pack the right supplies, you will surely perish along the trail.

This guide was written by looking at multiple primary sources from 1840s-1860s. This includes books, journals, and newspaper articles. The guide is written in a similar style to how books were written in the middle of the 1800s. Have fun, read the guide closely, and pack your wagons carefully!



Inside of a Covered Wagon

An Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California

Welcome

This guide is designed to prepare a traveler for the great trip to the West. Being equipped and supplied, as it is suggested here, the emigrant may set out upon this wild and interesting excursion. They will not suffer toil, hardship, or imminent danger. They will enjoy many extraordinary and pleasing scenes, and safely arrive at their desired destination.

Wagons

Good and substantial wagons should always be selected. However firm and staunch they may appear, they should be examined and repaired before leaving the East.

Otherwise, the emigrant may set out with what they believe is a good wagon, only to be stranded after a few hundred miles when the wagon's defects become obvious.



One of the most important rules of the trail is to limit weight as much as possible. The prairie schooner recommended by this guide should never be loaded with more than 2,500 pounds. Leaving Independence with a wagon that is overloaded or has hidden mechanical problems will inevitably end with a stranded wagon party who must rely on the kindness of friends or be left behind to perish.

Weapons

Each wagon should be equipped with a good rifle, at least five pounds of gunpowder, and at least twenty pounds of lead shot. If revolvers can be afforded, they are also a fine addition to an emigrant's supplies. However, they should not be considered indispensable.



An Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California

Livestock

The horse is preferable for the saddle. But no horse can be used daily, whether in saddle or wagon harness, throughout the entire trip. Therefore, they are not feasible for use as a wagon team. Mules are preferred to horses, when it comes to wagon teams. But, their extreme slowness, stubborn intractability, and tendency to suffer from fatigue make them an unwise choice.



Oxen are the preferred beast for this kind of expedition. Oxen endure the fatigue and heat much better than either horses or mules. They also subsist much better on vegetation alone, and require no additional feed. Each wagon should have four yoke of good oxen, and two good milk cows. Milk is a great luxury on the road.

Wild Game

Wild game, like bison, may be hunted along the way. However, emigrants should not rely on hunting as the way to stay fed along the trail. Additionally, with each passing year, the great herds shrink ever smaller. Many a traveler has starved to death along the trail due to poor planning in Missouri.



Cookware

Good cookware is essential on the trail. However, very few extra cooking utensils should be taken. They add too much to the wagon load and should be avoided. A Dutch oven, frying pan, tea kettle, teapot, and coffee pot are all the cookware an average family needs on the trail. Tin cups, tin plates, and ordinary knives, forks, and spoons should also be taken for each traveler.

An Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California

Food

It is imperative to pack enough food to survive the journey to the West. The list below shows the food that is needed for **each traveler**.

- 200 pounds of flour
- 100 pounds of bacon
- 30 pounds of beans
- 30 pounds of hardtack
- 20 pounds of sugar
- 12 pounds of dried fruit
- 10 pounds of coffee
- 10 pounds of rice



In addition, each wagon party should bring at least 30 pounds of salt, an ample supply of vinegar, 150 pounds of lard, 25 pounds of corn meal, and a small amount of tea and saleratus. Other food items should be avoided, as they provide little value versus the weight they add to the wagon.

Clothing

Each member of the wagon party should be supplied with enough sets of clothing to last a full year. Walking all day long, for a period of four to six months, wears out clothes at a much faster rate than normal. Additionally, emigrants will be outside during sun, storm, and cold. Having proper clothing is paramount.

Each individual should also be equipped with enough pairs of boots to last up to six months. The average emigrant walks 15 miles a day, and will go through a significant number of shoes during the trip.



An Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California

Tents

Emigrants should provide themselves with good wagon covers and sturdy tents. The weather along the trail to the West can be unpredictable and violent. Wagon parties will be sleeping outside in all types of weather, and will find these items worth their weight in gold throughout the journey to Oregon or California.

Bedding

Bedding should consist of nothing more than blankets, sheets, coverlets, and pillows. These items should be spread over a bison robe or oiled cloth to keep the wet ground off the emigrants' bedding. Feather beds are sometimes taken by families. But, in many cases they are not only burdensome and inconvenient, but also entirely useless. Oftentimes they are left along the trail.



