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### Emigrants and Death along the Overland Trail

“Seen 3 graves” wrote Ezekiel W. Headley in his journal for May 8, 1849.<sup>1</sup> He was only ten miles from St. Joseph, Missouri, one of the starting points for the Overland Trail. For the remainder of his trip to California, he would observe and record over 215 graves, three deaths, and four burials along the trail.<sup>2</sup> From this account, one can imagine death was a specter, constantly hovering over the emigrants as they moved west. The National Park Service estimates that there are ten graves per mile of the 2000-mile long trail and that overland migrants risked a one in seventeen chance of death.<sup>3</sup> The specter took liberally; young and old, male and female.

The emigrants faced death on the Overland Trail, but the extent has been exaggerated. Hollywood films depict death coming on the head of an arrow shot from a bow by a Native American defending his hunting grounds from the encroaching white man. Hollywood lies. Instead, death hunted the emigrants mainly with illness, cold, fatigue, hunger, and accident. Sometimes, humans gave death a hand. Thieves and robbers took supplies and livestock. Carelessness led to people getting run over by wagons. Fear led some to abandon others to their fate, in order to save their own lives. Such was the case of a seventeen-year-old girl. Her parents died from cholera on the same day. Her younger brother was sick with the disease. Her oxen were stolen. Her wagon train left her, since she would slow their journey.<sup>4</sup> Plain inexperience and incompetence of the emigrants caused them to start without the proper supplies, pack more

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<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel Whitehead Headley, *Handwritten Diary, Trails of Hope: Overland Diaries and Letter, 1846-1869*, Harold B. Lee Digital Collections, Brigham Young University Libraries, 6.  
<<http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/Diaries/id/7650>>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-118.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. National Park Service, “Oregon Trail Highlights,” accessed October 28, 2014,  
<<http://www.nps.gov/whmi/forteachers/upload/Section%201%20Guide%20Oregon%20Trail%20Highlights.pdf>>.

<sup>4</sup> Robert W. Carter, “When I Hear the Winds Sigh,” *California History* 74, no. 2 (Summer, 1995), 149.

than they needed, or discard the wrong items when trying to lighten loads. This led many to suffering and some to death.

This paper builds on scholarship from John Mack Faragher and Drew Gilpin Faust. In *Women & Men on the Overland Trail*, Faragher asserts that emigrants transferred their social mores nearly intact to their new communities in the West.<sup>5</sup> If he is correct, then the emigrants packed the concept of the “good death” in their wagons when they headed west. Faust shows how the sheer magnitude of death in the Civil War changed the relationship between death and Northern and Southern societies.<sup>6</sup> Accepting that she is correct that the copious body count of the Civil War destroyed the “good death” in the East, then a daily walk with death on the Overland Trail should have a similar impact on emigrant society. Except that it did not. The “good death” ideal continued almost intact.

This paper analyses emigrant death statistics. It looks beyond the simple equation of death indicating the degree of danger. It offers a basic comparison of emigrant deaths to those in the East. A more comprehensive study would require better emigrant statistics showing specific causes of death.

This study looks at the elements required for the “good death” and compares them to recorded emigrant deaths. A main requirement was for the dying to confess that they accept their fate, a death-bed confession to be made to one’s family. Since this was important enough for Civil War soldiers to send in letters home to their deceased comrades’ families, one would expect to see it in letters and accounts from the frontier, and it often is. However, not all deaths provided an opportunity for a familial gathering. Headley recorded the death of an unnamed man

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<sup>5</sup> John Mack Faragher, *Women & Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 187.

<sup>6</sup>Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), xvii-xviii.

as a drowning.<sup>7</sup> Obviously, this man had no time to gather his family about him and confess his peace with his fate before water filled his lungs. Less abrupt deaths, however, might have time for the gathering.

This paper further looks at how the survivors buried their dead. It examines how the ritual differed based on social standing of the deceased and their relationship to those doing the burial. For instance, Ruth Shackleford recorded six deaths and burials conducted by the members of her wagon train. The adult male who died was wrapped in a blanket and buried, whereas the children and women were placed in coffins and then buried. The women and children were related to Mrs. Shackleford's husband, whereas the man was simply another traveler.<sup>8</sup> Deceased individuals received better burials if they had family or friends in the company.

Finally, this paper examines the behavior patterns of the survivors. There were those who continued on to Oregon despite loss of their legal provider. Rachel Fisher's husband John died after a lingering illness. Rachel wrote her parents that she and her daughter continued the journey because "I had no one to take me back and I could not see how I could do better than to go on."<sup>9</sup> Some abandoned the goal of the West and returned to their place of origin. Abigail Scott recorded meeting a company along the Platte River who decided to return to Springfield, Illinois because of sickness and death.<sup>10</sup> The decisions of survivors helped shape society in the American West.

A singular theory dominated historical scholarship of the westward migration.

Comparatively speaking, the Overland Trail is still recent news having taken place only a

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<sup>7</sup> Headley, 30.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Shackleford, Diary in *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails, 1840-1890*, vol. 9, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes, (Glendale: A.H. Clark Co., 1990), 129-150.

<sup>9</sup> Rachel Fisher to her parents in *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails, 1840-1890*, vol. 1, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes, (Glendale: A.H. Clark Co., 1983), 100.

<sup>10</sup> Abigail Jane Scott, *Journal of a Trip to Oregon* (1852), in *Covered Wagon Women vol. 5*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1986), 59.

century and half ago. Frederick Jackson Turner, a history professor from Harvard and the University of Wisconsin, in 1893 published his paper that attributed the American democratic institutions and rugged individualism to the westward migration.<sup>11</sup> This “frontier thesis” led to a mythologizing of the hearty pioneers travelling into the West and drew the battle lines for successive historians who agreed with it, disagreed with it, or tried to avoid it all together.<sup>12</sup> The frontier thesis was the basic theory of westward migration for over 80 years.

