

Letter from Oscar F. Wilson, 1854

By Oscar F. Wilson

Oscar F. Wilson wrote this letter from Butteville, Oregon, to his friend M. Daugherty in West Alexander, Pennsylvania, on March 26, 1854, describing his overland trip west to Oregon. In the first paragraph, Wilson indicates his appreciation for his friend keeping the communication secret from other people in what Wilson calls his "native town." Wilson does not discuss the reasons he left West Alexander and traveled west, eventually over the Oregon Trail to the Willamette Valley. Wilson describes his travels from town to town in Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, Illinois, and Missouri, as he looked for and found work and new friends. After just under a year of that kind of travel, he moved to Griggsville, Illinois, and made plans for what he called "my trip across the plains to this great Oregon country." Wilson wrote that he was headed to the "land of gold," which at the time would probably have been California, rather than Oregon, but he did not write any more about the reason he made the overland journey. The fifty-three thousand people who moved to Oregon between 1840 and 1860 came for a wide variety of reasons, including to escape the strife of civil war, economic depression, and flooding disasters, and to take advantage of the promises of gold and land in the West. Like thousands of other emigrants who traveled overland to Oregon during the 1840s and 1850s, Wilson began the 2,000 mile trek by departing from the Missouri River in early spring with a group of families, oxen, and wagons. In this letter, Wilson describes many of the experiences that were typical for emigrants who traveled the Oregon Trail. His company elected a captain, moved steadily forward each day (travelers averaged about fifteen miles a day), feared attacks from Indians, thought constantly about having enough feed for their animals, lost livestock to what Wilson called "poison water" (probably alkaline water), and arrived in Oregon broke and exhausted. Wilson journeyed to Oregon ten years after the Great Migration, which consisted of almost 900 settlers. By the 1850s, when Wilson emigrated, the military had constructed forts, and businesspeople had erected trading posts along the trail. Until 1884, when a railway line was constructed, the Oregon Trail remained the major route for overland emigration. Other emigrants came by ship around Cape Horn. Further reading: Schwantes, Carl A. *The Pacific Northwest: An Interpretive History*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989. Unruh, John D. *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi, 1840-1860*. Urbana, Ill., 1979. Written by Eliza Canty-Jones, © Oregon Historical Society, 2007.

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