Journey of the Forty-niners
The Oregon-California Trail

Most forty-niners from the Midwest and many from the East traveled West on the Oregon-California Trail. Travel by ship was costly. Maps and books promised a quick and easy overland voyage. But for many gold seekers who traveled overland, the journey would be the hardest they had ever experienced.

Forty-niners usually traveled in covered wagons pulled by oxen or mules. A few rode horses. Once they passed frontier towns like Independence, Missouri, they entered the wilderness. Many of the forty-niners were from cities like Boston or New York. They had never camped outdoors, hunted for food, or built a fire. And now they faced months far from civilization. (The 2,000 mile journey took 4-6 months)

In 1849, some 32,000 gold-seekers went West on the trail through present-day Nebraska, Wyoming, Idaho, and Nevada. They endured violent thunderstorms, torrential rain, and scorching heat. They traveled mile after mile of bumpy trails that choked their throats with dust in dry weather and turned to mudholes when rain fell. They lost their belongings and even their lives trying to cross rivers such as the Platte, the Green, and the Bear.

Many gold-seekers feared attack by Native Americans. But this seldom happened. Disease was the biggest killer. Forty-niners fell victim to

cholera, mountain fever, pneumonia, and diphtheria. Hundreds of gold-seekers died and were buried along the trail.

The strain took a toll on the oxen and mules as well. As they traveled, forty-niners lightened the load by throwing out everything they didn't need--from cookstoves and furniture to barrels of flour. Still, thousands of animals died from exhaustion or thirst and were left to rot in the sun.

Near the end of their journey, the forty-niners crossed the Forty Mile Desert, a hot, dry wasteland between the Humboldt and Carson rivers in present-day Nevada. Some people brought enough water for the crossing. Those who did not sometimes paid for this with their lives. (In 1850, it is estimated that 1 out of 15 travelers died along the Oregon-California trai

Beyond the Forty Mile Desert, lay California, the land of gold. Some would find their fortunes there. Most would not. But they had survived their overland journey by a combination of bravery, cooperation, skill, and luck. The experience had changed them forever.