The mid-twentieth century saw some historians avoiding the Turner thesis by focusing on specifics of overland migrations. They became experts on groups of travelers, such as Leonard J. Arrington and the Mormons and Doyce B. Nunis, Jr. and the California gold miners. Others chose to avoid the conflict by focusing on particular events, usually the more sensational ones. Two of these, the Donner Party and Willie and Martin Handcart Company tragedies have attracted much attention that continues into the twenty-first century. However, researchers conspicuously avoid the Utter-Van Orman train massacre, despite elements such as an actual circle of wagons under siege for two days, children taken into captivity, and survivors resorting to cannibalism. In 1979 the scholarship on the topic was minuscule.<sup>13</sup> It remains as such, because of the correctness of today’s political climate and how it appears to be a rare case of indigenous aggression against the white emigrants. Some historians chose particular events to avoid controversy of topic or scholarship.

The desire to revise the scholarship of the frontier led several historians in the 1960s to objectively reexamine previous writings by returning to primary sources. From this movement

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<sup>11</sup> Frederick J. Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), 1-39.

<sup>12</sup> W. N. Davis, Jr., “Will the West Survive as a Field in American History?,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 50 (March 1964): 676.

<sup>13</sup> John D. Unruh, Jr, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 143.

came John D. Unruh, Junior's premier book of westward migration scholarship, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60*. Unruh set the narrative and presented the ground breaking theory that the westward migration was not just isolated, individual families or wagon companies, but micro-societies of people.<sup>14</sup> These societies helped each other through rough spots such as illness and equipment failure, but he indicated that the sharing of their food with one another was the greatest assistance rendered.<sup>15</sup> There were entrepreneurs who set themselves up as guides, established supply outfitters, operated ferries, or wrote guide manuals. Help along the road itself usually came from other emigrants.<sup>16</sup> Unruh also opened the field to asking more pertinent questions like what motivated people to sell everything and pay over 1,000 dollars in outfitting so they could journey to the other side of the continent. For many it was a financial crash and unemployment combined with "free" land.<sup>17</sup>

Social history inquiry opened up the scholarship of westward migration. Historians such as John Mack Faragher looked at the transference of social norms among the emigrants. In his book, *Women & Men on the Overland Trail*, he examined how the travelers maintained East Coast and Midwestern social mores of gender roles on their journey west. Although both sexes appreciated the natural beauty of the trail, the need for economy, and practicality, these commonalities showed the stark gender differences of women's concern with children and home chores and men's attention to violence – accepted gender norms.<sup>18</sup> Lillian Schlissel also notes the lack of recorded conflict amongst the women of the wagon trains, and attributes it to the gender

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., xiii-xiv.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 106-9.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 76-96.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 58-65.

<sup>18</sup> Faragher, 14-5.

expectation that women are more submissive.<sup>19</sup> Historian Julie Roy Jeffery in her feminist approach to the migration argued that the only changes experienced by the western women was the scenery and an increase in the workload.<sup>20</sup> Vaughn Baker of University of Southern Louisiana disagreed with her analysis. She argued that women assuming new roles led to an increase in female power on the western frontier.<sup>21</sup> A social perspective led historians to more focused inquiries.

Social history scholarship continued through the end of the twentieth century as historians became more aware of minority groups. Scholars returned to primary sources and looked at previously neglected narratives telling of minorities and other disempowered social groups. One of these groups was children. Many of the older children who walked the Overland Trail wrote letters of the experiences at the time or memoirs when they were older. Emmy E. Werner used these in her book, *Emigrant Children on the Journey West*. A developmental psychologist instead of a historian, Dr. Werner portrays the children as miniature adults, keeping in the period's social expectations. Reviewer Glenda Riley criticizes her for this and for not providing a diversity of color and age.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps Riley forgot that if a person used primary documents from the children, it would require the authors be literate and have the necessary paper and ink. These requirements would limit sources to older, middle-class white children. Minority studies on the Overland Trail are restricted by who wrote the primary sources.

The twenty-first century has historians dissecting the myths of the westward migration. R. Gregory Nokes was shocked when he found out his ancestors brought slaves on the trail to

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<sup>19</sup> Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 88-9.

<sup>20</sup> Julie Roy Jeffery, *Frontier Women*, rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 6.

<sup>21</sup> Vaughn Baker, review of *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880* by Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Journal of Southern History* 46, no. 4 (Nov. 1980): 609-10.

<sup>22</sup> Glenda Riley, review of *Emigrant Children on the Journey West* by Emmy E. Werner, *American Historical Review* 102 (1997): 182-3.

Oregon.<sup>23</sup> His research led to the first book on the topic.<sup>24</sup> Michael L. Tate tackled the myth of Native American attacks on migrants. His research debunked the idea of circling wagon to protect against Indian warriors and found primarily mutual cooperation and curiosity.<sup>25</sup> Three decades before, Glenda Riley studied the trail rumors of Native American attacks and behaviors, whereas Tate studied the actual encounters.<sup>26</sup> The deconstruction of the mythos of the West is the current preoccupation of historians.

For emigrants and historians, death is the elephant in the room. The emigrants wrote about it in their letters and journals. Historians have accepted the extreme hardships of the journey and the ever-present nature of death, but shy away from death itself. Instead they try and number the deaths, perhaps to demonstrate the danger of the journey and the heroic virtues of the emigrants by showing how great the death toll was. Or it could be as Faust said about numbering the Civil War dead, it was a means to try and make sense of what happened.<sup>27</sup> Scholars pay attention to specific deaths, but they are the more sensational ones. For example, a keyword search of “Donner Party” produced over 154,000 hits in the Oregon State University library database.<sup>28</sup> In fact only one scholar in the mid-1990s, Robert W. Carter, addressed the topic of mortality, but focused on the causes of death, rather than on the interment of the deceased. The topic of emigrant death itself has not been addressed by historians.

This paper augments and challenges the American West scholarship. Through

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<sup>23</sup> R. Greg Nokes, BlackPast.org, “Slavery in Oregon: The Ruben Shipley Saga,” *Perspectives*, accessed November 3, 2014, <<http://www.blackpast.org/perspectives/slavery-oregon-reuben-shipley-saga>>.

