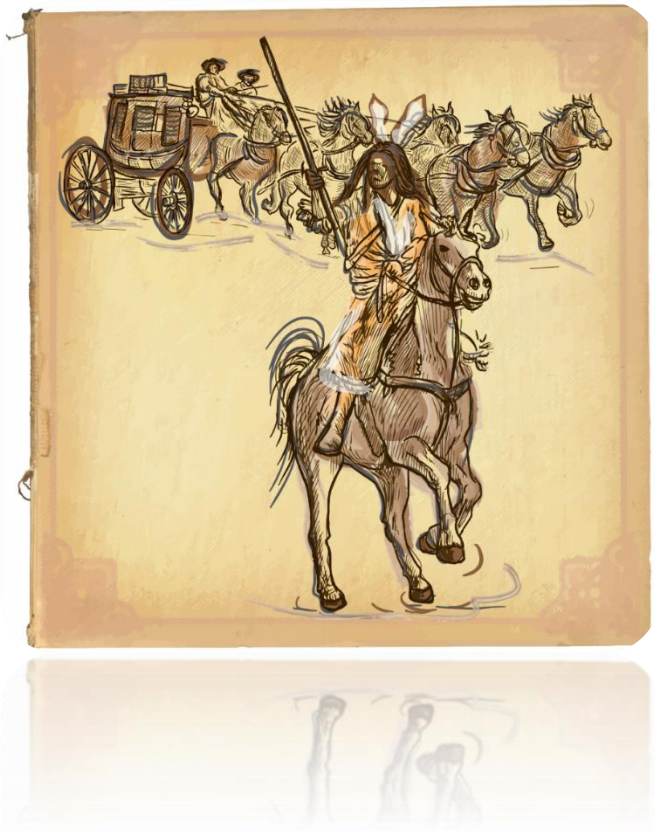
Myths of Time: The Wild West

Lesson Two

Busting Myths Bronco Style



The Wild West, aka the Old West, is often considered an astoundingly awesome period in American history that every little kid who has watched a cowboy movie or TV show (Gunsmoke was on television for 20 years!) wants to emulate. Now, clearly pop culture has turned much of the true West into legend -- there were never quick-draw artists who could shoot a six gun out of your hand with another six gun. But the basics were true, right? While we're here won't we have to be ready for the lawlessness, the guns, the constant Indian attacks?

Well ... not exactly. Some common myths a lot of us probably still believe include...

Myth #5. Settlers Were Constantly Clashing with Native Americans!

The Myth:

Shoshone women and children

Old Westerns seem to treat Native Americans kind of like *The Walking Dead* treats zombies -- sudden, murderous ambushes could come from anywhere, at any time. Any expedition into "injun" territory came with the warning that you'd better go well-armed. When wagon trains saw a raid of Cherokee or Sioux coming, they would "circle the wagons" to form a defense perimeter -- and to this day, "circle the wagons" is shorthand for "hunker down and fight back."

"I wish they would put brake lights on these wagons."

And all of this has to be true; we all know that horrific numbers of people died when settlers expanded West. Those frontiersmen must have been firing bullets and dodging arrows on a daily basis, right?

