

Songs

Emigrants traveling the Oregon Trail were journeying through the wilderness to their new home in the West. Although physically they were leaving behind the home and life they had lived in the East, they tried to take along as much of that home and society as they could. Singing the good old familiar songs was a way of bringing along an important part of the old life left behind.

Most of the songs sung on the Trail were the popular songs of the day. A lot of singing was done together in the evening around the campfire. Sometimes songs were accompanied by a musical instrument, typically a guitar, or they might be sung unaccompanied.

Since many of the songs were also played as instrumentals for dancing, the distinction between songs and dance tunes is somewhat arbitrary. A lot of these songs still are sung today, especially those written by the most popular American songwriter of the period, Stephen Foster. In any presentation of music of the Oregon Trail, virtually anything written by Mr. Foster would be historically correct.

Some of the songs were sentimental, reminding folks of their friends and relations, and the home they had left behind. Their journals are replete with mentions of how the songs eased the hardships of the trail, and allowed people to reflect on the life they had left behind and the new life they would be making in the West.

Some songs were religious, the well-known hymns of the era. These were often sung outside of any religious service, since they also helped relieve the cares of the day and aided in maintaining enough fortitude to continue the journey.

A major source of music and song during the Overland Trail period was the minstrel show. Many of the popular song writers of the period, including Stephen Foster, wrote for the minstrel stage. While many minstrel songs were comic in nature, others were quite sentimental. Some of the nineteenth century popular song lyrics in this book, especially the minstrel songs, have been edited to make them less offensive to modern sensibilities.

Patriotic songs also were an important part of the music on the Trail. They re-affirmed the emigrants' identity as Americans. In the early days of the Trail, the emigrants could not be sure whether their destination was a part of the United States or would be claimed by some other country. The ownership of the Pacific Northwest was still being disputed with England, and California was not yet independent from Mexico. It was the presence of large numbers of American settlers which ultimately brought the West into the United States. Whether or not they believed in or had even heard of "Manifest Destiny," they were accomplishing it.