<sup>24</sup> Stacey L. Smith, review of *Breaking Chains: Slavery on Trial in the Oregon Territory* by R. Gregory Nokes, *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 114, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 532-4.

<sup>25</sup> Michael L. Tate, *Indians and Emigrants: Encounters on the Overland Trails* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), ix-xx.

<sup>26</sup> Glenda Riley, “The Specter of a Savage: Rumors and Alarmism on the Overland Trail,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (October 1984): 427-444.

<sup>27</sup> Faust, 250-251.

<sup>28</sup> Oregon State University Library, 1-Search, November 8, 2014.

examination of the relationship emigrants had with death, it shows that they kept the same social standards and recreated Eastern society in the West. This corresponds with what both Faragher and Schlissel have shown in their gender studies on the Overland Trail and the American West. It challenges the still accepted notion of heroic emigrants overcoming extreme mortal dangers to settle the western territory. It does this by putting the emigrants back into the originating society of the antebellum United States and examining expected behavior and death rituals in comparison to actual emigrant behavior around death. By putting Overland Trail death against a backdrop of antebellum death, instead of in isolation, it demonstrates how the mortal dangers of the trail have been misrepresented as unique to westward migration and beyond the emigrants' experience.

Risk assessment relates the number of deaths directly to the danger level of any activity. Historical scholarship, especially that mythologizing of the emigrants, does the same. It points to the number of emigrants who died during the westward migration as proof of how risky the venture was. Accounting for deaths along the Overland Trails is problematic at best. One way is to count the number of deaths recorded in diaries and journals. An issue with this method is that often the record simply gives a generic entry such as, "We stopped to bury one woman out of our company."<sup>29</sup> They often recorded similarly generic records for others in nearby companies, "a man died near us in another company."<sup>30</sup> Without a proper name, it is possible that multiple persons would record the same emigrant's death and each account would be counted as a unique death.

Another method is to tally the number of graves the emigrants recorded seeing. Aside

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<sup>29</sup> Martha S. Read to her Brother and Sister in in *Covered Wagon Women vol. 5*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1986), 222.

<sup>30</sup> Abigail Scott, 96.

from a problem with the same generic recording, some graves contained multiple corpses and some none at all. As the journey progressed and oxen sickened or died, the emigrants lightened their wagon loads.<sup>31</sup> If the items were precious enough to the owner, they made a grave and hid their treasure. This protected the items from both wild beasts and native tribes, for it was known amongst the emigrants that “such is the superstition among Indians that a grave is never molested.”<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately for some owners, their fellow emigrants and settlers were aware of the practice and some would take their buried treasure.<sup>33</sup> Counting grave totals sighted by emigrants is not a reliable method of determining actual number of dead bodies.

Yet another method is comparing wagon train rosters. By 1860, the United States Army had seventy-nine military posts throughout the West, the majority along the Overland Trails. Wagon trains coming to the forts would register their companies, pick up letters, and procure supplies. Comparison of the wagon company rosters between forts one could determine that those whose names dropped off the lists died. However, companies were fluid. If a party member disagreed with the leadership they would take “French leave” and go join another group.<sup>34</sup> Sometimes parties splintered over route decisions or final destinations. The fluidity of travel groups leaves the emigrant train records with a substantial margin of error for determining emigrant deaths.

Historians disagree over the number of emigrant deaths because it reflects on how dangerous the Overland Trail was. With the de-mythologizing of the westward migration, few contemporary historians use the highest estimates of 30,000 deaths. Most use either Unruh’s

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<sup>31</sup> Howard Stansbury, *Exploration and Survey of the Valley of the Great Salt Lake of Utah* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1852), 60-1.

<sup>32</sup> Harriet A. Loughary, *Diary in Covered Wagon Women vol. 8*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1989), 129.

<sup>33</sup> Susan Bordeaux Betelyoun and Josephine Waggoner, *With My Own Eyes: A Lakota Woman Tells Her People’s History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 39.

<sup>34</sup> Abigail Scott, 96.

totals or those calculated by National Park Service Ranger Merrill Mattes. Through examination of detailed diaries, Mattes estimated that 6% of the emigrants died along the Overland Trail. Unruh determined it closer to 4%.<sup>35</sup> The difference in numbers is due to methods. Mattes took the total of graves and deaths and then used a multiplier because so many emigrants made comments such as “I counted 750 graves on the road but I suppose that was a small part, for there were so many camped of [sic] from the road and buried their dead”<sup>36</sup> or “if we should go by all the camping grounds we should see five times as many graves as we now do.”<sup>37</sup> Unruh discounted this kind of speculation since the emigrants did not really know to what extent off road burials were made. This paper uses Unruh’s 4% estimation because of the reduced reliance on conjecture.

An examination of the statistics shows that the death rate of emigrants was twice as high as that of the Civil War soldiers. Unruh’s yearly total of emigrants to Oregon, California, and Utah for 1840-1860 is 296,259 emigrants. The 1850s saw the rise of both deaths from disease and from hostile natives. By taking Unruh’s 4% as the emigrant death rate and comparing it to the yearly total of emigrants, one can get an idea of what the total death rate looked like. In the grand scheme of things, the orange block in Table 1 does not look like much. However, in comparing the mortality percentage in Table 2 (deaths: population), one sees that the comparative rate of the carnage of the Civil War battlefields is half that of the emigrants. Statistically speaking, emigrants were twice as likely to die as was a soldier in the Civil War and almost four times as likely to die as the civilians back “in the States.” In isolation, these statistics make the Overland Trail a heroic endeavor that only the intrepid could survive.

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<sup>35</sup> Unruh, 345.

<sup>36</sup> Read, 247.

<sup>37</sup> Cecilia Adams and Parthenia Blank, 267.

