



# Section Guide: Prairie Schooners



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:

This section teaches your students about the prairie schooner wagons that the emigrants used to cross the continent. They'll learn about the different parts of the wagons and then make a paper model of a prairie schooner.

The supplemental information on the next page will give you background information about the prairie schooner wagons – if you need it.

## Preparation:

Read the supplemental information about wagons if you are unfamiliar with them. You'll need to print out a copy of the two activities for each student, too. For the craft, you'll also need crayons or colored pencils, scissors, and glue sticks.

## Activities:

### Prairie Schooner Introduction Classroom Discussion:

To begin this section, you should have a short discussion with your students about how the emigrants used the prairie schooner wagons to travel west. Talk about how they were more than just transportation – they served as a moving truck, kitchen, and mobile home – all in one.

### Parts of a Prairie Schooner Activity:

After your classroom discussion, give each student the “Prairie Schooner Wagon” student handout. Let them read about the different parts of the wagon, and then use that information to label the twelve parts on the picture of the prairie schooner.

### Make Your Own Covered Wagon Craft:

After they've learned about prairie schooners, they get to make their own! The directions for the wagons are all included on the student pages. Make sure you print these pages single-sided so they can cut out the templates. Have fun!

## Supplemental Information: Prairie Schooners

The wagons most commonly used by emigrants on the Oregon Trail were called prairie schooners. These wagons were named after sailing ships because their white canvas covers looked like sails gliding across the open prairie. Unlike the larger and heavier Conestoga wagons used in the eastern U.S., prairie schooners were smaller, lighter, and better suited for the long, rugged journey west. Their compact size made them easier to maneuver across rivers, mountains, and rough terrain.

Prairie schooners typically measured about 9 to 11 feet long, 4 feet wide, and 2 to 3 feet deep. Their storage area was roughly the size of a modern twin bed. The wagon bed was a rectangular wooden box mounted on two sets of wooden wheels, with the rear wheels larger than the front to allow for easier turning. The canvas cover was stretched over a series of wooden bows and could be tied shut for privacy and protection from dust and rain. To make the most of limited space, many emigrants added false floors – raised platforms about 12 to 15 inches above the wagon bed. These created hidden compartments underneath for storing reserve supplies.

In addition to false bottoms, families often sewed pockets inside the canvas cover to hold small items like brushes, utensils, tools, or other commonly used items. Storage chests were also built to fit snugly inside the wagon or lashed to the outside. Every inch of space was used creatively, as wagons had to carry everything a family needed for the 4–6 month journey.

The wagons were pulled primarily by oxen, which were strong, steady, and could survive on prairie grass. About two-thirds of emigrants used oxen, while the remaining third used mules. Horses were rarely used to pull wagons – they were more expensive, required more feed, and were more prone to injury or theft. However, horses were brought on the trail and used for riding, scouting, or hunting.

Prairie schooners were more than just transportation – they were mobile homes, kitchens, and storage units all in one. Their design reflected the ingenuity and resilience of the pioneers who depended on them to carry their hopes, supplies, and families across thousands of miles of wilderness.

# The Prairie Schooner Wagon



Hey Kids!

