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Death was a difficult and lonely event on the plains when many families traveled without close kin or the same support groups they relied on back in their settled lives. In addition, they often lacked the time, materials, and rituals that mark death and burial in more established communities making the transition even more difficult. Previous scholars of the Oregon-California Trail have maintained that due to the necessities of keeping speed on the trail, scarcity of resources and an emotional detachment to death, emigrants put little effort into mourning the deceased and rushed through burials, sometimes merely throwing dirt on top of the corpse. However, using diaries and letters from the Oregon and California Trails, it is possible to demonstrate that deaths could not be separated from the ritualized mourning and burial practices typical of nineteenth century United States culture.

“DEEP IS THE GRAVE, AND SILENT:” DEATH AND MOURNING ON THE
OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS

By

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To Evan, my husband and best friend.

When the zombies come, I promise not to feed you to them.

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- Andrea Mary Binder, May 2011

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“Deep is the grave, and silent:”¹

Death and Mourning on the Oregon-California Trails

INTRODUCTION

In 1853, emigrant Velina Williams, traveling the Oregon Trail, wrote a message in her diary to her sister who was traveling the trail some days ahead of her. “Dear sister, shall we meet again in this world, or is our separation for time? Oh, may God protect you through all the way...”² The concern Williams felt was understandable as emigrants were very much aware of the dangers they faced during the five to six month journey across the plains. Disease and accident left many western bound travelers buried in make –shift coffins along the western trails. The number of graves seen and deaths experienced played on the minds of emigrants even after their journey. Pioneer Loren Brown Hastings stated to a friend that “I look back upon the long, dangerous and precarious emigrant road with a degree of romance and pleasure; but to others it is the graveyard of their friends.”³

Death was a difficult and lonely event on the plains when many families traveled without close kin or the same support groups they relied on back in their settled lives. Between the years 1841 and 1867, the Oregon-California Trail carried approximately 300,000 people to Oregon, California, Washington and other Western territories. One of

¹ Idaho State Univeristy: The Gold Rush. "Wilhelm Keil." <http://www.isu.edu/~trimmich/00.ar.keil.html> (5 April 2010). This line comes from a poem written originally in German by Dr. Wilhelm Keil, whose son died before their planned trip west and they carried him in a casket over the trail to their destination in Willapa, Washington. This family’s story provides an interesting contrast to the many families who buried their dead on the trail, rather than carry them to their new home. And, is, at the same time, a sort of representative story for the experience of the trail for many other families as a trail ending in death.

² Velina Williams, “Diary of a Trip Across the Plains by Mrs. Velina A. Willams,” Transcriptions of the Forty-Seventh Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association, Copy, Paul Henderson Collection, Box 4.

³ Oregon-California Trails Association. "Life and Death on the Oregon Trail." http://www.octa-trails.org/learn/people_places/articles_life_death.php (6 April 2010). I have quoted this from the Oregon-California Trails Association website due to lack of access to the printed diary of Loren Hastings.

the greatest fears these nineteenth-century emigrants faced during the journey to the West was death from sickness, injury or Indian attack. While the likelihood of problems from American Indians was slim, the chance of someone within the party receiving a mortal injury or illness was likely. The conservative estimate of the proportion of deaths on the trail between 1842 and 1859 is one in seventeen emigrants.⁴ The number of deaths associated with the overland trails brings into question how death and burial on the remote frontier was dealt with by families and party members. Citizens in settled communities had certain standards and goals for viewing death and dealing with burial. Emigrants who encountered it in the trail environment often lacked the time, materials, and rituals that culturally marked—and mitigated—death and burial. Yet, they still felt similar spiritual and meaningful connections to the deceased and their resting place that reflected the nineteenth century attitude of mourning the dead.

While library shelves are filled with books and articles on the travails of Oregon-California Trail travel, the amount of space dedicated to examining the ways emigrants dealt with mourning and burial on the overland trails is limited. In addition, there is a presumption that due to the necessities of keeping speed on the trail, lack of materials for burials and an emotional detachment that overtook emigrants due to the overwhelming number of deaths that they experienced, emigrants abandoned the death customs common in the East. However, when reading the diaries of emigrants it is apparent that deaths could not be separated from the ritualized mourning practices of the nineteenth century.

Previous scholars of the Oregon-California Trail have maintained that emigrants put little effort into mourning the dead and rushed through burials, sometimes merely

⁴ Merrill J. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road : The Covered Wagon Mainline Via Fort Kearny to Fort Laramie* (Lincoln, NE.: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 82.

throwing dirt on top of the corpse. According to Merrill Mattes' eminent work *The Great Platte River Road*, if a death fell within the first few weeks on the trail there might be "full dress funeral services," but as the trip continued on "...burials and funeral services were performed perfunctorily, sometimes with indecent haste."⁵ Mattes also quotes traveler Helen Carpenter's belief that emigrants were "...robbed of all sentiment," as an example for "...a numbing process of dehumanization" over death on the trail.⁶ It is important to recognize that while quick burials were not uncommon nor briefly mentioned deaths rare, experiencing the death of a family member or friend was common in the nineteenth century when both the general life expectancy was low and the rate of infant mortality high. Thus, scholars reading diaries must take into account that a death on the trail may not have the same influence on the diary writer and their emigrant party as a twentieth century reader may expect.

Lillian Schlissel's text on women's experience on the trails *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* examines women's trail life from a cultural history perspective, and thus is able to provide some background information on the nineteenth-century ideal of a "good death" and a small mention of period mourning rituals. Yet, this detail is brief and the author provides little analysis of the many accounts of death she examines in terms of period death rituals. Schlissel also follows the notion that deaths on the trail were faced with a detachment. She writes that "...grief was... 'schooled in'," due to diaries moving on to other topics in the days after a death and that "There was no time to mourn and no time to grieve..."⁷

⁵ Mattes, 87.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 51.

Some trail historians only touch on the mourning or burial process on the trails, rather limiting their dedication to the subject to the statistics of death and causes. Such a case is in John Unruh's *The Plains Across*, where Unruh provides a thoroughly researched account of the statistics of trail deaths in his notes and an overview of the causes of death in his main text, but provides no analysis of the culture of death among the emigrants. In his *Saleratus and Sagebrush*, historian Robert Munkres provides a number of quotations about deaths and burials on the trail, but does so without placing them in the context of mourning or burial practices. The only noticeable place that he adds a mention of a mourning ritual is in a footnote concerning the saving of a lock of hair from the deceased, for which he adds, "This custom apparently was widespread. On occasion the hair of the deceased was arranged in some artistic fashion and framed."⁸

Furthermore, Julie Roy Jeffrey's popular *Frontier Women* provides no significant discussion of death on the trail, let alone an analysis of trail death culture. This is strange as women's diaries often provide the most material related to mourning practices and burials, to the point that keeping track of deaths is almost a preoccupation for them. This same lack of attention to mourning and death on the trail is seen in John Faragher's *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*. As the premise of Faragher's work is an examination of the gendered relationship between emigrant men and women, it is odd to leave out a discussion of how they dealt with death and mourning, especially because attending the dead and dying fell within the nineteenth-century women's domestic sphere.

⁸ Robert L. Munkres, *Saleratus and Sagebrush: The Oregon Trail Through Wyoming* (Wyoming: Wyoming State Archives, Museums and Historical Department, 1980), 81, note 83.

Though there are no books dedicated to death on the Oregon-California Trails, there are a few articles written in the last two decades that do concentrate on the subject. One of these was the inspiration for this thesis, ““I have not told half we suffered”: Overland Trail Women’s Narratives and the Genre of Suppressed Textual Mourning” by Carey R. Voeller from the University of Kansas, printed in the literature journal *Legacy*. Voeller states that “These writers [female trail diary authors] treat death briefly and momentarily, and their loss and mourning rarely serve as a focal point in their narratives, as such events do in New England elegiac writings.”⁹ She goes on: “...the Overland Trail served as the antithesis to the nineteenth century home and the cult of mourning it supported.”¹⁰ Voeller’s belief that trail diaries do not always focus heavily on death is correct, but her assumption that this means that emigrant women were thus attempting to construct themselves as strong is overestimating this lack of focus. True, travelers did not usually have time to collect memento mori’s and write condolences or prepare bodies in the same way they did in their settled lives, but a lessening of mourning practices does not set the trail as the “antithesis” of nineteenth century mourning rituals.

A second article is Richard L. Rieck’s “A Geography of Death on the Oregon-California Trail, 1840-1860,” published in 1991 in the *Overland Journal*. Rieck’s article provides an overview of the causes of death on the trail using statistics gleaned from primary sources such as emigrant diaries. While useful to historians needing a reference for causes and numbers of death, Rieck’s background as a geographer limited his work to

⁹ Carey R. Voeller, ““I have not told half we suffered”: Overland Trail Women’s Narratives and the Genre of Suppressed Textual Mourning.” *Legacy* 23, no. 2 (2006): 150.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 151.

statistics and he provides no cultural or social historical information regarding death on the trails.

The purpose of this thesis is to show that if one examines overland trail diaries and archaeological investigations of trail burials, in light of widespread nineteenth-century beliefs about death and burial, that emigrants did try to adhere closely to period mourning and burial practices. This is not to say that there were not hasty burials or that some travelers did not develop a detachment to the deaths around them, but there is still a noticeable adherence to typical death practices of the time. Examining the way emigrants viewed death on the trail and how it compared to practices and beliefs in a settled community will allow historians to better understand how migration affects customs and to what degree emigrants attempted to retain them.

This will be done through the examination of primary resources such as trail diaries and letters written by emigrants on the Oregon - California Trails with brief reference to other western trails such as the Bozeman and Santa Fe and books and periodical resources that influenced the way nineteenth-century society understood death, the mourning process and burial. While using primary sources such as written first person accounts creates the problem of relying on the personal perceptions of the individual writing, these sources provide the only glimpse into the personal and community based experience of death on the overland trails. These sources will be used to answer a number of important questions: In what ways did emigrant's burial and mourning practices reflect the typical deathways of the United States during the mid-nineteenth century? How was death and burial perceived differently? What alterations did emigrants make to burials in order to keep them consistent with what period standards dictated?

The first chapter provides a brief look at the causes of death on the Oregon-California Trails and the medical limitations emigrants faced trying to treat illnesses and injuries. The second chapter will provide an overview of mid-nineteenth century deathways in the United States, roughly covering the period from 1820-1880 as these are the years most affected by westward migration. While the 1840's are the notable beginning of Oregon-California Trail movement, it is important to include at least two decades of time in which emigrants who traveled west as adults would have grown up and been exposed to period death practices. The third chapter, using both diaries and a recent bioarchaeology thesis, presents a picture of how emigrants practiced mourning rituals such as creating death scenes that portray the Christian ideal of a "good death," referencing the ways nineteenth century culture explained children's deaths and how emigrant burial locations and actual internments reflect period customs.