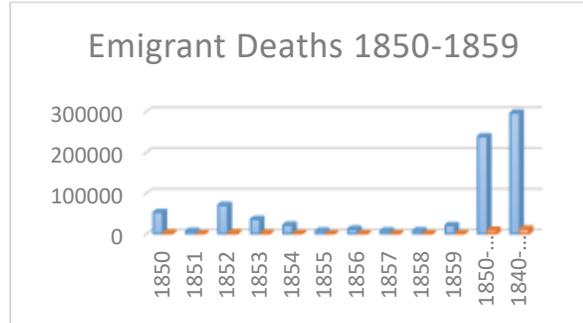


Table 1. Emigrant population is in blue. Deaths are in orange.<sup>38</sup>

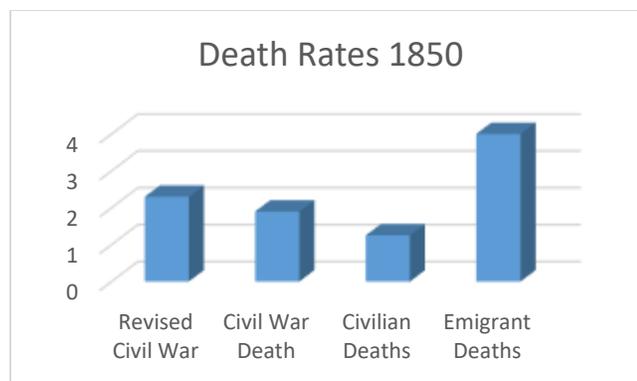


Table 2. Death rates of deaths: population. The emigrant death rate is to the emigrant population whereas the others are to the total population of the United States in 1850.<sup>39</sup> The Civil War death has the standard accepted total of 618,222 soldier deaths. The Revised Civil War death uses the new suggested number of 750,000 deaths.<sup>40</sup>

Understanding the numbers requires context. The peak cholera seasons along the Platte River were in 1850 and 1852.<sup>41</sup> The total Overland Trail deaths for those years were 2,100 and 2,800 out of a population of 52,000 and 70,000 respectively.<sup>42</sup> Cholera hit “the States” before moving westward to the Overland Trail, so 1849 was their prime cholera year. That year, 6,144 people died of cholera in New York City. This figure represents over one-third of the total

<sup>38</sup> Unruh, 85, 345.

<sup>39</sup> Unruh, 84, 345. U.S. Census, *Seventh Decadal Census, Mortality Charts*, 1870.

<sup>40</sup> Gugliotta, Guy, “New Estimate Raises Civil War Death Toll,” *New York Times*, April 3, 2013, Science, D1.

<sup>41</sup> Merrill J. Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 3. Unruh, 88.

<sup>42</sup> Unruh, 85, 348.

reported deaths in the city for the year.<sup>43</sup> By August of that same year, the Ohio town of Sandusky lost 2,300, or two-thirds, of its residents to cholera.<sup>44</sup> The “jumping off” city of St. Louis, Missouri had over 4,000 cholera deaths that year, or roughly ten percent of the population.<sup>45</sup> Although Cecilia Adams recorded 401 new graves during her Overland crossing to Oregon in 1852,<sup>46</sup> it is not as great a number as she would have seen in some communities in “the States.” The 4% emigrant death rate pales in comparison to the death rates of these Eastern locales.

Distinction must be made between deaths *on* the Overland Trail and deaths *because of* the Overland Trail. The implication of isolated statistics is that had the people not been on the Overland Trail, they would have lived longer. Such an idea is erroneous. Some emigrants took the journey while already in ill health. For instance, Abigail Scott’s mother was an invalid from before they began their journey and until her death around Laramie’s Peak.<sup>47</sup> As already noted, cholera ravaged cities and towns of the East before turning west. Murders were definitely not unique to the Overland Trail experience. Neither were negligent firearm discharges or getting run over by wagons. One could argue that the accidental firearm deaths were migration specific, since many emigrants had to purchase new rifles for the journey. Infant mortality and death in childbirth was not unique to the Trail either. For example, Keturah Belknap recorded her “first great trial of my life.”<sup>48</sup> Her two-year old daughter died. She lost three children while living in

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<sup>43</sup> Board of Health, *Report of the Proceedings of the Sanatory Committee of the Board of Health in Relation to Cholera, as it prevailed in New York in 1849* (New York: McSpedon & Baker, 1849), 57.

<sup>44</sup> “Dreadful Ravages of the Cholera at Sandusky,” *Christian Secretary*, August 10, 1849, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 115.

<sup>46</sup> Unruh, 345.

<sup>47</sup> Abigail Scott, 70-71.

<sup>48</sup> Keturah Belknap, in *Covered Wagon Women vol. 1*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1983), 207.

Iowa and none while travelling the Overland Trail.<sup>49</sup> The 1860 Mortuary Index reports 741 deaths by firearms, 989 homicides, 3,121 drownings, and 4,066 deaths in childbirth in the United States.<sup>50</sup> Unruh assessment that 9 out of 10 emigrant deaths were from diseases such as cholera, measles, and small pox.<sup>51</sup> That left only ten percent for the accidental shootings, drownings, murders, Indian attacks, and any other fatal experiences emigrants endured. This means less than one-tenth of the fatalities on the Overland Trail could have happened only because the emigrants were on the Trail.

If traveling into the “wilderness” were so dangerous, one would expect the greatest number of deaths to come from those who took untried cutoffs. For years the term “cutoff” has been equated with death. Most likely this comes from the often quoted letter of Virginia Reed of the Reed-Donner Party where she admonishes her cousin to “never take no cutoffs.”<sup>52</sup> However, in 1845 Stephen Meeks persuaded 200 wagons, or 1,000 – 1,500 emigrants, to follow him on a sure route that would avoid hostile natives and get them to the Willamette Valley faster than those who took the main route.<sup>53</sup> The group became known as “The Lost Wagon Train” because it took so much longer. There was no trail the way they went. They suffered from lack of food and water, illness, and fatigue. Anna Maria King was one of the members of that wagon train and described the experience as full of sickness and death. She lamented that out of the three families that made trip together, eight people were lost.<sup>54</sup> In actual count, only fourteen emigrants of “The Lost Wagon Train” died on the cutoff. Four of them, members of the extended King family,

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 207-13.

