

An Instructional Guide for
Music and Diaries from the Oregon Trail

A concert featuring

The Trail Band

Presented by

STAGE, Inc. at The Historic Elsinore Theatre, Salem, Oregon
and Ross Productions



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STAGE at The Historic Elsinore Theatre and Salem-Keizer Schools have been selected to participate in the Performing Arts Centers and Schools: Partners in Education Program of The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

Note to Teachers

This guide is meant to serve as a preparatory tool to help students understand and enjoy The Trail Band's concert. Its purpose is to provide a context for the music, lyrics, costumes, instruments and diary readings presented, and was written to be used in conjunction with the Trail Band's recording of, *Voices From The Oregon Trail*. Of the 17 songs in the concert, 14 were familiar during the Oregon Trail era. Three songs, (*Oregon Bound*, *What We Left Behind*, & *Down At The River*) are modern compositions written in period musical styles to teach students about the Oregon Trail. Lyrics to all the songs on The Trail Band recording are included. The guide is divided into four chapters to be presented in the days leading up to the show and was designed as a supplement to a more complete instructional program on the Oregon Trail. For more information on the Trail Band and their recordings and concerts, visit their website at www.trailband.com



Chapter 1

What was the Oregon Trail and why did people travel it?

The Oregon Trail was nearly 2000 miles long and stretched halfway across the North American continent from the Missouri River to the Willamette Valley in Oregon. This excursion took six months to complete. Approximately 30,000 of the estimated 400,000 people who attempted the journey died along the way. Most emigrants walked the entire distance since their small wagons were packed full with supplies. People left their farms, relatives, and friends to come west. Most would never see their old homesteads again. There were violent storms, dangerous river crossings, disease, high deserts to cross, and uncertainties with Indian tribes along the way.

So, why did people risk so much to travel the Oregon Trail?

In the 1830s there were no dams on the great rivers in America. In the years before the Oregon Trail era (approximately 1843 -1863) the Missouri, Mississippi, and Ohio Rivers flooded terribly and the winters were bitter cold. Most people lived on farms at this time, and the floods not only washed away crops, but forced people to leave and rebuild elsewhere. The floods also created a breeding ground in lowland areas for deadly diseases such as cholera, malaria, scarlet fever, typhoid, dysentery, tuberculosis, and yellow fever. Many people left the Mississippi and Missouri Valleys hoping to avoid the risk of infection. Such diseases, however, were also found along parts of the trail, especially amid unsanitary conditions, as people carried the deadly germs westward from home.

At about the same time, there were economic depressions in 1837 and again in 1842. These depressions caused people to lose their jobs, drove crop prices down drastically, and American currency lost much of its value. Farmers going to market to sell their harvest barely made enough money to avoid ruin.

In the early 1840's, news spread that there was farmland with a gentle climate in the Willamette Valley in an area to the west called Oregon. People were tired of cold, icy winters and the hot, humid summers of the Midwest. Western Oregon had fairly warm but rainy winters and comfortable summers. Stories about a "Heaven on Earth" often exaggerated the bounty of this region, but people were ready to believe in the promise of a better life. In 1843, the first organized wagon train left from Missouri. In 1850, Congress passed The Oregon Donation Land Act – a law that gave away thousands of acres of Indian land in Oregon to white settlers. Since there was no welfare or unemployment insurance, the lure of free land and a chance to start a new life were appealing. The Act meant that every white American male over eighteen could claim 320 acres of land if he lived on it for four years. If he was married, his wife was allowed to claim the same amount of land in her own name. Although the land was free, most people who were very poor could not afford the journey because it cost from \$700 to \$1500 to outfit a family for the journey. The Oregon Donation Land Act and the discovery of gold in California in 1849 influenced many more emigrants to come west on the Oregon-California trails.

Amongst those interested in this new land were members of various religious groups that had been persecuted in the United States. Oregon was seen by them as a place to practice their beliefs without being bothered. Some of these religious groups also believed that converting Indian people to Christianity was the right thing to do, and they left to build missions and churches in Oregon.

