1 Oregon Country

Reading Focus
- Why were settlers and trappers attracted to Oregon and the Far West?
- How did mountain men help explore lands in the Far West?
- What role did missionaries play in the settlement of Oregon?
- What hardships did settlers face on wagon trains to the West?

Key Terms
Oregon Country
mountain man
rugged individualist
rendezvous
Oregon Trail

Taking Notes
As you read, prepare an outline of this section. Use roman numerals to indicate the major headings, capital letters for the subheadings, and numbers for the supporting details. The sample at right will help you get started.

Main Idea By the 1840s, thousands of pioneers were following in the footsteps of fur traders and missionaries to settle in Oregon Country.

Setting the Scene Young John Johnson and Jane Jones fell in love as their families were moving west by wagon train. John's parents did not like the match, so they left the wagon train. John and Jane, though, secretly promised to leave letters for each other on the buffalo skulls that dotted the trail. They signed their letters “Laurie.” For the next month, Jane later told John “not a day passed ... but what I have found a letter signed by Laurie so I knew just where you were and was sure we would overtake you.”

The Johnson and Jones families were among thousands of people who traveled to Oregon in the mid-1800s. In 1820, Oregon had seemed a distant and dangerous place. Yet, by the early 1850s, large numbers of pioneers were heading across the Great Plains to the Far West. Their presence would support the claims of the United States to Oregon and put the nation into conflict with Great Britain.

The Lure of Oregon

By the 1820s, white settlers had occupied much of the land between the Appalachians and the Mississippi River. Families in search of good farmland kept moving farther west. Few, however, settled on the Great Plains between the Mississippi and the Rockies. The plains were too dry to support settlement. Instead, settlers headed to lands in the Far West.

Americans first heard about the area known as Oregon Country in the early 1800s. Oregon Country was a huge region west of the Rocky Mountains. Today, it includes Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and parts of Wyoming, Montana, and western Canada.

Land and Climate The geography of Oregon Country is varied. Along the Pacific coast, the soil is fertile. Temperatures are mild as...
year round, and rainfall is plentiful. Early white settlers found fine farmland in the valley of the Willamette River and the lowlands around Puget Sound.

Farther inland, dense forests covered the coastal mountain range. Beavers and other fur-bearing animals roamed these forests and the Rocky Mountains to the east. For this reason, fur trappers were the first whites to head into Oregon Country.

Not all of Oregon Country attracted Americans. Between the coastal mountains and the Rockies is a barren and dry plateau. This region was home to neither fur trappers nor farmers.

**Competing Claims** In the early 1800s, four countries claimed Oregon. They were the United States, Great Britain, Spain, and Russia. Of course, Native American groups had lived there for centuries. However, the United States and European nations gave little thought to Indian rights.

In 1818, the United States and Britain agreed to occupy Oregon jointly. Citizens of each nation would have equal rights in Oregon. Spain and Russia had few settlers there, so they withdrew their claims to Oregon Country.

**Fur Trappers in the Far West**

At first, only a handful of Europeans or Americans traveled to Oregon Country. Most were fur traders. Since furs could be sold for huge profits in China, merchants from New England stopped along the Oregon coast before crossing the Pacific. In fact, so many Yankee traders visited Oregon to buy furs that, in some areas, the Indian name for a white man was “Boston.”

Only a few hardy trappers actually settled in Oregon. These adventurous men hiked through the region’s vast forests, trapping animals and living off the land. They were known as **mountain men**.

Mountain men were admired as **rugged individualists**, people who follow their own independent course in life. Even their colorful appearance set them apart from ordinary society. Their shirts and trousers were made of animal hides and decorated with porcupine quills. Their hair reached to their shoulders. Pistols and tomahawks hung from their belts.

**Lives Filled With Danger** Mountain men could make fine profits selling their furs. They led dangerous lives, however. The long, cold winters demanded special survival skills. In the forests, mountain men had to watch out for bears, wildcats, or other animals that might attack.
In winter, food was scarce. Faced with starvation, a hungry trapper would eat almost anything. “I have held my hands in an anthill until they were covered with ants, then greedily licked them off,” one mountain man recalled.