<sup>50</sup> U.S. Census, *Seventh Decadal Census, Mortality Charts*, 1870.

<sup>51</sup> Unruh, 345.

<sup>52</sup> Reed, 81.

<sup>53</sup> Keith Clark and Lowell Tiller, *Terrible Trail: the Meek Cutoff, 1845* (Caldwell: Claxton Printers, Ltd., 1966), 44.

<sup>54</sup> Anna Maria King to her mother and siblings in *Covered Wagon Women vol. 1*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1983), 42.

drowned when their raft capsized on the Columbia. The other ten succumbed to illness.<sup>55</sup> Maria King just happened to know most of the victims, which made her perception of the death rate much grander. The actual on-the-cutoff death rate was less than 2%. One can see that emigrants themselves had an exaggerated perception of the threat of death.

The dreaded Indian massacre was an exception, not the rule. The majority came after the cholera years, which decimated the tribes along the trail. A total of 362 emigrants and 426 Indians were killed in clashes between the two. Ninety percent of these fatal clashes came after reaching the South Pass.<sup>56</sup> The statistics spike primarily because of near total party wipeouts as happened with the Alexander Ward party and the Utter-Van Orman train when they encountered the Shoshone Indians in 1854 and 1860 respectively.<sup>57</sup> The Utter-Van Orman train fought their attackers for two days. Eighteen of the 44 emigrants died in the attacks. Four children were captured, three of which died soon after. Fifteen emigrants escaped, but wandered in the wilds for a month and a half. Three of the party died during that time, and the survivors ate their corpses.<sup>58</sup> Many natives had commercial interaction with emigrants through trading of goods. Martha Read recorded an encounter with the Shosone Indians in 1852, when she “[b]ought some berries and fish of them. They were very friendly.”<sup>59</sup> Natives also ran river services, such as those who hired out to take passengers by canoe down the Columbia to Portland or Vancouver.<sup>60</sup> The massacres were exceptional, sensational encounters committed by atypical tribesmen.

Historians generally assert that the recording of graves seen indicated the emigrants’

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<sup>55</sup> Clark and Tiller, 167-237.

<sup>56</sup> Unruh, 144-5.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 143. Find A Grave, “Ward Family Massacre Burial Site,” *Ward Memorial State Park*, accessed November 24, 2014, < <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=cr&CRid=2349915>>. Larry Jones, “Site of Utter Party Massacre,” *Idaho State Historical Society* 233, June 1993, 1.

<sup>58</sup> Tate, 180-1.

<sup>59</sup> Read, 234.

<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Dixon Smith, *Diary in Covered Wagon Women vol. 1*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1983), 143.

preoccupation with their own mortality. This appears the case for some, such as for Lodisa Frizzell who wrote, “the mind is tortured with anxiety, & often as I passed the fresh made graves, I have glanced at the side boards of the wagon, not knowing how soon it might serve as a coffin for some one of us.”<sup>61</sup> Cecelia McMillen Adams also recorded that “it makes it seem very gloomy to us to see so many of the emigrants buried on the plains.”<sup>62</sup> But many others simply recorded the number of graves. Considering the emigrants travelled the flattest region on the continent, and they sped along at 20 miles a day, they could have simply counted the graves because they broke up the flat landscape and were familiar. Counting graves would have been a kind of early travel game to stave off boredom.

Graves also acted as messages for later travelers. Emigrants would leave notes along the trail for those behind them by attaching parchment to trees or writing on smooth surfaces like rocks or animal skulls. Most graves were placed alongside the road, in part for convenience. If possible, the name and birth place of the deceased was put on a board, letting family or friends coming behind know the fate of their loved one. Lucia Loraine Williams ensured her son John’s grave was protected and had a board placed with his name and age. She hoped that, “if any of our friends come through I wish they would find his grave and if it needs, repair it.”<sup>63</sup> Nancy C. Glenn wrote her family that their wagon train encountered an unidentified man who died of wounds received in an attack. Since they did not know the man’s name, they placed his boots and coat atop the grave in case anyone following behind could identify him.<sup>64</sup> In order for subsequent emigrants to get information from graves, they had to see the burial sites. Therefore

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<sup>61</sup> Lodisa Frizzell, *Across the Plains to California in 1852*, ed. Victor Hugo Paltsits (New York: New York Public Library, 1915), 29.

<sup>62</sup> Adams and Blank, 264.

<sup>63</sup> Williams, 132.

<sup>64</sup> Nancy C. Glenn to her parents and siblings in *Covered Wagon Women vol. 8*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1989), 22.

the graves were intentionally placed along the trail for later emigrants to see.

One must look at the antebellum relationship with death to understand the interplay between death and the Overland emigrant. Dying in nineteenth century America was a ritual. For Protestants who did not have the Last Rites sacrament, there was the “good death.” The ritual required the family gather round the dying in order to hear his or her last words. The last words of a dying person were presumed to be truth and indicative of his or her soul’s state, usually stating an acceptance of their imminent demise.<sup>65</sup> Consequently, it was not only important for the family to hear the last utterance of the dying, but one of the living had to record it for those not present.

The expectation of the “good death” was ingrained in the American psyche. When Lansford Warren Hastings wrote his infamous guidebook detailing his experiences leading a company of emigrants to California, he recounted the death of a party member. The young man was a blacksmith originally from Massachusetts. He was accidentally shot near Independence Rock and died after two hours of agony.<sup>66</sup> Hastings retells how the companions did all they could to make him comfortable, despite his protestations that he would die soon. The dying man further cautioned those about him to learn from this mistake and take better care when handling firearms. He also admonished that they should prepare themselves to meet their Maker, should that be their fate along the way.<sup>67</sup> This narrative encompasses all the elements of the “good death.” The family or companions are about him, trying to make him comfortable. He accepts the inevitability of his death. One of the listeners records the words and makes them available for absent family and friends. Whether or not this actually happened is debatable. After all, in the

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<sup>65</sup> Faust, 3-11.