Tools

A good set of tools will be invaluable along the trail and upon reaching Oregon or California. This should include axes, shovels, hoes, and at least 60 feet of rope for each oxen. Additionally, a set of blacksmith tools, used for repairing wagons, will be vital for emigrants. This includes axletrees, chains, hammers, and other tools of the trade.

Wagon parties should also include a few surgical tools and a small assortment of medicines. Accidents and disease are all too common on the trail west. These items can be used by doctor and layman alike.



An Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California

Trade Items

It is also advised to bring along items that can be traded with the Native peoples living along the trail. Beads, handkerchiefs, blankets, clothing, knives, fishhooks, gunpowder, lead shot, and iron arrowheads are all sought after items by tribes living across the continent.



List of Main Primary Sources Used for this Guide

“The Emigrants’ Guide to Oregon and California”

Lansford W. Hastings - 1845

“Palmer's Journal of Travels Over the Rocky Mountains”

Joel Palmer - 1847

St. Joseph, Missouri Gazette Article (Newspaper)

March 19, 1847

An Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California: Vocabulary

As you're reading the guidebook, you'll come across some new words. Use the resources in your classroom to look up and define these terms.

Emigrant:

Gunpowder:

Indispensable:

Staunch:

Prairie Schooner:

An Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California: Vocabulary

As you're reading the guidebook, you'll come across some new words. Use the resources in your classroom to look up and define these terms.

Perish:

Subsist:

Hardtack:

Saleratus:

Dutch Oven:

An Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California: Vocabulary

As you're reading the guidebook, you'll come across some new words. Use the resources in your classroom to look up and define these terms.

Paramount:

Bison Robe:

Burdensome:

Invaluable:

Layman:

Packing Your Wagon

The General Store

It's time to pack your wagon! Your teacher will be handing you a packet that shows what the general stores in Independence, Missouri have for sale. This shows you each item you *can* choose to bring with you on your journey to Oregon.



This packet tells you what each item is, how much it weighs, and a little information about it. Work together to decide what your team wants to pack. Remember, the guide you read told you what you need and what you do not need.

Filling Out the Worksheet

The back of this page has a worksheet to write down what you're going to bring on your journey. The information below will help you fill out your worksheet.

Weight: The column that says "Weight" shows you how much one set of that item weighs. For example, one set of "Cookware" weighs 35 pounds and "Bacon" comes in 100-pound packs.

Number: The column that says "Number" is where you choose how much of that item you are going to bring with you. For example, if you are bringing two sets of "Cookware", write down the number 2 in the "Number" column.

Total: This is where you will figure out your total weight for each item. Just multiply the "Weight" by the "Number" to figure out the total weight for each item. For example, if you brought two sets of "Cookware", it would equal a "Total" of 70 pounds.

Packing Your Wagon

Name of Emigrant #1:

Name of Emigrant #2:

Name of Emigrant #3:

Name of Emigrant #4:

Total Weight of All Supplies:

	Item	Weight	Number	Total	
Cooking	Cookware	35 lbs.			
	Soap	10 lbs.			
	Stove	300 lbs.			
	Water Keg	5 lbs.			
Food	Bacon	100 lbs.			
	Beans	30 lbs.			
	Coffee	10 lbs.			
	Corn Meal	25 lbs.			
	Dried Fruit	25 lbs.			
	Flour	100 lbs.			
	Fresh Fruit	25 lbs.			
	Hardtack	60 lbs.			
	Lard	150 lbs.			
	Rice	20 lbs.			
	Saleratus	5 lbs.			
	Salt	20 lbs.			
	Sugar	20 lbs.			
	Tea	5 lbs.			
	Vinegar	25 lbs.			
	Weapons	Gunpowder	5 lbs.		
		Lead Shot	10 lbs.		
Revolvers		10 lbs.			
Rifle		10 lbs.			

	Item	Weight	Number	Total
Personal Items	Bedroll	5 lbs.		
	Books	30 lbs.		
	Boots	3 lbs.		
	Chair	20 lbs.		
	China Set	40 lbs.		
	Clothing	3 lbs.		
	Dresser	50 lbs.		
	Family Clock	100 lbs.		
	Heavy Coat	3 lbs.		
	Heirlooms	5 lbs.		
	Instrument	5 lbs.		
	Medicine	10 lbs.		
	Mirror	10 lbs.		
	Table	25 lbs.		
	Toys	10 lbs.		
	Trade Goods	10 lbs.		
	Tools	Canoe	60 lbs.	
Extra Parts		75 lbs.		
Fishing Gear		5 lbs.		
Iron Safe		75 lbs.		
Tent		50 lbs.		
Tools		50 lbs.		
Wagon Tools	100 lbs.			