Trappers often spent winters in Native American villages. They learned trapping and hunting skills from Indians. Some mountain men married Indian women who helped the newcomers survive in the harsh mountains.

**Trading Furs** During the fall and spring, mountain men tended their traps. Then in July, they tramped out of the wilderness to meet with fur traders. They headed to a place chosen the year before, called the rendezvous (rahn day vo). **Rendezvous** is a French word meaning “get-together.”

The first day of the rendezvous was a time for entertainment. A visitor to one rendezvous captured the excitement:

“[The mountain men] engaged in contests of skill at running, jumping, wrestling, shooting with the rifle, and running horses... They sang, they laughed, they whooped; they tried to out-brag and out-lie each other in stories of their adventures.”


Soon enough, trappers and traders settled down to bargain. As long as beaver hats were in demand in the East and in Europe, mountain men got a good price for their furs.

By the late 1830s, however, the fur trade was dying. Trappers had killed too many beavers, and the animals had become scarce. Also, beaver hats went out of style. Even so, the mountain men found new uses for their skills. Some began to lead settlers across rugged mountain trails into Oregon.

**Exploring New Lands**

In their search for furs, mountain men explored many parts of the West. They followed Indian trails through passes in the Rocky Mountains. Later, they showed these trails to settlers heading west.

Jedediah Smith led settlers across the Rockies through South Pass, in present-day Wyoming. Manuel Lisa, a Latino fur trader, led a trip up the Missouri River in 1807. He founded Fort Manuel, the first outpost on the upper Missouri.

James Beckwourth, an African American, traveled west from Virginia to escape slavery. He was accepted as a chief by the Crow Indians. As a guide, Beckwourth discovered a mountain pass through the Sierra Nevadas that later became a major route to California.

**Missionaries in Oregon**

The first white Americans to settle permanently in Oregon Country were missionaries. Among them were Marcus and Narcissa Whitman. The couple married in 1836 and set out for Oregon, where they planned to convert local Native Americans to Christianity.
The Whitmans built their mission near the Columbia River and began to work with Cayuse (K1 oos) Indians, setting up a mission school and a clinic. Soon, other missionaries and settlers joined them.

Missionaries like the Whitmans helped stir up interest in Oregon Country. Eager to have others join them, the missionaries sent back glowing reports about the land. People throughout the nation read these reports. By 1840, more and more Americans were making the long and difficult journey to Oregon.

As settlers spread onto Cayuse lands, conflicts arose. Worse, the newcomers carried diseases that often killed the Indians.

In 1847, tragedy struck. A measles outbreak among the settlers spread to the Cayuses. Many Cayuse children died. Blaming the settlers, a band of angry Indians attacked the mission, killing the Whitmans and 12 others.

**Wagon Trains West**

Despite the killings, other pioneers boldly set out for Oregon. They were attracted by tales of wheat that grew taller than a man and turnips five feet around. Stories like these touched off a race to get to Oregon. Americans called it “Oregon fever.”

As Oregon fever spread, pioneers clogged the trails west. Beginning in 1843, wagon trains left every spring for Oregon. They followed a route called the Oregon Trail.

Families planning to go west met at Independence, Missouri, in the early spring. By mid-April, the prairie outside Independence was packed with people and wagons. Somehow, the pioneers formed themselves into wagon trains. Each group elected leaders to make decisions along the way.

The Oregon-bound pioneers hurried to leave Independence in May. Timing was important. Travelers had to reach Oregon by early October before the snow fell in the mountains. This meant that pioneers had to cover 2,000 miles in five months. In the 1840s, traveling 15 miles a day was considered making good time!

**Life on the Trail** On the trail, families woke at dawn to a bugle blast. Everyone had a job to do. Girls helped their mothers prepare food. Men and boys harnessed the horses and oxen. By 6 A.M., the cry of “Wagons Ho!” rang across the plains.

The wagon train stopped for a brief noonday meal. Then, it returned to the trail until 6 or 7 P.M. At night, wagons drew up into a circle to keep the cattle from wandering.
Most pioneer families started the journey with a large amount of gear. As they crossed rivers and scaled mountains, they discarded belongings to lighten their wagons.

The trail west held many dangers. During the spring, travelers risked drowning as they floated their wagons across rain-swollen rivers. In summer, they faced blistering heat on the treeless plains. Early snows could block passes through the mountains. Getting the heavy wagons past these obstacles was hard work.

