

Our journey to the new world

Sport & Tourism



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For Two days Martha rode in the back of the dusty wagon and cried. She was one big mess. Feeling sorry for herself, and mad at the whole family.

Pa stopped the wagon, and everybody got out to eat, Everybody but Martha. She just sat where she was, moping instead of crying, till she'd run out of tears.

" Martha Madison, are you going to eat something?" asked ma.

" You know I can't swallow when I'm upset," she told Ma.

" Leave her be," said Pa. " My Martha has a mind and a stomach of her own."

" I'll take her gingerbread," said Billy. He was Martha's older brother, only one year older.

Ma plunked Bob on Martha's lap. " Well, if you're not going to eat, how about looking after your baby brother?"

Bob was a cute little rascal, but Martha was busy thinking about her home back in Jackson, Mississippi and her friend Denis. Martha missed her home and wanted to go back home.

Denis and Martha swore to be friends forever, but the creaky old wagon was putting more miles between them everyday.

Billy and Bob liked traveling in the wagon, the same with Pa. Ma wasn't the complaining sort, but Martha just hated traveling.

Ma said to many times to Martha, " Your Pa's got itchy feet. He's a traveling man and he'll keep on moving west till we run out of land."

Everybody was excited about going to Saint Joseph, Missouri. It was where Pa was bringing them to join a wagon train headed for Oregon. It took them two weeks to reach Saint Joe. When they got to Saint Joe it was Pa and Billy who turn to be disappointed. They were too late for the wagon train. It had been gone for a week. They'd have to wait a month for the next one.

After their long miserable ride from Jackson things moved pretty fast. By late afternoon they were set up in two little rooms on Mudd Street. And Pa found a job with the New West Harness Company. Martha and Ma had supper ready. They all crowded around the table and joined hands. Pa said grace and they all said " Amen."

After supper Ma spread two blankets on the floor for Martha and Billy. Pa and Ma and Bob took the big bed in the other room. And everyone was sound asleep.

Pa worked all day at the New West Harness Company. " Missing that wagon train may turn out to be a blessing," said Pa.

" Why?" said Ma.

" It'll give me time to bargain for all the things we'll need for Oregon," answered Pa.

First Pa bought extra oxen. Then he traded their old wagon in for a big new one with a canvas top.

" How does she look?" he cried.

" Looks like a cross between a boat and a wagon," said Ma.

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" That's why they call these contraptions prairie schooners," said Pa.

" We're going to sail her all the way to Oregon!" shouted Billy.

Martha had to laugh. The wagon did look like a ship, with its big white canvas top. There small rooms in the wagon were crammed with things for the trip. Bags of dried beans, tin buckets of lard and brown sugar, and jars of apple jelly all these things crowded around their beds. When Martha looked up at night, Martha was staring at slabs of bacon and dried beef hanging from the ceiling.

" We'll need enough food to last us through six months," said Ma.

Saint Joe was filling up fast. New wagons pulled in, crammed with goods and people. New children and dogs were all over the place. Martha's worries came to her head the day Pa said, " Time to pack the wagon. Captain Jonah, the trail boss, says the train moves tomorrow." Billy and Pa loaded all the heavy boxes into the wagon.

" It's going to hard to fit everything in the wagon," she said. " But all of us ought to have our own little space. You can take anything you want, as long as it fits into your box."

Martha took out her box out to the porch. It wouldn't hold much. Maybe the box would hold her doll with the china head and her hair ribbons. Leaving Saint Joe was going to be just as bad a leaving Jackson.

At breakfast Pa said grace. " Dear Lord, give us a good journey and safekeeping. And bring us finally to Oregon if it be thy will."

Everyone rolled up there bedding and put it in the wagon. Martha helped Ma hang her pots on big hooks on the outside of the wagon.

Pa said, " I'm going to drive the wagon to the front of the house. Just to see how she pulls." They all watched.

Billy bounced up beside Pa.

" Giddup!" shouted Pa.

The oxen strained under the load. The wagon jerked forward.

" She rides real smooth," called Pa. " Everybody hop in."

Ma climbed up with Bob.

The grove outside Saint Joe where the wagon train formed looked like a big campground. Children ran yelling and playing around the wagons, dogs joined in, barking and chasing after kids.

