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Wagons Ho! A Diary of the Oregon Trail

Cynthia Mercati
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> *I think about what Pa said. About how Americans like to find new places, try new things.*

Lisa and her family decide to move from Illinois to Oregon. The year is 1849 and they must go by wagon train. Lisa's father sells the family home and buys a Conestoga wagon and six oxen. They pack the bare necessities and head for Independence, Missouri.

In April 1849, they arrive in Missouri and join a caravan of fifty wagons heading west. As they travel across the country, Lisa records the events in her diary. Captain McCullough, the man hired to head the wagon train, leads them through buffalo stampedes and raging rivers. In June they arrive in Wyoming Territory and Lisa tells of the sheets of lighting and mosquitoes they encounter. The wagon train celebrates July 4, 1849 near Independence Rock. By mid-July they reach the Continental Divide. When Lisa asks what that meant, Pa answered, "It means we're really, truly in the West."

In August, they reach Idaho Territory where all Lisa sees is sagebrush and sand. She writes of the heat and the dust and how everyone, including the animals, is parched. In trying to lighten the load of the wagon, Lisa's mother leaves behind her good china dishes. Lisa recounts how, after putting the china by the side of the trail, her mother "sat down by the campfire and cried." As the group makes its way across a river, Lisa hears a scream. The woman from the wagon behind them had fallen in the river, is swept away by the current and drowns. By the middle of October they reach Oregon City. They have made it!

Mercati, with her knowledge and love of history, has written a story that gives a history lesson without the reader realizing they have had one. It is fascinating to travel with Lisa and her family during their journey, which gives students insight as to how the West was populated. It includes a map, a listing of important places along the Oregon Trail, and a glossary to explain the unfamiliar words in bold type. This book can be used for elementary readers and reluctant older readers.

JUDI OSWALD (September / October 2000)

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