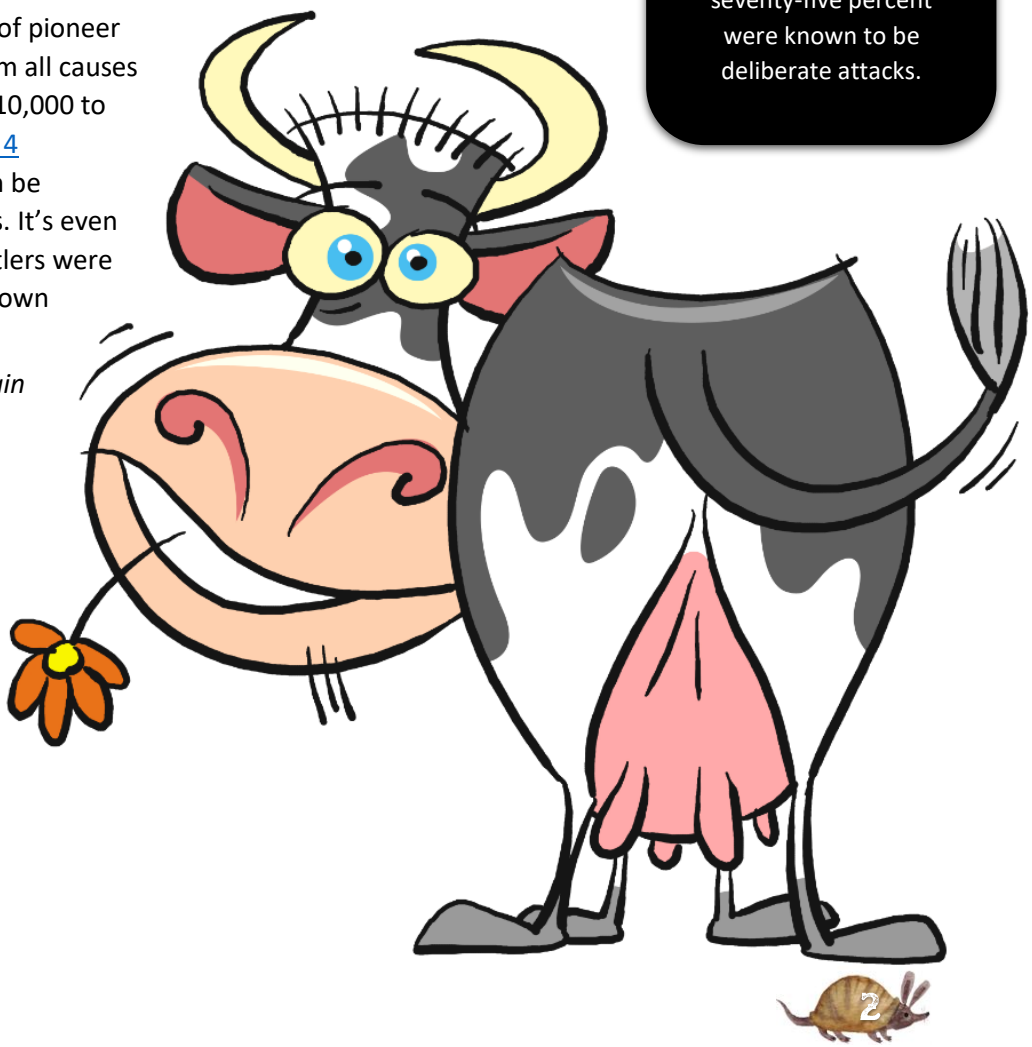
The Reality:

Well, not really. Granted, between the *United States cavalry* and, uh, pretty much every tribe you can name, things certainly got good and massacre-y. And The Oregon Trail could be and has been called this nation's longest graveyard. Nearly one in ten emigrants who set off on the trail did not survive. But skirmishes between Native Americans and the typical American settler trundling along in his covered wagon (breathing down a lot of dust!) hardly ever happened. Yes, there were some violent altercations between Indians and pioneers, but these were very few compared with the total number of settlers who traveled in safety through Indian lands. (Some tribes were notorious for stealing from the emigrants along the road, but they didn't kill them, most of the time.) Of the hundreds of thousands of pioneers who willingly trudged all the way through Nebraska, only a few hundred died in clashes with Native Americans. (Of the emigrants killed by Indians, about 90% were killed west of South Pass, mostly along the Snake and Humboldt Rivers or on the Applegate Trail to the southern end of the Willamette Valley.)

Did You Know?

In the United States, the CDC estimates that about twenty-two people are killed by cows each year, and of those cow attacks, seventy-five percent were known to be deliberate attacks.

That's right, not tens of thousands, not even thousands. About 300 to 400 (362 according to records). To put that number in perspective, the total number of pioneer deaths on the Oregon Trail from all causes (including disease) numbered 10,000 to 30,000, which means only 1 to 4 percent of all trail fatalities can be attributed to Native Americans. It's even very slightly possible more settlers were accidentally trampled by their own cows (but probably not).