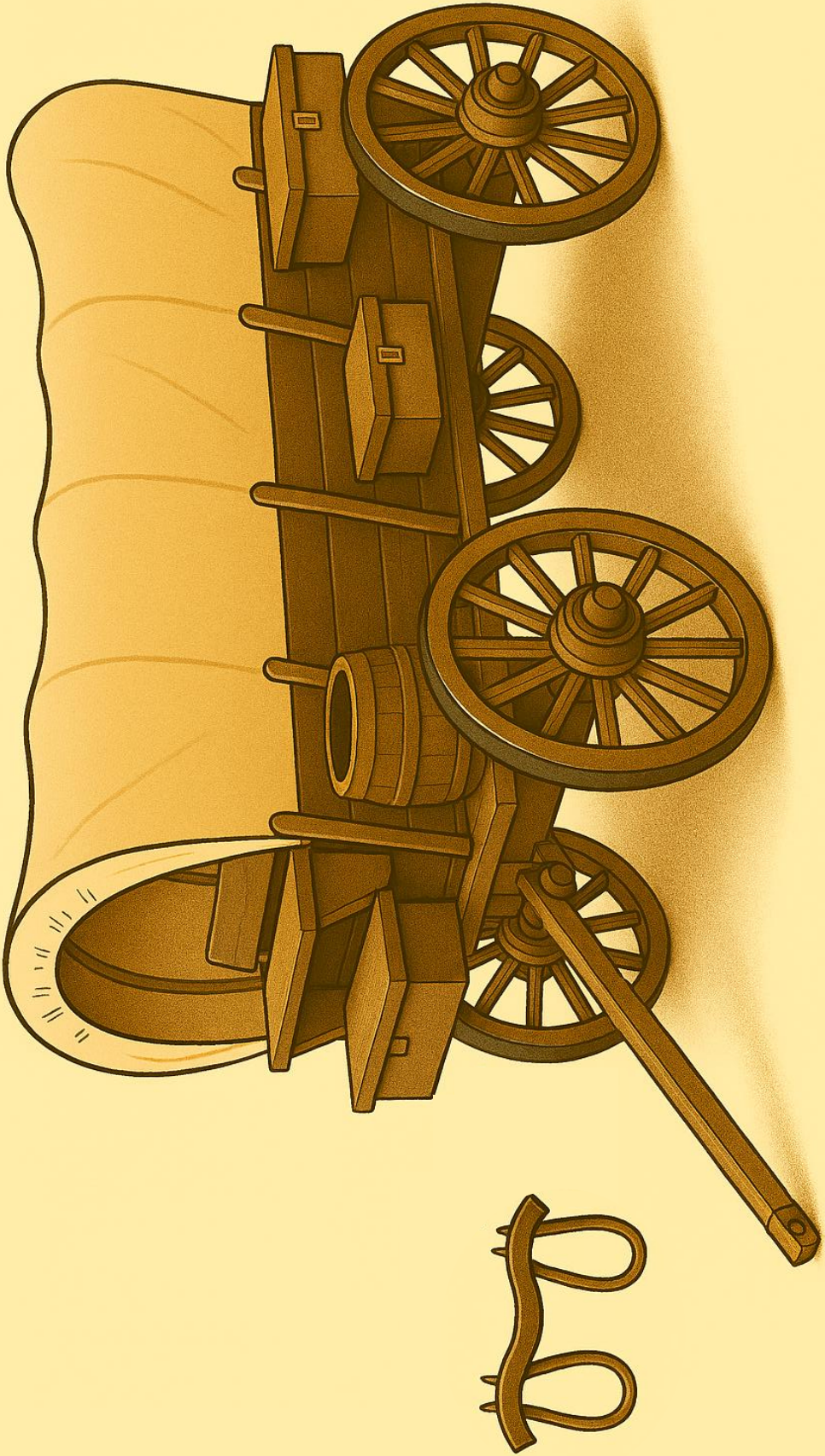
Let's learn about the different parts of the prairie schooner! Read below to learn all about the different parts of these little wagons, then see if you can label these same parts on the prairie schooner diagram.

## Parts of a Prairie Schooner Wagon

- 1) **Bed or Box:** The big wooden part of the wagon where families packed their supplies, food, tools, and personal items. It was usually made from strong hardwood and had tall sides – up to three feet high – to help keep everything from falling out.
- 2) **Bows:** Curved wooden pieces that looked a bit like rib bones. They stretched from one side of the wagon to the other and held up the canvas cover. Bows were flexible but strong, and were often made from hickory or oak.
- 3) **Cover or Bonnet:** A large piece of white canvas stretched over the wooden bows to protect people and supplies from the sun, rain, and dust. It made the wagon look like a sailing ship – like a schooner – when traveling across the prairie. That's how the wagons got their nickname “prairie schooners.”
- 4) **Wheels:** The wagon wheels were made of wood with iron rims. The back wheels were a bit bigger than the front wheels. Each wheel had spokes and a hub – kind of like a bicycle wheel today. They were built tough to handle bumpy trails, rocks, and mud.
- 5) **Axles:** Thick wooden beams that connected the wheels on each side of the wagon and helped them turn. There was one axle for the front wheels and one for the back. If an axle broke, the wagon couldn't move – so keeping them in good shape was super important!