Pa finally found Captain Jonah. He gave Pa a number for our wagon number 49.

Billy asked Pa if he could carve the number on the side of the wagon.

" You can do more than that," said Pa. " We've got to keep track of the days. Carve a notch for each weekday and a long mark for each Sunday."

Martha felt cheated. Pa always gave Billy the important things to do.

But Pa surprised Martha. " Come with me, Martha girl," he said. " I've got a special job for you."

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Pa lifted up a round tin can from under the wagon seat. Then he showed Martha how to put axle grease on the big wagon wheels.

" Every day it gets dark I want you to grease each wheel, Martha. Then check all the spokes for cracks. Let me know if you find anything wrong." said Pa.

Martha stared at the big wheels. They were as tall as her.

Pa said, " It's these wheels that will get us to Oregon. You've got a sharp eye, Martha. I'm trusting our wheels to you."

Pa managed to get there wagon through all the confusion. Finally they found wagon number 48. They pulled up right behind it.

Toward the front of the line they could hear a lot of shouting.

" I can't make it out," said Pa

At first Martha couldn't make it out either. Then she got it clear. " They're shouting, 'Wagons, ho!" she cried.

The air was ringing with " Wagons, ho!" too. Martha thought it was pretty exciting, before she knew it she was yelling, " Wagons, ho!" too.

The white tops of the wagons in front of us started bobbing up and down.

" Giddup!" shouted Pa.

" Oregon, here we come!" yelled Billy.

Martha crawled over the boxes and sacks to the back of the wagon. She raised the lid of her box, and there she saw her doll. " We're on our way, Miss Chocolate," she whispered. " So far, so good."

The canvas topped wagons were like ovens. Billy and Martha found out they could walk as fast as the train moved. It was cooler to walk, too.

The first day they were walking beside the wagon, she met a big girl who was in wagon 48. She was a sight. Wild, curly, carrot colored hair shot out in all directions around her head. Her calico dress looked about two sizes too large. She wore it hitched up so you could see the big brogan shoes on her feet.

This big headed girl walked right up to Martha and said, " My name's Laura Smith. What's yours?"

" Martha Madison," she told her.

" Let's be friends, I'll look after you," said Laura.

" But I don't need anybody to look after me," Martha told her.

" Rats!" she said. " Everybody needs a friend, and I am the best looker you'll ever meet. I do all the looking after for my Pa."

" What about your Ma?" asked Martha.

" Ma's dead a year now," she said.

" And you cook and wash and do everything?" asked Martha.

" Everything," boomed Laura. " Promised Ma I'd look after Pa."

Then Laura said, " Stick with me, honey. You won't have a thing to worry about. Let's shake on it."

When the shadows started getting long, a message came down the line of wagons. " Campsite for the night about a mile ahead," yelled the scout.

By the time they made the circle with the wagons it was late afternoon. Pa and Billy unhitched the oxen to let them graze on grass. Martha helped Ma get a cook fire started. Then Martha got the tin bucket from under the wagon seat and greased the wheels. She felt every spoke till they were smooth as glass.

Supper on the prairie that first night was delicious. Cook fires circled the big camp. There was lots of visiting back and forth.

Laura came barreling over to there campfire. She didn't give Martha a chance to even introduce her.

" I'm Laura Smith," she said, grabbing first Ma's, then Pa's hand. When she went to Billy, he stepped back and just nodded his head.

" Welcome," said Ma. " Would you like some coffee?"

" No, I'm full as a boardinghouse bedbug," said Lauren, patting her stomach.

Everyone laughed. Then Laura settled down with them like a longtime friend. In one of the wagons someone was playing a fiddle. Martha looked up at the

sky. About a million sparkling stars were winking at her. It was a perfect night.

From the first day, Billy was asking, " When are we going to see some buffalo?"

But he had carved ten notches on the wagon before we spotted any.

" I'd sure like to see one of them beasts up close!" he cried.

" I like them right where they are," Martha said.

In a way Martha soon got a lot closer to the buffalo. They ran out of firewood and had to burn dried buffalo droppings. They were called " chips."

The longer they were on the trail, the hotter it got. Everybody was glad to see the sun set. At least it was cooler at night. But when night came, so did thousands of buffalo gnats. The only way to keep from being eaten alive was to sit close to the campfires. The gnats hated smoke more than they liked humans. Martha sneaked over to Laura's wagon , and got dozens of bites.