The following is a list of the main causes of deaths along the Oregon/California Trail during 1841 to 1869:

- *Disease*
- *Drowning*
- *Gun Shot Wounds*
- *River Crossings*
- *Accidents*
- *Weather*

During this same period, settlers killed over 400 Native Americans (426 according to historians). Again, that's definitely not *zero*, but it does mean that the vast majority of settlers never got into a murderous conflict with hostile tribes. Most Indians were tolerant of the pioneer wagon trains that drove through their lands. It was far more likely that the average settler would trade with Native Americans (buffalo robes and moccasins for knives, clothes, food and other items) or hire members of various tribes as guides, rather than fight them.

It wasn't necessarily because they were open-minded and peace loving that they abstained from violence, but rather that it's never good business to kill your customers, or vice versa. Especially when you're talking about someone providing a potentially life-saving service (a guide kept you from getting lost, when getting lost meant getting dead. Yay for guides!)

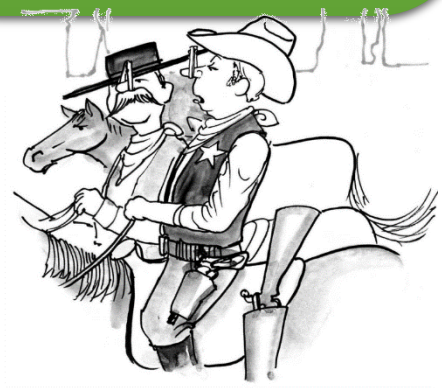
Native American deaths caused by the U.S. government and the military likely number in the millions. No one's disputing that one. But deaths due to wagon train clashes were few and far between. As for the "circling the wagons" thing, that ring (or square) formation was done each night not simply to keep hostile Indians out, but primarily for shelter from wind or weather, and to corral the emigrants' animals in the center to prevent their absurdly expensive livestock from wandering off. While Indians might attempt to raid horses under cover of darkness, they rarely attacked a train. In the early years of the trail, Indians never attacked a large wagon train, but stragglers could be in big trouble!

Actually it probably wouldn't even be possible to "circle the wagons" in an emergency -- these wagon trains typically traveled spread out in a line several miles wide, when the terrain permitted it, rather than in the column that the term "train" suggests, in an effort to avoid choking on each other's dust, or getting stuck in their wheel ruts and debris. Especially with larger trains, it would have taken hours to get everybody together and hooked up in circle formation.

Membership in wagon trains was generally fluid and wagons frequently joined or left trains depending on the needs and wishes of their owners. An accident or illness, for instance,

Watch out for that…disease?

Emigrants feared death from a variety of causes along the trail: lack of food or water; Indian attacks; accidents or rattlesnake bites were a few. But the number one killer, by a wide margin, was disease. The most dangerous diseases were those spread by poor sanitary conditions and personal contact. Death from diseases usually came quickly and painfully. It is estimated that 6-10% of all emigrants on the trails succumbed to some form of illness. Of the estimated 350,000 who started the journey, disease may have claimed as many as 30,000 victims. Since the trail was 2,000 miles, this would indicate that there was an average of 10-15 deaths per mile. Of this large number, only a few known grave sites remain. Usually, there wasn't time or opportunity to observe the customary rites of home. Victims of epidemics and massacres were usually buried anonymously in mass graves. Single graves were often dug in the trail itself where the loose dirt could be compacted as the wagons rolled over it. Most graves were deliberately left unmarked to protect the deceased from robbers and vandals.



"Not hard to trail the Diarrhea Kid."

might force someone to fall behind and wait for the next train, or an emigrant might "whip up" to overtake a forward train after a quarrel. Some might break away to settle in Colorado Territory or other territories along the way.

Home on the Range!

Building a Wagon or 'Prairie Schooner'

"A prairie schooner is a relatively small covered wagon averaging 10-12 feet long and 4-6 feet wide. *[Measure it out. Could you fit all of your worldly possessions and your whole family in a space that size?]* Most were converted farm wagons, although a few individuals such as freed slave Hiram Young and the Studebaker brothers made a living crafting wagons in Missouri for the Oregon Trail."