## The Prairie Schooner Wagon

- 6) Tongue: A long wooden beam that stuck out from the front of the wagon. It connected to the animals – usually oxen or mules – that pulled the wagon across the trail.
- 7) Oxen Yoke: Yokes were curved wooden bars that rested on the oxen's necks. They were connected to the wagon tongue using chains and pins. This let the oxen pull the wagon. Mules, on the other hand, used harnesses and straps instead.
- 8) Seat or Driver's Bench: A wooden seat or bench at the front of the wagon where the driver could sit. But on the trail, the driver usually walked beside the animals to guide them.
- 9) Toolbox: A wooden box that held important tools like hammers, axes, wagon wrenches, and spare parts. It was usually attached to the side or back of the wagon. Most emigrant wagons had a toolbox because things often broke on the trail – like wheels, axles, or even the wagon tongue. Having the right tools nearby helped families fix problems quickly and keep moving west.
- 10) Jockey Box: A small wooden box mounted on the very front of the wagon bed. It held items pioneers needed often – like grease, nails, and small tools. The jockey box was technically a toolbox, but smaller and easier to reach.
- 11) Feed Box: Some wagons had a wooden box for storing animal feed – attached to the side or back of the wagon. Feed boxes were common on wagons pulled by mules, since they needed extra food. Oxen mostly grazed on prairie grasses, so wagons pulled by them would have small feed boxes or none at all.
- 12) Water Barrel or Water Keg: A barrel mounted on the side of the wagon that held drinking water for the family and their animals. Water was one of the most important supplies on the trail, and families had to refill their barrels at rivers and springs.



# Make Your Own Covered Wagon

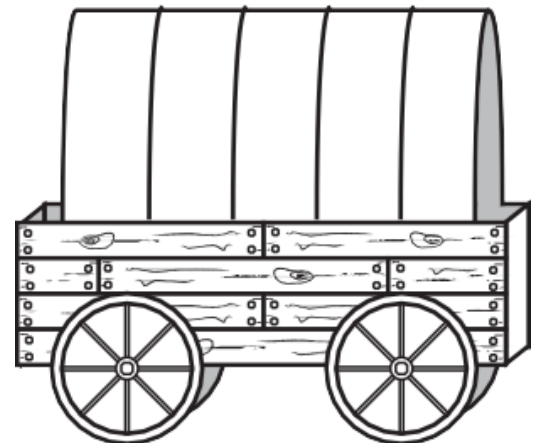


Hey Kids!

You are going to make your own covered wagon out of paper! Follow the steps on this page to make your wagon. Have fun!

