

A Pioneer Woman's Memoir

(Oregon Trail 1864) by Arabella Clemens Fulton (1930)

She was born 1844 in MO & died 1934 in WA. She wrote these notes 60 years after her experience. The 1892 Homestead Act offered 160-acres free to those who would improve it & settle. 300,000 people & 75,000 Conestoga wagons traveled the OR Trail from 1840-1870, most from the civil war ravaged south. Her dad could not sell his land, but wanted his daughters & their husbands to go. Arabella was single and 20 at the time they left on 5May64.

Leaving too early might hit snow not melted off yet & grass not grown out yet. Leaving too late might cause them to get caught in the mountains in an early winter storm. Most guides estimated that it would take 5 months & \$600 (for emergencies & 1st winter) for a family of 4 with 4 ox (castrated bull) on their wagon. Oxen were stronger & more patient than horses. A loaded wagon could weigh as much as 3000 pounds. During the war food, gold & supplies were scarce & expensive.

Most started in Independence, MO & could travel 3 mph (100 miles per week). There was no wood for cooking fires so a lot collected buffalo chips. It was a blessing to find driftwood. The east prairies had tall grass (6-12 feet) with 30" annual rainfall. And by the time they were closer to the Rockies the grass was short (6-12 inches) since most of the storms dumped on the west side of the mountains.

Heading west along the Platte River the Indians were mostly friendly, but were frustrated with the lack of respect from the white man (toward them & buffalo). About 10% of the migrants died (mostly from accidents & illness). River crossing were extremely dangerous & ferry crossing could be backed up for days. One night they camped on an island & made a quick evacuation when a flash flood came.

Beef & dairy cows were easily frightened in the storms & Indians like to steal some. Chimney Rock (carved names in the soft rock) & Independence Rock (granite) were important landmarks. It was important to reach the 2nd by July 4th & 100 miles past that was the continental divide. It was a gentle climb up the south pass to 7550'. Remaining on schedule was of the utmost importance. Weak animals were shot & used as meat. If a family was unable to keep up, they would have to join another group. Dry air west of the Mississippi River caused the wood wheels to shrink.

They would travel along the Snake & Columbia Rivers to Fort Vancouver (WA) or Willamette Valley (OR). There was more wood after the Green River Valley. Her party avoided Salt Lake route (little grass & water); they took the Sublette cutoff (Weber Canyon). The Great Plains had extreme weather, fierce Indians & was a desolate land.

Gold miners from CA headed to ID & NV and were happy to exchange news from each coast. Hudson Bay Co built Fort Boise in 1834 as a fur trading outpost. Gold was confiscated & "greenbacks" were issued to pay for the war. But people out west wanted to see gold. The money brought with them was heavily discounted or worthless (southern currency).

25Sep64 they reached Boise & her brother-in-laws were offered a job to build a house for a successful farmer/freighter before winter set in. They accepted the offer since they need cash. Arabella fell in love with Frank Fulton (the farmer), married on 24Nov64 & decided to stay. Frank would sell his hay, grains & produce to nearby forts, haul lumber from mills, etc. They raised chickens (eggs & fryers), pigs & cows (diary & beef). Eggs & butter were expensive. And he planted a fruit orchard.

Most pioneers made a quick sod shelter that was infested with snakes, mice & bed bugs. The land of opportunity was in reality a struggle for survival. When some moved on, others came to take their place. Gardens seeds were scarce & rice was a delicacy. Anything that had to be shipped in was expensive. Her husband bought her a cook stove (cost \$25 in St. Louis) for \$125 (it had to be shipped down the Mississippi & around the horn (South America) & up the coast. Next to marriage & birth of a child it was the next important event of her life.

10May1869 the golden spike was set & connected the transcontinental railroad. By 1890 the railroad brought 5 million people to the west to homestead. The railroad allowed farmers & ranchers a chance to get their goods to market. At first cattle ranchers were allowed to open graze, but overcrowding caused them to buy land & fence it. The railroad allowed Frank & Arabella to go back & visit family.

Frank was very successful there, but wanted to try TX, so (against her best judgment) they moved on 15Apr72. It was a disaster. They hated it there & finally on 15Apr83 they left for the NW territory. They settled in Kittitas Valley (Ellensburg, WA) & started over.

Books: Oregon Trail (Francis Parkman); Dr. Gunn's Medical Advisor (Gunn); CA Gold Rush (Ralph Andrist)