The preparations for a journey west on the Oregon Trail took more than a year. Emigrants had to sell land, businesses, and property while gathering the supplies they would need on the journey. A wagon built to withstand 2200 miles across plains, mountains, and desert was the most important piece of equipment. Wagons were 4-6 feet wide and about 12 feet long with a 3 feet high interior.

Did You Know?

In 1978, the entire Oregon Trail, including the Barlow Road, was named a National Historic Trail by the U.S. Congress. The Trail crosses through six states -- Idaho, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Oregon, and Wyoming.

Design challenges:

The wagons had to be tall enough to cross through streams without completely submerging. Tar buckets hung from the sides so settlers could fill the cracks between the boards with tar to make the wagons waterproof when they crossed rivers. **(What would happen to all your stuff if it wasn't sufficiently waterproof?)** The canopy of the wagon was oiled to keep rain out. Water barrels hung from the back of the wagon and were filled with water from rain and streams. Other things that hung from the sides of the wagons included buckets of axle grease, extra wheels and axles to replace ones that broke, coils of rope to lower the wagons down steep hills, and extra leather harnesses for the animals.

Pioneers needed wagons strong enough to haul people and supplies for five months or more. To outlast the rugged trail and months of wear, the wagon needed to be constructed of seasoned hardwood. Most pioneers used the typical farm wagon with a canvas cover stretched over hooped frames. A family of four could manage with a single wagon. It would be very tight on space since supplies would take up

almost the entire space within the wagon. If they could afford it, many families took more than one wagon. Most emigrants on the trail went West in their farm wagons, modified to take the punishment, while others bought rigs specifically built for the one-way journey.

A wagon had to be light enough to not over tax the mules or oxen that pulled it and strong enough not to break down under loads of as much as 2,500 pounds. For these reasons wagons were constructed of such hardwoods as maple, hickory and oak. Iron was used only to reinforce parts that took the greatest beating such as tires, axles and hounds. An emigrant wagon was not comfortable to ride in, since wagons lacked springs and there was little room to sit inside the wagon because most space was taken up with cargo.

Stuffed with Stuff!

Inside view of emigrant wagon from the Oregon Trail Center

You didn't get to ride your way west inside the shady cover! The inside of the wagon was often crammed with the supplies needed to make the journey and for use once the settlers reached Oregon. To survive the long journey, a family of four would need 600 lbs. of flour, 120 lbs. of biscuits, 400 lbs. of bacon, 60 lbs. of coffee, 4 lbs. of tea, 100 lbs. of sugar, and 200 lbs. of lard. These would just be the basic staples. Other food stuffs could include sacks of rice and beans, plus dried peaches and apples. Bacon was often hauled in large barrels packed in bran so the hot sun would not melt the fat. Each man took a rifle or shotgun and some added a pistol. A good hunting knife was essential. Farm implements such as a plow, shovel, scythe, rake, hoe; plus, carpentry tools - saw, broad axe, mallet, plane. Seeds for corn, wheat and other crops. Many also brought along a cow for milking purposes. Milk could also be churned into butter by simply hanging it in pails beneath the bumpy wagon. By the end of the day fresh butter would be ready.

Their clothing had to be sturdy and well-made and each person needed strong boots or shoes for walking and to withstand the weather conditions along the trail. A team of 8 to 12 oxen pulled each wagon. A wagon and oxen team cost each family about $400 to $600. The total weight of wagon's cargo pulled by the oxen was about 2500 pounds.

The Oregon Trail ran approximately 2,000 miles from Missouri to the Rocky Mountains and then to the Willamette Valley of Oregon. The trip took four to six months. Independence, Missouri, is considered the beginning of the Oregon Trail and Oregon City, Oregon, is considered the end. The trail was busy, lasting from the early 1840s and ending with the coming of the railroad at the end of the 1860s. Large scale migration began in 1843, when a wagon train of over 800 people with 120 wagons and 5,000 cattle made the **five month** journey.

The standard date for departure from any of the jumping-off places was April 15 - give or take a week or two, with expected arrival in Oregon or California hopefully by September 1, but not later than October 1. An ideal crossing was 120 days, April 15 to August 15, a daily average for the 2,000 mile long trail of 15 miles per day, a typical crossing took about two weeks longer. On a good day more than 15 miles could be covered, on a bad day, much less."