<sup>66</sup> Lansford W. Hastings, *The Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California* (Cincinnati: George Conclin, 1845), 9.

<sup>67</sup> Hastings, 10.

same publication the author wrote of a shortcut to California, called the Hastings Cutoff, although he never took it himself.<sup>68</sup> Taking this shortcut off the established trail helped lead the Donner Party to its troubles in the Sierra Nevada Mountains.<sup>69</sup> Real or fabricated, the account depicts what both author and reader expected of a legitimate death scene, perhaps lending credibility to the remainder of the guide.

Other westward migration narratives include the “good death” imagery. Abigail Jane Scott kept a journal of her family’s overland journey. She included more details than most because her father exempted her from all duties except for recording the day’s events. On Sunday, June 20, 1852, she recorded the death of her mother. She describes her mother’s fatal sickness and the family’s distress over her passing.<sup>70</sup> However, in a letter to her grandfather, James Scott, informing him of her mother’s death, she gives a proper “good death” narrative:

She remarked that her destiny was fixed, and drawing the little children to her, kissed them affectionately... and when father tried to get her to talk, she said she had a great deal to say “but” said she “I shall die with weakness”. These were her last words[.]<sup>71</sup>

From the differences between the descriptions in the journal and the letter, one can see a forerunner of what Faust calls a “condolence letter,” a genre of writing that sprung up from the need for “a good death” and the circumstances of the Civil War.<sup>72</sup> Rachel Fisher also wrote her parents a “condolence letter.” She reported that her husband had “some knowledge of his death but could not talk much.”<sup>73</sup> The condolence letter was an adaption by the emigrants to the separation of the dying from the extended family because of the Trail.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>69</sup> Virginia E. B. Reed to her cousin, May 16, 1847, in *Covered Wagon Women*, vol. 1, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1983), 74-81.

<sup>70</sup> Abigail Scott, 71.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 151-2.

<sup>72</sup> Faust, 15.

<sup>73</sup> Fisher, 100.

A proper or decent burial was also a component of the “good death.” At a minimum, the deceased was placed in a coffin and then buried in a family plot, with a stone marking their eternal resting place. This need drove families to search Civil War battle sites for their loved ones’ remains, exhume the bodies, and ship them home.<sup>74</sup> The circumstances on the Overland Trails did not always provide this opportunity, but the emigrants tried.

The coffin, or some barrier between the body and the earth was important. It was what separated the human from the animal.<sup>75</sup> Wood was not readily available along much of the Trails. In the plains, emigrants cooked with dried buffalo dung for fuel and made homes out of sod. In the deserts, they burned sagebrush. Coffins were generally made from wood they brought with them, which usually was part of their wagons. For instance, Mary Ann Boatman and her husband Willis told of first giving up the upper floor and then the sides of their wagon for coffin construction.<sup>76</sup> Preferably, the deceased’s wagon would be used as a source of lumber. When no lumber was available, emigrants improvised wooden coffins. Small children were often buried in wooden cartons, such as cracker boxes.<sup>77</sup> One woman was buried in a coffin made of tree bark. It was rudimentary, but made from wood so “very decent.”<sup>78</sup> Another emigrant, by the name of Glenette had been buried in a canoe.<sup>79</sup> Edward Paync thought he saw a couple bury their child and line the grave with pine boughs, as they could not make a traditional coffin.<sup>80</sup> When possible, wooden coffins or improvised coffins of wood were the preferred container for the

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<sup>74</sup> Faust, 61-3, 73-4, 90-4.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>76</sup> Weldon Willis Rau, *Surviving the Oregon Trail 1852* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 2001), 54, 69.

<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth Elliott to her parents in *Covered Wagon Women vol. 8*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1989), 111-3.

<sup>78</sup> Martha S. Read, *Diary in Covered Wagon Women vol. 5*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1986), 222.

<sup>79</sup> Amelia Hadley, *Diary in Covered Wagon Women vol. 3*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1984), 76.

<sup>80</sup> Edward B. Paync, “Spectres on the Overland Trail,” *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* 14 (December 1889): 655.

dead.

The “good death” dictated that the deceased be protected from the earth. When even improvised wooden caskets were unavailable, emigrants used bedding. They shrouded their dead with blankets or feather beds. Willis Boatman recalled wrapping his brother-in-law in a feather mattress, “[I] rolled him up in a feather bed and gave him as good a burial as I could under the circumstances,”<sup>81</sup> he reported. Others used blankets or sheets. As Cecilia Adams recorded, “They wrapped him in bed clothes and layed [sic] him in the ground without any coffin.”<sup>82</sup> Perhaps the use of bedding is linked to the Christian idea of eternal rest and sleep, because the Civil War soldiers also used blankets, not having the means to carry about even a thin feather mattress.<sup>83</sup> For whatever reason, bedding was an emigrant’s secondary choice to protect the body in burial.

The “good death” need to protect the body in burial took on a new dimension in the wilderness where wild animals would feed on carrion, be it human or other prey. As emigrants travelled westward, they would find shallow and makeshift graves disturbed by wolves and coyotes. Wolves not only found the canoe grave of Glenette, but made it into a den. Upon seeing it, Amelia Hadley recorded that wolves “dig up everyone that is [buried] on the plains as soon as they are left. I would hate to have my friends or myself [buried] here.”<sup>84</sup> Mary Ringo, mother of infamous outlaw Johnny Ringo, recorded sighting a skeleton of a man dug out by wolves.<sup>85</sup> If available, and they had strength, emigrants would cover the grave with piles of rocks. That is what Lucia Loraine Williams did for her ten year-old son, John. The boy died after falling from a

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<sup>81</sup> Rau, 69.

<sup>82</sup> Cecelia Adams and Parthenia Blank, *Diary in Covered Wagon Women vol. 5*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1986), 270.

<sup>83</sup> Faust, 75.

<sup>84</sup> Hadley, 76.

<sup>85</sup> Mary Ringo, *Diary in Covered Wagon Women vol. 8*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1989), 217.

wagon and having it roll over his head.<sup>86</sup> It was the responsibility of the survivors to protect their departed loved one's mortal remains as best they could.