## Steps to Make Your Covered Wagon

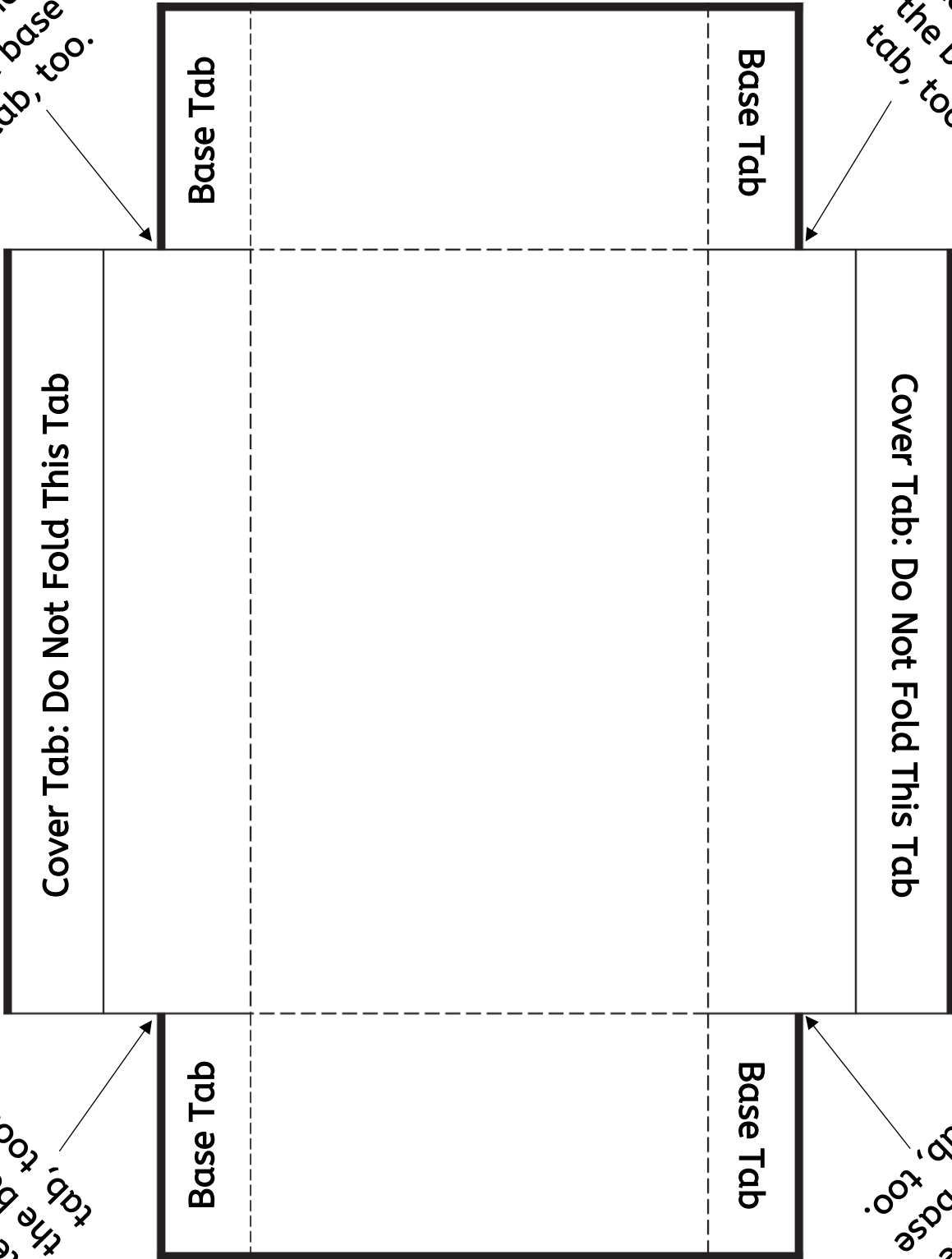
- 1) Color your wagon's end panels, side panels, cover, and wheels.
- 2) Carefully cut out all the pieces of your wagon.
- 3) Fold the wagon base along the dotted lines. Then, put glue on the tabs labeled "Base Tab" and glue them to the flap beside them.
- 4) Glue the two side panels to the sides of the wagon base.
- 5) Glue the two end panels to the ends of the wagon base.
- 6) Glue the wheels to the sides of the wagon.
- 7) Glue the cover to the wagon base. Do this by gluing the two "Cover Tabs" on the cover to the two "Cover Tabs" on the wagon base.
- 8) When you're done, the wagon should look like the picture below.



# Wagon Base

Cut the little line on the base tab, too.

