ONSITE TEACHER-LED ACTIVITIES

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO THE CALIFORNIA TRAIL INTERPRETIVE CENTER

Thank you for choosing the California Trail Interpretive Center (CTIC) for your field trip! To prepare you for your time at the center the CTIC staff has prepared this summary of our exhibits. The CTIC exhibits are displayed geographically, starting with a "jumping off town" at the edge of the American Frontier on the Missouri River and progressing west to California. Our exhibits are intended to create a full immersion experience on the California Trail, featuring exhibits that stimulate the senses and listening stations to hear emigrants' own words. As you go through the California Trail Interpretive Center don't forget to look, listen, touch, and even smell the exhibits!

INTRODUCTORY MOVIE

Why did people go? Reasons to head west were as diverse as the people who traveled on the trail. Starting in 1837 America suffered from a severe economic depression, leaving many in financial hardship. Going west offered these people a new lives and opportunities. Also, there was the opportunity for adventure. As pioneers moved west, the American frontier shifted. They were also drawn west by the promise of adventure, hope for better health in the California climate, religious freedom, expanding the United States from "sea to shining sea," protecting lands from other countries, and by their concern over the expansion of slavery.

One of the most important considerations for the emigrants to take into account was the timing of their trip. Emigrants typically left in mid-April, early May. If they left earlier, there wouldn't have been enough grass grown on the prairie to feed their draft animals. If they left later than this they may have gotten stuck in the early snows of the Sierra Nevada and faced the same awful fate as the Donner Party.

Guiding Questions:

- What is Manifest Destiny?

Content Standard H2.0 - Nation Building and Development - *Students understand the people, events, ideas, and conflicts that lead to the evolution of nations, empires, distinctive cultures, and political and economic ideas.*

Content Standard H3.0 - Social Responsibility & Change - *Students understand how social ideas and individual action lead to social, political, economic, and technological change.*

Content Standard G5.0 - The World in Spatial Terms: *Students use maps, globes, and other geographic tools and technologies to locate and extrapolate information about people, places, and environments.*

SEEING THE ELEPHANT

"Seeing the Elephant," is an expression found in the journals of many overland emigrants. It describes the difficulties in describing the Trail and the West to others. The trail's landscapes and

hardships are so extreme that a person cannot merely describe it, they have to see it. Later, this expression also came to describe the fear of the unknown that many emigrants encountered along the trail. In the early 19th century photography was still in its infancy, and few people had ever seen what an elephant really looked like. It makes sense that such a huge, strange beast came to symbolize the California Trail: an experience that could not be described with words alone.

*Activity:

- Choose one or two students to close their eyes and shut their ears. Then have the rest of the class quickly think of five words that describe what an elephant looks like. Ask the two students who didn't watch or listen to try to decide what the list of five works describes. Can they figure it out? If taken out of context the words are used collectively to describe the look of the elephant might not be able to describe an elephant at all. You've got to see it yourself to know what it is!

Guiding questions:

- Have you ever visited somewhere that you knew nothing about?
- How would you feel leaving your home, relatives, friends, the United States, to venture somewhere uninhabited by Americans?

JUMPING OFF

Most emigrants began their overland journey at "jumping off towns" on the Missouri River frontier. People traveled from all over the world and United States to begin their journey across the California Trail at these jumping off towns. The Missouri River Frontier was the last place they could buy supplies for their journey. By crossing to the west bank of the Missouri River they were leaving the United States and crossing into unorganized territory.

Popular jumping off towns were, Independence, Council Bluffs, and St. Joseph. These towns' economies depended on emigrants buying supplies in their towns, so each tried to get the competitive edge by promoting cheap goods and discrediting the competing towns.

The CTC's Jumping-off town tries to get students to understand what life was like in these towns. Students will be immersed in the California Trail when they walk along the sidewalks, look in the store windows, and listen to the sounds of the town.

Guiding questions:

- What are some reasons that people chose their respective Jumping Off towns?
- What are some of the sights, smells and sounds you would expect to find?
- Compare the Jumping off town to Elko. What is different, what is similar?

Content Standard G6.0 - Places & Regions - *Students understand the physical and human features of places and use this information to define and study regions and their patterns of change.*

WAGONS

During the 4-6 months of their journey, the wagon was the emigrant's home. Contrary to Hollywood's portrayal, wagons were not used to carry emigrants but were used to transport food and other necessities. Emigrants would not ride in the wagons because of comfort (wagons did not have suspension or anything to absorb the jolts from the rugged terrain) and most importantly, because of weight. It was essential for the wagons to be as light as possible to not exhaust their draft animals.

