New England Common Assessment Program

Released Items
2013

Grade 8
Reading

Reading

Some members of the committee were shocked by the flippant remarks made at the solemn event.

1. What does the word flippant mean as it is used in the box?

   A. hopeless
   B. confusing
   C. exaggerated
   D. disrespectful

Use the definitions below to answer the question.

trace *n* **1.** a visible mark of a person or thing once present **2.** a barely visible indication, touch **3.** a very small amount, a dash **4.** a path through the wilderness made by people or animals

2. What is the **best** definition of the word trace as it is used in this sentence?

   The pioneers followed the trace across the mountains and settled in the valley near a blue lake.

   A. definition 1
   B. definition 2
   C. definition 3
   D. definition 4

Originally just a footpath, the Oregon Trail stretched 2000 miles, from Missouri to Oregon. Read the passage. Then answer the questions that follow.

Life on the Oregon Trail

Gary L. Blackwood

Eating Dust

Because it was essential to make good time on the trail, most captains got under way at the earliest possible hour and did not call a halt until late in the day. The emigrants were typically routed out of bed at around 4 A.M.—an hour of the morning that most farmers were used to—by the men on guard duty firing their rifles. Wagon train captain William H. Russell described a normal day's schedule:

> We get up at daylight, get breakfast as soon thereafter as practicable, always mean to start or break up the caral [corral, or circle of wagons] at 7 o'clock. At 12 we stop and noon it, rest about an hour, and then travel until between 4 and 5 o'clock P.M., when we stop for the night.

To pitch camp for the night, emigrants arranged their wagons in a circle and herded the cattle into the center.

Each wagon had an assigned position within the train and, ideally, kept it all the way to Oregon. It would not have been fair, of course, for some wagons to always roll along at the head of the train while others always brought up the rear, eating the dust of the lead wagons. So the positions rotated daily; the wagon that had been in the lead the previous day became last in line, the following day it was next to last, and so on, until it worked its way to the front again.

Each family, then, spent much of the trip choking on and blinded by the dust of the wagons ahead of it. On the grassy plains the problem was not usually severe. But in the high plains west of Fort Laramie, it was practically unendurable. The alkali in the dust made the travelers' eyes red, swollen, and itchy, and their lips developed painful cracks. When possible, members of the company walked along several yards to one side of the train, where the dust was not so bad. Some wore goggles to protect their eyes. Those with no protection soothed their stinging eyes as best they could with zinc sulfate ointment.

The Foot and Walker Company

Even when the dust level was minimal, many emigrants—unless they were ill or the weather was bad—preferred to join what they called "the Foot and Walker Company" rather than suffer the constant jarring, jolting motion of the wagons, which were seldom equipped with spring suspension. Those who chose to ride did not enjoy it much. Catherine Sager recalled that

> not being accustomed to riding in a covered wagon, the motion made us all sick, and the uncomfortableness of the situation was increased from the fact that it had set into rain, which made it impossible to roll back the cover and let in the fresh air. It also caused a damp and musty smell that was very nauseating. It took several weeks of travel to overcome this "sea sickness."

5 By the 1850s the trail had become as wide as forty-five paces (about seventy-five yards) in some spots, as a result of wagons traveling abreast of one another, and emigrants trying to avoid the dust had worn regular footpaths that paralleled the main trail, but at some distance from it. "The paths were nice to walk in," wrote Arabella Clemens, "were free from dust, and usually led to all the nice, little shaded nooks along the way." But they could also lead nowhere in particular, as Clemens learned when she followed one trail and wandered about in the dark for hours before she managed to find her way back to the train.

If a wagon was pulled by oxen, the driver had no choice but to walk alongside. Since oxen do not need harnesses or wear bits in their mouths as horses do, they are not guided by reins. Instead, drivers use spoken commands—"gee" for "turn right," "haw" for "turn left"—supplemented by the crack of a whip. Usually the driver was a man, but women sometimes took a turn when the men were out hunting. Lydia Waters wrote, "I . . . learned to drive an ox team on the Platte and my driving was admired by an officer and his wife. . . . I heard them laughing at the thought of a woman driving oxen." Mary Ellen Todd enjoyed cracking the whip and shouting commands; she found "a secret joy in being able to have a power that set things going."

