Settling the Far West

Where was the Oregon Country? To whom did it belong?

The Oregon Country stretched along the Pacific coast from California to as far north as southern Alaska. Spain, Russia, Great Britain, and the United States had all claimed Oregon. However, by 1825 Spain and Russia had withdrawn their claims and Great Britain and the United States had agreed to govern the territory jointly. In 1846 the two countries agreed to split Oregon Country between them. For more information, see the Oregon Country Atlas Map on the Exploring America’s Past CD-ROM.

Why did people migrate to the West Coast?

- **Religion**—Some of the earliest American settlers in Oregon were missionaries who settled in the Willamette Valley to convert local Indians to Christianity. For more information, see the Narcissa Prentiss Whitman Media Bank Image and the Marcus Whitman and Narcissa Whitman Profiles on the CD-ROM.

- **Oregon fever**—The missionaries told people back east about Oregon Country. Soon, thousands had “Oregon fever” and journeyed there themselves. For more information, see the On the Oregon Trail and Oregon Fever Media Bank Images on the CD-ROM.

- **Trade**—Many of the first Americans to arrive on the West Coast were men in search of trade. Some were fur traders or trappers; others were merchants. Eventually, many of these traders made their homes in the Mexican territories of California and New Mexico. For more information, see the Indians and Trappers in Oregon and the Sutter’s Fort, California Media Bank Images on the CD-ROM.

What routes did migrants take to their new homes in the West?

- **The Oregon Trail**—The trip to Oregon generally took about six months along this 2,000-mile trail. Groups left from western Missouri and followed the Platte River to Fort Laramie, in what is now Wyoming. They then crossed through the South Pass of the Rocky Mountains, followed the Snake and Columbia Rivers, and proceeded to the Willamette Valley.

- **The Santa Fe Trail**—Pioneers heading to the Southwest followed this 780-mile-long trail from Missouri to Santa Fe, New Mexico.

- **The Mormon Trail**—Followers of the Mormon religion blazed this trail from Illinois into Utah while searching for a permanent refuge from religious persecution. Because they moved cautiously, the first Mormons to travel this route took a year to arrive at their new home.

- **Sea travel**—Many who moved to California headed south from the Oregon Trail or west from the Santa Fe Trail, though others traveled by sea. Some travelers leaving eastern harbors
sailed to Central America, trekked across the Isthmus of Panama, and then boarded a California-bound ship at the Pacific Ocean. Others sailed all the way around the tip of South America to arrive at the California coast. For more information, see the Clipper Ship Media Bank Image.

- Other routes—People constantly searched for shorter or easier routes to the West. These new routes were often dangerous, however. In 1846 the Donner party tried a shortcut to California through the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Trapped by a snowstorm, they ran out of food. To survive, several members of the party resorted to cannibalism.

What was life like on the journey west?

Life on the journey west was difficult. Large caravans of about 1,000 people set out in 120 or so canvas-covered wagons along with several thousand animals. Strict order was necessary. An elected council made rules and settled disputes. A caravan might travel 15 to 20 miles on a good day. At night, the wagons were formed into circles, partly as protection from Indian raiders. Many pioneers died from disease. Those who survived worked hard. Men drove wagons, herded cattle, and scouted for Indians. Women cooked and washed, hauled water, and helped load and unload wagons. Men and women set up camp and tended animals. When the men were off scouting or rounding up stray cattle, the women and children were responsible for everything. Another hardship that the pioneers endured was homesickness. For more information, see the Crossing the Plains Media Bank Image.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

Westward Trails/Settlement

1. Describe where the Oregon Country was? Use a direction

2. What was meant by “Oregon Fever” having made people migrate to the west coast?

3. Who were the 1st groups of people to make the journey to the Oregon Country?

4. What were the two ways to get to the Oregon Country?

5. When journeying westward, people traveled in what? (term)

6. What were some problems that these pioneers faced? (3)