Late one afternoon Laura and Martha were counting the notches Billy had carved.

" It's hard to believe we've been on the trail almost three weeks," Martha commented.

" Not for me," said Laura. " I feel like I've already walked three thousand miles and picked up a million buffalo chips!"

While they were laughing, Martha heard a rumbling sound. " You hear that?" asked Martha.

" Sounds like thunder," said Laura.

From the front of the train two scouts came riding towards them.

" Swing the wagons in a circle!" they shouted.

" What's wrong?" asked Pa.

" Buffalo stampede!" shouted the scouts.

The rumbling was growing louder.

Laura ran to her wagon.

In a few minutes the wagons were in a raged circle. Ma and Martha ducked under the wagon with Bob. Pa and Billy grabbed guns and crawled behind the big wagon wheels.

All Martha could see was a big dark cloud mobbing towards them.

" Where are the buffalo?" Martha asked.

" In the dust cloud," said Pa. " There must be thousands of them."

Captain Jonah rode up. " Have your guns ready!" he shouted. " But don't shoot until I give you the order."

The buffalo were close. Martha could taste dust in her mouth. Then, in the moving dust cloud, she saw them. They were packed tight, like a solid wall.

Their heads were down. Their tails were in the air. The ground shook under their pounding hooves.

" Hold your fire!" commanded Captain Jonah.

Martha was sure the buffalo would crush them any second. She closed her eyes.

" Fire! Fire! Fire!," shouted Captain Jonah.

The guns barked and Martha's eyes flew open.

Several buffalo in the front of the pack crumpled to the ground. More and more piled up behind them. But one huge wounded beast kept coming. He plowed into a wagon near there's. There was this sickening thud. The wagon rolled over.

Martha heard screams and more gunfire's. The huge shaggy buffalo was slumped against a schooner. A red stain was spreading in the sand around the dead buffalo. Martha felt sick.

But the gunfire was working. The solid line of buffalo split in the middle. They turned away from the pile of dead buffalo and ran past the wagons. Martha could see hundreds of brown shaggy legs flying by their wagon.

" We've broken the stampede!" shouted Captain Jonah.

The mad, rushing buffalo swung wide of the wagons. Soon the last of the huge herd passed them by. The dust began to settle. The thundering roar of the stampede faded away.

" We're safe now," said Pa. " I'm going over to help the folks under the wagon and shook the dust off.

Back at the wagon Pa told us we were going to stay put for the night. " It'll give us time to skin some buffalo for supper," he said.

Billy went to skin the dead buffalo. Martha started greasing the wagon wheels.

The men came back with big buffalo steaks. Ma fixed some for there supper. Martha couldn't eat the tough meat. Martha stared out across the starlit prairie. She felt so lonely. As far as she could see there was nothing just flat prairie stretching on and on.

" Where is your Pa?" asked Captain Jonah.

" Over there," Graped Martha, pointing in the opposite direction.

The Captain rode away, in a hurry. When Pa came back to there wagon, he said we would make camp early.

" Why?" asked Ma.

" Indians," said Pa. " They've been tracking us all day."

For three days the scouts reported: " Indians still tracking us."

" They probably only want to do some trading," Captain Jonah reassured us. " The important thing is that no one panics and does something foolish. I've brought many wagon trains through Indian country and I had never had any real trouble."

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It was late in the afternoon on the fourth day when Martha saw them. At first they were tiny specks bobbing up and down far out on the plains.

" They're on horseback," said Laura.

The scouts rushes up shouting, " Circle the wagons!"

As soon as the circle was made, Pa grabbed his gun. Then he joined the men lined up behind Captain Jonah.

Martha peeked through a slit in the canvas. A long line of Indians on horseback were moving slowly toward them. It was so still and quiet, Martha could hear everyone breathing in the wagon. Suddenly the Indians stopped.

Captain Jonah made a sign with his hands.

An Indian who must have been the chief returned Captain Jonah's sign.

Then Captain Jonah and the chief rode out and met in the middle.

For a few minutes they talked, and made signs with their hands. Then Captain Jonah turned and went back to his men. The chief did the same.

Crack! A single gunshot rang out from one of there wagons.