CHAPTER 1: THE EXPERIENCE AND CAUSES OF DEATH ON THE OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS

Deaths and subsequent burials on the Oregon-California Trails were a reality all emigrants moving to the West faced. Few emigrants fail to mention the death of a party member or seeing graves along the way. One emigrant, Francis Sawyer, wrote in her diary that “Today we have passed a great many new-made graves & we hear of many cases of cholera....we are becoming fearful for our own safety [sic].”¹¹ Mattes estimate of one in seventeen emigrants, about 15,000 thousand, dying on the trail is a conservative estimate and there are sources such as John G. Ellenbecker in his article “Graves Along the Oregon Trail,” who estimated it at about five graves per mile with nearly 4,000 miles of trail (20,000 thousand total) and Sarah Wisner’s estimation of 30,000 deaths between 1842-1859.¹²

Although emigrants worried about Indian attacks, the likelihood of such an event was low. According to John Unruh, the “less than 400 emigrants killed by Indians during the antebellum era represent a mere 4 percent of the estimated 10,000 or more emigrant deaths.”¹³ A chart provided by Unruh in his book *The Plains Across* shows that between 1840-1860 an estimated 362 emigrants were killed by American Indians while 426 American Indians were killed by emigrants.¹⁴ However, Richard Rieck, whose article “A Geography of Death of the Oregon-California Trail, 1840 – 1860” provides an overview

¹¹ Mrs. Francis Sawyer, “Diary.” Manuscript. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley as quoted in Lillian Schlissel’s *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 112.

¹² John G. Ellenbecker, “Graves Along the Oregon Trail.” *Pony Express Courier* (November 1936), 9 and Merrill J. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road : The Covered Wagon Mainline Via Fort Kearny to Fort Laramie* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 82.

¹³ John D., Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 408.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 185.

of the causes of death on the trails and the statistics associated with them, states that American Indian attack was second only to cholera as the most frequent cause of death on the trails. Using a database of trail statistics, Rieck says that “nearly three out of four deaths due to Indian attack occurred in the second half of the journey.”¹⁵ Both Rieck and Unruh are examining the same period from 1840-1860, but have very different ideas of the most common cause of emigrant death as Unruh states that he believes trail accidents were the second most common cause of death. It is possible that this difference in opinion over the placement of American Indians as cause for emigrant death is due to the number of sources consulted by each researcher and the factors considered into determining cause of death.

As Unruh and other Western historians have pointed out, disease was by far the largest cause of emigrant deaths. A number of ailments shadowed the already rough trek through barren plains and rugged mountains, among them cholera and mountain fever, both of which posed a very real threat to the lives of pioneers. While in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California Trail emigrant, William H. Kilgore, wrote in his 1850 diary that “Together with the Change of Climate and Diet as a matter of course would Cause a great deal of Sickness, of which the Diareah or Bludy flux Seems to be the most fatal. The Skivry Does not prevail at present much as formerly...”¹⁶ Emigrants concerned themselves with their health as those who became sick on the journey would find themselves with little access to care, especially if the sickness was one known for high morbidity rates. In reading through emigrant diaries from the trail, statements over

¹⁵ Richard L. Rieck, “A Geography of Death on the Oregon-California Trail, 1840-1860,” *Overland Journal* 9, no. 1: 15.

¹⁶ William H. Kilgore, “The Kilgore Journal of an Overland Journey to California in the Year 1850,” ed. Joyce Rockwood Muench (New York: Hastings House, 1949), 59.

personal health concerns or that of others in the party are common. Historian John Mack Farragher states that "...writing on health took its place immediately after notes on work as a topic for concern."¹⁷

The 1849 California Trail narrative of emigrant William J. Pleasants expressed the hope of more than likely just his own wagon train when he wrote :

Since 1849 a terrible epidemic of Cholera had been raging in the States of the Union, claiming its victims by the thousands, but we naturally supposed that being so far away from the busy haunts of men, and the noisome influences of over-crowded cities, living clean lives, out own hearts close to the great heart of nature and beating in unison with it, that we would be beyond the reach of the destroyer.¹⁸

However, as his own emigrant party soon discovered, as many other trail emigrants would, the number one killer on the trails was cholera, or what was sometimes called the "bloody flux." A water borne illness, cholera causes gastro-intestinal symptoms that often result in severe dehydration. If treated quickly, patients can survive, if left untreated they can die within hours as emigrant Winfield Scott Ebey wrote in his diary, "Mr. S.P. Burr this morning at daylight was taken violently ill with the Cholera & at 3 oclck this afternoon he was a corpse."¹⁹ Not every year was a "cholera year," but it was an epidemic in the West between 1848 and 1855.²⁰ After discussing occurrences of illness in another camp and passing graves on the trailside, one woman wrote that they were "all from

¹⁷ John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), 13.

¹⁸ William J. Pleasants, *Twice Across the Plains: 1849 & 1856* (Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 198), 16.

¹⁹ Winfield Scott Ebey, *The 1854 Oregon Trail Diary of Winfield Scott Ebey*, ed. Susan Badger Doyle and Fred W. Dykes. Emigrant Trails Historical Series No. 2 (Oregon-California Trails Association, Independence, MO, 1997), 85.

²⁰ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 409.

Aseatic cholera in its worst form from the beginning to the end of the journey.”²¹ While emigrant John Clark wrote in his 1852 account of the trip that :

We pitched our tents but soon found we were in a distressed crowd. Many Oregon families. One woman & two men lay dead on the grass & some more ready to die of cholera, measles & small pocks. A few men were digging graves, others tending the sick. Women & children crying, some hunting medicine & none to be found scarcely; those that had were loathe to spare. With heartfelt sorrow we looked around for some time until I felt unwell myself. Ordered the teams got up & move forward one mile so as to be out of hearing of crying & suffering.²²

Interestingly, cholera was only a major concern on the section of the trail before Fort Laramie, which was otherwise the easiest portion of the journey.²³ After Fort Laramie, mountain fever became a concern. The symptoms included a high fever and pain throughout the body and was spread by ticks. This and numerous other illnesses threatened the health and lives of trail pioneers, including scurvy, smallpox, scarlet fever, whooping cough, dysentery, and typhus.

The presence of a physician for trail emigrants to rely on in cases of illness or sickness was unlikely. To make matters worse, even if medical care by a trained physician was available the treatment provided would not necessarily prevent loss of life. Doctors in the nineteenth century could not claim an esoteric body of knowledge. Common people had “similar concepts of disease and bodily structures and could easily comprehend doctors’ language.”²⁴

²¹ Elizabeth Keegan, “A Teenager’s Letter from Sacramento,” in *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails*, ed. Kenneth, L. Holmes, Vol. 4 (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1983-1993), 24.

²² Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*, 84.

²³ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 408.

²⁴ Emily K. Abel, *Hearts of Wisdom: American Women Caring for Kin, 1850-1940* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000), 71.

To some degree, early nineteenth century medical understanding clung to the classical theory of humors, or that the state of the human body depended on the balance of bodily fluids (black and white bile, blood, and phlegm).²⁵ According to Richard Shryock's *Medicine in America*, "...cures were sought through depletion procedures (bleeding, purging, etc.) which would rid the body of excess or impure fluids...and the use of a complex list of drugs supposed to achieve similar results."²⁶ The use of pukes and purges is represented in trail diaries.

In addition, the understanding of how diseases spread was still being formed. Although bacteriology and parasitology had begun in the early 1830's, in the decades leading up to 1870, bad "airs and waters" were still being attributed to the spread of infection.²⁷ Thus, one doctor heading west in 1849, Israel Shipman Lord, wrote of his experience treating cholera in his journal on May 6: "A single dose of Laudanum...with pepper, camphor musk, ammonia, peppermint, or other stimulants, usually effected a cure in a few minutes. If pain in the bowels was present, another dose was given...The medicines were aided by friction, mustard plasters, and other external applications."²⁸ Such treatment, while lessening symptoms, were not cures and likely relied on guesswork. This lack of understanding of treatments for diseases encountered and their frequency on the trail makes a statement by Amelia Hadley in her 1851 diary all the more meaningful, "...health is a great blessing on this road."²⁹

²⁵ Richard Harrison Shryock, *Medicine in America: Historical Essays* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1966), 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

²⁸ Israel Shipman Pelton Lord, "At the Extremity of Civilization:" *An Illinois Physician's Journey to California in 1849* ed. Necia Dixon Liles (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc, 1995), 15.

²⁹ Amelia Hadley, "Journal of Travails to Oregon," in *Best Of Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 2008), 129.

Women were often responsible for the care of the sick and injured on the trail as they conformed to nineteenth century expectations of women's proscribed role in family and community life. As all domestic needs and arts fell within the woman's sphere, one aspect of a woman's role was that of healer and nurse for both her own family and at times neighbors and friends. Women cared for ill children and husbands, managed injuries and helped the infirm. Girls were socialized into the role of caregiver at an early age, often helping their mothers care for sick neighbors or family members.³⁰ Although not trained in a professional sense, nineteenth century women learned medical practice both empirically and by knowledge passed down from mothers and other older women in the community. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, author of *A Midwife's Tale*, writes that women's learning of medical practices was "incremental, a slow build up of seemingly casual experience."³¹ Women kept recipes that dictated how things such as cough syrup could be made as well as information on medical "techniques".³² The April 28, 1853 trail diary entry of Velina Williams is one instance of the use of women on the trail to care for the ill:

A woman near was taken sick and sent to our camp for assistance. Fidelia, Dorcas and Charlotte went; found her in hard convulsions; administered such remedies as suggested themselves to them. F. returned. leaving her somewhat relieved. I went to take her place as watch with C. for the night. Applied mustard to her stomach and feet. In the course of an hour she became quite easy.³³

³⁰ Abel, *Hearts of Wisdom*, 39.

³¹ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 62.

³² *Ibid.*, 122.

³³ Velina A. Williams, "Diary of a Trip Across the Plains in 1853 by Mrs. Veina A. Williams," Copied from the Transcripts of the Forty-Seventh Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association, Portland, June 19, 1919. Portland, Oregon, Chausse – Prudhomme Co., Printers, 1922, pages 7-8, Box 4, Paul and Helen Henderson Collection, North Platte Valley Museum, Gering, Nebraska.