Animals were vital to the survival of the emigrants – without them, emigrants would have to carry their own goods. Mules, horses, and most commonly, oxen were used to pull wagons. Other animals, including cows, sheep, goats, and chickens, also traveled on the trail. It is believed that there were 5 animals to every emigrant on the trail. While wagons were the most commonly used carrier, during the Gold Rush many young men tried crossing the trail with mules or on horseback. Emigrants needed to pack enough to supply them for months on the trail, but also needed to pack for their future in California. Supplies were often too expensive or simply unavailable in California.

*activity:

- Pack your wagon. Each wagon has items of a variety of uses, sizes, and shapes. Decide what you would take and what you would leave. Compare between the two groups.

Guiding questions:

- Imagine the longest road trip you have been on with your family. What did you do to keep busy? Did you have toys? Did you play games or watch a movie? Emigrant children traveled with their families for up to 6 months!
- What do you think the most important things to pack are?
- Can you fill the wagon with the most important items? Remember, you want to bring as little as possible.
- What would you bring? Imagine packing everything that you would need for 4 months and be concerned about weight.
- What would you be most upset about leaving behind?

PLATTE RIVER

Life on the trail was difficult but there were also times for celebration. Music, dancing, games, and even weddings took place at camp. These occasions were not confined to emigrants; Indians participated in feasts and games with emigrant parties. A typical day as an emigrant consisted of waking early, walking until noon, taking a break to feed the animals and have lunch, and continuing their journey on average until dusk. Most days, people walked between ten and twenty-five miles, depending on the terrain, animals, and weather. Groups typically sent people to scout out the terrain ahead. When looking for a campsite, emigrants tried to find a place that had access to water, fuel for their fires, and grass for animals.

At night, women would cook, men would repair equipment, care for the animals and set up camp, while kids did chores. Typical chores for kids included finding buffalo chips or wood for fires, feeding the animals, taking care of other children, fetching water, and assisting with other activities around camp. The overland trail was not all work, however. Kids played with toys and games. For a lot of children and women, the California Trail was an opportunity for more social interaction than at home. Wagon Trains could consist of hundreds of people and wagons, allowing for a better social atmosphere.

Our scene shows four emigrants at their encampment. The women are cooking while the men clean a gun, and play music.

*activity:

- If you could only eat one thing for the next 3 months, what would it be?

Guiding questions:

- What three things did emigrants look for in a good campsite?
- Looking at the diorama, what can you tell about the emigrants' trip? Does it look similar to when you camp? What is the same? What is different?
- Look at the fire. What is burning? Why would they use buffalo chips instead of wood?
- What are some problems the emigrants encountered at camp?

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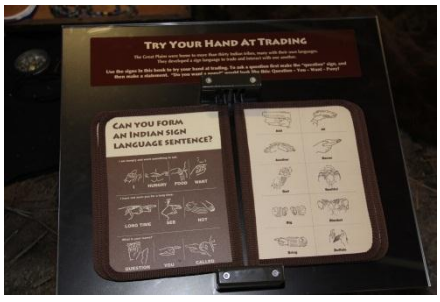
PLATT RIVER 2

When they began their journey the thing many emigrants feared the most was being attacked by Indians. However, most soon learned that there was little reason to be afraid of Indians. Instead of fighting, most Indians wanted to trade with the people on the trail for useful things like metal pots, beads, ammunition, and cloth. The emigrants often needed things the Indians had to offer too, like comfortable moccasins, warm buffalo robes, fresh food, and help crossing rivers.

In later years when there were many people on the trail and some began settling along the trail. This strained the relationship between emigrants and Indians. Imagine how angry you would be if strangers started traveling through your home, scaring off your food, and taking the best campsites for themselves? In the end it was Indians who had more reason to fear the emigrants. Within 50 years of the first wagon trails on the California Trail, whites put an end to most Indian's traditional ways of life.



This scene shows an emigrant trading with a Native American. An emigrant child is looking on through an

opening in the wagon. Items to trade are scattered on the ground.

*activity:

- Sign language. Try your hand at sign language. Try to ask for a deer to eat.

Guiding questions:

- What is the girl in the wagon thinking?
- What items did the Native Americans have that that emigrants would want?
- What items did the emigrants have that the Natives would want?
- What needs to happen to have bartering (trade) be effective?
- Who benefits from trade?