Some women on the Oregon Trail did not want to go. Diaries indicate that many wives of farmers would have preferred to stay home, but because their husbands insisted, they journeyed west. Women typically had little to say in such decisions in the households of 19th century America.

Exercise: Have students listen and follow the lyrics to *Oregon Bound* (cut #2). This is a song they'll hear at the Trail Band concert. The lyrics tell why a farmer, a banker, a mother, and a preacher come to Oregon. Have them tap feet or clap hands to the rhythm and encourage them to sing the chorus as it repeats each time. You can divide the students in the class to sing the different verses and then all sing on the choruses.

Exercise: Have students list three reasons people left the Midwest in the mid-1800's. Have them list 3 reasons they came to Oregon instead of some other region of the U.S. Historians have called these 2 different types of reasons, "push" and "pull." Have students explain why historians would use these two words to describe the different reasons people traveled the Oregon Trail.

Oregon Bound

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FARMER'S VERSE

Well, a lightening bolt it hit the barn,
Floods came up and took our farm,
By the grace of God we weren't harmed,
But the river got our cow.
And every year we froze or drowned,
While the price of corn kept going down,
So long, boys, this farmer's Oregon bound.

CHORUS (all sing)

Well, I'm on my way to a higher ground,
To a better world than I've ever found,
I've got my reasons for leaving this town, boys,
So long, Ma, I'm Oregon Bound.



BANKER'S VERSE

In '37 they closed the banks.
They said, "Sorry boys, so long, and thanks."
The price of gold fell off and sank,
And kept on going down,
And the dollar that I made in May,
Is not worth a nickel come today,
So long boys, this banker's Oregon bound.

CHORUS (all sing)

MOTHER'S VERSE

Well, Amos, here came home one day,
He said, "Pack the bags, we're on our way.
Oregon is where we'll stay,"
And I couldn't change his mind.
So we sold the farm and smoked the pigs,
We said 'goodbyes' and grabbed the kids,
So long, Ma, this family's Oregon bound.

REPEAT CHORUS (all sing)

PREACHER'S VERSE

In New York Town they burned our church,
We stood our ground, but things got worse,
We pulled up stakes and began to search,
For a place to settle down.
We looked to God to give a sign.
He guided us to the Kansas line,
So long, boys, this preacher's Oregon bound.

CHORUS (all sing)



Chapter 2

What were the people like who went on the Oregon Trail?

Although many different kinds of people from various cultures traveled the Oregon Trail, most had much in common. Except for the bachelor prospectors going to California for gold, most were families. Almost all were Protestants. Most were not very wealthy and few were very poor, since it took money to buy the supplies including oxen, wagon, tents, and provisions to get to Oregon. Also, there was one large body of emigrants, nearly half, who in many cases set out with much reluctance - the women.

In the mid-1840's, women were just beginning to organize to obtain the same rights as men. They could not vote or run for office. They were even outlawed in some cities from wearing pants in public, and society placed many restrictions on their behavior. Even on the Oregon Trail women felt obligated to wear long dark dresses in the summer heat of the high desert. Only the most daring would ride a horse like a man - with legs on both sides of their ponies.

One of the unique things about Oregon was that women could own property there. In many parts of the United States this was not the case. One of the most famous leaders of the women's rights movement came across on the Oregon Trail. Her name was Abigail Scott Duniway. After completing the journey, she began her career as a teacher in the Salem area in 1853. In 1871, Abigail moved to Portland and started her own newspaper, *The New Northwest*. After fighting for equal rights much of her 78 years, she was rewarded for her perseverance in 1912, when the state of Oregon passed a law granting voting rights to women.

The small size of the wagons and the roughness of the trails created hardships for the women. Families often tried to pack too much because they knew they would not likely be able to go back and get anything left behind. Hard-to-replace items such as stoves, dressers, mirrors, rocking chairs, toys, and even pump organs were loaded in Missouri, but abandoned later along the trail due to deep mud, tired oxen, difficult river crossings, and broken wagons. Numerous Oregon Trail diaries by women contain passages describing the sorrow of leaving cherished family belongings along the trail.