Serious injuries and accidents were also a cause of mortality on the trail. A common occurrence were injuries to emigrants cause by wagons and cattle. Keturah Belknap, in her 1848 diary, recorded that they, "...had only gone about 5 miles when a little boy was run over by the wagon and killed instantly."³⁴ Children were commonly killed in this fashion, often times falling out of the wagon and being run over, but even adults received injuries in this way. The John A. Hunt Wagon Train of 1856, emigrating to Utah, experienced one such incident, "During the stampede, Sister Ester Walters, from Cardiff, Wales, was knocked down and so badly injured, that she expired in a few minutes afterwards, leaving a babe four weeks old..."³⁵ But the most frequent accidents leading to death were accidental shootings and drownings during river crossings. Merrill Mattes in his *The Great Platte River Road* writes that "'Shot himself accidentally' was the monotonous refrain on emigrant grave markers..."³⁶ One of the more descriptive accounts concerning an accidental shooting is from an August 1, 1864 letter written by William Davenport about the death of Martin Ringo:

Just after daylight on the morning of the 30th ult. Mr. Ringo stepped on the top of the wagon, as I suppose, for the purpose of looking around to see if Indians were in sight, and his shot gun went off accidentally in his own hands, the load entering his right eye and coming out at the top of his head. At the report of the gun I saw his hat blown up twenty feet in the air, and his brains were scattered in all directions.³⁷

³⁴ Keturah Belknap, "The Commentaries of Keturah Belknap," in *Best of Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails*, ed. Kenneth, L. Holmes (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 2008), 34.

³⁵ "The John A. Hunt Wagon Train Emigrating Journal," in *Emigrating Journals of The Willie and Martin Handcart Companies and the Hunt and Hodgett Wagon Trains*, ed. Lynne Slater Turner (Taylorsville, UT: L.S. Turner 1996), 180.

³⁶ Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*, 91.

³⁷ Mary Ringo, "The Journal of Mary Ringo, 1864," in *Best of Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails*, ed. Kenneth, L. Holmes (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 2008), 291.

Drownings were also common as emigrant trains attempted to cross rivers, sometimes having to float their wagons across. According to Richard Rieck's article "A Geography of Death on the Oregon-California Trail, 1840-1860," most drownings occurred in three main areas near Fort Laramie, at the Green River Crossings, and an area on the North Platte between the Mormon Ferry near Casper and Deer Creek.³⁸ Sadly, Unruh believes that almost every diary recorded a drowning seen in person or a report of one, and writes of one day in 1847 where two women lost their husbands and nine children their fathers attempting to cross the Snake River.³⁹

The diary of Amelia Stewart Knight tells of a similar plight, "Here we passed a train of wagons on their way back, the head man had drowned a few days before, in a river called Elkhorn, while getting some cattle across, and his wife was lying in the wagon quite sick, and children were mourning for a father gone. With sadness and pity I passed those who perhaps a few days before had been well and happy as ourselves."⁴⁰ William H. Kilgore, traveling to California in 1850, wrote in his diary that his party passed a "fresh grave here of a man that was taken out of the River yesterday" and later in the same entry noted there was "A Drowned man taken out of the river while we are nooning here."⁴¹

³⁸ Richard Rieck, "A Geography of Death on the Oregon-California Trail, 1840-1860." *Overland Journal* 9, no. 1 (1991): 15.

³⁹ Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 410.

⁴⁰ Amelia Stewart Knight, "Diary of Mrs. Amelia Stewart Knight, 1853." Idaho State University: The Gold Rush. <http://www.isu.edu/~trinmich/00.ar.knight.html> (8 April 2010).

⁴¹ Kilgore, *Kilgore Journal of an Overland Journey to California in the Year 1850*, 47.

When reading the diaries of Oregon-California Trail emigrants it is nearly impossible to find one that does not mention the death of a party or family member, worry about death and burial on the plains, or give an account of the number of graves seen on the way. As Samuel Dunass aptly expressed:

For several hours an almost unbroken train of wagons were wending their way over the vast plains towards the far west. . . Some out of such a large number may never reach the point of their destination, and the grave of an emigrant with an humble inscription on a board, rendered the conjecture to which we have referred, a positive certainty.⁴²

The number of deaths experienced and recorded brings into question how emigrants dealt both emotionally and practically with death on the trail and how their actions compare to typical nineteenth century death culture.

⁴² Samuel Rutherford Dundass, *The Journals of Samuel Rutherford Dundass & George Keller: Crossing the Plains to California in 1849-1850* (Fairfield, WA.: Ye Galleon Press, 1983), 15.

CHAPTER 2: DEATH AND RITUALIZED MOURNING IN WHITE FAMILIES IN
THE UNITED STATES, A NINETEENTH CENTURY PERSPECTIVE,
1800-1890

During the nineteenth century in the United States, the experience of death and mourning for the majority of white middle-and upper-class Americans played a prescribed and significant role in their daily lives. In fact, the religious and cultural understandings of the period led to what was a cultural affinity toward death and mourning. Americans practiced a Christian concept that idealized what a “good” death was and collected memento moris such as a loved one’s hair turned into a necklace or broach, photographs taken of the deceased laid out before a burial and wrote condolence letter praising the dead and how well they died.

To many contemporary Americans the nineteenth century focus on death seems macabre and unnecessary. However, this is largely because death has been simplified and suppressed during the last century. Unlike our contemporary experience of dying, the nineteenth century experience of death permeated its cultural world. Not only because death was more frequent, and thus more accepted, but it was experienced in a largely first-hand manner with deaths occurring mostly at home and with the deceased laid out in the family living room for viewing before burial. In order to examine nineteenth century mourning practices, this chapter will use primary source material such as letters and diaries and secondary source material written by nineteenth century historians and historians of period death and mourning culture.⁴³

⁴³ When direct quotations are taken from period sources, the term [sic] will not be used when awkward grammar or spellings are present, as this distracts from the quotation and the paper as a whole.

One of the largest factors to consider when examining the culture of mourning in the nineteenth century United States was the frequency of death in most homes. In 1850, the mortality rates show that 21.6 % of children died during infancy.⁴⁴ Childhood diseases were the normal culprit for a young child's death. Measles, whooping cough, diphtheria, diarrheal diseases (leading to death from severe dehydration), and various fever complaints meant that parents and families were likely to experience the burial and mourning of at least one of their children. As one mother wrote in her November 14, 1858 diary entry "...Again has he blessed me with a little babe and to make that blessing doubly dear, she is a girl--- Father in Heaven I pray thee that thou wilt preserve her in life and health, and enable us fully to appreciate the immortal soul thou hast given in our charge -- While I write she lies in her cradle the embodiment of health."⁴⁵

In addition, the life expectancy for adults shows that families dealt with not only the death of their children, but of adult members, also. If one was to live past the vulnerable years of early childhood (birth-5 years of age), the average life expectancy for a woman in the United States in the year 1850 was only 51.2 years, while the life expectancy for a man was 50.1 years⁴⁶ Although women typically live longer than men in contemporary society, the high rate of death associated with childbirth could partially account for the nearly equal life expectancy during the mid-nineteenth century.

⁴⁴ Michael Haines, "Fertility and Mortality in the United States." *Economic History Association*. <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/haines.demography> (15 Nov 2010).

⁴⁵ Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, "Letter from Ella Gertrude Thomas, November 14, 1858," in *Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*, ed. Virginia Ingraham Burr (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 469.

⁴⁶ Paul H. Jacobson, "An Estimate of the Expectation of Life in the United States in 1850." *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (1957): 198 – 199.

The frequency of death and the closeness that family members had the deceased in at-home funerals and even preparation of the deceased for burial by family themselves lessened the uneasiness individuals of the period had with the event. Instead, nineteenth-century culture embraced the mourning process. Religious historian Gary Laderman, states that “From the somber tolls of the church bell to the recognizable mourning dress, from the large number of printed and posted elegies to the iconographic expressions found in graveyards, the public acknowledgement of death was an accepted feature of social life before the Civil War.”⁴⁷ Often referred to as the “cult of mourning,” the rituals surrounding a death were meant to help remember the deceased and ease the transition for the survivors. The main aspects of nineteenth mourning rituals consisted of the taking and creation of *memento mori* (a Latin phrase meaning “Remember you must die”), such as death portraits of the recently deceased, jewelry created from locks of hair, in addition to the eulogization of children’s deaths through poetry and the creation of condolence letters by family and friends.

Nineteenth Century Religious Influence on Period Death Culture

Historical attitudes towards death are influenced by the historical context, which includes contemporary religious beliefs as well as major events. The nineteenth century mourning and burial practices after a death were based upon Christian religious understanding of death and the afterlife. This religious influence led to a ritualized practice created around ensuring the eternal happiness of the deceased’s soul and mitigating the grief of the surviving family and friends. Throughout the nineteenth

⁴⁷ Gary Laderman, "Locating the Dead: A Cultural History of Death in the Antebellum, Anglo-Protestant Communities of the Northeast." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63, no. 1 (1995): 31.

century these mourning practices, centered on the notion of a “good death,” were a unifying concept and would have been familiar practices for Oregon-California Trail emigrants.

The religious changes that occurred between the late seventeenth and the early nineteenth centuries were an important influence on the manner in which death was viewed. Seventeenth century Puritan Christianity taught even the young members of their society that instead of looking forward to death as a release from struggle, they faced a reality of torment in hell if their souls were not prepared. One preacher wrote:

What a dismal thing it will be when a Child shall see his Father at the right Hand of Christ in the day of Judgment, but himself at His left Hand: And when his Father shall joyn with Christ in passing a Sentence of Eternal Death upon him, saying, Amen O Lord, thou art Righteous in thus Judging. And when after the Judgment, children shall see their Father going with Christ to Heaven, but themselves going away into Everlasting Punishment!⁴⁸

The Puritan belief, following Calvinist teachings, taught predestination. No amount of good work on earth could provide salvation. It was God’s choice alone, and “God had already chosen who would be in heaven or hell, and each believer had no way of knowing which group they were in.”⁴⁹ As David E. Stannard states in his article “Death and the Puritan Child,” to the “...adult Puritan contemplation of death frequently ‘would make the flesh tremble.’”⁵⁰

The Second Great Awakening (1790’s -1840’s), altered believers’ relationship with their faith, turning their belief away from the impersonal God and fear of Calvinist

⁴⁸ Increase Mather, “An Earnest Exhortation to the Children of New England to Exhale the God of their Fathers,” (Boston, 1711), 35; as quoted in David E. Stannard, “Death and the Puritan Child,” in *Death in America*, ed. David E. Stannard (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 24.

⁴⁹Robert N. Barger and Kay Kizer, “Puritans.” *History of American Education Web Project*, <http://www.nd.edu/~rbarger/www7/puritans.html> (1 April 2011).

⁵⁰ Stannard, “Death and the Puritan Child,” 28.

Christianity to a more spiritual, personal understanding of God. One of the most significant changes was a move from the Calvinist idea of predestination, to a belief in a “universal salvation.”⁵¹ This difference between the Calvinist Puritan view of death and the post-Second Great Awakening nineteenth century understanding of death can be viewed in hymnal lyrics from each period. For example, these circa 1724 lyrics from Issac Watts:

Since no device, nor work is found,
Nor faith, nor hope, beneath the ground...

