

Into • *Child Pioneer*

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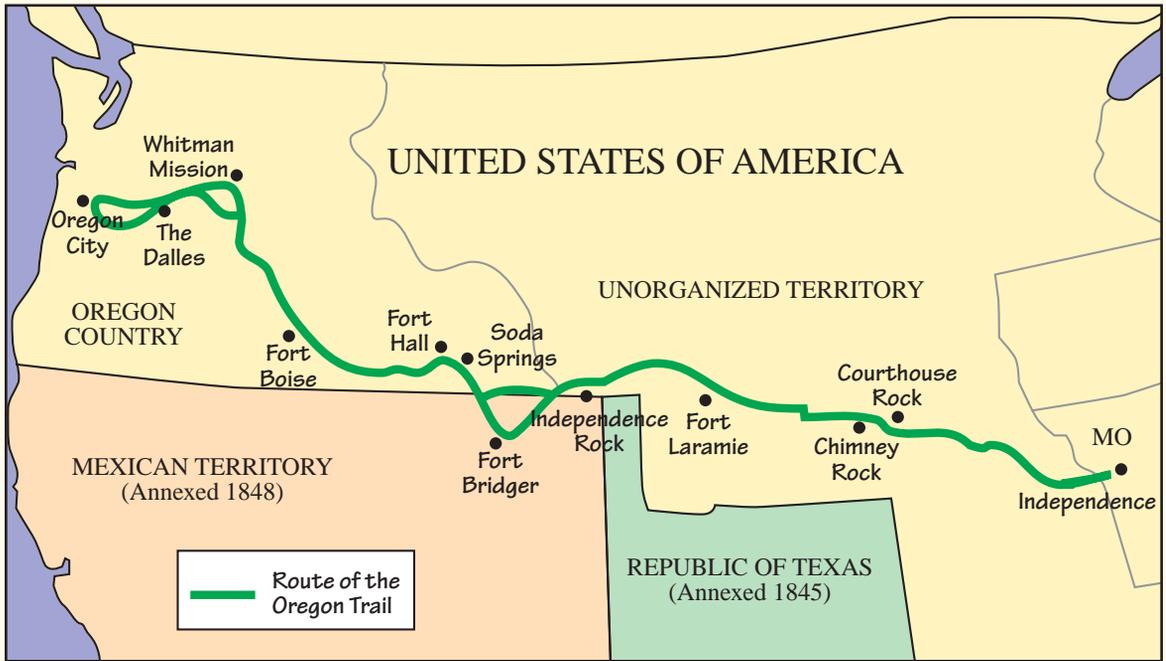
Seven children had traveled 500 miles over the Oregon Trail, fighting hunger, thirst, Indians, heat, cold, and a host of other problems. Honoré Willsie Morrow recorded their story in a style that reads more like a history report than a short story. But the tale itself is so gripping, and the character of John Sager, so powerful, that the writer wisely lets the plain facts speak for themselves.

Focus

This is the story of one family, and of one member of that family in particular—John Sager. It is also the story of a certain breed of person, the tough, determined pioneer who conquered the wilderness and settled the vast, wild country that was the American frontier. The story’s style is the reverse of dramatic: it is understated. This style mirrors the spirit of the pioneers. Facing danger and deprivation at every turn, they had to be calm and matter-of-fact. Their tone, expression, and language tended to minimize rather than to dramatize the obstacles they faced. As you read the story, ask yourself where John Sager got the strength and purpose that so characterize him. Do you know anyone whom you could call “single-minded”? Do you admire this trait?

About the Author

American novelist **HONORÉ WILLISIE MORROW** was born in 1880. She wrote many works of historical fiction set in the American past. These novels include *With Malice Towards None*, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, *Yonder Sails the Mayflower*, and *We Must March*. The story, *Child Pioneer*, was first published in 1926. It describes the ordeals suffered by the pioneers on the Oregon Trail—a well-known chapter in American history. In her simple and forceful style, Honoré Willsie Morrow brings these historical events to life. Morrow died in 1940 in Connecticut.



Child Pioneer

Honoré Willsie Morrow

Let me tell you the epic story of thirteen-year-old John Sager, as I gleaned it from letters and diaries of Oregon pioneers.