Abigail Scott Duniway



Exercise

Listen to the song, *What We Left Behind* (cut #6). Make a list of the things the singer had to leave behind. Now, list the three things that would be hardest for you to leave behind as your family left for a new life never to return home. Be able to explain why it would be hard to leave the things you listed.

What We Left Behind

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A box full of ribbon, a toy soldier's drum,
And the old chair of Mama's she rocked in the sun,
Oh, the cradle abandoned is still on my mind,
I'm afraid I'm still missing what we left behind.

This table's too heavy, this mirror's been cracked,
And this old chest of Grandpa's will just hold us back,
Oh, this trail's lined with pieces from long ago times,
I'm afraid I'm still missing what we left behind.

And I'm not afraid of lightning, or the wolf at my door,
And I'm not afraid of dying all alone anymore,
But when journeys are over and there's fruit on the vine,
I'm afraid I'll be missing what we left behind.



Chapter 3

How did the Oregon Trail affect native people?

By the time the first organized wagon train left Missouri in 1843, Indian people living along the route had already felt the impact of the Euro-Americans in the West. Trading with British and American fur companies decades earlier, tribes had welcomed trade goods, but contracted diseases from whites such as smallpox and measles. They had no resistance to these illnesses and thousands perished.

Different languages, customs, religions, and appearances caused many Euro-Americans to distrust and mistreat Indians who had lived on the continent long before the arrival of Columbus. Often land was taken by force, and Indians were placed on reservations where many suffered from sickness and starvation.

The emigration of the settlers along the Oregon Trail had its negative side. Geography books of that era described the region as the "Great American Desert", but native peoples had lived successfully off the prairies and high desert land for centuries. The U.S. Government had designated it as Indian land, but this policy was not enforced. The wagon trains were clearly trespassing. The Indian way of life was being destroyed. There was a lack of understanding on both sides. The Indians could not understand why treaties with the settlers were only honored for a short time. The Indians were not immune from new diseases brought by the settlers and many died. Bison were being shot and forced from their traditional migration routes, and livestock brought by the settlers were destroying grazing land.

One of the crucial differences between the Euro-Americans and the Native People was the way each thought about land. Euro-Americans believed that unless a person farmed a piece of land and lived year-round on it, they had no right to own it. The U.S. government justified taking Indian lands using this argument. Many Indians lived off the land by moving each season to where bison were migrating, fish were running, or berries were ripening. Settling down in one place, fencing it off, and farming a single plot of land year-round seemed confining and unnecessary to many Indian peoples.

Teachers: Play *Native American Flute Medley* (cut #7) and discuss.

Despite great differences, emigrants and Indians usually interacted peacefully on the Oregon Trail. Settlers entrusted their stock, wagons, belongings, and even their families to Indian swimmers and boatmen at river crossings. Indians were also hired to cut and carry grass, watch and herd stock, interpret, and bring in wood for fires.

Native people have endured and have kept their rich cultural heritage despite two centuries of being treated badly and hardship. Their dances, music, religions, and art have survived and continue to grow in strength and popularity throughout the world. Indian tribes on the plains such as the Sioux have played songs on wooden flutes for centuries. They were played for celebrations, as lullabies, for dancing, and in religious ceremonies. One of the oldest songs from the Sioux people is called *Ink-Pa-Ta-Ya*. This is a lullaby and is one of the first songs Sioux children learned growing up.



Exercise

Writing Activity for Chapter 3 (Students choose one)

1. Imagine that you are an Indian leader and your people are dying of sicknesses that you've never seen before and cannot cure. The bison that you use for food, shelter, and clothing are being killed, often just for sport, by the whites passing through your land. There seems to be no end to the wagons coming, and you are afraid for your people's way of life. Write a list of arguments you would use to convince leaders in Washington that your lands should not be trespassed. Once your list is complete, write a persuasive letter to the United States Congress using your list of ideas.