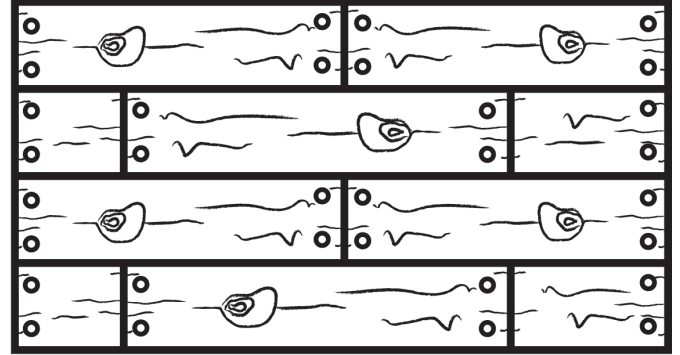
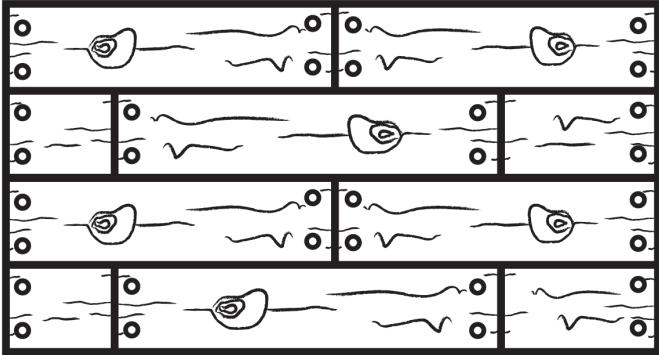
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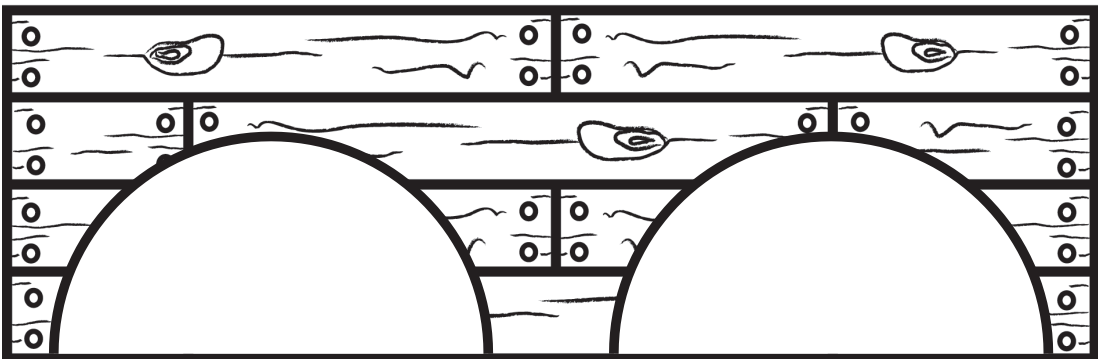