The image of the bereaved family standing at the lone grave is etched into the American consciousness. While it did happen, usually the emigrants buried their loved ones near other graves. Abigail Scott recorded that they buried her mother next to a woman from a different wagon train, who had died the day before.<sup>87</sup> Elizabeth Elliot buried her son Fremont next to another child, 60 miles from Bridger. She wrote to her parents that "it was a great satisfaction that we did not have to leave him alone."<sup>88</sup> If a settlement were reasonably close, the families would carry the corpse with them until they reached the settlement. Once there, they would procure a coffin, or means to make one, and bury their loved one in the cemetery.<sup>89</sup> An example of an extreme case of wanting their loved one buried in a proper cemetery is that of Caroline Grant. She died in September 1847 along the Bear River.<sup>90</sup> Her husband carried her body 200 miles so she could be buried in Salt Lake City.<sup>91</sup> The emigrants desired the funerary rituals they were accustomed to and did their best to recreate them along the trail.

While the societal expectation of the "good death" ritual usually travelled across the continent with the emigrants, there were several instances where emigrants dropped their civilized demeanor and ignored the rules that bind society together. Several emigrants recorded murders committed within wagon trains. Abigail Scott wrote of finding the grave of a murdered man. The corpse was discovered at the side of the road by a wagon train who then buried him.

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<sup>86</sup> Lucia Loraine Williams, *Diary in Covered Wagon Women vol. 3*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1984), 132.

<sup>87</sup> Abigail Scott, 71.

<sup>88</sup> Elliot, 112-4.

<sup>89</sup> Shackelford, 144-5.

<sup>90</sup> "Pedigree Resource File," database, FamilySearch (<http://familysearch.org/pal:MM9.2.1/9HWF-ZSW> : accessed 2014-11-21), entry for Caroline Van Dyke, submitted by lljones2748923.

<sup>91</sup> Kenneth L. Holmes, ed, *Covered Wagon Women, vol. 1* (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1983), 162.

She supposed, “He probably got into some effray with his company who had served him in this manner.”<sup>92</sup> For most people their civilized demeanor simply wore thin. This shows in the diaries and journals in the manner in which people cared for the dead. If it were a family member, they tried to give as much of a “good death” experience as possible, providing a protected grave and recording detailed information on the location of it, the circumstances of death, and at times, the burial itself. If the deceased were a stranger or someone with few personal relationships, the company would lay them on the ground, shovel some dirt over top the corpse, and maybe record that a “woman of our company died as we were travling [sic] a long she had been sick some time.”<sup>93</sup> Few recorded their concern that they were losing their civilized veneer, but Helen Carpenter did worry over it after their party discovered they were cooking atop a grave and did not bother to change location. She wrote, “I have mentioned our growing indifference and can but think that what we are obliged to endure each day is robbing us of all sentiment.”<sup>94</sup> The appearance of civilization may have worn thin, or off in some cases, but for the most part, the emigrants managed to bring their social ideals with them.

The emigrants never truly were outside their familiar social structure, encountering settlements and other travelers along the route west. The region between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Ocean contained numerous white settlements for most of the Overland migration period. The lucrative fur trade of the Pacific Northwest had set up several trading posts in the 1830s, primarily Fort Hall, Fort Boise, and Fort William.<sup>95</sup> After the discovery of gold, entrepreneurs rushed out to set up way stations along the routes to the goldmines. The prices

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<sup>92</sup> Abigail Scott, 56.

<sup>93</sup> Cecelia Adams and Parthenia Blank, 263. Elizabeth Dixon Smith, *Diary in Covered Wagon Women vol. 1*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1983), 136.

<sup>94</sup> Helen Carpenter, *A Trip Across the Plains in an Ox Cart, 1857* in *Ho for California!* ed. Sandra L. Myers (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1980), 127.

<sup>95</sup> Unruth, 198-9.

were exorbitant as the law of supply and demand allowed for such. John Tucker Scott's accounts list paying \$150 for two yoke of oxen along the Burn River, compared to the three yokes he procured in Missouri for the same price.<sup>96</sup> The trading posts also provided services like blacksmith forges and wagon repairs. Some posts were flash in the pan establishments and others grew into settlements that still exist today, such as Fort Boise and Fort Laramie.<sup>97</sup> By 1850, the Salt Lake Valley was established enough that emigrants could choose to winter over or resupply there. The Trail itself, in-between settlements and trading posts, was not isolated either. So long as companies stayed near the establish routes, they would encounter other emigrant trains or companies of people heading to the East. Polly Coon records "there were hundreds around us and hundreds passed on travelling in the night."<sup>98</sup> Even those who took the Southern route to California encountered settlements.<sup>99</sup> Emigrants stayed within their native social structure as they travelled west.

Once the surviving emigrants reached their destinations, they recreated the life with which they were familiar. This is part of the return to "normalcy" that comes after a disaster. In the nineteenth century, the family unit was not just the building block of society but also the economic unit of a farm.<sup>100</sup> Tasks were generally divided up by gender -- women took care of the house and children and men took care of the crops and animals. This social conditioning had survivors remarrying after reaching their destinations. While on the trail, the work was done collectively. For example, Mary Francis Scott, Margaret Ann Scott, and Martha Roelofson

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<sup>96</sup> Abigail Scott, 137.

<sup>97</sup> Unruh, 207-9.

<sup>98</sup> Polly Coon, Dairy in *Covered Wagon Women vol. 5*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1986), 188.

<sup>99</sup> Myers, 192-3.

<sup>100</sup> Faragher, 40.

