

INTRODUCTION

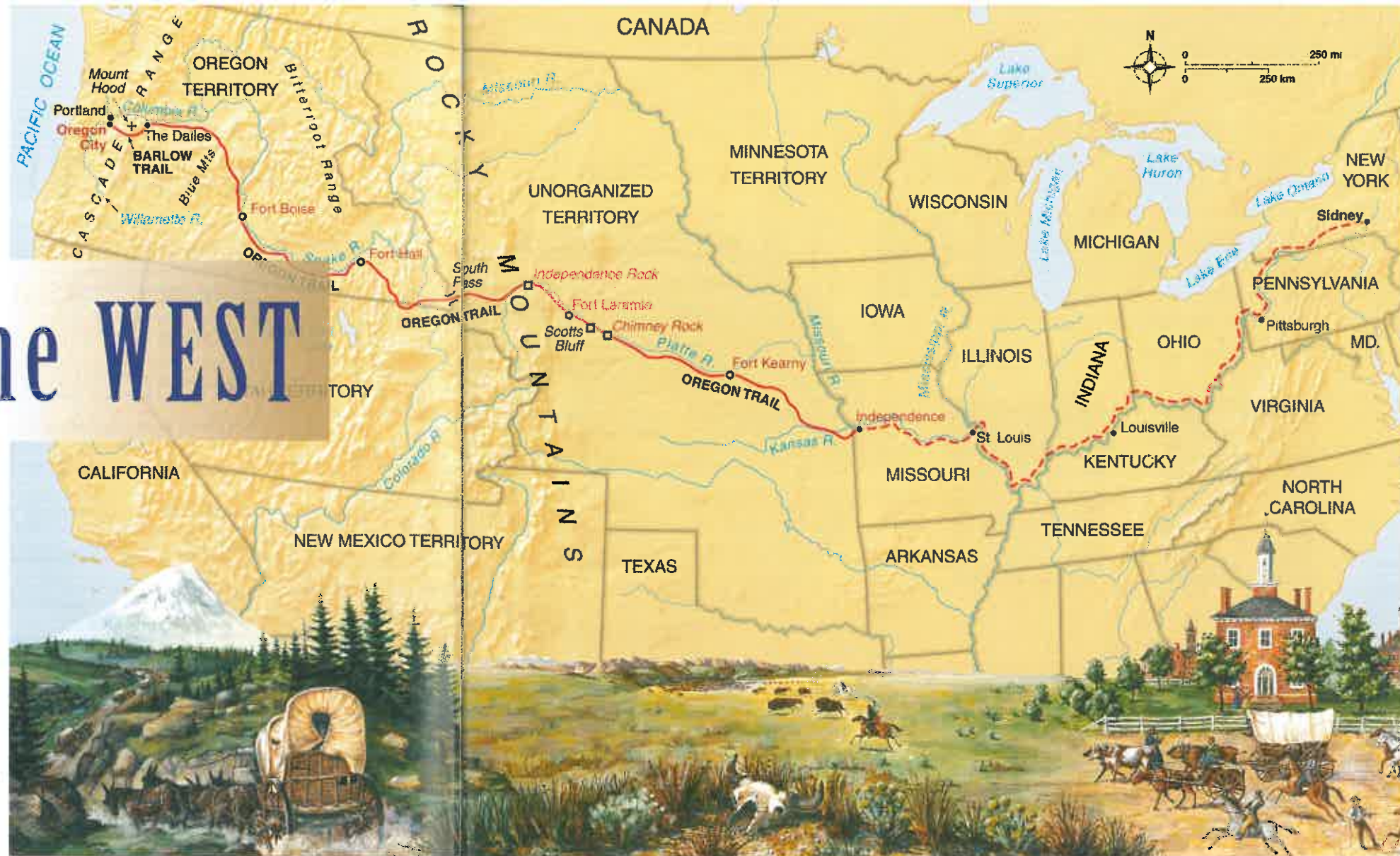
Why did they call it the Louisiana Purchase?