There are no acts of pardon past
In the cold grave, to which we haste;
But darkness, death, and long despair
Reign in eternal silence there.⁵²

Instead of bringing hope to the singer, these lyrics contain the typical early American imagery of the end of life not as a reward in a peaceful heaven, but as a cold, silent prison. Compare those words to lyrics from the 1859 hymnal “Nearer My God to Thee,” which contains lyrics that express hope of being closer to God and of traveling to heaven rather than being left in the cold, lonely earth as the previous hymn contained:

Tho' like the wanderer,
The sun goes down,
Darkness be over me,
My rest a stone;
Yet in my dreams I'd be
Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee!

⁵¹ Donald Scott, “Evangelicalism, Revivalism, and the Second Great Awakening,” The National Humanities Center, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nineteen/nkeyinfo/nevanrev.htm> (1 April 2011).

⁵² Issac Watts, “Wells,” Popular American Hymns of the 18th and 19th Centuries, Benjamin Robert Tubb. <http://www.pdmusic.org/hymns/Wells.txt> (30 March 2011).

There let my way appear,
Steps unto heaven;
All that Thou sendest me,
In mercy given;
Angels to beckon me
Nearer, my God, to Thee....⁵³

While seventeenth century Puritans feared death and the grave under the belief of predestination, nineteenth century Christians embraced death as a fulfillment of God's plan and turned from the assumption of damnation to the assumption of heavenly reward. This meant that the dying should accept their death and die peacefully amongst family and friends, perhaps repenting of sins, but not fearing a pre-defined destination. For nineteenth century individuals, "...in a general, endlessly stated sentiment, death represented escape from the world's sadness, and end to the "pilgrimage."..."⁵⁴

Following the Second Great Awakenings and the growth of the evangelical religious movement, the idea of a good death was emphasized in period media and the values of the evangelical church affected even those who did not attend one.⁵⁵ The *ars moriendi*, or the art of dying, taught that death was a test of courage and that a good death might make up for a life lived in a less Christian manner. Before dying an individual could make their peace with God and ask forgiveness for their sins in front of family and friends acting as witnesses as a way of clearing the soul and preparing the mind for death. This importance placed on confession and a prepared death can even be seen in the contemporary and historical legal system with the idea of the Dying Declaration, which

⁵³ Sarah Francis Adams "Nearer, My God, to Thee," *Popular American Hymns of the 18th and 19th Centuries*, Benjamin Robert Tubb. http://www.pdmusic.org/hymns/Nearer_My_God_to_Thee.txt (30 March 2011).

⁵⁴ Lewis O. Saum, "Death in Pre-Civil War America," in *Death in America*, ed. David E. Stannard (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 48.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

states that if an individual, who is aware of their impending death, makes a statement that otherwise would not be admissible in court as hearsay, their dying declaration will be legally permissible. This is because of a traditional assumption that there is a “special likelihood of truthfulness of deathbed statements.”⁵⁶

Period poetry, magazines, literature and songs involved the idea of a good Christian death and such information was available to all. Even children’s periodicals taught the idea of dying a good, Christian death. One 1837 children’s magazine has an account of a young boy’s death which contained his submission to death and its pains, “His patience was wonderful for so young a child...he never was heard to utter a complaint..he would meekly observe, ‘Oh! This is nothing to what my dear Saviour suffered for me.’”⁵⁷ Another account from a girls’ magazine states, “There was nothing very sad about it. After all there is nothing very terrible in leaving sorrow and pain for everlasting gladness.”⁵⁸

Nineteenth century Christian beliefs also helped to provide the dying and their families with the strength to submit to death. Harry Goulburn, aware of his nearness to death, believed that his physical pain was meant to “wean away my soul for the earth.”⁵⁹ Goulburn acted according to proper nineteenth century Christian understanding by viewing a trying death as preparation for his afterlife. In the account of one woman’s death from tuberculosis, she “assured her father she was ‘quite happy,’ prayed that God’s

⁵⁶ McCormick’s Handbook of the Law of Evidence, ed. Edward W. Clearly (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Co., 1972), 680.

⁵⁷ Diana Dixon, “The Two Faces of Death: Children’s Magazines and their Treatment of Death in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Death, Ritual and Bereavement*, ed. Ralph Houlbrooke (New York: Routledge, 1989), 142.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁵⁹ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 42.

will be done, and asked for forgiveness for her sins,” while her father wrote afterwards that “her brightness and resignation indeed deprives death of every sting.”⁶⁰

In addition, the Christian consolation that death was uncontrollable and the will of God helped to support individuals through their own death or through that of family members or friends. According to historian Craig Thompson Friend, this view of death as the will of God particularly appealed to Southern culture in the United States. The will of an almighty God could be equated with the will of the family patriarch, the “unrivaled dominance of the man in familial, communal...and religious contexts.”⁶¹ Virginian poet Margaret Preston recorded in an 1854 letter the death of her mother, saying:

But *the inevitable* -- how inexorable it is! God's will may not be resisted; or if it is, we only sink down at last to a lower depth of grief, baffled and weakened by our poor vain struggles against it. I think we, one and all, have been enabled to say, even amidst the fierce waves that have gone over us, "Not as I will, but as Thou wilt!"⁶²

The concept of reunions in heaven was another important feature of the nineteenth century Christian understanding of death. Nineteenth century religious beliefs focused on the hope of immortality in a peaceful heavenly state and this belief was relied upon by individuals after the death of family members and friends. A recently widowed husband wrote that he knew his wife was “in the unclouded enjoyment of God’s love,” while another believed her sister was “safe at home” and her sister would have a “joyful” surprise to find herself “in the Saviour’s presence.”⁶³ As the deceased were waiting for

⁶⁰ Ibid., 43.

⁶¹ Craig Thompson Friend, "Little Eva's Last Breath: Childhood Death and Parental Mourning in "Our Family, White and Black"," in *Family Values in the Old South*, ed. Craig Thompson Friend and Anya Jabour (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), 67.

⁶² Margaret Junkin Preston, "Letter from Margaret Junkin Preston to Charles F. McKay, June, 1854," in *The Life and Letters of Margaret Junkin Preston*, ed. Elizabeth Preston Allen (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1903), 378.

⁶³ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 270.

them in heaven, period culture taught that they would one day be reunited. The imagery of joyful families in the afterlife was common in the period and, thus, elicited comments such as “Grant that I may join her with Thee never to part again...” from a woman who recently lost her sister.⁶⁴

Memento Mori's and Remembrance of the Deceased

Historian Patricia Jalland states that “the memory of the deceased was central to the grieving process for Christians and unbelievers in the nineteenth century,” and it is within these memory practices that the deceased are idealized in order to cope with the initial period of mourning.⁶⁵ For nineteenth century mourners, this memorization took the form of memento mori such as mourning jewelry and post-mortem photography and in the form of condolence letters.

The advent of photography in the 1840's led to one of the most popular forms of memento mori, death photographs and portraits. While strange to contemporary Americans, a common way of remembering the deceased in the period was through post-mortem likenesses taken soon after death and kept by family members. These were a way of immortalizing the dead and remembering them in a serene state. Death portraits might be especially important for recently deceased infants and small children, as they could be the only pictures a family might have of the child. Death masks, made of plaster, were a similar tradition and were a common way for the wealthier bereaved to remember their dead.⁶⁶ These photographs and portraits could play a part in the idealization process

⁶⁴ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 271.

⁶⁵ Patricia Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 284.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

mentioned earlier. One woman commenting on the death portrait of her brother-in-law, said “His face was beautiful like the face of a saint as I imagine it to be...”⁶⁷ Another woman said of the portrait of her mother that she thought of her “...like what I should imagine an angel to be.”⁶⁸ This play of memory and idealization was an important aspect to the nineteenth century mourning process as the remembering of good people was viewed by Christians as a way to help influence their lives for the better.⁶⁹

While providing a way for the living to memorialize the dead, photography also helped the dying through the process of a “Good death” in situations where they faced death away from family and friends by providing a connection to home. For instance, as the Civil War raged across the United States, both Union and Confederate soldiers confronted dying away from family and friends, who were a necessary aspect of dying a “good death.” According to Southern historian Drew Gilpin Faust in her popular book on death during the Civil War, *This Republic of Suffering*, “...soldiers endeavored to provide themselves with surrogates: proxies for those who might have surrounded their deathbeds at home.”⁷⁰

Another way nineteenth century society practiced remembrance of the dead was through the writing of condolence letters. Condolence letters were a way to gain the support of family and friends.⁷¹ These letters enabled friends and family to give Christian comfort and, like portraits of the departed, to memorialize the deceased in a positive light. The death of one woman led her to be eulogized as “...so lovely, so graceful, so

⁶⁷ Ibid., 289.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 285.

⁷⁰ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 11.

⁷¹ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 307.

elegant, and so full of love and affection for us all, and with the highest powers of intellect and cultivation united to all that is most to be prized in woman.”⁷²

Condolence letter writers also often placed the death within a period religious understanding. One writer stressed the nineteenth century Christian belief of death as God’s will, a common point found in period letters. She wrote “One can only say God’s will be done...” and that “...he is a merciful and loving father who does not afflict any of his children except for some good end...”⁷³ In a letter home to her parents, one woman told of the death of her husband, saying “On seeing my tears, he said, ‘Are you not reconciled to the will of God, my love?’ When I told him I hoped I did not feel unreconciled, he continued, ‘I have long ago, and many times, committed you and our little one into the hands of our covenant God. He is the husband of the widow and the father of the fatherless.’”⁷⁴ The image of the dying chastising the grieving family and friends at their death bed is an important part of the idea of the “good death” and is common imagery seen in condolence letters of the period.

Obituaries also served as condolences for the dead and their families. One obituary for Thomas D. Newton, a Civil War soldier from Alabama who died at the Wayside Home in April 1864, says that he was a “...fond, obedient son; the tender, loving brother, the kind, generous friend, and the brave undaunted soldier” and that:

We can say to his weeping parents, brothers, sisters, and friends, “Grieve not for your dear Thomas: Our Heavenly Father has taken him from this cold, cruel world, for a good and wise purpose; and to his will we must submit. So farewell dear Thomas, farewell! We will think of them and love thee, though the portals of

⁷² Ibid., 311.

⁷³ Ibid., 310.