In the fall of 1844, John appeared at the gate of Dr. Whitman’s medical mission, in what is now the state of Washington, carrying a starving five-month-old baby sister. He was staggering before an emaciated cow on whose back were perched a sister aged eight, with a broken leg, and a sister of five who helped support the leg. A sister of three and one of seven walked beside his eleven-year-old brother, Francis.

Unaccompanied, John Sager and his five sisters and a brother, all younger than himself, had made their way from Fort Hall, 500 miles to the east, over the Oregon Trail, which was then little more than a horse track.

The trail was visited by unfriendly Indians and was so difficult that the migration of 1844, which John’s parents had joined, went to pieces. Some died



The Oregon Trail

en route; others turned southwest into California. But John came through.

The record of this strange children’s expedition starts in early July, when Kit Carson came across the Sager’s camping place near the Green

River Rendezvous in what is today eastern Idaho.

He rode at a gallop into the camp, two fresh scalps hanging at his belt, flung himself from his horse and told John to put out the fire—a band of Sioux was on the warpath. John sent his brother and little sisters scurrying into the Conestoga wagon, kicked out the tiny blaze of buffalo chips, then looked to Carson for further orders.

Word Bank

epic (EH pick) *adj.*: heroic; extending beyond the usual in size or scope

gleaned (GLEEND) *v.*: gathered information bit by bit

staggering (STAG er ing) *v.*: having difficulty standing; reeling from side to side

Carson described John as a sandy-haired, freckle-faced boy, clad in a hunter's red flannel shirt which came to his knees. His snakeskin belt carried a knife and powder horn. In reply to Carson's questions, he said his father and mother were in the wagon, both sick. The remnant of the caravan to which they had attached themselves was two days' travel ahead. Carson told John to hitch the oxen at once and move forward all night and as far the next day as his strength would permit.

We next pick up the Sagers approaching Soda Springs on the Bear River. There were a half-dozen families in this camp, and one of the men was a veterinary. On the edge of the camp John halted the oxen and asked for a doctor. He said that for two days his mother had been too sick to nurse the baby and that he couldn't make the infant drink cow's milk. The veterinary climbed into the wagon. He was out in a few moments. Both the Sagers were dead, he told the waiting crowd. John called the doctor a liar and tried to climb into the wagon, but was held back by a dozen pitying hands.

The Sager orphans stayed with the caravan until it reached Fort Hall, a British trading post owned by the Hudson's Bay Company. The factor¹ in charge of the post was trying to prevent American emigrants from entering the Columbia Valley by deflecting them into California. (Great Britain was then beginning her final struggle to retain her hold on Oregon Territory.) He told them that the wagon trail to Oregon, made the year before by Marcus Whitman, the missionary doctor, was impassable. The members of the caravan, already worn and discouraged and terribly afraid of Indian massacre, decided to go down into California.

John Sager, squatting by the campfire, listened without a word to the council of elders. His grief for his father



Fort Hall

and mother had merged into one immense desire. Ever since he could remember, he had heard his father talk of making a great farm in the valley of the Columbia, of helping to keep Oregon Territory for America. John determined to go on to the Columbia, to complete his father's life for him.

He would abandon the wagon; the oxen and cow could carry the packs of food and bedding. He had learned from an old woman in the camp how to feed the baby. The next morning he was gone, leaving this note: "I have taken the family back to the States with Kit Carson. He is in a hurry. John Sager." By this false information he made sure he would not be followed and prevented from pushing westward.

Here there is a break of several weeks in the story while John and the rest of the children crept along the valley of the Snake River to Fort Boise² nearly 300 miles beyond. The Snake writhes through a tremendous canyon that slashes Idaho from east to west. Barren plains, brutal mountains, scorch-

1. A *factor* is an agent.

2. *Boise* (BOY zee) is now the capital of Idaho.

