

## READING HOMEWORK

# WAGON TRAINS OF THE OLD WEST



One of the most popular kinds of story told in Westerns is that of the Wagon Trains. A wagon train is a group of wagons (usually Calistoga or covered wagons) traveling together.



People traveling across the plains and mountain passes in covered wagons formed “trains” of twenty to a hundred wagons together for mutual assistance and safety. All the wagon trains departed from one central point in a town called Independence, Missouri.



The most famous wagon train trail was the Oregon Trail. It was over 2,000 miles long. Other trails were the Santa Fe Trail, the Chisholm Trail, the California Trail (which split southwestward from the Oregon Trail), the Mormon Trail, and the Old Spanish Trail.

Wagon trains often operated democratically voting for a “Captain” to lead them and rules to govern themselves. Captains actually had limited authority. His job was to get the train moving in the morning and selecting when and where to camp at night. Only the early wagon trains needed guides. Once the trail was established it was easy to follow.

Membership in wagon trains was voluntary and people came and went freely. When camping, the wagons usually formed one large circle in the center of which they placed their animals for protection from predators or thieves. At night the people shared their fires, food, stories and music. Deep friendships formed and sometimes romances led to marriages during the trip.