

The feats of adventurous single men may have opened up new western territories but the ensuing great migration west was a family affair with much of the burden falling on the women.

Preparing for the Overland Trail Journey

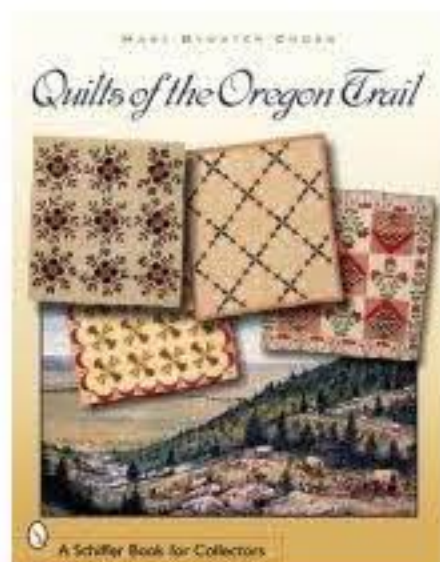
Plans to settle in the new lands involved much discussion including the urging of extended family members to come along. In most cases a single wagon traveled in the company of family and friends, often all from the same town or general area.



There was much preparation necessary before these families could begin their travels. Enterprising individuals were quick to publish guides to be sold to potential pioneers. These publications listed needed items including firearms, food for about 6 months and bedding including two or three blankets or comforters for each man, woman and child. It was suggested that each family should bring enough bedding to last a few years after arrival in the west; a hint that both quilting supplies and time on the part of the quilter would be scarce on the frontier. Clothing would be needed as well. As a result a great deal of sewing and quilting was done before the journey even began.

Women's Feelings About the Journey

While the men talked eagerly of overcoming challenges and settling on the abundant rich farmland awaiting them the womenfolk were all too aware of the dangers and hardships that lay ahead. Another factor that made women more reluctant about migrating west was their close ties with women friends and family. Most likely these dear friends would never see each other again. To ease this separation friendship quilts were sometimes made for the woman leaving for westward lands. A friendship quilt served as a remembrance of dear ones left behind.



The women gathered together all the quilts, blankets and tied comforters they could either make or acquire. While very special quilts were packed in a trunk or used to wrap precious china, everyday quilts were left out for bedding. It wasn't long before women found this bedding to be necessary for many other uses. A folded quilt offered a little padding on the wagon seat for the person driving the oxen or any one riding over the long rough trail. When winds rose up and screamed across the dusty plains blankets, quilts and comforters were used to cover the cracks and any other openings that let the choking dust inside the wagon.

A Woman's Life While Traveling West



Despite misgivings most pioneer women proved to be hardy and determined. It would be a long wearisome trip going 9 to 12 miles each day and taking several months for those going to the west coast regions. If a woman had not yet cast away her ideas of what a proper nineteenth-century woman should do she would quickly find she had no choice. Although her womanly skills of cooking, sewing, mending, and child care were as important as ever she was soon pressed into such tasks as gathering wood or buffalo chips for evening fires, pitching tents and driving stock.

The wagon ride was uncomfortable and jolting and more often women and children walked alongside the wagons. Needless to say little quilting was done on the trail. A few women managed to piece some quilt blocks or perhaps a whole quilt top but more often women knitted or mended clothing during the short breaks and occasional layovers. Any fine sewing would have been impossible while traveling and difficult in the poor light of a camp fire.

Unexpected and Sometimes Tragic Ways Quilts Were Used

As the journey plodded on quilts were needed for far more serious purposes than simply comfort and dust control. In some cases they became targets for arrows when they were hung on the exposed side of the wagons for protection during Indian attacks.

The thought of hostile Indians wasn't the only fear lurking in the back of each pioneer woman's mind. There were many dangers on such a long journey. Vicious storms of wind and rain could soak right through all clothing and bedding while bogging the wagons down in mud and making rivers impossible to ford. Not only animals and belongings were lost in rough fording but people as well. Stock including the oxen pulling the wagon could be startled into a sudden stampede. Great herds of buffalo represented another danger of deadly stampede.



Mothers were especially anxious about their children. Accidents were frequent and medical help limited in the case of serious injury. Women gave birth along the trail in conditions that made childbirth even more dangerous than it already was at that time in history.

One Grave Every Eighty Yards From Missouri to Oregon

Worse of all illness was a never-ending threat and many were lost on the trail to diseases like cholera. "There were twenty thousand deaths on the Oregon Trail: one out of every seventeen pioneers was lost en route. It is estimated that there was an average of one grave every eighty yards between the Missouri river and the Willamette Valley, Oregon." ¹

As you can see death from sickness and injury was no stranger to the weary travelers. During much of the journey wood was scarce making it impossible to even build a proper coffin. Wrapping a beloved mother, child or husband in a quilt for burial gave the family comfort knowing that something symbolizing family and their love enfolded their dear one in that lonely grave along the trail.

More Than Friends and Family Left Behind

Hardships increased as the trail became more difficult; it was sometimes necessary to leave items like china and pieces of furniture at the side of the trail. Even quilts were left at times, no longer needed to protect precious belongings. As these items brought from a far away home were cast away pioneer women felt even more keenly the separation from loved ones left behind.

Quilts Helped Sustain Body and Spirit in the New Land



Once a pioneer family reached their destination quilts and blankets were still needed for uses beyond bed coverings. Instead of keeping rain and wind out of the wagon they covered windows and doors of log cabins and dugouts. Sometimes they were used to partition off a room in an otherwise one room structure. There was a need for emotional sustenance as well. Putting a favorite quilt on the bed gave a woman a sense of connection with her former way of life. Something of beauty was very much needed in her barren home.

Arriving in the new land did not immediately change life much especially for the early settlers in a region. The family still had to live in tents, the wagon or a crude lean to until a log cabin or sod house could be built. It took a few years to establish first a farm and then a home. These years were often difficult and lonely.

One pioneer woman in Texas recalled how she was left alone in the dugout while her husband went to get firewood, a task that took a week. During his absence a major dust storm came up. For three days the wind was so bad she had to tie a rope around her waist to go to care for the cow. The sound of the wind was frightening and all she could do was worry and endure. She spent those days quilting in the dugout and related, "If I hadn't had the piecing, I don't know what I would have done". ²

At Last Some Time for Needlework and Quilting Bees

At no time did pioneer women forget friends and families left behind. Letters were a tenuous connection as there was no way to be sure if every letter would even make it to its destination. Nevertheless women continued to write letters and even included scraps of fabric representing a dress they'd made or to share a bit of cloth to be put into a quilt.

Life in the new land would never be the same as the one the women had left behind but eventually they were able to find more time for needlework. Quilting and other projects were popular topics when socializing. It even became possible for women to occasionally gather together to quilt. Pioneer quilting had come full circle from making quilts in anticipation of the journey to the opportunity to express creativity through quilting in the new land.

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References:

¹ p 54, "[Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women & Quilts on American Society](#)", by Pat Ferrero, Elaine Hedges and Julie Silber.

² pp 23 & 24, "[The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art, an Oral History](#)", by Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Allen

"Quiltmaking on the Overland Trails: Evidence from Women's Writing", by Barbara Brackman, [Uncoverings 1992](#)

"[Treasures in the Trunk: Quilts of the Oregon Trail](#)", by Mary Bywater Cross
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