

Traveling the Oregon Trail

Samuel Parker



OVERVIEW

Among the first travelers to head for the Oregon Territory were the Reverend Samuel Parker and the Reverend Marcus Whitman. These two missionaries set out in 1835 with a caravan of fur trappers to Christianize the Native Americans. Parker described their experiences in these excerpts from his journal.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- Why might it have been important to Reverend Parker that the Native Americans observe the operation performed by the doctor?
 - Does this journey seem to be a difficult one?
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We proceeded to-day a few miles up the Loup fork, and unexpectedly found a good fording place, where we crossed the river, which in this place is nearly a mile wide. After going a few miles up the river, we halted for the night. The manner of our encamping, is to form a large hollow square, encompassing an area of about an acre, having the river on one side; three wagons forming a part of another side, coming down to the river; and three more in the same manner on the opposite side; and the packages so arranged in parcels, about three rods apart, as to fill up the rear, and the sides not occupied by the wagons. The horses and mules, near the middle of the day, are turned out under guard, to feed for two hours; and the same again towards night, until after sunset, when they are taken up and brought into the hollow square, and fastened with ropes twelve feet long, to pickets driven firmly into the ground. The men are divided into small companies, stationed at the several parcels of goods and wagons, where they wrap themselves in their blankets and rest for the night; the whole, however, are formed into six divisions to keep guard, relieving each other every two hours. This is to prevent hostile Indians from falling upon us by surprise, or coming into the camp by stealth and taking away either horses or packages of goods. . . .

After stopping for the night upon the New Fork, a branch of Green river, we arose on the 12th, at the first breaking of the day, and continued our forced marches. Although we were emerging from the mountains, yet peaks covered with perpetual snow were seen in almost every direction, and the temperature of the air was uncomfortably cold. . . . In the afternoon we came to the Green river, a branch of the Colorado, in latitude 42([in today's Wyoming] where the caravan hold their rendezvous. This is a widely extended valley, which is pleasant, with a soil sufficiently fertile for cultivation, if the

climate was not so cold. Like the country we have passed through, it is almost entirely prairie, with some woods skirting the streams of water. . . .

While we continued in this place, Doct. Whitman was called upon to perform some very important surgical operations. He extracted an iron arrow, three inches long, from the back of Capt. Bridger, which was received in a skirmish, three years before, with the Blackfeet Indians. It was a difficult operation, because the arrow was hooked at the point by striking a large bone, and a cartilaginous substance had grown around it. The Doctor pursued the operation with great self-possession and perseverance; and his patient manifested equal firmness. The Indians looked on meanwhile, with countenances indicating wonder, and in their own peculiar manner expressed great astonishment when it was extracted.