The biggest threat was sickness. Cholera and other diseases could wipe out whole wagon trains. Because the travelers lived so close together, diseases spread quickly.

Trading With Native Americans As they moved toward the Rockies, pioneers often saw Indians. Many Native Americans traded with the wagon trains. Hungry pioneers were grateful for the food that the Indians sold in return for clothing and tools. A traveler noted:

"Whenever we camp near any Indian village, we are no sooner stopped than a whole crowd may be seen coming galloping into our camp. The [women] do all the swapping."

—John S. Unruh, quoted in The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–1860

Oregon at Last! Despite the many hardships, more than 50,000 people reached Oregon between 1840 and 1860. Their wagon wheels cut so deeply into the plains that the ruts can still be seen today.

By the 1840s, Americans outnumbered the British in Oregon. As you have read, the two nations had agreed to occupy Oregon jointly. Now, many Americans wanted Oregon for the United States alone.

### Recall

1. Identify Explain the significance of (a) Oregon Country, (b) James Beckwourth, (c) Oregon Trail.
2. Define (a) mountain man, (b) rugged individualist, (c) rendezvous.

### Comprehension

3. Why were trappers and settlers attracted to Oregon Country?
4. How did mountain men contribute to the settlement of the Far West?
5. How did missionaries like the Whitmans attract other people to settle in Oregon?

6. Describe two difficulties that settlers faced on the Oregon Trail.

### Critical Thinking and Writing

7. Exploring the Main Idea Review the Main Idea statement at the beginning of this section. Then, write a letter that a missionary might have sent East encouraging people to settle in the Oregon Country.

8. Linking Past and Present (a) What qualities helped the settlers survive the Oregon Trail? (b) Do you think such qualities are still important today? Write a paragraph explaining your answers.

### Activity

**Take It to the NET**

**Writing a Diary** Use the Internet to find out more about the life of the mountain men. Then, use the information to write two or three diary entries describing the way of life of an imaginary mountain man. Visit The American Nation section of www.phschool.com for help in completing the activity.
3 California and the Southwest

Reading Focus
- Why did Americans take an interest in the New Mexico Territory?
- What was life like for Native Americans on California’s missions and ranches?
- Why did many Americans support the idea of westward expansion?

Key Terms
- New Mexico Territory
- Santa Fe Trail
- self-sufficient
- vaquero
- Manifest Destiny

Taking Notes
Copy this incomplete Venn diagram. As you read, write key facts about the Southwest and California in the 1840s in the appropriate sections. Write common characteristics in the overlapping section.

Main Idea As Americans learned more about California and the Southwest in the 1840s, many came to think that the United States should expand its borders to the Pacific Ocean.

Setting the Scene Richard Henry Dana reached California after 150 days at sea. His ship had sailed from Boston around the tip of South America. One “fine Saturday afternoon,” Dana and his crew sailed into Monterey Bay. “Everything was as green as nature could make it—the grass, the leaves, and all; the birds were singing in the woods and great numbers of wild fowl were flying over our heads. . . . The Mexican flag was flying from the little square Presidio, and the drums and trumpets of the soldiers . . . sounded over the water and gave great life to the scene.”

Dana wrote about his experiences in the book Two Years Before the Mast, which appeared in 1840. Dana’s book contains a detailed description of life on the California coast. In it, Dana gives close attention to the daily lives of the peoples of California: Latino, Native American, and European.

At the time, California belonged to Mexico. With the help of books like Two Years Before the Mast, however, many Americans began to think that the United States should take control of all the lands between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

New Mexico Territory
In the early 1840s, Mexico ruled not only California but all of the Southwest. The Southwest included most of present-day Arizona and New Mexico, all of Nevada and Utah, and parts of Colorado. This huge region was called New Mexico Territory.

Much of the Southwest is hot and dry with deserts and mountains. In some areas, thick grasses grow. Before the Spanish arrived, the Zuñi (zoohn yee) and other Indians farmed using irrigation. Other Native Americans, such as the Apaches, lived mainly by hunting.
The Spanish explorer Juan de Oñate (ohn YAH tay) claimed the region for Spain in 1598. In the early 1600s, the Spanish built Santa Fe and made it the capital of the territory. In time, Santa Fe grew into a busy trading town.