Spending the Night

Around midday the captain customarily called a halt for an hour or two, to give the animals and the human travelers a chance to rest and to eat. There was not usually enough time to cook, so lunches consisted mainly of leftovers, as Addison Crane noted: "Bill of fare Ham raw. Crackers soda, Buckwheat Cakes cold. Melted sugar, Cheese & Water."

8 Late in the afternoon the guide or the commanding officer scouted ahead for a suitable spot to spend the night. Captain Marcy, being a military man, noted in his guidebook, "One of the most important considerations that should influence the choice of a locality is its capability for defense." Marcy also quoted the advice of an English army doctor: "It is prudent, as now said, in *selecting ground for encampment*, to avoid the immediate vicinity of swamps and rivers. The air is there noxious."

But the emigrants were eager to camp near a stream if possible so that they could water their thirsty stock and have water nearby for cooking and washing. As far as defense, the standard tactic was to corral the wagons. In her diary, Catherine Haun described how this was accomplished:

> When going into camp the "leader wagon" was turned from the road to the right, the next wagon turned to the left, the others following close after and always alternating to right and left. In this way a large circle, or corral, was formed within which the tents were pitched and the oxen herded.

10 Some of the emigrants did camp in canvas tents as Haun suggests, but it was certainly not the only or even the most common sleeping arrangement. Many found, as Dr. John Dalton did, that in a prairie thunderstorm a tent could be more of a liability than a luxury:

> At nearly the first the wind came whistling & knocked our tent into a *cocked hat*. tearing up the pins and letting the cloth right down upon us, when the rain came through as though there was nothing over us and it required all our exertions to keep the whole concern from blowing away. . . . As soon as the wind slacked a little I . . . went out and repin[n]ed down the tent. . . . I then went to hunt a light and on returning with one, found the boys had all left the tent and crawled into the wagon.

3. The illustration shows that the emigrants on the Oregon Trail

A. prepared to travel at night.
B. remained close together.
C. found the trail to be very rocky.
D. were often lost on the trail.

4. To avoid dust from the wagons in front of them, emigrants sometimes

A. walked along the footpaths beside the wagon trail.
B. left early to get ahead of the wagon train.
C. wore bandanas over their mouths.
D. rode in the backs of the wagons.

5. What caused the widening of the Oregon Trail?

A. Most people walked on the main trail to avoid getting lost.
B. People had used the trail for many years to go east and west.
C. Wagon trains often passed each other on the trail.
D. Wagons traveled side by side on the main trail.

6. In paragraph 5, which hazard of the trip does Arabella Clemens experience?

A. getting sick
B. going hungry
C. being injured
D. becoming lost

7. Explain how various wagon formations helped the emigrants. Use information from the passage to support your answer.

8. In paragraph 8, the word prudent means

A. wise.
B. tough.
C. dangerous.
D. hopeful.

9. One disadvantage of sleeping in tents was that

A. they were smelly from being wet.
B. wild animals could enter under the flaps.
C. strong thunderstorms blew them over.
D. they were difficult to put up every night.

10. In paragraph 10, the word liability means

A. symptom.
B. distinction.
C. responsibility.
D. problem.

11. What is the author's **most likely** purpose for writing this passage about the 1800s?

A. to explain why so many emigrants chose to head west
B. to provide a detailed description of the dangers on the frontier
C. to provide a factual account of travel on the Oregon Trail
D. to describe the kinds of people who risked their lives to go west

12. Explain how the author's use of eyewitness accounts contributes to the reader's understanding of the passage. Use information from the passage to support your answer.

Acknowledgments

The New Hampshire, Vermont, Rhode Island, and Maine Departments of Education wish to acknowledge and credit the following authors and publishers for use of their work in the reading portion of the *New England Common Assessment Program*—2013.

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