

Pioneer Roads and Travel

The modern modes of travel on our fine highways makes it extremely difficult for the youth of to-day to visualize the way our forefathers got from place to place.

No one took a trip if it could be avoided, except, perhaps on the smooth winter surface — but from sheer necessity. There were no corner shops in the pioneer settlements. Everything that could not be grown or made had to be fetched, often, over long distances.

Even after roads appeared, it was still often faster to walk than to battle a wagon over the bumps. Many an early settler carried a sack of wheat on his back 30 miles to a mill, and returned a day or two later with the flour.

If the nearest doctor was many miles away, a man could be excused for hesitating to go for help and home remedies were used.

Wagon travel was always an adventure — especially over dirt or corduroy roads. But as roads improved, more comfortable vehicles made their appearance.

(See Book I Vol. I for pictures of some early vehicles.)

Even the wagon was improved and instead of wooden pegs the wooden axles had a strip of iron above and below to prevent the wood from wearing away. They were greased with tar made from the pitch got from the pine trees, mixed with lard in winter to prevent it from becoming too thick.

Those who could afford more than an all-purpose wagon bought a buggy. These light carriages sat two people and were often handsomely designed. They had a hood, and their large wheels made them practical over bumps and in mud.

Increased traffic required some regulations. The first traffic laws were concerned with the marking of roads in winter, usually by evergreen branches set in the snow along the side. This was the responsibility of the neighboring land owner, and was so important that he was liable to severe penalties for failure to meet his obligations. He was also expected to clear the road of snow drifts and fallen trees. When this was not done, winter travellers took the easiest route around the drifts, going over or pulling down rail fences in the way.

Later, regulations provided sleigh bells on harness in the winter to warn of oncoming vehicles when visibility was poor. Drivers were ordered to pass on the right and overtake on the left, and to allow half the road to the other sleigh or carriage.

Long before the arrival of motor cars there were laws against drunk driving, including men on horseback, "furious" driving (except on occasional town streets set aside for racing, and the use of improper language when drivers tangled.

There does not appear to have been any law against what was a major sport — "hooking" rides on the horse drawn sleighs and cutters.

Overland travel was limited by the strength and endurance of animal muscle. Nothing — neither a person nor a message — could move faster than a horse could gallop. But a horse could not travel all day at high speed. The answer was the stage-coach.