2. Imagine that you are an adult emigrant on the Oregon Trail. Indians have stopped your wagon train and do not want you to continue your journey. The Indians are concerned that their way of life is being destroyed because of the large number of white people coming. Write a list of arguments you would use to convince the Indians to let you pass and continue your journey to Oregon. Once your list is complete, write a persuasive letter to be read to the Indians which includes your list of ideas.



Chapter 4

What instruments were played on the Oregon Trail?

Note for Teachers: Instruments **boldened** below will be featured in the concert.

During the Oregon Trail era there were no phonographs or radios. Because music and dancing were popular pastimes in the States, many people learned to play instruments and dance. Numerous small towns and rural communities had brass bands. All ages participated together, and they often wore uniforms or jackets modeled after military clothing.

Brass instruments were popular because they were relatively loud and could be heard from great distances (remember, there were no microphones or speakers in those days). The **cornet** was popular and similar to the modern trumpet. The **tenor horn** was invented by the same man who invented **saxophones**, Adolphe Sax. Both the **tenor horn** and the **saxophone** were comparatively new during the Oregon Trail era. The **tuba** was popular as the bass instrument in these early brass bands.

Exercise: Have students listen to *Men of the West*, (cut #10) a popular waltz from the Oregon Trail era. It is performed on three of the instruments mentioned above, the **cornet**, the **tenor horn**, and the **tuba**. The three sections of the tune showcase each of these instruments – have the students identify each instrument as it is featured and, if you can, help them clap out the 3/4 waltz rhythm. Explain to students that the waltz was a very popular dance for well over a hundred years.



Tenor Horn



Hammer Dulcimer



Cornet

The **violin or fiddle** was used for both classical and folk music. It was also the most popular instrument for dancing on the Oregon Trail. It was small, light and could be carried without taking up too much space. The **guitar** and the **banjo** are also mentioned in Oregon Trail diaries. **Dulcimers** were stringed instruments originating in the Middle East. Variations developed in Europe and the dulcimer came West with migrations to America. Some are played on the lap with a plectrum or pick, and some are played on stands and have over 20 strings that are struck with wooden “hammers”.

On the trail where instruments were often sparse, people sometimes created dance rhythms by taking two **spoons** and tapping them between their hands and knees. Sometimes animal rib **bones** or sticks were played in a similar fashion. The **snare and bass drums** were also common percussion instruments during this era and were used often in military bands.

Exercise: Have students listen to the *Trail Band Medley* (cut #4) Which instruments can they pick out on the first song, *Golden Slippers*? (fiddles, banjo, hammer dulcimer, and spoons for the first half; cornet, tenor horn, tuba, and bass drum added for the second half) *Golden Slippers* was written by African American composer/performer James Bland. He also wrote Virginia’s official state song, *Carry Me Back To Old Virgin-ny*. The second song, *Redwing*, features the hammer dulcimer at the beginning of the tune. See if students can identify the rest of the instruments. On the third tune, *The Gal I Left Behind Me*, the percussionist stops playing the spoons and switches to the snare drum giving this tune a ‘march’ feel.

Oregon Trail Literature List

Addie Across the Prairie
by Laurie Lawlor
Whitman 1976.

By Wagon and Flatboat
by Enid Meadowcroft
Harper 1938.

The Cabin Faced West
by Jean Fritz
Putnam 1958

Children of the Wild West
by Russell Freedman
Ticknor 1983

Chuck Wagon Stew
by E.J. Bird
Carolrhoda 1988

The Edge of Nowhere
by Lucy Sypher
Puffin 1990

Indian Summer
by F.N. Monjo
Dutton 1981

Joshua's Westward Journal
by Joan Anderson
Morrow 1987

Justin & the Best Biscuits
in the World
by Mildred Walter
Knopf 1992

Next Spring An Oriole
by Gloria Whelan
Random 1987

The Obstinate Land
by Harold Keith
Harper 1977

On the Frontier With Mr. Audubon
by Barbara Brenner
Putnam 1977

Petranella
by Betty Waterton
Vanguard 1981

The Pioneers
by Marie & Doug Gorsline
Random LB 1982

Pioneer Cat
by William Hooks
Random 1988

Sarah, Plain & Tall
by Patricia MacLachlan
Harper LB 1985

Tree In The Trail
by Holling C. Holling
Houghton 1942

Trouble for Lucy
by Carla Stevens
Houghton 1979



Lyrics from additional songs on The Trail Band's recording,
"Voices From The Oregon Trail"