OPENING the WEST

In 1803 President Thomas Jefferson bought a huge piece of land stretching west from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains and north from the Gulf of Mexico to the Canadian border. Called the Louisiana Purchase, it doubled the size of the United States. In 1804 Jefferson hired Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to explore this unknown land. With their Native American guide Sacagawea, Lewis and Clark explored the West from 1804 to 1806. They created maps, charted rivers, identified plants and animals, and brought back tales of harsh weather and beautiful land.

Mountain men, like Jim Bridger and James Beckwourth, followed Lewis and Clark. They blazed new trails, trapped beavers for fur, and led expeditions into the West. Soon, tales of the rich farmland, fine climate, and plentiful game convinced many people to move west. In 1848 gold was found in California. The movement west became a mad rush. Large numbers of people left home in search of free or cheap farmland, religious freedom, or gold. These people called themselves **emigrants** because they were leaving the United States and moving to lands that were then **territories**.

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Between 1840 and 1860 somewhere between 300,000 and 500,000 emigrants traveled westward on the Oregon Trail.

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MEET THE MARSHALL FAMILY

In 1852 the Marshall family from Sidney, New York, decided to move west. They planned to join relatives already settled in the Oregon Territory. Their diaries and letters tell of life on their journey west.



William Marshall, father



Harriet Marshall, mother



Tom Marshall, 16



Henry Marshall, 6



Sarah Marshall, 12

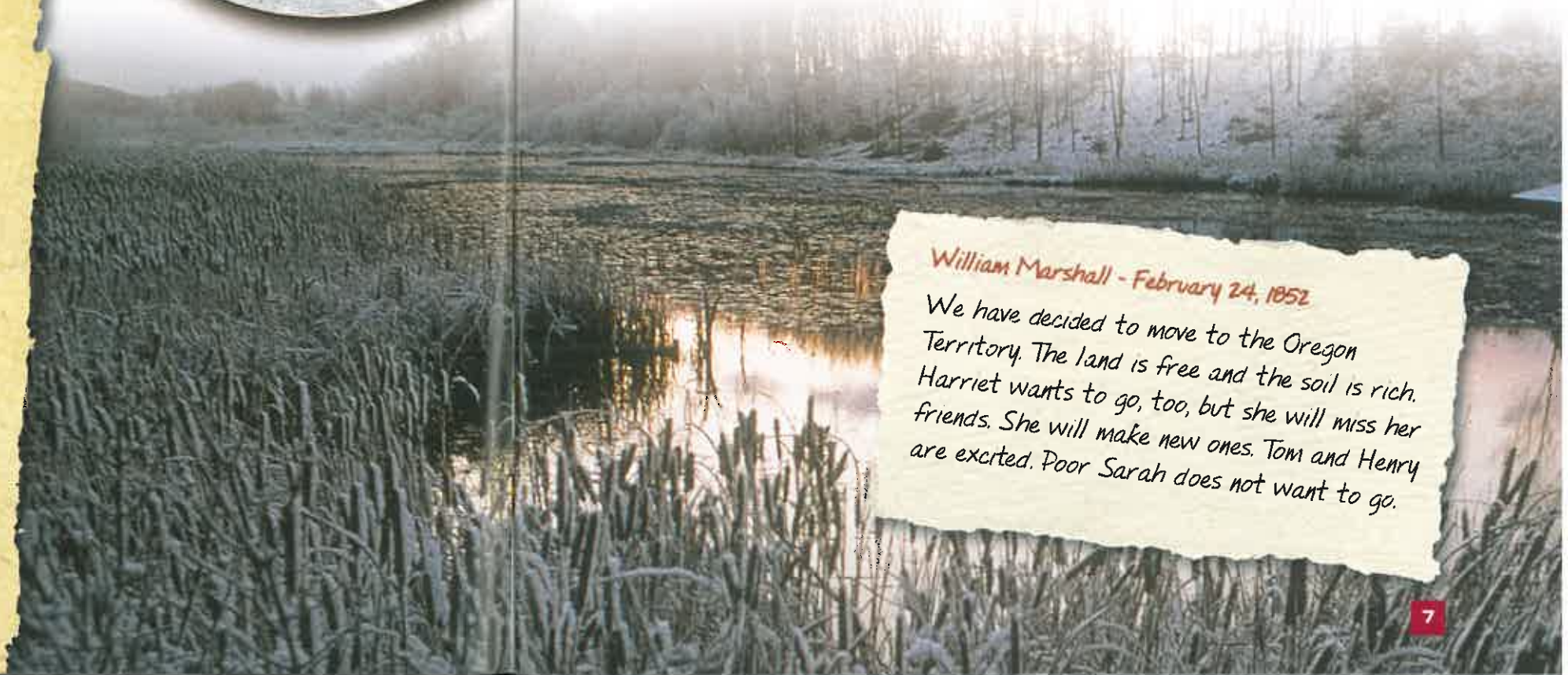


LEAVING HOME