⁷⁴ Sarah Hall Boardman Judson, “Letter from Sarah Hall Boardman Judson to Abiah Hall and Ralph Hall, March 07, 1831,” in *Memoir of Sarah B. Judson, Member of the American Mission to Burmah*, ed. Emily E. Chubbock Judson (Cincinnati, OH: L. Colby and Company, 1849), 250.

the tomb open wide, received thy loving form, and enveloped it in its dark bosom.”⁷⁵

This particular obituary also reflects the importance to die at home and in the care of family and friends, both aspects of the “good death.” It states that Newton, “...died away from home and friends, doubtless for want of attention. No brother near to cheer and comfort him, while enduring the pain that has laid him low; no mother to administer the cordials that are so necessary and refreshing in the hours of affliction; no sister to smooth his pillow, and wipe the dews of death from his noble brow...”⁷⁶ But even here the obituary author reasons away this lonesome death by concluding that “But being a good and devoted Christian, a member of the Baptist Church from his early youth, he was not alone...,” implying that he died a Christian and thus had God and Jesus for company.⁷⁷ These same concerns are applicable to the death of an emigrant on the trail that feared death away from loved ones or feared losing a loved one without being present as emigrant Velina Williams feared for her sister. In later chapters, this theme of the loneliness of dying on the plains will be explored further, in addition to the application of Christian faith by emigrants to such deaths in the same manner as the obituary author.

Children’s Deaths

The sentimentality surrounding the death of a child is another essential aspect of nineteenth century mourning culture and period literature attests to the peculiar interest

⁷⁵Unknown, Obituary of Private Thomas D. Newton, Home of the American Civil War. "Letters About The Civil War." <http://www.civilwarhome.com/newtonletter.htm> (27 November 2010).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

nineteenth century society had in memorializing children's deaths. As discussed earlier, nineteenth century families dealt with frequent early childhood deaths with 23% of infants dying before age one.⁷⁸ This high infant mortality rate is noted in a 1839 letter by George Washington's adopted granddaughter Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis:

I have often told you, my dearest friend, that you were happier in being without those precious objects of devoted affection which bind our hearts to earth, & altho sources of happiness, are also sources of most heartrending anxiety & overwhelming affliction. Of eight precious children I have outlived six. But to all but this last beloved & most excellent child, I have been permitted, by the Almighty, to pay the last duties, to resign them myself into the hands of Him who giveth & taketh away.⁷⁹

The Christian religious attitudes of the period established a unique view of a child's death by using the child's suffering as a means of Christian transcendence. One way these sentimental views were expressed was through the writing of poetry centered on the death of a child. These poems are a means of understanding children's deaths as God's will and as a form of religious consolation.⁸⁰ According to historian Paula Bennett in her essay "God's Will, Not Mine: Child Death as a Theodocian Problem in Poetry by Nineteenth-Century American Women," "the Evangelical clergy's principal function was to reconcile the bereaved to God's will. When the deceased was a child, this meant justifying the death of one 'too young to die.'"⁸¹ This idea of justifying the death of a young child was served by the Christian understanding of the wickedness of our world.

⁷⁸ Haines, "Fertility and Mortality," <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/haines.demography>.

⁷⁹ Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis, "Letter from Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley, November 05, 1839," in *George Washington's Beautiful Nelly: The Letters of Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 1794-1851*, ed. Patricia Brady (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 287.

⁸⁰ Paula Bennett, "God's Will, Not Mine: Child Death as a Theodocian Problem in Poetry by Nineteenth Century American Women," in *Representations of Death in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Lucy E. Frank (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 127.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

One of the more prolific authors of nineteenth century sentimental poetry, Lydia Huntley Sigourney, wrote poems that centered on a child's death and focused on either the child's relief from pain or explained that the child was better off dead.⁸² In her poem "The Little Brothers," Sigourney writes "Are they not dwelling side by side?/Have they not 'scaped the strife/The snares, the sins, the woes that stain/This pilgrimage of life?"⁸³ The popularity of such poems, and the views they expressed, are attested to by the publication of anthologies comprised of them, which were printed in nearly every major United States city between 1827-1899.⁸⁴

Nineteenth century letters and diaries also reflect this understanding of child deaths. These sources share the common theme of children going home to heaven or being taken to heaven to escape pain or worldly sins is common. Author Catharine Maria Sedgwick of New York expressed her grief to a friend over the death of her sister's child in 1847. She wrote that her sister acted "with unqualified faith, resigned her precious gift to better teaching, better guidance than hers; and while her eye is deprived of the loveliest object on earth to her, she has opened her spiritual eye upon an angel."⁸⁵ Here, Sedgwick shows that she and her sister both wanted to view the child's death, not as a loss, but the opportunity for the child to be taken care of by a higher power, a typical nineteenth century mourning practice when the loss of a child occurred. A letter from Frances

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Lydia Howard Huntley Sigourney, "The Little Brothers." Old Poetry. <http://oldpoetry.com/opoem/129332-Lydia-Howard-Huntley-Sigourney-The-Little-Brothers-> (2 April 2010).

⁸⁴ Jessica Roberts, "The Little Coffin," in *Representations of Death in the Nineteenth Century*, Lucy E. Frank (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 141.

⁸⁵ Catharine Maria Sedgwick, "Letter from Catharine Maria Sedgwick, November 29, 1847," in *Life and Letters of Catherine M. Sedgwick*, ed. Dewey, Mary E. (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1871), 446.

Marvin Smith Webster in Newport, Kentucky, to her husband stationed in the military is a further example of how period culture tried to give reason to the death of a child:

...we have been again called to mourn for the death of a most lovely and promising child, our darling boy is now an angel in Heaven, taken from this world of sorrow ere the breath of sin had sullied his young heart. I trust and feel you will find consolation in the only source whence it can be derived. Still it is hard oh how trying to give up one so lovely and cherished. The poor little angel suffered many weeks, the strength of his constitution causing him to resist and struggle against disease till the poor little mortal frame was worn out and completely wasted away. Yet he was a most patient and resigned little sufferer. His little eyes full of intelligence constantly turned towards me with a most pleasing yet resigned look.⁸⁶

In this letter Webster expresses her belief that he was taken in death before the sins of the world could affect his purity. She also uses ideas attached to a “good death” such as dying patiently and resigned to his fate that are common ideals seen in both adult deaths and those of children.

General Nineteenth Century Burial Practices

Along with death comes the necessity of some form of preparation and disposal of the deceased. According to Gary Laderman’s essay “Locating the Dead: A Cultural History of Death in the Antebellum, Anglo-Protestant Communities of the Northeast,” “The first order of business in the treatment of the newly dead was to “lay out” the body, meaning that the corpse was ritually washed, shaved in some cases, then dressed, usually in a shroud or “winding sheet” during the first half of the nineteenth century, and finally

⁸⁶ Frances Marvin Smith Webster, “Letter from Frances Marvin Smith Webster to Lucien Bonaparte, August 17, 1847,” in *The Websters: Letters of an Army Family in Peace and War, 1836-1853*, ed. Baker, Van R. (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2000), 327.

placed in the coffin.”⁸⁷ It was often women who filled the role of caregiver to the dead and performed the tasks of washing and dressing the deceased. In the article, “Exhuming Women’s Premarket Duties in the Care of the Dead,” Georganne Rundblad shows that although later nineteenth century customs changed to place the undertaker in charge of care of the corpse, for most of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, women were culturally expected to prepare the body for burial. Rundblad states that “The preparation of the body by shrouding women was viewed as a neighborly duty, an extension of nurturing tasks that were already being performed in the home.”⁸⁸

The burial process itself could be simple or ornate, but would most likely include a burial box in some form. For most of the period, a coffin was commonly used for burial and could be made of wood or metal and lined with fabric.⁸⁹ During the typical burial a religious service would be held to help comfort the attendees. For instance, after the death of her father in 1866, Sarah Acland “gained some comfort from the beautiful words of the burial-service,” while Mary Drew said her father’s funeral was a “wonderful scene which one had hardly the presence of mind to take in.”⁹⁰ A proper burial container for the dead and the holding of a service were important for the family and friends of the deceased in order to provide closure. These expectations, along with the religious beliefs of the period, gave nineteenth century individuals an understanding of what to anticipate after a death.

⁸⁷ Laderman, “Locating the Dead: A Cultural History of Death in the Antebellum, Anglo-Protestant Communities of the Northeast,” 32.

⁸⁸ Georganne Rundblad, “Exhuming Women’s Premarket Duties in the Care of the Dead.” *Gender and Society* 9, no. 1 (1995): 176.

⁸⁹ Penny Colman, *Corpses, Coffins, and Crypts: A History of Burial* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 81-83.

⁹⁰ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 217 – 218.

The intrusion of the Civil War into nineteenth century life was violent and deadly. More than 620,000 Union and Confederate soldiers died during the conflict.⁹¹ This incredible number of deaths over four years led to changes in the treatment of bodies and the handling of burials. Both Union and Confederate dead often buried where they fell in battle. Families were left without the ability to proceed through the burial process according to period standards. Historian John Neff, author of *Honoring the Civil War Dead*, states that the need “for the comfort of death ritual to be restored, for burial to take place within the circle of family and community” never went away.⁹²

Thus, the changes made to the ways a body was handled after death in order to allow for transport were the most noticeable for they served the purpose of retaining nineteenth century death practices that dictated the importance of being buried at home and by family and friends. The number of men dying away from home or even just a proper burial place led to a new focus on the process of embalming as means to allow for the transportation of soldiers’ remains. Before the Civil War, chemical embalming was used mainly to preserve bodies for dissection; however, during the war, with the need to keep bodies intact for transportation either home or to a burial place, embalming became widely used.⁹³ In addition to embalming, special caskets were made to keep bodies preserved provided. During the Civil War period, patents for “innovation in casket design” increased significantly in number.⁹⁴ These caskets included lids that contained

⁹¹ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 854.

⁹² John R. Neff, *Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 46.

⁹³ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 92.

⁹⁴ Neff, *Honoring the Civil War Dead*, 46.

ice or were advertised as being air-tight.⁹⁵ Such designs allowed for long distance transport of the remains home to families.

Like the handling of the remains of the deceased, the actual place of burial changed over time. Eighteenth and early nineteenth century burials typically took place on family land near a homestead, or as Sloane states in his book *The Last Great Necessity*, early burials might simply take place where the death happened without much fuss and only a field stone as a marker or no marker at all.⁹⁶ Early burials were typically in family plots, churchyards, or outside meeting houses depending on the region and religious background. Many of these burial grounds were neither fenced nor particularly sacred.⁹⁷ And, as Stanley French explains in his essay “The Cemetery as Cultural Institution,” early nineteenth century grave yards faced a neglect that eventually led to complaints “about the frequently revolting state of burial places.”⁹⁸

The nineteenth century development of the rural cemetery changed the way individuals viewed burial locations by creating park or garden cemeteries that used a green and peaceful environment to help calm visitors and provide a setting similar to a park.⁹⁹ The first of these in America, Mount Auburn in Massachusetts, was created in 1831 and was intended to be a place for the living to visit the dead. It contained monuments, chapels, and decorative plantings to make the cemetery attractive and

⁹⁵ Ibid., 47.

