



# EMIGRANT TRAILS HALL OF FAME

OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION

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## John D. Unruh, Jr.

John Unruh was a descendant of Mennonite emigrants who settled in the Dakota Territory in 1874 in the area that is now Freeman, South Dakota, where Unruh grew up. Inspired both by an interest in learning about his ancestral heritage and by his father, an historian and history professor, Unruh developed an interest in history at an early age.

He attended Freeman Junior College and received his bachelor's degree with highest distinction from Bethel College. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Kansas, where he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Between college and graduate school he served for two years with the Peace Section of the Mennonite Central Committee. From 1967 until his death in 1976 he was an Associate Professor of History at Bluffton College in Ohio (now Bluffton University). His death at age 38 occurred after surgery to remove a brain tumor.

His widely-acclaimed book, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1860*, was first published in 1979, three years after his death. It was one of three finalists for the Pulitzer Prize in History in 1980. The book was based on his doctoral dissertation which he had submitted simultaneously to his graduate advisor and to the University of Illinois Press in 1975, the year before his death.

The book was the winner of seven awards, including the John H. Dunning Prize of the American Historical Association, the Ray A. Billington Book Award of the Organization of American Historians, and the National Historical Society Book Prize. Billington, an influential Western historian, commended the book in the *Washington Post* as the "best book yet written on the overland migrations."

In 2009 Bluffton University dedicated the John D. Unruh Archive in the Musselman Library, where his papers are now preserved.

### Biography

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- Born: 1937, Marion , South Dakota
- Died: 1976, Toledo, Ohio
- Married: Elda Waltner, 1967
- Historian, college professor

### Achievements

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- Associate Professor of History, Bluffton College
- Author of *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60*