The Land At Eden's Gate

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Teachers: There are many 19th century references to the Oregon Territory as, "A Garden of Eden," "The Promised Land," or "Heaven." This song was written to convey the hope of a better life in Oregon that emigrants held. This is an easy song to play on guitar. Chords below placed above the lyrics are the same as used on the recording. Key of "C"

 C F C
There's a garden God is tending,
 Am G/B C
Where the fields are green and deep,
 C Am F C
With a harvest never-ending there,
 G D7 G G7
By waters cool and sweet.
 C F D7 G
There a man can lay his burdens down,
 Am G F Am G E7
There a man can live in grace, oh,
 Am F C Am C G6 C
I hope I see before I die the land at Eden's Gate.

Oh, the morning sky has broken,
Like the dawn at Eden's birth,
And it lights the pine and meadowlark,
And shines on God's great work,
Oh, I'm leaving now and won't be back,
Won't you come with me this day, oh, Am D7
I hope I see before I die the land at Eden's gate, oh,
 C G6 C
The Land at Eden's Gate.

May the children of your children,
See the wild, rare primrose grow,
Hear the gentle rains a falling down,
Among these ancient groves.
Oh, may angels watch it evermore,
And protect it's perfect state, oh,
 Am F C Am C G6 C E7
I pray they see before they die the land at Eden's Gate, Oh...
 Am F C Am C G6 C
I pray we see before we die the land at Eden's Gate.

Down At The River

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Teachers: The Oregon Trail followed rivers across the plains and mountains. This song was written to show students how important rivers were to the emigrants, and how these waterways played a role in their daily lives. This is an easy song to play on guitar. The chords below placed above the lyrics of the first verse are the same as used on the recording. All verses have the same chords. Introduction chords are G and D7. Key of "G"

G
Grab a friend, grab a pole,
D7 G
Come on down to the swimming hole,
Bring your dog, bring a rope,
D7 G
But don't bring Mama 'cause she'll bring the soap.
C
Yea, she'll bring the soap ("Down at the river!")
G
Yea, she'll bring the soap ("Down at the river!")
Em G D7 G
Some are lost, some are delivered, take your place, down at the river.



Some catch fish, some catch cold, some catch fever and pan for gold,
Some catch hell, just ask Joe, he found a turtle but he lost a toe,
Yes, he lost a toe ("Down at the river!") Yes, he lost a toe ("Down at the river!")
Some are lost, some are delivered, take your place, down at the river.

Some wear hats of the latest style, some wear nothing but a Kansas smile,
Some get caught, some get found, some get a lickin' and they can't sit down,
Brother Roy lost his teeth, he dived in a river 2 feet deep,
Now he can't eat corn, he can't chew rind, he talks kind of funny but he whistles fine,
Yea, he whistles fine, (band whistles) Yea, he whistles fine, (band whistles)
Some are lost, some are delivered, take your place, down at the river.

Some folks splash, some have fun, some get sick from too much sun,
Some get clean, some composed, some look funny when they hold their nose.
Some get kissed, some get sparked, some get goosebumps in the dark,
Some get sobered, some get lit, we all hate skeeters but we all get bit,
Yea, we all get bit ("Down at the river!") Yea, we all get bit ("Down at the river!")
Some are lost, some are delivered, take your place, down at the river.

Some folks kick, some don't care, some blow bubbles, some lose hair,
Some get saved, some can't swim, some find Jesus and jump right in,
Some folks splash, some folks scream, some spend life swimming upstream,
Some just wade, others leap, some don't think until they're in too deep. ("Till there in too deep!")
Down at the river, ("Till there in too deep!") Down at the river,
Some are lost, some are delivered, take your place, down at the river.
Some are lost, some are delivered, take your place, down at the river.