Cookware

35 lbs.

This simple cookware kit includes a cast iron skillet, Dutch oven, coffee pot, cooking utensils, eating utensils, and a few dishes.



Soap

10 lbs.

While pioneers took few baths on the trail, soap was important for washing dishes, washing clothes, and keeping themselves clean.



Stove

300 lbs.

The cast iron stove was a staple within homes during the 1800s, and used to cook meals almost every day.



Water Keg

5 lbs.

The trail had long stretches without water. Pioneers would fill up their water keg at a stream before braving these dry areas.



Bacon

100 lbs.

Salted bacon was a great food for the trail. It was often stored in barrels with bran to keep it from spoiling and its fat from melting. With care, it could last the entire trip.



Beans

30 lbs.

Beans were a very important part of the pioneers' diet. They were often eaten for breakfast, lunch, and dinner on the trail.



Coffee

10 lbs.

Coffee was one of the most vital items for the trip. Pioneers loved drinking it with meals, and it hid the taste of dirty or foul river water.



Cornmeal

25 lbs.

Cornmeal was used on the trail to make a variety of foods. One of the most popular was cornmeal pancakes.



Dried Fruit

25 lbs.

Fruit was a great treat on the trail. Dried fruit lasted much longer than fresh fruit. The pioneers mainly brought apples, pears, figs, and raisins.

Flour

100 lbs.

Bread was a staple of the pioneer diet, and flour was used to make it almost every day. It was also used to make hardtack, biscuits, and (occasionally) pies.



Fresh Fruit

25 lbs.

Fresh fruit is part of a healthy diet. In the 1800s, people ate fresh fruit whenever they could to get vitamins, fiber, and minerals.

Hardtack

60 lbs.

Hardtack was a necessary but hated food item. It was similar to a thick cracker, and eaten when the weather was too bad to cook other food.



Lard

150 lbs.

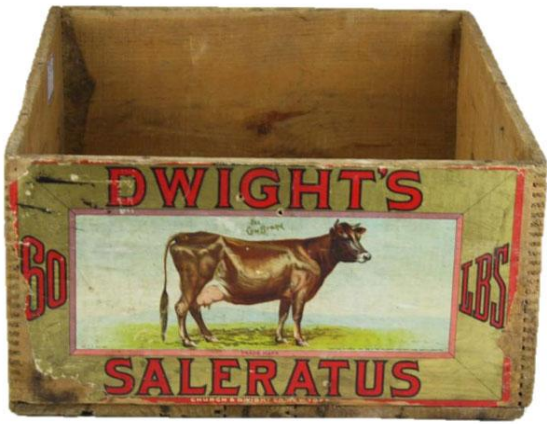
Lard is made from animal fat (usually from pigs) and was used for cooking all sorts of food. It was used much like butter is used today.



Rice

20 lbs.

Rice was a great meal to eat on the trail. It stored well and was easy to cook. It could be eaten with dried meat and beans. Rice helped fill the pioneers' hungry bellies.



Saleratus

5 lbs.

Saleratus was an important ingredient when baking on the trail. It is still used today, but is now known as baking soda.



Salt

20 lbs.

Salt was used for cooking and for flavoring foods. It was also used to preserve meat that was hunted along the trail.



Sugar

20 lbs.

Brown and white sugar was used for making pies, cakes, and jams on the trail. It was also used for flavoring other food.



Tea

5 lbs.

Tea was a very popular drink throughout much of the 1800s. Like coffee, it was enjoyed by men, women, and children on the trail.



Vinegar

25 lbs.

Apple vinegar was used for food processing and canning, to treat cuts and scrapes, and for flavoring in many different foods.



Gunpowder

5 lbs.

Gunpowder was needed for firing the pioneers' guns. But it was dangerous and could explode if it was accidentally exposed to fire.



Lead Balls

10 lbs.

Lead balls were the projectiles fired by rifles, shotguns, and revolvers on the trail. Pioneers could not fire their guns without it.

Revolvers

10 lbs.

If revolvers could be afforded, they were a good item to have along the trail. This option represents two black powder revolvers.



Rifle

10 lbs.