⁹⁶ David Charles Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity: Cemeteries in American History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 14.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 15-20.

⁹⁸ Stanley French, “The Cemetery as Cultural Institution,” in *Death in America*, ed. David E. Stannard (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 73.

⁹⁹ Meg Green, *Rest in Peace: A History of American Cemeteries* (Minneapolis, MN: Twenty-First Century Books, 2008), 35-36.

beautiful.¹⁰⁰ Alan Swedlund, author of *Shadows in the Valley: A Cultural History of Illness, Death and Loss in New England, 1840-1916*, writes that “The rural cemetery movement, coupled with the cult of mourning that prevailed for most of this period, made cemeteries physical and social landscapes in which people enacted both ritualized and heartfelt performances and communed with an idealized “nature.”¹⁰¹

The subjects of death and mourning are areas of study that can provide historians with a unique view of a period’s cultural landscape by using them to not only examine the religious views of the time, but also how family and community life reflect these views. This is especially true for the nineteenth century in the United States, which dealt with high mortality rates, especially for children, and strong Christian beliefs that stood at the center of the period’s family and cultural life. The realities of death and mourning on the plains for nineteenth century Oregon-California Trail emigrants meant that strict adherence to period burial and mourning rituals was difficult. However, that does not mean that trail emigrants did not seek to assure the handling of the deceased’s remains and expression of mourning stayed true to period practices as means to reassure families, friends and fellow emigrants that the deceased died well and peacefully.

¹⁰⁰ Mount Auburn Cemetery, “History,” http://www.mountauburn.org/national_landmark/history.cfm (15 November 2010).

¹⁰¹ Alan C. Swedlund, *Shadows in the Valley: A Cultural History of Illness, Death and Loss in New England, 1840-1916* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 169.

CHAPTER 3: EMIGRANT MOURNING AND BURIAL PRACTICES ON THE OREGON – CALIFORNIA TRAILS

As Caleb and Alice Richey wrote in a letter to their brother regarding the circumstances of their aunt's burial on the trail in 1852, "We buried her the same morning. She was buried as decent order as circumstances would admit of."¹⁰² While emigrants often lacked the ability to confront the mourning and burial process as they would in an established town or city, they still often attempted to recreate comparable conditions. More importantly this lack of time and materials does not mean that death on the trails was deficient of meaning. Emigrants still felt similar spiritual and cultural connections to the deceased and their resting place that the nineteenth century manner of mourning the dead dictated.

The grave counting many emigrants did while traveling and the sometimes off hand way they mention death reflect an acceptance to the frequency of death in the nineteenth century and the closeness family members had to it through at-home funerals. Grave counting is especially prevalent in women's accounts of the journey. Women, more so than men, appear to have paid closer attention to the experience of mourning on the trail and keeping track of the graves passed along the way.¹⁰³ According to Lillian Schlissel, "...women kept their accounts [referring to grave watching] with a bookkeeper's care for detail" and they even noted whether graves were old or new in

¹⁰² James Akin, Jr. to Lafayette Richey and Hannah Richey, June 19th, 1852, Elva Ingram Folder, Box 4, W.W. Morrison Papers, 1804-1977, Collection 323, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

¹⁰³ Perhaps emigrant women are merely extending their traditional role as caregiver to the dying and preparer of the corpse for burial to the trail. See Georganne Rundblad, "Exhuming Women's Pre-market Duties in the Care of the Dead." *Gender and Society* 9, no. 1 (1995): 173-192, for more information about women's roles in post-death care in early America.

order to keep watch over how close death [read: disease] actually was.¹⁰⁴ Women such as Cecilia McMillen Adams seemed to account for every burial her party came across on the way West. Nearly every day of Adams' diary kept count of the graves she saw, "June 25 Passed 7 graves..., June 26 Passed 8 graves..., June 29 Passed 10 graves..., June 30 Passed 10 graves..., July 1 Passed 8 graves..."¹⁰⁵ This was a pattern that continued through her diary. Lillian Schlissel believes that not even births were accounted for as much as deaths.¹⁰⁶ This focus on death in trail diaries shows that it was an event that was ever present in the minds of emigrants. Rather than ignore it they embraced it by keeping track of the graves witnessed as though keeping track of miles traveled.

Death to many travelers could be matter of fact and mentioned in passing along with other daily tasks. Diary writers often mentioned deaths and burials as though no more important than where they camped. For instance, Elizabeth Dixon Smith (Geer) kept an account of her 1847 journey to the Northwest in which she made two casual references to deaths and burials of party members:

Sept 24 layed by to dry our things which got wet crossing the river Mr. Kimball's oldest son died last night of tiphus fever.

Sept 25 buried the corpse proceeded on our journey made 14 miles camped on Burnt River some feed and willows

Oct 1 woman of our company died as we were traveling along she had been sick sometime.

Oct 2 buried the corpse made sixteen miles camped on south branch of powder river¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 112.

¹⁰⁵ Ceceila Adams, "Twin Sisters on the Oregon Trail," in *Best of Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 2008), 160-162.

¹⁰⁶ Schlissel, *Women's Diaries*, 113.

¹⁰⁷ Elizabeth Dixon Smith, "The Diary of Elizabeth Dixon Smith," in *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes, Vol. 1 (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1983-1993), 135-136.

The offhand manner in which Smith mentioned both the boy's and woman's deaths among the other mundane occurrences and miles traveled presents an interesting reflection of the normality, or at least the acceptance, of death on the trail and in nineteenth century life. The diary of James Madison and Nancy Iness Coon also demonstrates the straightforward way emigrants discussed death and burial on the trail. Their September 7th entry said "Came nine miles to Powder River, four miles to crossing, two miles to a creek and camped. John Miller's child died today. Good Camp."¹⁰⁸ While the July 14th entry stated: "Buried Turner's son, three years old. Left south fork of the Platt at 12 o'clock. Camped on the prairie eight miles from the river. Here we used buffalo chips for fire for the first time."¹⁰⁹ Like Smith's diary, the Coons included the mention of Miller's son's death and Turner's son's burial in a very matter of fact way.

Besides showing evidence of the nineteenth century acceptance of death due to its frequency and the closeness of it in everyday life, emigrant accounts reflect the Christian religious understanding of death during this era. This comprehension is demonstrated in the diary kept by Agnes Stewart, a young twenty year old woman who traveled with her family from Allegheny City, Pennsylvania, to Oregon in 1853.¹¹⁰ Her account of the trip contains numerous references to period religious beliefs surrounding death [italics are mine]:

Saturday, May 21: Ten o'clock – "...Passed the grave of a young man, just 21 years of age. *Starting with all the pride of his heart in life, thinking, no doubt, of wealth and pleasure, when he possessed the wealth and thousands had done before him, but left with all his wild ambitions to*

¹⁰⁸ Benton County Oregon Rootsweb Homepage. "The Diary of James Madison Coon and Nancy Iness (Miller) Coon on the Oregon Trail." <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~orbenton/COONDIAR.htm> (20 November 2010).

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Agnes Stewart, Diary, Agnes Stewart folder, Box 3, W.W. Morrison Papers, 1804-1977, Collection 323, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

wander away on the plains. Perhaps some romantic notion filled his heart before he started. Such things often happen to people. Perhaps a dear wife, or sisters, not knowing where he is, expecting his return at some appointed time, are to be disappointed. "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick." This is very true."

May 24: We camped at a place on the Blue River where a woman had been buried and the wolves had dug her up Her hair was there with a comb in it still. She had been buried too shallow. *It seems a dreadful fate, but what is the difference? One cannot feel after the spirit is flown. I would as soon not be buried at all as to be dug out of my grave.*

June 6: Where we stopped at noon there was a greave dug up by the wolves, and we saw a rib in the place, so Lizzie and I carried stones and filled the hole again. Some person had done the same before not liking to see *the lifeless clay thrown about.*¹¹¹

Stewart's references to bodies as lifeless clay whose souls have flown are a reflection of the Christian understanding of death. These statements give evidence for possible reasons that emigrants did not always focus in detail on the deaths they encountered as death was not viewed in a negative light This would also help explain why emigrants mentioned deaths and burials in such a commonplace manner. Rather, period religious beliefs provided emigrants with reasons to see death as impermanent and less negative, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Another nineteenth century belief concerned the idea of the deceased dying a "good death." This same belief is found in the accounts of deaths on the trail. Lillian Schlissel states that "Popular songs of the 1850s depicted the "happy death" of a good Christian as something that occurred in the bosom of the family. Pioneer family and friends gathered beside the death bed in order to comfort the dying."¹¹² An example, from the Santa Fe Trail, is the death of Kate Kingsbury in 1857 from tuberculosis while

¹¹¹ Stewart, Diary, W.W. Morrison Papers, American Heritage Center.

¹¹² Schlissel, *Women's Diaries*, 131-132.

traveling with her family's freight business. According to an article by historian Conevery Bolton Valencius covering Kingsbury's death and the history of health seeking by moving to the West in the nineteenth century:

As the night wore on, John and Eliza Ann told Kate they had done all they could. It was considered no kindness to let a Christian soul depart unprepared. Struggling to draw breath, Kate insisted, "[I]f I was in your place I would not give up, but would persevere in trying to do something to give relief until the last, and never give up." Yet as the narrative of a good death demanded, she was eventually convinced that this was her end. As family friend James Webb wrote, "She then commenced with perfect composure, and took leave of her sister and John." She asked them to forgive her for "every hasty expression, or unkind word that had passed her lips during her illness" and reassured them that "if my Heavenly Father has sent for me, I am ready to go."¹¹³

This account is an interesting example. Either the dying emigrant truly adopted the nineteenth century attitude of a "good" death by accepting her fate and speaking positively to her family surrounding her, or, her family felt the need to create an idea for those back East that Kate died in such a manner, whether she did or not, in order to conform to cultural expectations.

As nineteenth century culture taught the "good death" ideal to both young and old, emigrant diaries expressed this need to be prepared for and not to fear death. As one woman wrote, "We passed a newly-dug grave this morning... a warning that we, too, are mortal. May we take good heed to it and be prepared to meet death whenever she may come."¹¹⁴ Caleb and Alice Richey wrote a letter to their sibling from the trail in 1852 telling him of the death of their aunt from a

¹¹³ Conevery Bolton Valencius, "Gender and the Economy of Health on the Santa Fe Trail." 79-92, *Osiris* 19 (2004), 80.