Spain, however, would not let Americans settle in Santa Fe or anywhere else in New Mexico. Only after Mexico became independent in 1821 were Americans welcome there. William Becknell, a merchant and adventurer, was the first American to head for Santa Fe. In 1821, he led some traders from Franklin, Missouri, across the plains to the New Mexico town. Other Americans soon followed Becknell’s route. It became known as the Santa Fe Trail.

**California’s Missions and Ranches**

California, too, was ruled first by Spain and then by Mexico. Spanish explorers had reached California in 1542, long before the English settled in Jamestown. Spanish and Native American cultures shaped life in California.

**A String of Missions** As you have read, Spanish soldiers and missionaries built the first European settlements in California. In 1769, Captain Gaspar de Portolá led an expedition up the Pacific coast. With him was Father Junípero Serra (hoo nee peh roh sehr rah). Father Serra built his first mission at San Diego. Later he and other missionaries set up a string of 21 missions along the California coast.

Each mission included a church and the surrounding land. Each became self-sufficient, producing enough for its own needs. Spanish soldiers built forts near the missions. The missions supplied meat, grain, and other foods to the forts.

**California Missions and Ranches** Before the Spanish arrived, California Indians lived in small, scattered groups. As a result, they had little success resisting the Spanish soldiers who forced them to work on mission lands.

Native Americans herded sheep and cattle and raised crops for the missions. In return, they lived at the missions and learned about the Roman Catholic faith. Many missionaries were dedicated to converting the Indians to Christianity. However, mission life was hard. Thousands of Native Americans died from overwork and diseases.

In the 1820s, newly independent Mexico decided that California’s economy was growing too slowly. Hoping to speed up growth, the government took land from the missions and gave it to wealthy individuals. These people set up huge cattle ranches in California.

Native Americans did most of the work on the ranches, tending cattle and other animals. A new culture developed on the ranches—the culture of the vaqueros. Vaqueros were the Indian and Mexican cowhands who worked on the ranches. They were excellent riders and ropers, and their traditions strongly influenced later cowhands.

**Support for Expansion**

In the mid-1840s, only about 700 people from the United States lived in California. Every year, however, more Americans began moving west. On several occasions, the United States government offered to
buy California from Mexico. Some officials were eager to gain control of the ports at San Francisco and San Diego.

The Idea of Manifest Destiny There was another reason for wanting to purchase California. Many Americans saw their nation and its democratic government as the best in the world. They believed that Americans had the right and the duty to spread their culture across the continent all the way to the Pacific Ocean.

In the 1840s, a newspaper in New York called this belief Manifest Destiny. Manifest means clear or obvious. Destiny means something that is sure to happen. Americans who believed in Manifest Destiny thought that expansion would also open new opportunities for the United States economy.

Manifest Destiny had a negative side. Many white Americans believed that they were superior to Native Americans and Mexicans. They used this belief to justify taking lands belonging to people whom they considered inferior.

Election of 1844 Manifest Destiny played a role in the election of 1844. The Whigs nominated Henry Clay for President. Clay was a well-known national leader. The Democrats chose a little-known candidate, James K. Polk.

Voters soon labeled Polk the candidate who favored expansion. Polk wanted to add Texas and Oregon to the United States. Clay, on the other hand, opposed the annexation of Texas.

The Democrats made Oregon a campaign issue. Britain and the United States held Oregon jointly. Polk demanded the whole region as far north as latitude 45°40'N. “Fifty-four forty or fight!” became the Democrats’ campaign cry. On election day, Americans showed their support for expansion by choosing James Polk President.

Critical Thinking and Writing

6. Exploring the Main Idea
Review the Main Idea statement at the beginning of this section. Then, write a newspaper editorial that might have appeared in the 1840s for or against expansion.

7. Supporting a Point of View
You are a supporter of one of the major candidates for President in the election of 1844. Write a paragraph stating whether you support Polk or Clay. Give reasons to support your choice.

Activity

Drawing a Political Cartoon Draw a political cartoon about Manifest Destiny from the point of view of the people of the Southwest.