The New York winter of 1852 had been long and harsh. Many small farmers were talking about moving west. Traders had been telling exaggerated stories about the "golden West," of beautiful weather, fertile land, and little illness. And now gold had been discovered in California.

Like many other farmers, William and Harriet Marshall decided it was time to move and start a new life. Their small piece of land produced poor crops. The Marshalls saw little hope of improving life for themselves or their family.



William Marshall - February 24, 1852
We have decided to move to the Oregon Territory. The land is free and the soil is rich. Harriet wants to go, too, but she will miss her friends. She will make new ones. Tom and Henry are excited. Poor Sarah does not want to go.

They decided to join Harriet's sister Liddy and her husband, James Thomas, in the Oregon Territory. Once there, William and Harriet could get 320 acres of farmland by living on the land and improving it over four years. With that much land, they believed they and their children could live a better life. The Marshalls had to raise about \$800 to pay for their trip.

Sarah Marshall - February 26, 1852

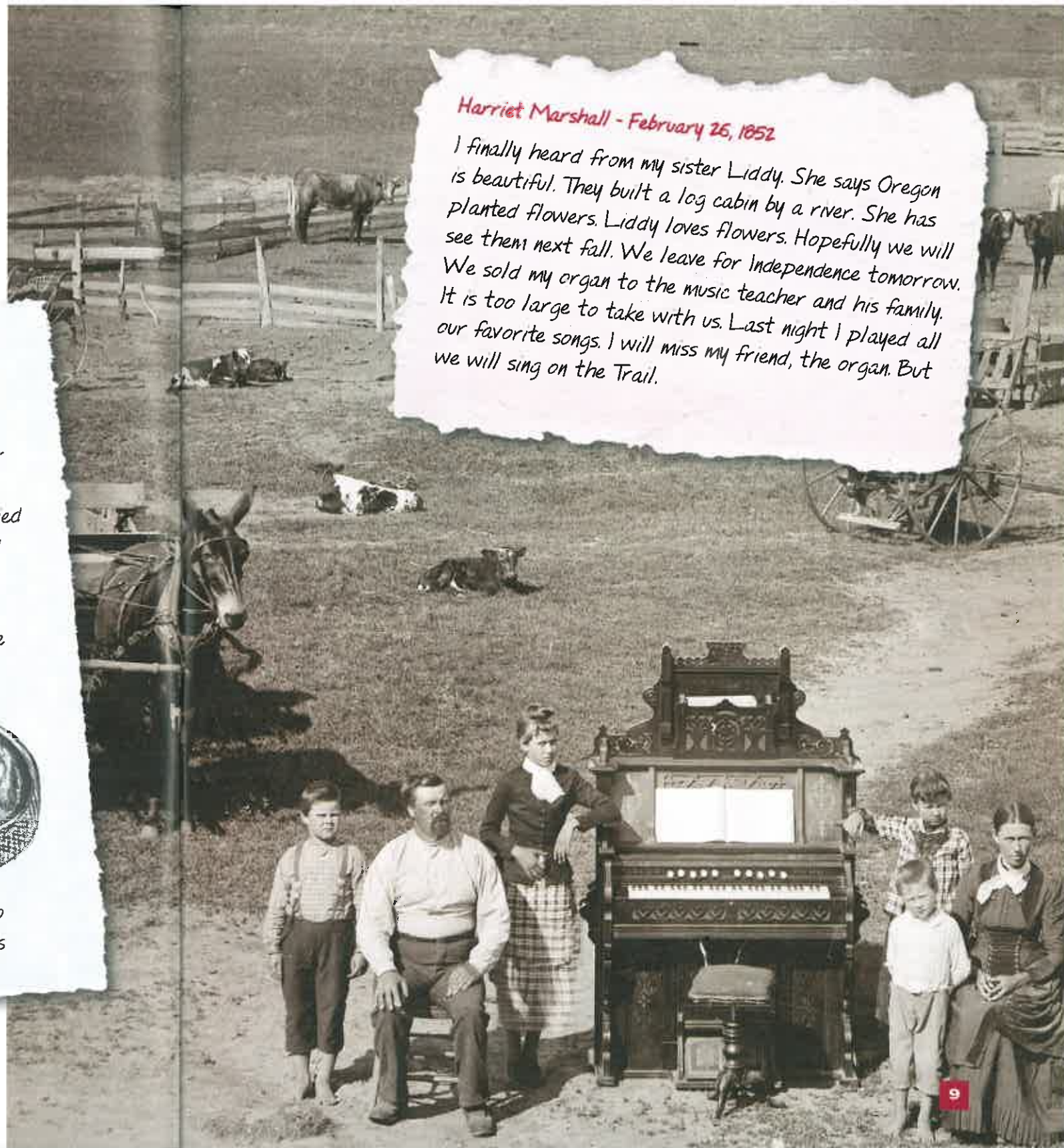
The neighbors gave us a farewell party. They are all sad to see us go. Mrs. Smith gave Mama some lovely lace handkerchiefs and a calico shirt for Papa. Mrs. Ketchum gave us bonnets and hats for the boys because she heard the sun is harsh in the West. Others gave us aprons, blankets, quilts, jams, mustard, pickles, lots of dried fruit and beans, and bread. Mr. Black gave us new shoes. He said we'd need them walking to Oregon. It is about 2,000 miles. Papa got a new rifle. Tom will get Papa's old one. Henry wants a gun, too, but Mama says he is too young. I have to learn to drive the wagon and herd the sheep. So does Tom. I hope I can do it.

