Jeff Knight was 13 when his family left their Iowa farm to head west to Oregon. They packed everything they owned, from clothes and cooking pans to beds and tools.

Today, the trip they made would take three days by car—or three hours by plane. But in 1853, the 2,000-mile trek was a six-month ordeal by covered wagon.

The prize awaiting them at the end of the trail was free land. The government offered property to lure pioneers like the Knights to the unsettled Northwest.

But free land could be costly. The trail was littered with broken wagons and castoff belongings. Some travelers paid a higher price. Buried along the route were thousands who lost their lives.

The Knights—and many like them—were willing to take the risk. They sought a home in the West. The Oregon Trail showed the way.

Trail of Adventure

The Oregon Trail (see map on next page) was blazed not by pioneers but by adventurers who came before them. Early explorers, missionaries and trappers had found their way across the prairies and into the Rocky Mountains.

In 1841 the first 13 settlers traveled the
Dirt Highways to the West

The Oregon Trail stretched 2,000 miles from Independence, Mo., to Oregon. It wasn't the only dirt highway into the American West. The California Trail led gold miners and others to California. It split from the Oregon Trail in Idaho, turned south to cross Utah, and ended in Sacramento.

The Santa Fe Trail went 800 miles west from Independence, Mo., to Santa Fe, N.M. It led settlers to the great Southwest.

The Oregon Trail

In the next 20 years about 40,000 followed.

Diaries Recorded the Knights' Trek

Some of the wagon people, including Jeff Knight's mother, kept diaries to record their journey.

The Knights' adventure began when they sold their farm in Iowa and bought supplies. Jeff, his parents, and six brothers and sisters then loaded everything they thought they would need into two covered wagons. (See sidebar on opposite page.)

For safety, they joined other travelers bound for Oregon. Jeff had never seen so many people in one place. Wherever he looked, families were camped with their wagons, children, dogs and livestock.

During daylight hours, lines of creaking wagons with white canvas tops rolled slowly across the grasslands toward the mountains.

Noise and dust were everywhere. In dry weather, people tied handkerchiefs over their faces to keep from breathing the dust. When it rained, dust turned to mud, and wagon wheels sank into the earth.

On the trail, Jeff sometimes sat high on one of the wagon seats, driving. Or he helped herd the family cattle along behind the wagons.

Another young traveler that year was 16-year-old Welborn Beeson. Every day, Welborn and the other travelers had to find grass for their animals. Some days the animals went hungry, and so did the people.

If the animals died, wagons were left behind. Welborn's diary tells of seeing abandoned cookstoves and furniture thrown out to lighten the load.

For families following the Oregon Trail, each day brought new adventures—and new dangers.

Death on the River

One of the greatest dangers was crossing rivers. Where there were no bridges or ferries, animals and people waded or swam. They sometimes made a wagon into a watertight boat that they could pull across with ropes.

Diaries tell of many tragedies. One woman wrote of how her family built a ferryboat but never crossed the river in it. Their cattle stampeded into the boat and sank it, nearly drowning the family.

The diary of Celinda Hine from New York tells of the August day her family reached the Sweetwater River in Wyoming. Her father drove his cattle to the riverbank and prodded the animals into the water. Then he rode his horse beside the cattle to keep them swimming toward the far shore.

Halfway across, the swirling water dragged him from his horse. His family watched, helpless, as he drowned.

Another woman, the mother of nine children, also watched her husband drown in a
Indians!
At night, beside the trail, the people slept in and under their wagons or in tents. Jeff Knight helped guard the cattle and horses. Indian tribes, whose land the white people were invading, were not strong enough to stop the great migration. But they often drove off horses and cattle. And sometimes they attacked.

Between 1840 and 1860, Indians killed nearly 400 settlers on the Oregon Trail. The settlers killed even more Indians.

Stampede!
Another danger was buffalo. At that time, the big furry beasts numbered in the millions across the prairies. Catherine Haun described a buffalo stampede along the Oregon Trail in 1849.

"One day a herd came like a great black cloud," she said. The people watched as thousands of buffalo raced straight toward their wagon train at about 35 miles an hour. The earth trembled beneath the thundering hooves. The buffalo could not be turned aside, and there was no time to escape. The herd crashed through the wagons, tearing them apart, leaving the people trampled and injured.

The Real Killer
But the biggest killer along the Oregon Trail was sickness and disease, especially cholera, spread by infected drinking water. Lydia Rudd and her husband, Harry, traveled the Oregon Trail in 1852. She wrote, "We passed another grave...died of cholera."

One man told her that, within two weeks, he had buried six members of his family. Travelers saw hundreds of new graves beside the trail.

Oregon at Last!
Finally, Jeff Knight and his family saw the snowy peaks of the Rocky Mountains far away to the West. Once beyond the mountains, they pushed on until they reached the Columbia River, which flows to the Pacific Ocean. By now, there was a new child in the family. They had camped beside the trail while Jeff's mother gave birth to another baby.

In Oregon, Jeff's father traded some of his livestock for a small farm with a log cabin. Their new house had no windows, and the earth was the floor. But it was a start. The soil was rich. The weather was good. The Knights had a chance for a new life.

Oregon Fever Finally Cooled
In 1848, gold was discovered in California. As gold fever grew hot, "Oregon Fever" cooled. Over the next decade, traffic to Oregon slowed to a trickle. By then, thousands of pioneers had already bravely made the famous Oregon Trail. Many died, but many others found new lives in a beautiful, faraway land.†

---George Laycock

In the 1840's, America was rich in wildlife. Travelers along the Oregon Trail found and trapped wild game to add fresh meat to their diet of dried foods.