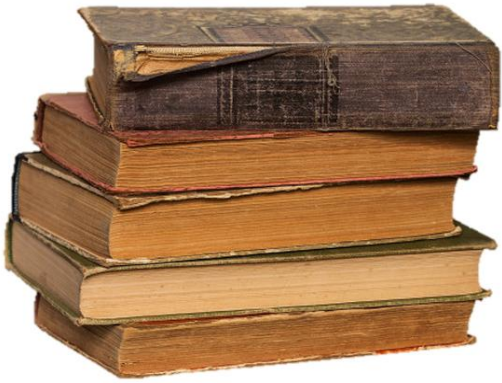
Rifles were an important tool while on the trail. They could be used for hunting or protecting the wagon train.



Bedroll

18 lbs.

The pioneers slept on the ground every night. They usually lay on top of bison robes. They would also have pillows, blankets, and homemade quilts.



Books

30 lbs.

Reading was popular during the middle of the 1800s. This is a box of fifteen books to help pass the time while on the trail to Oregon or California.



Boots

3 lbs.

Walking 2,000 miles over five to six months destroyed the boots of the pioneers. This is one extra pair of boots for one person.



Chair

20 lbs.

Chairs could be used for comfort along the trail and to decorate the pioneers' future homes in Oregon or California.



China Set

40 lbs.

Some pioneers would bring family treasures, like this china set – a gift from the wedding of two of your grandparents.



Clothing

3 lbs.

Good clothing was important, as the constant walking took its toll on clothes. This is one extra set of clothing for one person.

Dresser

50 lbs.

Some pioneers took furniture along the trail to use during the journey and later in their new homes. This is a family dresser.



Family Clock

100 lbs.

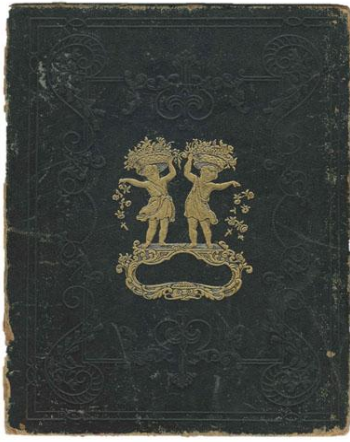
This is a family heirloom, passed down from great grandparents. It is a cherished piece of your family history.



Heavy Coat

5 lbs.

Pioneers had to keep walking in almost every type of bad weather, including snow. This is one heavy coat in case of cold weather.



Heirlooms

5 lbs.

These are the most precious heirlooms for your family. They might include photos, journals, keepsakes, and a family holy book.

Instrument

5 lbs.

A musical instrument could be a good source of enjoyment and happiness on the long 2,000-mile journey.



Medicine

10 lbs.

Medicine, while seldom effective, was an important item to bring on the trail. This kit also includes surgical supplies.



Mirror

10 lbs.

This mirror is a family keepsake and has been used for years by the entire family.



Table

25 lbs.

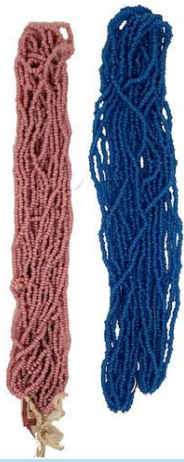
Some pioneers took furniture along the trail to use during the journey and later in their new homes. This is a family table.



Toys

10 lbs.

Children of all ages joined their parents on the trail. This is one box of simple toys to keep the kids entertained.



Trade Goods

10 lbs.

Beads, fishhooks, clothing, blankets, and cookware were often taken to be traded with Native American tribes on the trail.

Canoe

60 lbs.

Canoes had already been used on North American rivers and lakes for thousands of years before the Oregon Trail.



Extra Parts

75 lbs.

A broken wagon could mean death for an entire family. This is one spare part (wheel, axle, tongue, etc.) for your wagon.



Fishing Gear

5 lbs.

The wagons traveled along rivers for a good portion of the trail. Fishing gear was used to try to catch fish.



Iron Safe

75 lbs.

Some pioneers brought small iron safes on the trail to keep their money and prized heirlooms safe from thieves.



Tent

50 lbs.

Tents were used by pioneers at night when it was too rainy, snowy, or dusty to sleep under the stars.



Tools

50 lbs.

This tool kit has shovels, hoes, hatchets, saws, hammers, and other tools to help along the trail and to build a new home in Oregon or California.



Wagon Tools

100 lbs.

Blacksmith tools (also known as wagon tools) were used to fix broken parts of pioneer wagons and for repairing other broken items on the trail.