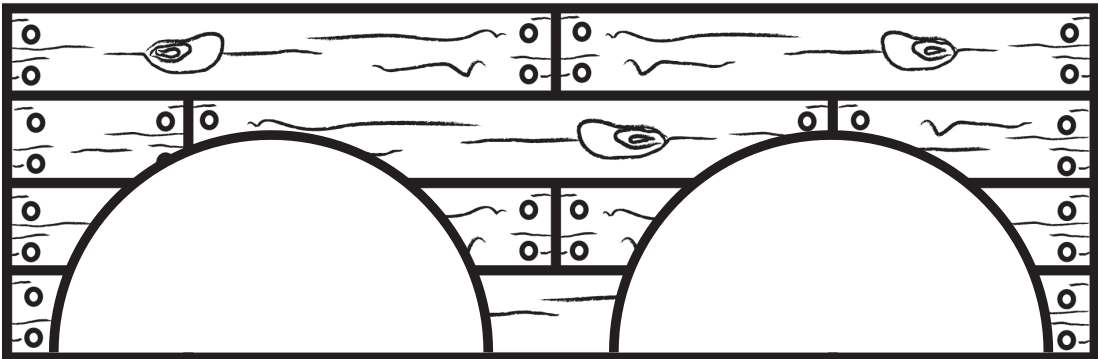
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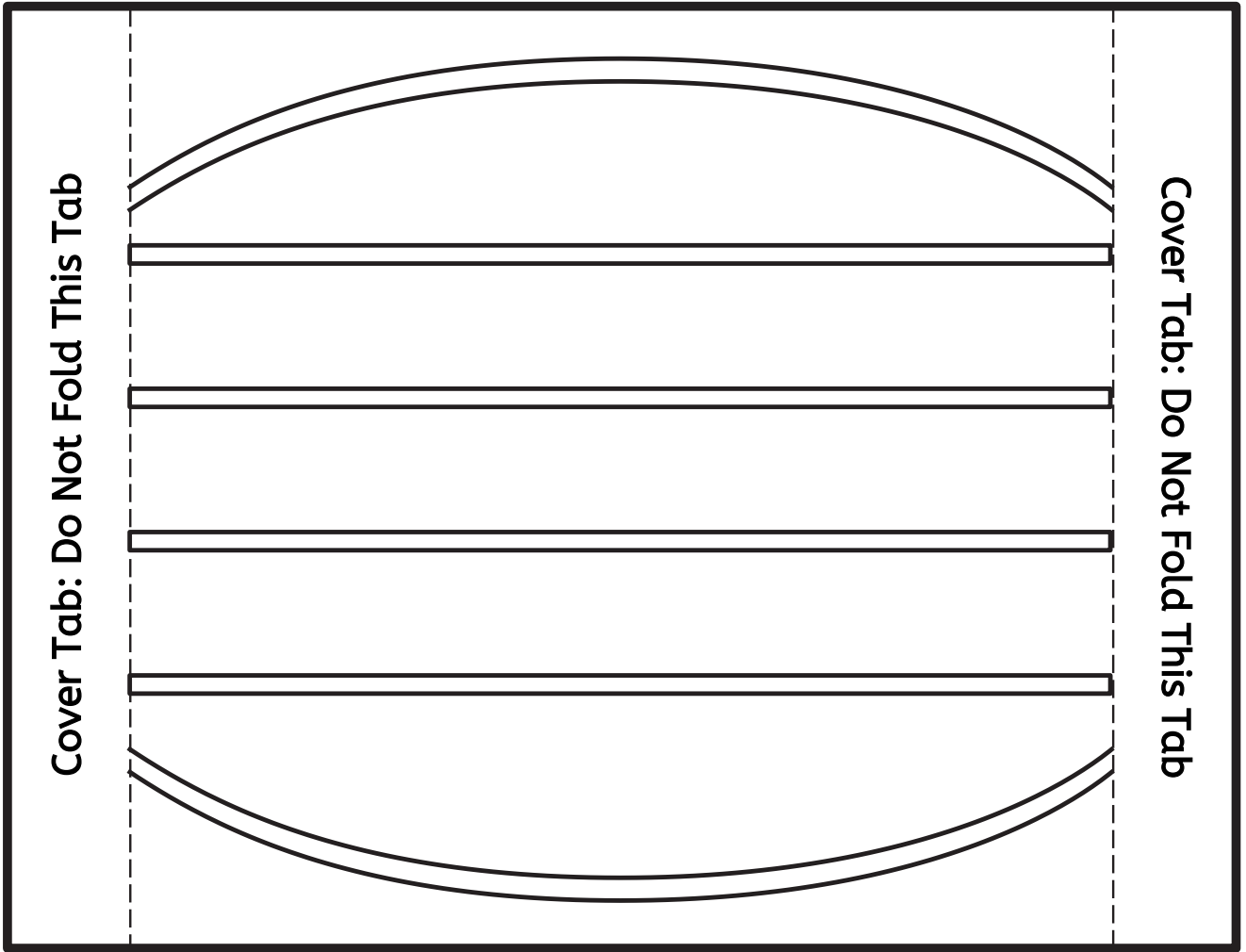
## End Panels



## Side Panels



# Wagon Cover



# Wagon Wheels

