I. The Lure of Oregon

A. Since the early 1800’s Americans had heard of the Oregon Country. While settlers filled in lands between the Appalachian Mountains and Mississippi River few settled on the lands between the Mississippi and Rocky Mountains. Instead, settlers moved to the Oregon Country.
B. Settlers from the east continued to move west in search of fertile farmland. Lands along the Pacific coast were fertile and the climate was mild year-round with abundant rainfall.

C. Trappers were also attracted to the Oregon Country because of its dense forests.

D. Trappers flocked to the Oregon Country for its abundance of fur-bearing animals, especially the beaver.
II. Competing Claims

A. In the 1800s there were 4 countries who had claims to the Oregon Country; Britain, Spain, Russia and the United States.

B. The United States based its claim on expeditions it sent through the area at the start of the century. (i.e. Lewis and Clark)

C. The British claim to Oregon dated back to the 1500s. (Sir Francis Drake and Fort Vancouver)
II. Competing Claims (con’t)

D. In 1818 the United States and Britain laid equal claim and the agreement convinced Russia and Spain to drop their claims. The United States and Great Britain would jointly occupy the Oregon Country.
III. Fur Trappers in the Far West

A. At first the majority of people traveling west were fur traders looking to profit in the areas abundant furs for trade to places such as China and Europe.

B. Very few trappers actually settled in the forests of Oregon. These people lived off the land, trapping animals and became known as mountain men. Many of these men would later become guides to settlers moving to Oregon.
III. Fur Trappers in the Far West (Con’t)

C. Although Mountain Men could make a small fortune selling the furs they collected, they experienced great hardships including:

1. Animal attacks
2. Starvation
3. Conflicts with Native Americans
4. Harsh Climate
D. During the fall and spring seasons trappers would trap their animals and prepare pelts for trade during the summer.

E. In the summer months trappers would leave the wilderness to meet with fur traders at a gathering known as a rendezvous. At this event trappers would sell their pelts to traders who shipped them to Europe and China.
F. Eventually fur companies were established for trade. John Jacob Astor founded the American Fur Company and made him the wealthiest man in the United States.
G. By the 1830’s furs were running out of style, and animals were becoming scarce due to over-trapping causing supply and demand to drop. As a result, many trappers took up jobs as guides for settlers moving through the Oregon area.
IV. Exploring New Lands

A. Trappers and Mountain Men followed Indian trails through the mountains. Later these trails would be used by settlers moving west.

B. Guides such as Jedediah Smith, James Beckwourth and Marie Dorian explored new routes west.

C. Beckwourth was an African slave from Virginia and Marie Dorian was a Native American woman from Iowa.
V. Missionaries in Oregon

A. The first settlers to build permanent homes in Oregon country were Christian missionaries named Marcus and Narcissa Whitman.

B. The Whitman’s mission was built near the Columbia River. However, conflicts over native lands and a measles outbreak caused the Native Americans to rebel and kill the Whitman’s and other white settlers.
VI. Wagon Trains West

A. Reports to the east of the fertile farming land and fictitious tall-tale stories of wheat growing as tall as a man caused a mass rush by settlers to Oregon. This was called “Oregon Fever”.

B. Beginning in 1843 “wagon trains” of settlers began an annual migration from Independence, Missouri to the Oregon Country. The route followed was called the Oregon Trail.
Westward Expansion of the United States

Key Routes of Exploration and Settlement:
- Lewis & Clark 1804-06
- Santa Fe Trail 1821+
- Oregon Trail 1841+
- Pony Express 1860+
- Transcontinental Railroad 1869+

Statehood Eras:
- Original 13
- 1791-1821
- 1836-1867
- 1876-1912

Source: NPS Publications

Gerry Bakker - September 2001
Ruts of Wagon Trains still exist in some areas of the United States.
Photo of a Wagon Train Reenactment
Illustration of Life on the Wagon Train
VI. Wagon Trains West (con’t)

C. Timing was essential for settlers making the 2,000 mile journey. The trip began in May took 5 months to complete before the winter snow set in in the Rocky Mountains and grazing lands disappeared.

D. Typical days on the trail began at 6 a.m. and ended at sunset. A brief stop at noon was taken for lunch. Most settlers walked this journey.
E. Each night the settlers would circle their wagons for protection and keep their oxen from wondering.

F. Life on the trail was dangerous with violent weather, flooding, blistering heat and blizzards.

G. The largest danger came from disease; cholera would sometimes wipe out entire wagon trains.
VI. Wagon Trains West (con’t)

H. Along the trail many settlers traded with Native Americans, the Native Americans provided settlers with food.
VI. Wagon Trains West (con’t)

I. Between 1840-1860 50,000 people moved to the Oregon Country. In some areas wagon ruts can still be seen today.

J. Many believed this should now be a part of the United States.