

Oregon Trail and Cumberland Gap

Woody Guthrie, critics say, got it wrong. The sentiment is right but the facts are wrong.

*I been a grubbin' on a little farm on the flat and windy plains
I been a list'nin to the hungry cattle bawl.
I'm gonna pack my wife and kids,
I'm gonna hit that western road.
I'm gonna hit that Oregon Trail this comin' fall.*

You don't leave in fall. Never in fall. There was only a tight spring window of opportunity if you wanted to rely upon thick prairie grass for the livestock and if you wished to avoid the devastating mountain snowfall. Don't you listen to that fellow named Lansford Hastings who thinks he's a guide or you'll end up like the Donner party. Him promoting a route he never scouted. Who's on the menu? And to think of it, Tahoe was just around the corner from them. Of course, it wasn't much of a resort back then.

Nowadays you can leave for Oregon in fall because now it's an easy drive from Independence, Missouri, to Oregon City. Take interstate 70 to 80 to 84 and you are there. Three days.

Back then in 1841 you would never travel alone. Best is a caravan of 84 wagons grouped into three bands electing their own captain. Organization saves lives.

Back in 1841 when the trail was first blazed it took from spring to winter. Imagine the first caravan looking up at snow-capped Mount Hood.

Those who followed would eventually blaze new trails toward other destinations, marking signs along the way to show the right way, to indicate the best way among a whole of bad ways, leaving their wagon ruts behind for posterity. Them blazing new trails to take you to new destinations, destinations you could only imagine. Destinations of hope. Destinations of opportunity. Just give me a chance.

The journals and documentaries you can experience at the End of the Trail Interpretive Center report eighteen miles covered as a good day. August 11, the Rockies. Two days and one night with no water. When the oxen smelled water, they raced to the source and we bounced in the wagon. Dust storms so thick you couldn't breathe. River crossings. Mountain crossings. Hunting accidents. Burials and births. November 2, having chosen to travel north toward Oregon Country rather than through the desert to California, we broke down the wagons and rafted the Columbia River to the settlements of Fort Vancouver or Oregon City. Coastlines are easy to settle.

It is what is in between that is tough.

The end of the trail they said was the worst. Out of food by that time, no clothing left from bartering with the Native Americans for vegetables, the prized household possessions cast aside on the trail long ago as burdensome weight, arriving weak, tired, supplies spent.

If it weren't for the earlier settlers such as John McLaughlin -- a Canadian from the Hudson Bay Company -- they wouldn't have made it. McLaughlin looked upon these emigrants to his country with sympathy and compassion. Even though instructed by his British government to deter these travelers, reject them, send them home, he believed in justice. Justice was his code of conduct, he said. How could he refuse to help them start new lives?

One in ten died making the journey. Sickness, accidents, age, weariness, hunger. But then death was nothing uncommon to them, whether as pioneers, settlers, or easterners. There's was an era of no antibiotics. No hospitals. No maternity wards. No roadside rests. No EMT's. No highway patrol. No nearby supermarkets. Only your own preparation and gumption.

To be politically and morally repentant, let's admit that the original locals had a rougher time of it and we are not referring to McLaughlin. We're talking about Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce, the Chinooks, Cayuse, Yaquina, among others. By the time settlers arrived to populate the end of the Oregon Trail, there were more settlers than natives, the natives nearly exterminated by the new diseases the pioneers (themselves long immune) brought with them.

Still, it was a call to travel, despite. The magnet of a new life drew them inexorably. A new chance. A chance for 320 acres for each man. Plus, another 320 acres if you had a wife. Women were finally given the right to own property. A chance to be your own master and call "no man your master." A chance for a second chance after losing the farm in the east. A chance to be someplace new. A chance to be "someplace where I ain't." A chance not merely to discover the promised land but to build the promised land.

A life of despite. Despite the unknown. Despite the hardship. Despite the danger. Despite the risk. Because of the hope, because of the promise, because of the drive for something better.

*I'm gonna hit that Oregon Trail this comin' fall,
I'm gonna hit that Oregon Trail this coming fall,
Where that good rain falls a plenty
Where the crops and orchards grow
I'm gonna hit that Oregon Trail this coming fall.*

Wanderlust is one thing. Migration is another thing altogether.

Do you hear what they heard? The call to struggle and build a new life?

What are you willing to risk to attempt building the promised land?

Are we still the same people?

*Now, my true love she gets ailin'
When this dry old dust gets sailin'
And she wishes for the days beyond recall
If we work hard there's a future
In that north Pacific land
I'm gonna hit that Oregon trail this comin' fall.*

Coda:

There's another popular song Woody sang about traveling the trail, a song called "Cumberland Gap." The Oregon Trail pioneers had the benefit of a guide book, the original Fodors. You can buy a reproduction, a facsimile of the book they relied on at the End of the Oregon Trail Interpretative Center gift shop. Doesn't cost much. The Wagon Road Guide. Palmer's Journal of Trails.

It is a different story when you visit the Cumberland Gap and imagine the first pioneer to approach the gap and realize this gap is a doorway. Somebody had to step through this gap in the Appalachian mountain range to see what was on the other side. Somebody had to venture through this gap to find out what lay over yonder. Yonder. To see it for themselves. I wonder who it was?

I envy them.

*Seventeen miles from the Cumberland Gap
Cumberland Gap, Cumberland Gap
Seventeen miles from the Cumberland Gap*