Tomorrow I say good-bye to my best friend, Emily. She gave me a birthday card because I will be gone on my birthday. I miss her already. She took home my cat, Smoky. I made a beautiful basket for him to sleep in. Emily said Smoky will sleep in her room. It will take us almost six months to get to Oregon. I am scared. Tom claims he is excited, but I think he is scared, too. I know Mama is. What will happen to us?



Harriet Marshall - February 26, 1852

I finally heard from my sister Liddy. She says Oregon is beautiful. They built a log cabin by a river. She has planted flowers. Liddy loves flowers. Hopefully we will see them next fall. We leave for Independence tomorrow. We sold my organ to the music teacher and his family. It is too large to take with us. Last night I played all our favorite songs. I will miss my friend, the organ. But we will sing on the Trail.





WAITING for SPRING

By early spring the prairie outside Independence was full of emigrants. They were waiting to set out on the Trail. When the spring grass along the Trail was high enough to feed the livestock, the wagons would leave. The animals had to live off the land as the many wagon trains moved westward. But the emigrants couldn't wait too long to set off because of the threat of early snow in the mountains by September. As a result, everyone traveled along the Trail at once.

William Marshall - February 27, 1852

We sold Harriet's organ. We now have the money we need to buy supplies and oxen. We'll pack everything in our wagon and drive it to Independence. Sarah had to give up her cat. We can't take a cat on the Trail. I'm worried about Henry getting lost, never mind a pet. Sarah is sad. I have all my farm tools, and our mules and our horses are ready to go. Our wagon will get us to Independence. Then we'll join a wagon train. I'm anxious to get on the Trail. I pray we have a safe journey.



Some of the items emigrants took with them were pans, a butter churner, and a doll.

Like all emigrants, the Marshalls had to decide what to pack for the long journey to the Oregon Territory. The wagons had little room for things that could not be used on the Trail.

Most emigrants packed dishes, pots and pans, tools, clothes, firearms, and bedding. They often packed a few favorite pieces of family furniture, too. Sometimes they had to abandon them along the Trail to lighten their wagons to make it up the steep mountains.