The pony one of the young Indians was ridding stumbled and crashed to the ground. The rider went down with him.

Our scouts raced back toward the wagon train, yelling, " Hold your fire!"

The Indians pulled up around the wounded pony and the fallen rider. Captain Jonah dashed up to them and jumped off his horse. Martha was sure the Indians would kill him. Why didn't the scouts go to his rescue?

Instead the scouts kept yelling, " For God's sake, don't shoot!"

In a few minutes that seemed to last forever, the crowd around the fallen rider parted. The young Indian who had gone down with the pony looked dead.

The captain rushed back to the wagons. The Indians made a long line facing them. They just stood there, silent and threatening.

" Who fired that shot?" demanded the captain angrily.

Two scouts dragged a man from wagon 42.

" That was a stupid thing to do, Ned Butcher!" shouted the captain.

Ned stared to protest. But Captain Jonah shouted, " I don't care about your excuses. I only care about the safety of the folks on this wagon train. I could hang you for disobeying orders. Or I could just hand you over to the Indians."

Ned's wife rushed up to Captain Jonah. She stared to pleading with him.

Captain Jonah motioned her away.

" All they wanted was to trade hides for blankets and sugar. Now the stakes are higher. Thank God the boy's only stunned. But the pony is dead. Either we supply them with two oxen and sugar and blankets, or we can expect an attack. Those are the terms!"

The men started shouting all at once.

Captain Jonah held up his hand for silence.

" They're going to sit there for a half hour. If we don't have the oxen and other stuff outside the wagon train by then, they're going to come swooping down on us. I've told the chief we'd meet their demands."

" Ned Butcher, you have 4 oxen. Unhitch two of them for the Indians," commanded the captain.

" But only two oxen can't pull my wagon," Ned protested.

" You can lighten your load by dumping some of it right here."

" Every wagon must give a pound of sugar and a blanket," said Captain Jonah. " And be quick about it! Our time is running out."

In just a few minutes every person piled up a great mound of blankets and sugar. Captain Jonah and the scouts brought out the two oxen. They staked them by the sugar and blankets. Then everyone pulled back behind the wagons.

" Keep your guns ready, men. But don't make a move unless I give order!" shouted Captain Jonah.

Suddenly the still, silent line of Indians plodded. They came racing toward them. They were yelling and waving guns and spears, kicking up clouds of dust. Martha expected arrows and bullets to rip through the wagon any second.

When the Indians reached the staked oxen, the pile of blankets and sugar, the Indians stopped in a cloud of dust.

Suddenly the wagon train started to move out. When Martha looked back, the Indians were dividing up the blankets and sugar. They were chattering and laughing and didn't seem the least bit warlike. That night as they sat around the campfire, they celebrated there coming to Oregon.

In the morning Captain Jonah pushed the wagon train hard after the Indian scare.

" This is the hard part of the trip," he said. " We've got a tough river to ford before we cross the mountains."

" But the oxen are worn out," one of the men protested.

" Get out of the wagons and walk!" snapped the captain. Then he made it an order. " Everybody walks from here on."

All of them plodded along beside our wagons in the boiling sun.

" If you had three wishes, what would you wish for?" Laura asked Martha.

" Ice, ice, and more ice!"

" Your wishes wouldn't last a minute in this heat," said Laura.

They kept walking in the whole terrible heat.

One day they came upon a long line of boxes, trunks, and furniture scattered beside the trail. Lauren and Martha ran over to see what was in the trunks.

" Keep moving!" shouted one of the scouts. " Just count yourself lucky we don't have to dump all our goods. Take a like over there!"

Martha gasped. Sun bleached skeletons of oxen lay in the sand.

" Their teams gave out," explained the scout. " They doubled up and went on as best they could. Move along now. We've got a river to ford up ahead.

By the time they reached the river, the scouts were struggling to get ropes strung across. The muddy water looked ready to overflow the riverbanks. The oxen had a hard time making it across. But finally the scouts got two short ropes anchored across the river. Then the captain gave the signal.

" One driver to a wagon, everybody else, over on the ropes!" he ordered.

Pa drove there big schooner into the river.

" She floats like a boat!" he called

They plunged into the water. Martha could see Laura up ahead on the rope.