Caffee shared the responsibility of feeding the 27 members of their company.<sup>101</sup> However, upon reaching Oregon, the families settled on separate claims. Within six months, John Tucker Scott married a widow with two young children who had traversed the Trail with the Scott family traveling company.<sup>102</sup> Some women attempted to farm claims on their own. Elizabeth Smith lost her husband after a six week illness upon their arrival in Oregon. She tried making a go of farming, but her two boys left for the goldmines and she could not farm the claim on her own. So she remarried a widower from Connecticut who had an orchard along the Willamette River.<sup>103</sup> Legally, women did not need to remarry in order to keep their land claims. The Donation Land Claim Act of 1850 gave 320 acres of land to each settler, providing they lived on and cultivated it for four years.<sup>104</sup> Realistically, no one person could accomplish the task. Socially, it needed to be a family unit of husband, wife, and children.

Even in an agriculturally based society not everyone was a farmer. There are professions such as doctors, lawyers, tailors, smiths, coopers, merchants, and teamsters. The same social structure existed within the new settlements. When her school teacher husband died in 1854, Polly Coon divided up their claim and sold lots to form a new town, Silverton. She taught school in the town and re-married a carpenter and millwright. Polly's mother had started the trip as an invalid, but recovered her strength along the trail. She became a much sought after nurse in Oregon.<sup>105</sup> The new settlements in the western territories were based on what was familiar to the emigrants.

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<sup>101</sup> Kenneth L. Holmes, ed, *Covered Wagon Women*, vol. 5 (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1986), 111.

<sup>102</sup> Margaret Scott to Lawrence Roelofson in *Covered Wagon Women* vol. 5, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1986), 163.

<sup>103</sup> Elizabeth Dixon Smith to friends in *Covered Wagon Women* vol. 1, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1983), 148-151. Joseph Geer to friends *Covered Wagon Women* vol. 1, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1983), 152.

<sup>104</sup> US Legal, "The Donation Land Claim Act of 1850 Law and Legal Definition," *Legal Definitions*, accessed November 24, 2014 <<http://definitions.uslegal.com/t/the-donation-land-claim-act-of-1850/>>.

<sup>105</sup> Holmes, 5, 176, 204-6.

Religion was another aspect of frontier life that helped maintain the familiar social structures for the emigrants. Several of the diarists remarked on the inability to keep the Sabbath.<sup>106</sup> Occasionally, their layby days landed on Sunday. If a preacher was available, they would have a sermon and sing hymns.<sup>107</sup> Other trains, such as the company Sallie Hester travelled in, made Sunday their day of rest and held morning and evening sermons.<sup>108</sup> When burying their dead, they would have a modified funeral. Often it was nothing more than singing a hymn and having a prayer.<sup>109</sup> But these simplified rituals helped keep their pre-trail culture alive. Once they arrived at their destination and set up homesteads, they rebuilt their congregations, according to the denominations they belonged to in the East. Joseph Geer wrote friends asking them to send a Universalist preacher their way, as the territory did not have one of that sect.<sup>110</sup> For those who had a religious belief, their religious practices helped them retain their social structure on the trail and rebuild it in their new homes.

The death emigrants experienced along the Overland Trail had a different impact on the United States than what Faust found with the death in the Civil War. Several factors contribute to this. First, the total number of emigrants was at most only 2/5 the number of soldiers that died in the Civil War. Second, the soldiers that died in the war came from all the states. The majority of the emigrants came from Missouri, followed by Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Missouri accounted for most of the emigrant deaths as well.<sup>111</sup> This meant the individual social impact was not shared throughout the country as was the Civil War. **Good analysis here.** One could also consider that mortality spikes such as cholera and massacre wiped out entire families,

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<sup>106</sup> Scott, 61. Adams and Blank, 262.

<sup>107</sup> Adams and Blank, 287.

<sup>108</sup> Sallie Hester, Dairy in *Covered Wagon Women vol. 1*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1983), 236.

<sup>109</sup> Adams and Blank, 270.

<sup>110</sup> Geer, 152.

<sup>111</sup> Unruh, 342.

thereby reducing the number of grieving survivors having to face a constant reminder of those who died. Third, with few exceptions, the emigrants did not cause the deaths of the other emigrants. However, in war a soldier's duty is to kill the enemy. The Civil War deaths were caused by disease and humans killing humans. That left a psychological burden on society not born by the emigrants. Fourth, the emigrants were in a new land, rebuilding the society familiar to them. After the Civil War, the South had to not only rebuild a new society that included freed slaves, but rebuild it on the literal ruins of their former society and country. This burden could explain why so many veterans went west after the war to restart their lives. There are probably other contributing factors to explain the differences death had on the emigrants and the post-Civil War society, but these are the main ones. The different aspects meant emigrant deaths did not impact the greater society of the United States to the extent that the Civil War death did.

The emigrants maintained their social norms as they travelled. This is demonstrated through their efforts to maintain the "good death" ritual and civilized burial. Due to the physical separation from extended family, they wrote the "condolence letter" that allowed family members to vicariously participate in the ritual. Burials were also improvised affairs that sought to provide the deceased with protection and companionship. Emigrants went to great lengths to provide both for their departed loved ones. When circumstances limited their options, the survivors felt great anguish over their inability to provide a civilized burial or proper last resting place. Although the conditions of the Trail prevented the emigrants from fulfilling their obligations to the dead, this desire or need to do so kept the social norms alive.

When the emigrants reached their frontier destinations, and became pioneers, they established their settlements based on the social expectations of their previous home. Most important for this was the repairing of the familial structure impacted by the overland journey.

For many this meant remarriage to recreate the family unit their farms and society required. It also included establishing necessary businesses, schools, and churches. This agrees with Faragher's and Schlissel's arguments that social change did not take place because of the westward movement.

Emigrant death has been misrepresented in both popular mythologizing and in scholarship. The popular myth has emigrants dying due to savage attacks by natives. Most deaths were from disease and negligence. When placed in perspective with the death rates of the organized states, one sees that there was as great an opportunity for death by illness or accident there. Actual deaths by natives were but a small fraction of the overall death rate and the only method by which one in eastern states could not die. Since Faust's argument that the magnitude of Civil War death caused social repercussions we still live with today, the lack of magnitude of death explains in part why there is not a similar legacy from Overland Trail deaths. There simply was not a corresponding degree of death to create the social rift.

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