The Marshalls first traveled from upstate New York to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, next to Louisville, Kentucky, then to St. Louis, Missouri, and finally to Independence, Missouri. Independence was a "jumping-off" point for traveling along the Oregon Trail. Here the emigrants could buy supplies, join a wagon train, and wait for spring to begin their trip. By beginning their journey in mid-April, the emigrants could reach the Oregon Territory before the winter snows.

William Marshall - April 2, 1852

My brother-in-law, James, wrote me. He says to leave Missouri with a good light wagon, 150 lbs. of flour, 60 lbs. of bacon, 40 lbs. of sugar, 25 lbs. of dried fruit, 10 lbs. of rice, plenty of pickles, vinegar, coffee and tea, and lots of warm blankets. I had a wagon built with a toolbox, a place for a water barrel, and hardwood brakes. The brakes might save our lives. He said to buy a spare axle, too. There will be little room in the wagon—four feet by ten feet. Tom and I will have to walk or ride. I'll teach Sarah how to drive the wagon. She'll have to walk too, herding the sheep. Tomorrow I sign us up for a wagon train. We hope to leave in two weeks. The talk about crossing the rivers makes me jumpy. I'll try to save some money to take ferries.

Harriet Marshall - April 3, 1852

Our wagon is called a prairie schooner. It looks like a ship at sea. It has red wheels, a blue body, and a bright, white canvas top. There are two tops, and they are coated with linseed oil to protect us from the rain. It is pretty but it is not home. We have been camping in the wagon. Luckily the weather is warm. Cooking outside is hard. The wind blows out the fire before I can get it started. Sarah is lonely. She hates herding. Tom thinks he's all grown up and a man. Henry does, too. I fear for them. Pride leads to mistakes. I so miss my organ and my friends singing around it. A woman here has a piano and she lets me play it. She is taking it with her. William says it won't reach Oregon. We bought lots of quinine, hartshorn for snake bites, and castor oil. I hope these medicines will protect us on the Trail.

The emigrants began final preparations. Independence became a hub of activity. People, animals, and wagons filled the streets. Blacksmiths hammered constantly in their sheds, building and repairing wagons and shoeing horses, mules, and oxen. Shops bustled as emigrants scrambled to buy supplies before shortages drove up prices or food ran out. A family of four needed over a thousand pounds of food for the 2,000-mile journey.

Upon arriving in Independence, the Marshalls set up camp and began to prepare for their long journey west.



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*April 7, 1852
Independence, Missouri*

Dear Emily,

There are all kinds of people here, most of them nice. The camp is like a small town. The girl camped next to us likes Tom. He says no, but she does. Mama just laughs. Papa tries not to laugh at him. Tom sort of struts by the girl's wagon.

There is so much to do. Mama and I have to dry food, store it, and wash all the clothes. My fingers are red from washing things in the river. And I miss my bed. My bedding is hard and cold. Everyone says this is nothing compared to life on the Trail. I'm glad I have my diary. Papa says I can ride Henry's horse for some of the journey. Henry says no, but I will. Some rich people are going out west, too. They have a wagon just for their servants. The women wear these strange pants-like things called bloomers. Mama says I will wear dresses. We'll see. I don't want to walk over 2,000 miles in a dress.

Today I tried to cook over an open fire. I nearly burnt my hand. I guess we'll eat a lot of stew on the Trail because it's easy to cook over a fire. No more roast pig or venison for me. Papa says to enjoy the meat now. I hope we have meat on the journey. I hate beans. How's Smoky? Write to me. Miss you.

Your best friend,
Sarah Marshall



Bloomers

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STARTING OUT

As dawn broke, the emigrants began to stir. The wagon master gave the signal and a bugle played. Nearly one hundred wagons started to move. Close to 400 people were leaving for the Oregon Trail this morning. The wagons looked like waves moving across the prairie. The Marshalls' wagon joined the others. On their first day along the Trail they walked almost fifteen miles.