¹¹⁴ Velina A Williams, "Diary of a Trip Across the Plains in 1853 by Mrs. Veina A. Williams," Copied from the Transcripts of the Forty-Seventh Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association, Portland, June 19, 1919. Portland, Oregon, Chausse – Prudhomme Co., Printers, 1922, page 11, Box 4, Paul and Helen Henderson Collection, North Platte Valley Museum, Gering, Nebraska.

cholera-like illness. In their account they wrote that their aunt "...did not express any fears of death but was unwilling to die and be left on the plains."¹¹⁵

Christian consolations regarding death are also found in descriptions of deaths on the western trails. These accounts include references to the deceased being at peace, death being the will of God, and the hopeful reunion in heaven the author of the account will have with the deceased. Some emigrants assigned deaths to the will of God, such as Abigail Jane Scott, whose mother died of cholera on the journey. In response to her mother's death she wrote, "How mysterious are the works of an all wise and mysterious Providence!"¹¹⁶ A young child dying in the wagon train of Samuel Word led him to record: "It appears hard for a parent to lose a child & have to leave it in this wild and desolate country. May the lord save us from such an affliction...Nevertheless His will be done and not mine."¹¹⁷ Like many emigrants experiencing death on the trail, Word dreaded leaving a party member buried on the plains, but used the reassurance provided by period religious understanding as a way to provide him solace. Word provides further evidence of religious solace on the trail after the previously mentioned child died the next day. His June 16th entry states:

Far, Far from home friends & all most dear to me, the lines that were sung on the occasion [the child's burial] "And 'ere another day is gone Ourselves may be as they" seemed to have ten fold their usual significance – nothing is truer than those lines. We know not what a day will bring forth, nor who will be the next to go. The Lords will be done.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ James Akin, Jr. to Lafayette Richey and Hannah Richey, June 19th, 1852, Morrison Papers, University of Wyoming.

¹¹⁶ Abigail Jane Scott, "Journal of a Trip to Oregon," in *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes, Vol. 5 (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1983- 1993), 71.

¹¹⁷ Samuel Word, "Samuel Word Diary," in *Journeys to the Land of Gold: Emigrant Diaries from the Bozeman Trail, 1863-1866*, Vol. 1, ed. Susan Badger Doyle (Helena, MT: Montana Historical Society Press, 2000), 78.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

Here, Word again uses the Christian understanding of death as God's will to provide meaning to a death on the plains. He expresses the sentiment that death is often unplanned for (therefore, it is best to be prepared as the *Ars Moriendi*, or Art of Dying, taught).

Other emigrants hoped for a reunion in heaven with the deceased or thought of them in the afterlife. Mary Ringo's distressing account of the death of her husband by accidental shooting ends with "...but thank god tis only the body lying there and may we only meet in Heaven where there is no more death but only life eternally."¹¹⁹ After the death of Celinda Hines' father from drowning, she wrote in her diary that, "...our loss is his gain that he is yet (unreadable) & he loves (unreadable) watch over me & continue to guide me."¹²⁰

Trail emigrants expressed the same sentimentality over children's deaths on the trail that they did in settled nineteenth century life. Some diaries viewed children's deaths in a positive light because the dying child left a world too wicked for their soul or their body was no longer suffering. In Elizabeth Elliot's letter home to her parents, she provided an account of the death of her young son. In it she wrote he "...is no longer a sufferer on this earth..." "...I suppose he is better off," and she talked about what "a pretty little corpse" he was.¹²¹ In fact, Elliot filled most of letter with a discussion about

¹¹⁹ Mary Ringo, "The Journal of Mary Ringo, 1864," in *Best of Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 2008), 281.

¹²⁰ Celinda Hines, "Life and Death on the Oregon Trail," in *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes, Vol. 6 (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1983-1993), 116.

¹²¹ Elizabeth Elliot, "A Letter from the Oregon Trail," in *Best Of Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes, (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 2008), 263.

how “natural” he appeared, the fact that he was buried in his summer suit and looked “so sweet.”¹²²

A rare occurrence on the trails is the taking of memento moris, or items used to remember the dead. Few instances of this nineteenth century tradition could be found in the trail diaries. This is likely due the relative time available for taking items such as hair or photographs of the deceased and the confusing or stressful environment in which trail deaths took place. Lydia Milner Waters’ account of the death of a young husband from a lightning strike is one such rare instance of the creation of a memento mori. She wrote that “As soon as the burial was over, we started...we could not lay over as we were in the midst of hostile Indians. I kept a lock of his hair which was burnt off by the lightening and gave it to his wife some days afterward. No one else had thought of cutting it for her.”¹²³ In Elizabeth Elliot’s account of the death of her young son, she discusses wanting to take “his likeness” to send to her parents, a reference to the memento mori photographs common during the period.¹²⁴

Burials

It is the image of a hasty emigrant burial that largely comes to mind when discussing death on the trails. While such burials did occur, this does not indicate that those deaths were any less meaningful than ones that were more elaborate in an established town or city. In addition, there are many cases of burial on the western trails that fit the cultural conditions of the nineteenth century.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Lydia Milner Waters, “Diary,” Lydia Milner Waters Folder, Box 4, Paul and Helen Henderson Collection, North Platte Valley Museum, Gering, Nebraska.

¹²⁴ Elizabeth Elliot, “A Letter from the Oregon Trail,” 263.

June 16th. Tuesday. Our preacher's child died this morning and was buried this afternoon – all turned out to the funeral. Mr. Bryan for Caldwell Co Mo officiated in the funeral ceremonies, singing and prayer. the grave was made on a little mound West of our camp, and a pine board with an inscription now marks its resting place. Was a lonely place to leave a relative or a friend...I was seriously impressed by the novel circumstances attending the funeral...¹²⁵

While the burial discussed above takes place on the trail, it contained ceremonies and even singing, as well as a burial marker; aspects that seem to surprise even the diary author. Attempts at, and concerns over, “proper” burials can be found in descriptions of burials in many diaries. One party made the most out of a trailside burial:

...the corpse of the deceased lady was conveyed to its last resting-place, in this desolate but beautiful wilderness. Her coffin was lowered into the grave. A prayer was offered to the throne of grace by the Rev. Mr. Cornwall. An appropriate hymn was sung by the congregation with much pathos and expression.¹²⁶

After the deaths of two emigrants in her party, one woman wrote that, “A passage of the bible (my own) was read; a prayer offered, and Nearer My God to Thee sung. Owing to the unusual surroundings the ceremony was very impressive.”¹²⁷ Preparation of the body for burial is also noted in emigrant journals. Nineteenth century culture assigned such preparations to women of the community and this is reflected in trail accounts. One woman, Ruth Shackelford, writing about the death of a young girl in her California party, noted that “She died very hard. She was teething and had diarrhea...Mrs. Kirkland and I washed and dressed her.”¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Samuel Word, “Samuel Word Diary,” *Journeys to the Land of Gold*, 80.

¹²⁶ Edwin Bryant, *What I Saw in California* (Palo Alto, CA.: L. Osborne, 1967), 64.

¹²⁷ Catharine Haun, “Reminiscences,” in Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 183.

¹²⁸ Ruth Shackelford, “To California by the Mormon Trail, 1865,” in *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes, Vol. 9 (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1983- 1993), 149.

Emigrants used the resources available to them on the trail to provide as close of a resemblance to caskets and headstones as possible. A casket might be made from wooden storage boxes. Tree trunks were cut into boards or simply carved out to hold the corpse. Pieces of wooden furniture were used. The deceased might be wrapped in fabric or, in one case, a feather mattress.¹²⁹ When the young daughter of the Henderson family died from a laudanum overdose in 1846, her father fashioned a coffin from the walnut boards of a table he had made for the journey.¹³⁰

In many cases, the materials for the construction of a wooden coffin were beyond the means of the emigrant party. After a death in Cecilia Adams' 1852 wagon party, a coffin was unavailable. The emigrants relied on other materials to provide a representation of one. "The sick man is dead this morning We stop to see him buried They wrapped him in bed clothes and layed him in the ground without any coffin We sung a hymn and had a prayer O! it is so hard to leave friends in this wilderness."¹³¹ The use of bed clothes or extra material to wrap the body in after death is a common occurrence on the trail. This practice is similar to the traditional method of shrouding a body before burial. In addition, it explains the wrapping of the deceased in cloth even when there was wood present to construct a make-shift coffin, or at least wood to cover the burial vault. An 1855 account states that after a death, the man was buried the next morning, but "Of course there was no coffin. He was dressed in his best clothes, wrapped

¹²⁹ According to the papers in the W.W. Morrison Collection at the University of Wyoming American Heritage Center and the Oregon-California Trails Association, Mary Homsely, buried near Fort Laramie in 1852 after dying from the measles, was wrapped in a feather bed before burial because her wagon party had no wood to build a coffin. Laura Gibson, "Recollections of Mrs. Laura Gibson, daughter of Mary Homsley," Box 6, W.W. Morrison Papers, 1804-1977, Collection 323, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

¹³⁰ Lucy Ann Henderson (Deady), "Diary Excerpts," Lucy Ann Henderson (Deady), Folder, Box 2, W.W. Morrison Papers, 1804-1977, Collection 323, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

¹³¹ Adams, "Twin Sisters on the Oregon Trail," 162.

first in a sheet and then in a patchwork quilt. The men dug a deep grave and cut cottonwood and laid it over him to quite a thickness to prevent the coyotes from unearthing his body...”¹³² This practice of shrouding even with wood available is also noted in an account by James Akin, Jr. of a burial he witnessed on the trail. In his 1852 letter, he reported the same solution of wrapping a dead woman in bed clothes and that “the grave was dug very deep, with a vault... We took the side boards of a wagon and covered the vault with them, and then covered it up.”¹³³

When emigrants felt the need to leave a marker on the grave, possibly with hopes of returning one day or simply to let future travelers know who was there, they might take the time to carve a piece of local sandstone or wood. In one case, they even used a wagon wheel.¹³⁴ Mary Homsley’s husband fashioned a grave stone, carving it by hand with a jackknife, after her death on the trail in 1852.¹³⁵

The cultural need to provide proper markers for a loved one, even on the plains, is the likely explanation for a series of stories centered on a grieving husband traveling back to a nearby fort or settlement to retrieve a grave stone for his deceased wife. One such account tells of the husband traveling back about 200 miles to Fort Kearney to obtain a proper headstone for his wife’s grave.¹³⁶ Usually, emigrants made do with what they

¹³² Waters, “Diary,” Paul and Helen Henderson Collection.

¹³³ James Akin, Jr. to Lafayette Richey and Hannah Richey, June 19th, 1852, W.W. Morrison Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

¹³⁴ Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, Rebecca Winter’s Gravesite, <http://mormonhistoricsitesfoundation.org/USA/nebraska/scottsBluff/wintersGravesite/complete.pdf> (20 January 2011).