Word Bank

writhes (RYTHES) *v.*: twists; turns

barren (BAHR in) *adj.*: not bearing fruit or seed; desolate

brutal (BROO til) *adj.*: cruel; harsh



Snake River Falls

ing heat by day and chill by night, a pestilence of mosquitoes and fleas—a heartbreaking test even for seasoned adults. Yet, one September afternoon there crept up to the gates of Fort Boise a boy holding a baby in his arms. The boy was dressed in ragged buckskin pants and still more ragged moccasins. His sun-faded hair fell to his shoulders in tangled profusion.

The factor in this one-man post was accustomed to all kinds of hardships, but when he saw John he uttered an oath of shocked surprise. John asked with fierce eagerness if there was a white woman in the fort. Something had to be done for the baby: she vomited everything she ate. The factor, with increasing horror in his eyes, looked down on the unsavory atom³ in the boy's arms. There was no white woman, and the factor suggested an Indian mother. John declared that nothing could induce him to allow a squaw to touch the baby. Someone had warned him of the diseases a child would contract through such measures.

At this point Francis came up with the pack-train, and there disembarked such a rabble of wild little girls as the Scotsman had never seen even among Indians. He ordered his cook to feed the youngsters and watched while they devoured the venison⁴ stew, gobbling and fighting like puppies. John stood aloof and chewed down a hunk of venison which he held in one hand, support-

ing the baby with the other.

The factor suggested that John leave the baby and the two next sisters at the fort. John shook his head. The baby's one chance, he decided, was to get through to Dr. Whitman's mission with all speed. The factor warned the lad that the baby looked ready to die any minute, anyhow. John's face flamed; he cursed the factor and began to sob.

The Scottish factor afterward set down his feelings in a letter to his mother.

My letters to you have contained many strange tales, but none that twisted me like this. They were a scourge to have about, I assure you, but nothing could lessen the pathos of them. That lad John! How moving was this lad's vicarious⁵ fatherhood. Not that he was a gentle guardian! He took no nonsense from any of them. When the girl of eight protested against holding the baby, he jerked the sister across his knees and clouted her until she begged to take the baby. The strain had told on him. He was all nerves and unable to throw off the torture of responsibility. By Jove, he ruled me too, for I sent them on, after a night's sleep, under the care of a pair of good Indians and fresh horses.

3. Here, an *atom* is a very small creature.

4. *Venison* (VEN ih sun) is deer meat.

5. *Vicarious* (vy KARE ee USS) means serving instead of someone else.

Word Bank

pestilence (PES tih lintz) *n.*: a natural population suddenly and greatly enlarged; epidemic

seasoned (SEE zuhnd) *adj.*:

experienced

profusion (pro FYOO zhun) *n.*: a great supply; superabundance

aloof (uh LOOF) *adj.*: reserved; withdrawn

pathos (PATH ose) *n.*: feelings of pity

clouted (CLOW tid) *v.*: struck forcefully, especially with the hand or fist

They may have been good Indians once, but evidently they regarded the job of guiding white papooses across the difficult Blue Mountains as beneath their dignity. A few days out they disappeared, accompanied by the horses.

We have few details of the crossing of the Blue Mountains. The oldest sister slipped under a ponderously moving ox and broke her leg. John used hard-packed snowballs to keep down the swelling. The baby was very low, and John was sometimes not sure she was breathing at all. He had to abandon the starving oxen. The cow, which still yielded a small quantity of milk for the baby and transportation for the oldest sister, must come along. With frosted feet, with festering sores due to dirt and emaciation, the children began the last lap of the journey. They made five or six miles a day, huddling together at night like stricken lambs under the shelter of a rock or backed against a fallen tree, warmed by huge fires. A thousand times during the trip the younger children shrieked that they would go no farther. John forced them to go on.

It would have wrung my heart, but I wish I might have witnessed the last lap of that immortal journey, though after many days with the diaries I can see it as clearly as if I had actually come upon them in those mountain fastnesses.⁶

Now they have topped the last crest, and as they stand gazing into the vast valley to the west, the snow is blood-stained beneath their feet. Behind them is a chaos of range and canyon over which they have crept like snails. Before them, a wide, undulating plain cut by the black and silver ribbon of the Columbia River. A moment to gaze, to shiver, then John moves with fumbling feet down the mountain. His legs are tied in strips of buffalo hide. His long hair is bound back from his eyes by a

twist of leather around his forehead. On his back is the three-year-old sister. In his arms the baby, wrapped in a wolf-skin, lies motionless as death.