That night they camped at the Shawnee Mission in Kansas where some of the emigrants saw their first Native Americans. Shawnee children were taught English and agriculture at the Mission. The Marshalls slept outside their wagon on the hard ground. Exhausted, they quickly fell asleep.

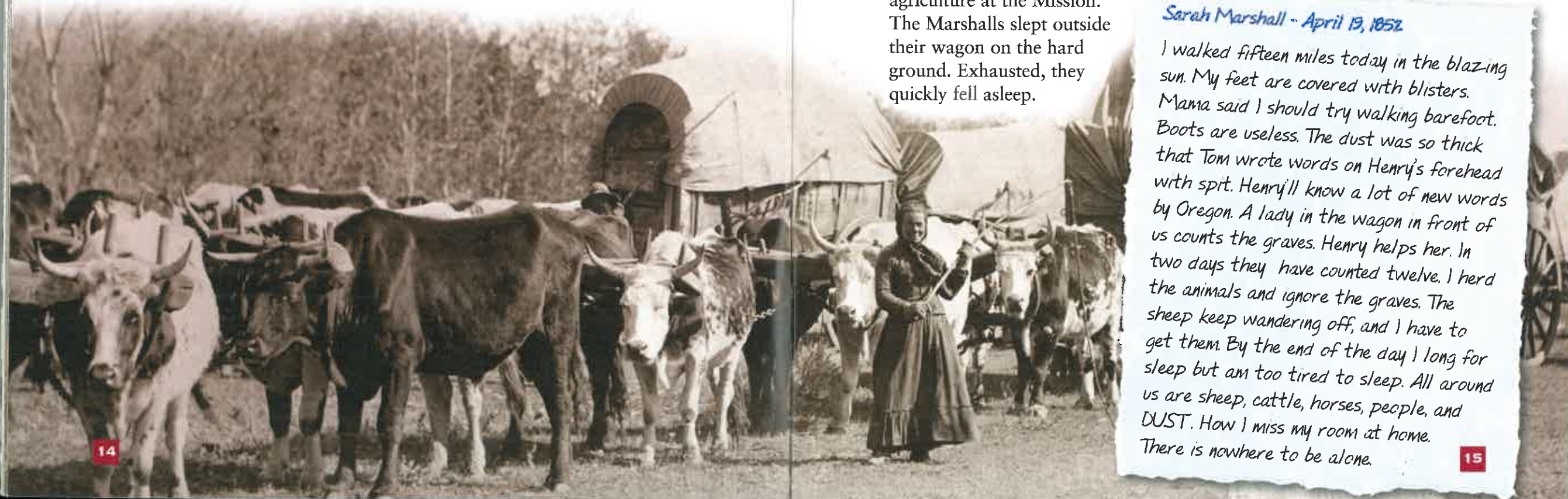
Sarah Marshall - April 19, 1852

I walked fifteen miles today in the blazing sun. My feet are covered with blisters. Mama said I should try walking barefoot. Boots are useless. The dust was so thick that Tom wrote words on Henry's forehead with spirt. Henry'll know a lot of new words by Oregon. A lady in the wagon in front of us counts the graves. Henry helps her. In two days they have counted twelve. I herd the animals and ignore the graves. The sheep keep wandering off, and I have to get them. By the end of the day I long for sleep but am too tired to sleep. All around us are sheep, cattle, horses, people, and DUST. How I miss my room at home. There is nowhere to be alone.

Spring finally arrived. The emigrants were anxious to begin their journey. They joined different wagon trains, choosing carefully to find a train with a good wagon master.

The wagon master and the pilot, or scout, were critical to the success of the wagon train. They mapped out the journey and made decisions about which routes to take. The wagon masters were often former mountain men who knew both the Native Americans and the region well. The pilot would travel ahead of the wagons to deal with any problems along the Trail, such as fallen trees, or rocks, or hills too steep for the wagons. Often, the pilot or the wagon master spoke at least one Native American language.

The Marshalls joined a wagon train leaving on April 17, the day before Sarah's birthday. They thought it was a good sign. Their wagon master said he had traveled with the famous mountain men, Jim Bridger and Jedediah Smith. The Marshalls began their journey westward. Their goal was to reach Fort Kearny, Nebraska, by May. At this military post built to protect the emigrants along the Trail, they could buy fresh supplies.