Content Standard H1.0 - People, Cultures, and Civilizations - *Students understand the development, characteristics, and interaction of people, cultures, societies, religion and ideas.*

Content Standard G7.0 - Human Systems - *Students understand how economic, political, and cultural processes interact to shape patterns of human migration and settlement, influence and interdependence, and conflict and cooperation.*

FORT LARAMIE

Emigrants relied on Forts and other landmarks to gauge distance. Forts were also used as trading posts and post-offices. Many emigrants would write one last letter home from Fort Laramie before venturing into the true wilderness of the Great American Desert beyond.

Guiding Questions:

- If this were you last chance to write to your family, what would you say to them?
- What things might the emigrants want to buy at the last trading post?

CLOTHING

Clothing in the mid 1800s was made to be durable. Emigrant's clothing was mainly wool, cotton, and linens. Women typically layered their clothing, wearing up to 6 petticoats under their dresses. Emigrants always wore hats outdoors.

At the CTIC we have 2 chests of clothing for students to wear.

*activity:

- Try on clothing.

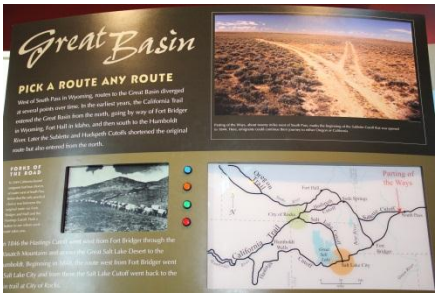
Guiding questions:

- Why are there no shoes in the chests?
- What fabrics are the clothing made out of? Why would they choose that fabric?

FINDING A ROUTE

Within the 28 years the California Trail was in use, many new routes were developed. Emigrants advocated alternative routes based on water and grass availability, and ease and speed of passage. The routes developed were referred to as "cutoffs". Although cutoffs were supposed to be

shortcuts, sometimes people would promote routes that had not really been explored. This caused problems for those who decided to take them. (In)famous cutoffs include, Hastings' Cutoff (the end of which faces the Trail Center), Hensley-Salt Lake Cutoff, and the Sublette Cutoff.



While decision making is relevant throughout the CTIC, this structure forces students to choose a route and compares the advantages and disadvantages in taking each route.

*activity:

- Split group into two and have them read the advantages and disadvantages of each route. Have them decide which way they want to go as a group and tell you why. Once they decide, have them follow the decided path. Ask each group to describe what they see and compare.

Guiding questions:

- Have you ever taken a shortcut that actually extended your trip?
- What kinds of decisions did the emigrants need to make along the Trail?
- What could happen if the emigrants took the wrong path?

Content Standard G6.0 - Places & Regions - *Students understand the physical and human features of places and use this information to define and study regions and their patterns of change.*

REGISTER ROCK

This is a replica of Register Rock in Nevada. Journals tell of hundreds of names covering every open space of the rock, while currently names are sparse on the rock due mainly from erosion. Emigrants knew that they were taking part in history and wanted to share their progress with other trains.

Guiding questions:

- What would you do if you saw an artifact on the ground or in a rock?
- What is a good way to record what you have seen?

40 MILE DESERT

After traveling over 1,500 miles the emigrants encountered one of the most challenging sections on the trail, the 40 mile desert. In the modern town of Lovelock the Humboldt River sinks into

the ground, depriving people of water and grass for 40 miles. Animals and emigrants alike struggled to cross the waterless area, exhausted from sinking into the loose sand and lack of sustenance. In this section of the trail, people were desperate, throwing out as many of their belongings as they could to lighten their load so their animals wouldn't die of exhaustion. Journals depict the land littered with discarded wagons, metal, trunks and carcasses so abundant that people could walk across on the fallen animals. One emigrant wrote that in 1849 it was possible to walk the whole forty miles without setting foot on the ground – you could step from one animal carcass to the next the whole way!

This diorama depicts emigrants struggling in the 40 mile desert. There are 4 people alongside a collapsed ox. Two men attempt to lift the dying animal while a teenager looks on confused. A woman brings water to the animal. We hope to evoke thoughts of struggle, camaraderie, and loss of innocence to the visitor.

Guiding questions:

- Look at the mural. What strikes you from the image?
- What types of emotions are expressed in the faces of the figures?
- What are some challenges the emigrants would face heading into the 40 mile desert?
- What could the emigrants do to make the journey more successful?
- Have you ever thought that you were almost finished with something, only to find you have just started the most difficult part?
- Why does the box smell of death and decay?

Content Standard G8.0 - Environment and Society - *Students understand effects of interactions between human and physical systems and the changes in use, distribution, and importance of resources.*