Staggering back of John moans the cow, her hoofs split to the quick. On her back the eight-year-old girl huddles under a bit of blanket which she shares with the five-year-old. Francis, his gray eyes dull with hunger and exertion, buckskin pants reduced to a mere patch of leather, and flannel shirt only a fluttering decoration across his chest, brings up the rear with the others.

Stumbling, rising, panting, but in a silence more tragic than weeping, they move down into the valley and stand at last before the Whitman mission. Narcissa Whitman gave a little cry when she saw them and held out her arms toward the bundle in John's arms. Her only child, a little girl of two, had been drowned a few years before. She groaned as she turned back the wolfskin and saw what lay beneath.

Dr. Whitman looked with her while the six young derelicts waited in breathless silence. The doctor thought that perhaps the baby was still alive, and Narcissa took her into the house and laid her in a warm bath while her husband herded the others into an outbuilding and began the unsavory job of turning them into human children. All but John. He shook his head on hearing the doctor's order and followed Mrs. Whitman into the house. Bathed, rubbed with warm oil, wrapped in soft wool, the baby showed no sign of life until Narcissa began to drop hot, diluted milk

6. *Fastnesses* are objects which are firmly fixed and stable.

Word Bank

derelicts (DEHR uh LIKTS) *n.*: persons abandoned or forgotten

between the blue lips. After several moments of this, the little throat contracted and a whimper, something less than a mouse squeak, came forth. At this sound John dropped to the floor, wrapped his arms around Narcissa's knees, laughed, groaned, and then limped from the room.

All that night Narcissa sat with the baby on her lap. John, washed and in decent garments, slept on a blanket on the floor beside her. The doctor dozed on a cot nearby. What thoughts passed through Narcissa Whitman's mind that night we cannot know. We do know that she was already worn with anxiety and

overwork, and the prospect of adding seven more to her household must have been staggering. Toward dawn she roused the doctor and told him that she wanted to keep the children at the mission. The next morning they invited the little orphans to become their adopted children.

And so the heroic odyssey⁷ came to an end. Little John Sager had fulfilled his father's dream of making a home for the Sager family in the Columbia Valley, and of helping save Oregon for America.

7. An *odyssey* (AHD ih see) is a long wandering.



Columbia River

● Studying THE SELECTION

Recalling

1. How did the Sager family appear at the beginning of the story? Describe their appearance, using details given by the author.
2. Why did John need to take his siblings to the Oregon Territory all alone?
3. What did John feel he was accomplishing, by leading his family to Columbia?
4. What happened as the family crossed the Blue Mountains?

Interpreting

5. What does John's decision, to take the family on a difficult journey, show about his character?
6. The Scottish factor said that John was not a gentle guardian. Do you think the harsh manner in which John behaved was appropriate? Explain.

Concluding

7. Which character traits did John possess that allowed him to complete his journey with all his siblings?

Examining Fiction

The story, *Child Pioneer*, is written in a natural, matter-of-fact style. Even though the events are dreadful and grim, the author relates them with little emotion. The overall effect is one of harsh realism.

1. The author's plain, factual telling of the story reflects the plain, matter-of-fact way the characters face hardship. Choose three places in the story where some difficulty is described. Copy out the descriptive sentence, then add one or two sentences of your own, that tell about the character's emotions.
2. Is the simple, deadpan tone more powerful than a voice charged with drama? Explain your answer.

Thinking About Fiction

1. Suppose that you were facing the same circumstances as John Sager. Would you continue your journey on the Oregon Trail? Explain your decision.
2. Many thoughts went through Narcissa Whitman's mind the night before she decided to adopt the children. Reconstruct the events of that evening, and explain how Narcissa arrived at her decision.

Creating and Writing

The settling of the western territories of the United States required strength and courage. Thousands of Americans made this treacherous journey, yet little is known about their lives. Write a paragraph in which you discuss the bravery of families such as the Sagers whose persistence transformed the history of the United States, particularly regions west of the Mississippi River.