

# A Day on the Trail

By Jerry Miller, Cricket Media on 09.06.19

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Illustration by: Kyle Utter

*Editor's Note: The following story describes a typical day on the California Trail. Such a day might be June 20, 1852, and our typical pioneer group might include the Keegan family. If their crossing was on schedule, they would be close to the western border of present-day Nebraska, where all emigrants hoped to arrive by late June. The setting is the prairie because pioneers spent far longer crossing the prairie than either the mountains or the desert.*

The sun has not yet risen, but Mrs. Keegan is awake already and starting her breakfast fire. The other women in this wagon train of fifteen families also are out of bed. The two men who had guarded the cattle, horses, sheep, mules, and oxen during the night herd the animals back to camp. The animals have to be guarded constantly to protect them from stampeding, being stolen, or wandering off and getting lost.

By the time the sun comes up, the rest of the travelers also are awake. Breakfast consists of coffee, milk, bacon, and biscuits. After eating, it is time to clean up, milk the cows, repack the wagons, and harness the teams. The two men who will serve as today's scout and hunter ride off on their horses.

Whips crack, mules bray, oxen low, and the day's march begins. Mr. Keegan walks beside the family's team of six oxen. Mule drivers sit on wagon seats, but oxen drivers walk beside their animals. Nine-year-old Joe Keegan and his 12-year-old sister, Meg, also walk. Mr. Keegan's brother, Ezra, rides their saddle horse as he herds the train's cattle and sheep. Mrs. Keegan rides in the wagon with 3-year-old Helen. Except for mule drivers, only small children, sick people, or women caring for them ride in wagons. The 4-by-10-foot wagon beds already are piled high with enough food for a six-month trip, tools, furniture, cooking supplies, clothes, medicine, family heirlooms, and every other necessity. The Keegans' wagon also contains a butter churn filled with cream from the morning milking. Each day, the wagon's jolting churns the cream into butter.

The prairie is flat but rough, and riding in a wagon is uncomfortable. It is better to walk alongside the oxen. They move at a steady two miles an hour, making it easy to keep pace. Walkers can avoid the dust, pick wildflowers, and enjoy exploring the prairie dog villages or strange rock formations along the trail.

Today, the Keegans are thrilled by the sight of Chimney Rock rising high above the prairie. But they also pass several wooden crosses that mark fresh graves. Seeing the graves brings chills to Mrs. Keegan. What if her husband dies on this trip? What if she, like so many other mothers before her, has to leave a child in one of those lonely graves? There is no doctor on the trip, and no cure for the deadly cholera.

After five hours spent covering 10 miles, it is time for the noon break. Lunch is the same as breakfast, except for some fresh greens Meg picked on the prairie. Suddenly, 12 Sioux Indians frighten everyone by riding into camp, demanding to be fed. The wagon train is crossing their land, and they intend to collect a toll — coffee, bacon and bread. Mrs. Keegan and the other women hurry to feed the Indians while Joe and Meg stare in wonder. These strange men in blankets, feathers, and animal skins are the first Native Americans they have seen.

Two hours after they stop, the people and animals begin their march again. It is hot and dusty. Everyone is tired. Joe, daydreaming about dinner, hopes there will be antelope or buffalo to eat instead of bacon. But that is not likely. The men do not have any experience at hunting on the prairie. Besides, wild animals have started to avoid the heavily traveled trail.

Maybe on Sunday's half-holiday from travel, his mother will put some beans on to cook during the preaching. Everyone likes beans, but they do take a long time to cook, and fuel is scarce.

After another 8 miles, it is time to camp for the night. The wagons are set up in a circle, forming a temporary fort of protection from both Indians and wild animals. The horses are unhitched and unharnessed. Meg and Joe hurry to gather buffalo chips. This manure is used as fuel because there is seldom any wood to be found on the prairie. The men feed and water the animals and check their hooves — if the wagon train is to reach California, its animals must be well cared for. The women walk to a nearby stream and wash themselves, the children, and some clothing and diapers.

Dinner is coffee, milk, pickles, fresh bread with butter — and bacon. After dinner, the leader of the train and tomorrow's scouts study their guidebooks and discuss possible camping spots and river crossings. Joe listens to stories at one campfire; Meg and her friends sing hymns at another. Finally, the bone-tired travelers enter their tents, and the night herders ride off to work.

A wolf howls in the darkness. Tomorrow will be much like today — a mixture of monotony, hard work...and new adventures.