Materials:

- Popsicle Sticks
- Skill Sticks
- Brown Paper Bags
- Cardboard
- Hot Glue, Craft Glue, or Wood Glue
- Binder Clips (optional)

Basic Wagon Design

Step 1: Using your Skill Sticks create the bed of your wagon. We built ours three sticks high all the way around.

Step 2: Using regular Popsicle sticks, create a frame by gluing four of them together at the corners.

Step 3: After the corners dry, glue more sticks across the middle to form a solid plank. Then turn it over and apply glue to the bottom two Popsicle Sticks.

Step 4: Set your Wagon bed onto the glue and let dry. If you're using a glue gun this step is much quicker, the wood glue will take a while to dry and you should set it somewhere where it won't be moved.

Step 5: (This is an optional step, we did to keep our canvas up) Using 4 Popsicle sticks, glue them around the sides of the wagon like posts.

Step 6: Cut a long rectangle shape from your paper bag. We used the side of the bag and that width worked pretty well. Curve up the edges as shown in the picture.

Step 7: Glue your paper bag to your wagon. We used wood glue, so we had to put on these little binder clips to hold it in place while it dried. If you have a glue gun, it would really speed up the process here.

Step 8: Using a circle the size of a small coffee cup,

trace 4 circles onto your cardboard. Cut them out and poke a small hole in the center of each of them.

Step 9: Insert a Popsicle Stick into each of the wheels. You can use a glue gun around the sides if the hole is too big and they get loose.

Step 10: Glue the Popsicle sticks together to make the axle. You'll have two sets of wheels like this.

Step 11: Glue the axles to the bottom of your wagon. Make sure that your front and back wheels are sitting evenly, and make any necessary adjustments. *Engineering Challenge: Can students design an axel system that will really rotate? What could we use? Ex. skewers, pencils…*

Load 'er Up!

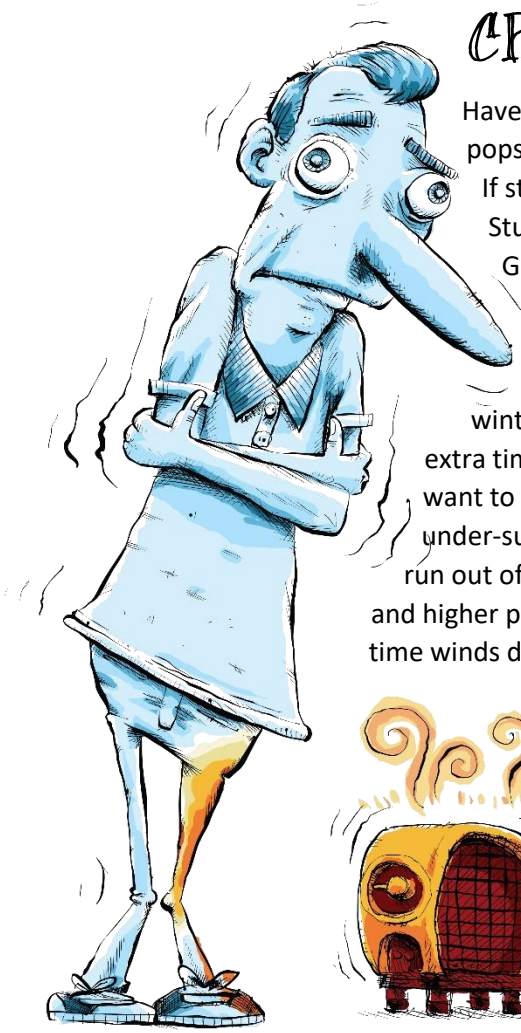
After your wagon is complete (Students can add a driver's seat, tool boxes or whatever else you like) it's time to fill it up with some pioneer goodies! Make little scrap quilts and boxes, pots and pans, or even a clay family to put inside, a Popsicle stick axle and some oxen to pull us down the Trail!

Modify Your Ride!

The instructions show the basic model, but that's only the beginning!