At first it felt good just to be cool again. Then in the deeper water Martha began to feel the strong pull of the undertow.

Billy called behind Martha. " Hey, this is fun!"

Martha was about to tell him to hold tight, since he'd soon be in the undertow. But Billy shouted again. " Look, no hands!"

Martha turned, there he was, treading water with both hands off the rope.

" Billy!" called Martha. " Stop that!" You know you can't swim!"

He struck the undertow and went under like a rock.

Martha was so frighten, she couldn't even call for help. Billy popped back up right next to her. He was coughing and spitting water. Martha grabbed his arm. But she was thrashing around so wildly, Martha lost her grip on the rope. They both went whirling toward the center of the river.

They shot right past Ma and Bob. Ma screamed. Martha was sure they were lost. But she still held on to Billy, but his head kept on bobbing under.

Then she hit something. Something hard that sent pain shooting up her arm. It was Laura's wagon. Martha grabbed it. Then she pulled Billy up close, where she could keep his head above water. He coughed, and spit more muddy water.

" Grab the wagon!" She yelled. He clawed at the side of the wagon and found a pot hook to hang on to. Martha was afraid to let him go. But her arm was hurting so, she didn't know how long she could hold on.

Suddenly Laura was there with her arms around both Billy and Martha. She had them penned against the wagon.

" Hang on!" she cried. " You all right, Billy?"

He spit more water and mumbled, " I'm fine."

" You don't look too bad for someone who's just drunk half a river," said Lauren. " How about you, Martha?"

Martha was scared to death, and her arm was hurting something fierce.

Laura clung to the wagon with them until they were across the river.

Everyone cheered as they staggered up the muddy riverbank to safety. The three of them flopped on the ground and sat there, completely worn out.

" Oregon's on the other side," announced Captain Jonah. " We've got a hard ride up, but an easy ride down. Let's start climbing!"

They all still had to walk. And when the trail got steeper, they had to help push the heavy wagons. But the coolness in the mountains felt good. The rocky trail was hard on wheels. Every day a wagon would have to pull out of line to fix a broken wheel. Martha still took care of their wheels. Even though her arm was hurt, she wouldn't let Billy take over. She was superstitious about them. When the last one was checked, she'd pat it and say, " Lucky wheels! You'll get us there!"

Well, the luck played out before they reached the crest of the mountains. The whole family plus Laura's was pushing there wagon up a steep part of the trail. Crack! There left front wheel hit a big rock.

" Knocked the iron rim completely off!" cried Pa. " We'll have to drop out of line and fix it."

" How long will it take?" Martha asked Pa.

" Maybe half a day," he answered.

Captain Jonah rode up.

" Tough luck," he said. " We're less than a day away from the crest. Then it's easy going. Tell you what we'll do. I'll camp an hour early tonight and start out an hour later tomorrow. That'll give you time to catch up."

Pa thanked the captain.

Then he rode off and left them to tend the broken wheel.

Martha was scared seeing all the wagons go, and being left behind.

By the time Pa fixed the wheel, it was dark.

" Hurry! We've got miles to make up," he said. And he pushed the oxen as fast as he dared.

" Pray for a bright moon," said Pa. " Driving by night is the only way we're going to catch up."

But low hanging clouds blocked out the moon and the stars. It started to rain. " We'll have to stop," said Pa. " It's foolhardy to go on."

" Might as well try to get some sleep," Ma said.

Martha then realized it stopped raining. A bright patch of moonlight cut through the back of the wagon.

" The moons out! It's so bright you can see everything! Pa! Pa! Martha called. Wake up! The rain's stopped. We can get moving!"

Pa jumped up

" By golly, our luck's changed. We'll catch up now!" he cried.

Day was breaking when we saw the wagon train camp on the crest of the mountains.

When we pulled into camp, Lauren ran to meet their wagon.

" I knew you'd make it!" she shouted. I've got breakfast ready.

As they had breakfast the sun suddenly popped out, round and red and beautiful.

Captain Jonah's big voice boomed, " Look, folks. There it is. That's Oregon down there!"

From there high perch you could see miles of wild, beautiful valleys stretching before them. For a moment no one said anything.

Then Martha let out a yell and turned a cartwheel.

Pa put his arm around Ma. " Now, this looks like our Journey to the New World."