William Marshall - April 26, 1852

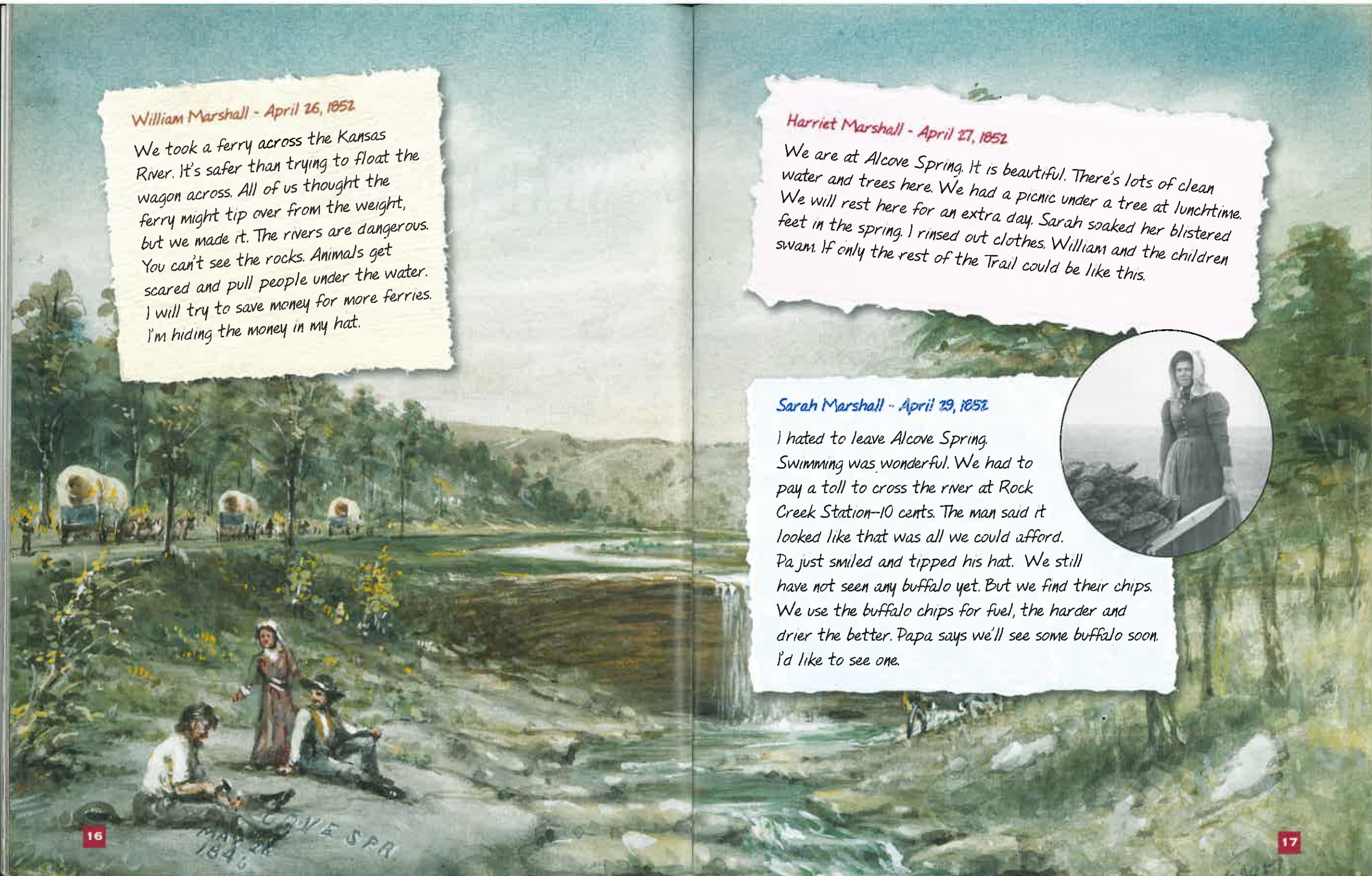
We took a ferry across the Kansas River. It's safer than trying to float the wagon across. All of us thought the ferry might tip over from the weight, but we made it. The rivers are dangerous. You can't see the rocks. Animals get scared and pull people under the water. I will try to save money for more ferries. I'm hiding the money in my hat.