Can students think of design modifications to the basic model? Do they think more wheels or less might work better? How can they maximize the space? Ex. Would it work to make 'loft'? Would a different material for the wheels be lighter/sturdier?

Have students test their theories and see which wagon holds up best in a simple pulling test/rolling test. Does one roll smoother/farther? Is one design more aesthetically pleasing? Can one hold more cargo than the rest? Ex. test it out with a standard item, ex. small buiding blocks or marbles. Is one lighter/easier to pull? Work to determine as a group how to test designs and which design would work best over the rough Trail terrain ahead.



Challenge: Winter is Coming!

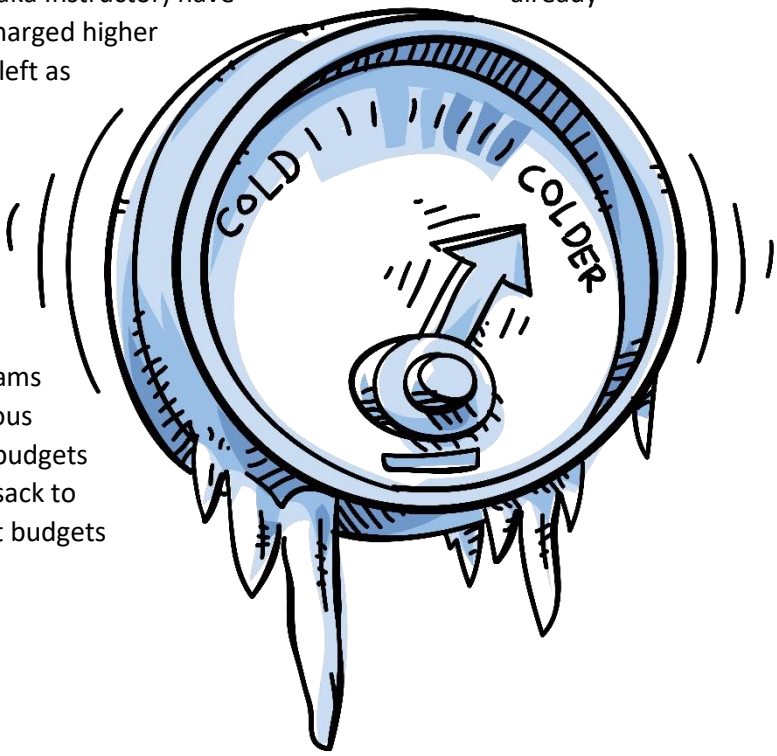
Have a time limit and a cost per 'building material.' Ex. $1 in play money for each popsicle stick 'board.' $2 for cardboard for wheels, etc.

If students break any or need extra supplies, it'll cost 'em!

Students must work within a budget to design their dream wagon.

Give students specific parameters, e.g., a total cost limit of $200 and a total time limit of 1.5 hours (e.g., at $10 an hour), and must stay within those rules as they complete their design.

Challenge the students to stay in budget and finish their wagon 'before winter sets in'! They want to build a strong wagon (fixing shoddy work takes extra time and money!) and be well-supplied, but not wait too long. They don't want to be the last one on the trail. And if they are, then there's a risk they'll be under-supplied if the merchants (aka Instructor) have already run out of the goods or they'll be charged higher and higher prices for the few that are left as time winds down!



Additional Challenge Option:

Have students/teams draw various starting budgets out of a sack to emulate how different emigrants would have different budgets according to their backgrounds, etc.

Wagoneers! Constructioneers!

Budget: _____ (How much money do you have at the start?)

Supply/Tool	$ Cost for each one	x Total number	= Total Cost

Total Cost of Supplies (add up the amounts in the Total Cost column): A._____

Time/Labor Cost: _____ (Number of hours) x _____ ($ per hour) = B. _____

Overtime Labor Cost: Add $_____ for every _____ minutes of overtime. = C._____

Tally Sheet:

Starting Budget	$
Subtract/minus your total cost of supplies (A)	-
Total/Equals	=
Subtract/minus your total cost of Labor (B)	-
Total/Equals	=
Subtract/minus your Overtime Labor Cost (C) if you had any	-
Total/Equals	=
Did you go over budget?	