

In Pursuit of a Dream

Two dozen teenagers and three teachers go back in time, dress as the pioneers did, and travel by wagon train on the Oregon Trail from Wyoming to Oregon. Along the way they meet a variety of other people, from topographical engineers mapping the West to gold seekers headed to California, and Indians wanting to trade. The interactions of the students in the film mirror the kinds of interactions experienced by the thousands of people who crossed the country in the mid 1800s on these same trails and helped create the nation as we know it today.

The kinds of hardships and problems encountered by the kids are the same as those encountered by the pioneers. Similar feelings were experienced by both groups—appreciation for the beauty of the landscape they were passing through, happiness and laughter as they danced and sang around the campfire, the sense of accomplishment they felt when they worked together to overcome a difficulty or solve a problem, joy and relief when they finally arrived in Oregon.

The teenagers learned about the history of the movement westward across the continent, they learned about the consequences of the decisions they made and the value of the bonds they formed with their fellow travelers, and they learned about the importance of preserving the history of the trails for future generations to learn from.

Vocabulary

Some terms that have specific meanings in the context of the Oregon-California trail experience:

- Emigrants
- Oxen
- Covered wagon
- Manifest destiny
- Jumping off
- Wagon train
- Swale
- Landmark
- Hand-carts
- Parting of the ways
- Cutoff
- Preservation
- Trail marking

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think some of the motivations were for people to make the long journey to Oregon, Utah, or California?
2. What were some of the decisions people might have to make along the way? What might be the consequences of making a poor decision?
3. Why did the pioneers walk most of the time rather than ride in the wagons? Who might ride in the wagons?
4. What were some of the hazards and hardships the emigrants encountered along the trail? How were these the same as those encountered by the teenagers in the film? How were they different?

5. What were some of the difficulties people might encounter in learning to know and work with each other to successfully make the long journey west?
6. How did the emigrants know what they would need to take with them to successfully make such a long journey?
7. What are some of the skills people would need to successfully make the long journey west across the country? What were some of the personal characteristics they would need? Did the kids in the film need these same skills and personal characteristics?
8. Who were some of the people the kids in the film met on their journey? What did they learn from these meetings? Do you think the emigrants met these same kinds of people on their journeys?
9. What significance did Independence Rock have for the emigrants?
10. How do you think children's and women's experiences on the trail were different from those of men? How were they alike?
11. How do you think the experiences of the kids in the film compared with those of kids traveling the trail in the mid 1800s? What was the same or similar? What was different?
12. What happened when the pioneers reached Oregon or Utah or California? Were they able to fulfill their dreams?
13. Why do you think it is important to preserve the historic trails today? What can young people do to help preserve historic trails?

For More Information

Oregon-California Trails Association

<http://octa-trails.org>

The main OCTA web site, with information, learning activities, lesson plans, resources, and links to other web sites to help teachers, students and others learn about western emigrant trails. Also has information about the organization and its chapters, membership, and contact information.

In Pursuit of a Dream

<http://www.inpursuitofadream.org>

Information about the making of the film, the cast and crew, daily diary entries by cast members, links to the film's Face Book and YouTube sites, and more.

Virtual Trail

<http://octatrails.micromaps.com>

Maps of the Oregon and California Trails. Major trail sites are identified. Click on a site to see a picture and find information about the site, driving directions, diary quotes, and things to see and do at the site.

Reading, Writing and Riding Along the Oregon-California Trails, by William E. Hill. Independence, Missouri: Oregon-California Trails Association, c. 1993

An educational activity book with good information and a wide variety of learning activities. Suitable for upper elementary and middle school students; activities can be readily adapted for younger or older learners.