Harriet Marshall - April 27, 1852

We are at Alcove Spring. It is beautiful. There's lots of clean water and trees here. We had a picnic under a tree at lunchtime. We will rest here for an extra day. Sarah soaked her blistered feet in the spring. I rinsed out clothes. William and the children swam. If only the rest of the Trail could be like this.

Sarah Marshall - April 29, 1852

I hated to leave Alcove Spring. Swimming was wonderful. We had to pay a toll to cross the river at Rock Creek Station—10 cents. The man said it looked like that was all we could afford. Pa just smiled and tipped his hat. We still have not seen any buffalo yet. But we find their chips. We use the buffalo chips for fuel, the harder and drier the better. Papa says we'll see some buffalo soon. I'd like to see one.



William Marshall - May 3, 1852

We saw buffalo today, thousands of them as far as the eye could see. The wagon master stopped the train. A party of men went off to hunt the buffalo. Tom joined them. I told him to be careful to stay out of the line of fire! All morning we heard shots, but the men came back with only three buffalo. We all set about carving them up. I felt bad leaving the carcasses, but there's no time to dry the skin! We'll dry the meat and use it later in stews.

Sarah Marshall - May 4, 1852

A herd of buffalo stampeded by. It was a sight I will never forget. We had to wait for over two hours for all of them to pass! They are gigantic. I got out my pencils and sketched them. Tom bragged about how he helped shoot one of the buffalo. Henry wants to keep one for a pet. Mama laughed and said no. Henry wrote a note on one of the buffalo skulls to leave beside the Trail. Others had done the same.



Harriet Marshall - May 5, 1852

I cooked buffalo meat for the first time last night. It is like deer meat but tastes gamier. But what a welcome change after days of bacon and bread. We saw many dead buffalo along the Trail. They are magnificent creatures. I feel sorry that we must kill them.

William Marshall - May 7, 1852

We have reached Fort Kearny. It is just a bunch of sod buildings, not a big fort. I'm not sure how it would protect us. But we can buy food here. Also, we all got letters. Harriet got some letters from her sister, and I heard from James. The worst is yet to come, according to his letters. We will rest here for three days. Poor Sarah's feet need it. Tom is supposed to be helping her with chores, but he seems distracted by a girl in the wagon behind us.

Fort Kearny was the first military post built to protect the Oregon Trail emigrants. But it wasn't the sturdy, walled town they expected. Still, the fort was an important stopping point where emigrants could buy fresh food and other supplies. It was also a place where some of the emigrants, already discouraged, decided to turn back.

At this point many emigrants began to lighten their wagon loads. Crossing rivers with heavy wagons was dangerous. If the wagons tipped over, all was lost.

The Trail became littered with furniture, food, and other belongings that were not essential for the trip. Scavengers came out from Independence to collect the things the emigrants left on the Trail. They either kept them or sold them to new emigrants arriving in Independence.

Determined to reach the Oregon Territory, the Marshalls pushed ahead. Thoughts of uniting with Harriet's family and beginning a new life on their own large and fertile farm drove them onward.



ALONG the TRAIL

The emigrants came to understand the harsh realities of their journey as they passed by the many graves along the Trail. Many of the emigrants died during cholera epidemics. Cholera was caused by bacteria, which thrived in the crowded, unsanitary campgrounds along the Trail. The emigrants could do little to prevent or cure cholera. Cholera resulted in severe diarrhea, heavy sweating, and often vomiting. The sick died very quickly.

Harriet Marshall - May 13, 1852

All it seems to do is rain. Everything is soaked. Nothing ever dries. Many families have sick ones. We leave them behind and hope they find us. Medicine does not seem to help. But I make William, Tom, Sarah, and Henry take castor oil every day. I had to chase Henry to make him take it. William says we will soon be at Courthouse Rock. We found the grave of my nephew, Liddy's son. We prayed over it and left flowers. I fear losing a child on this journey.