¹³⁵ Fred Lockley, *Impressions and Observations of the Journal Man*, Copied from the August 1932 Oregon Journal, Box 6, W.W. Morrison Papers, 1804-1977, Collection 323, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

¹³⁶ Report by Robert Harvey at 1910 meeting of the Nebraska Historical Society, Amanda Lamin Folder, Box 6, W.W. Morrison Papers, 1804-1977, Collection 323, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

could locate nearby on the trail. In one instance, after emigrant Rebecca Winter died just east of present day Scottsbluff, Nebraska, her party members used an iron wagon wheel hoop carved with her name.¹³⁷ Placing markers on a burial site also allowed for the possibility of a family member returning one day to retrieve the remains. Emigrant Howard Stillwell Stanfield noted that after the death of a young man in his party, they “dug a grave on a hill near by the side of four other graves and in it we buried him and marked his grave so that his father can obtain his remains at some future day which he intends doing.”¹³⁸

In addition to a grave marker, emigrants placed adequate information on it to better identify the deceased to future travelers. In Elijah Preston Howell’s 1849 California Trail diary, the author writes that “...A. Campbell who had died last night at one o’clock from Cholera... I put the name of the county and State on the head-board. His name and the date had been written before on it.”¹³⁹ A marker and a name did not go without purpose. The diaries and letters of future emigrants record mention of earlier graves with markers and inscriptions on the trail. Joseph Goldsborough Bruff, a California Trail emigrant, wrote on July 26, 1849 “...near the outlet a grave attracted my attention, and I pictured it.”¹⁴⁰ While not writing down the inscription in words, Bruff

¹³⁷ Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, <http://mormonhistoricsitesfoundation.org/USA/nebraska/scottsBluff/wintersGravesite/complete.pdf>.

¹³⁸ Howard Stillwell Stanfield, *Diary of Howard Stillwell Stanfield*, ed. Jack J. Detzler (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1969), 56.

¹³⁹ Elijah Preston Howell. "Crossing the Plains May to September 1849," in *The 1849 California Trail Diaries of Elijah Preston Howell*, ed. Susan Badger Doyle (Independence, Mo.: Oregon-California Trails Association, 1995), 15. The quoted statement is from his 1870 rewritten account of the 1849 journey based on Howell’s original notes, but with additional details. This diary and the original by Howell are both contained in Doyle’s edited work.

¹⁴⁰ Joseph Goldsborough Bruff, *Gold Rush: The Journals, Drawings, and Other Papers of J. Goldsborough Bruff, Captain, Washington City and California Mining Association, April 2, 1849 – July 20, 1851*, ed. Georgia Willis Read and Ruth Gaines. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 52-53.

sketched the grave, that of Frederic Richard, to include that in his journal of the trip. A little more than a week later, Bruff came across the grave of Mary Fulkerson, possibly the mother of Frederic:

On the Plateau, above, on the left of trail, a grave, with sand-stone slab, engraved thus: "Mary, consort of J.M. Fulkerson, Died July 14. 1847" The grave was covered with sand-stone slabs, and by the names, it will be seen that the lady is the mother of the youth, buried in the Rattle-snake Pass, ms. Back, which I visited July 26th. The youth died on the 1st. and 13 days after his mother died here.¹⁴¹

The graves of Sarah Keys and John Fuller, buried near Alcove Springs in Kansas, were noted in multiple emigrant journals. Amos Piatt Josselyn, traveling west in 1849, wrote that "At the Blue there is two graves one of which is an old Lady from Springfield, Ill. Buried in the spring of 1846. The other is John Fuller who lost life by the accidental discharge of a gun."¹⁴² The 1849 California Trail diary of Samuel Rutherford Dundass also noted these graves, writing:

Near the Blue River we passed the graves of two, under a large spreading oak; which had been barked, and their inscription cut on the tree; one was an old woman of seventy, Sarah Keys, from Illinois, who had died the 29th of May, 1846, emigrating at that advanced age, and at so early a period of Western Emigration. The other's name was John Fuller, who had been accidentally shot on the 29th of April, 1849.¹⁴³

Besides the worry over a culturally proper burial, emigrants were concerned over leaving a loved one or party member alone on the side of the trail or open to scavenging by wolves and the local American Indian population. One woman wrote after encountering a grave on the trail that "It looks so cruel I should hate to have my friends

¹⁴¹ Joseph Goldsborough Bruff, *Gold Rush*, 74-75.

¹⁴² Amos Piatt Josselyn, *The Overland Journal of Amos Piatt Josselyn : Zanesville, Ohio, to the Sacramento Valley, April 2, 1849, to September 11, 1849 : Together with Letters, Financial Accounts, a Guide, and Related Documentary Materials Concerning his Life Before, During, and After the California Gold Rush*, ed. J. William Barrett II (Baltimore, MD: Gateway Press, 1978), 21.

¹⁴³ Samuel Rutherford Dundass, *The Journals of Samuel Rutherford Dundass & George Keller: Crossing the Plains to California in 1849-1850* (Fairfield, WA.: Ye Galleon Press, 1983), 15.

or myself buried here, which all may be.”¹⁴⁴ Velina Williams 1853 diary from the journey expressed similar feelings about the possibility of dying and receiving a desolate trail burial. “We passed graves by the roadside. The spot seemed mournful and reminded me that earth is our common burial place; and when I reflect that some of us in all probability may find a like burial I involuntarily exclaim. ‘Has egypt no graves’ that we thus seek them in this wilderness?”¹⁴⁵ Hugh Brown Heiskell, traveling to California in 1849, wrote:

The place selected for the grave is a pretty spot, with a fine bush (of the hawthorn species) shading his head, and some on each side and others at his feet. As the sun buried itself behind the mountains, we buried him whose sun has set forever on the earth; when it rises tomorrow it will shine upon his grave, far from the habitations of civilization, his peaceful slumbers only troubled by the stealthy tread of the Indian or the howl of the wolf.¹⁴⁶

However unavoidable death on the prairie was, emigrants recognized that wolves might open graves. Amelia Hadley wrote in her diary that they “came to a grave his name Glenette died 1849, was buried in a canoe. The wolves had made a den down in his grave. They dig up everyone that is buried on the plains as soon as they are left.”¹⁴⁷ Cecilia Adams mentioned another such incident in her June 25, 1852, diary entry, “To day we passed a grave that had been dug open by the wolves all we could see of the remains were the clothes that it had been wrapped up in We found the headboard some distance from the grave...”¹⁴⁸ Thus, the concern over the desecration of a grave led some

¹⁴⁴ Amelia Hadley, “Journal of Travails to Oregon,” in *Best of Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 2008), 133.

¹⁴⁵ Velina A Williams, “Diary of a Trip Across the Plains in 1853 by Mrs. Veina A. Williams,” Paul and Helen Henderson Collection, Gering, Nebraska.

¹⁴⁶ Hugh Brown Heiskell, *A Forty-niner from Tennessee: The Diary of Hugh Brown Heiskell*, ed. Edward M. Steel (University of Knoxville, TN: Tennessee Press, 1998), 44.

¹⁴⁷ Hadley, “Journal of Travails to Oregon,” 133.

¹⁴⁸ Adams, “Twin Sisters on the Oregon Trail,” 160.

emigrants to hide evidence that a grave was ever there. Commonly, they attempted to do this by driving wagons over fresh burials. In the case of one woman's burial "the oxen were corralled over her grave so the Indians would not dig her up to get her clothing."¹⁴⁹ Despite the party's attempt at preventing her grave from being disturbed, two years later a Colonel Nesmith remarked that he had seen the grave open and a "number of human bones were scattered about."¹⁵⁰

Emigrants often commented on the romantic, peaceful or beautiful locations where burials were made. By focusing on the attractive setting of a burial, emigrants were able to distract themselves, and possible diary readers, from the discomfort they may have felt leaving someone on the trail. In addition, the creation of the rural cemetery in the mid-nineteenth century placed burials in a woodland, park-like locations and emigrants might be attempting to make trail burials fit into this ideal. One emigrant woman wrote of her mother's burial place that:

The place of her internment is a romantic one and one that seems fitted for the last resting place of a lover of rural scenery... The grave is situated on an eminence which overlooks a ravine intersected with small pine and cedar trees... In the outskirts of this basin [the ravine] clusters of wild roses and various other wild flowers grow in abundance...¹⁵¹

When Edwin Bryant wrote of the death of a woman in his party he focused not only on how appropriate the ceremony was, but also on the beauty of the grave. "The grave was then closed and carefully sodded with the green turf of the prairie, from whence annually will spring and bloom its brilliant and many-colored flowers."¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Lucy Ann Henderson (Deady), W.W. Morrison Papers, American Heritage Center.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Scott, "Journal of a Trip to Oregon," 71.

¹⁵² Bryant, *What I saw in California*, 64.

Some emigrant accounts note that, after a death, family members would carry the deceased to a more agreeable place or burial. California bound emigrant Ruth Shackelford's 1865 diary states that "Little Annie died this morning... We will take her to San Bernardino to bury her."¹⁵³ James Bennett's 1850 party traveling to California lost a woman to "congestion of the lungs" on the trail and they carried her "on to Pacific Springs where it was contemplated the funeral should take place."¹⁵⁴

Sometimes even when not describing the place of death, diary authors used romantic descriptions of the burial in general. Polly Coon, a young girl traveling with her family, wrote in her diary that "We laid Jane in her narrow home by moonlight last night. After which we ate our silent supper by the same light and went to our beds. The wagon train moved on its dreary way, but not until Webster had taken his cherished violin from its case and fashioned the case into a headboard to mark the resting place of his beloved young wife."¹⁵⁵ In addition, one woman fashioned a poem about her trip across the plains that described the death of her husband in the romantic language of nineteenth century mourning culture, "So then we buried two that day, two more were taken sick/One of them was my husband dear, I never can forget/It seemed to me his dying words, are printed on my heart/I could not think that we would die, that we must forever part/But, Oh, his sifferings found an end, August the second day, beside the little stream so clear, five of our number lay."¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Shackelford, *To California by the Mormon Trail*, 1865, 149.

¹⁵⁴ James Bennett, *Overland Journey to California*, ed. Edward Eberstadt (New Harmony, IN: Times Print, 1906), 27.

¹⁵⁵ Polly Coon, "Journal of a Journey Over the Rocky Mountains," in *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes, Vol. 5 (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1983- 1993), 200.

¹⁵⁶ Susan E. Hays, Poem, Copied from Fort Laramie Scout, January 28th 1936, Mary Homsley Folder, Box 4, W.W. Morrison Papers, 1804-1977, Collection 323, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

An interesting burial location along the trail is Box Elder Springs along Child's Cutoff in eastern Wyoming. The springs were a popular spot for emigrants to camp and resupply their water and so it is not unexpected that some would die while near this spot. This place became a small burial ground for emigrants. According to a 2008 Masters thesis by Adam S. Wiewel, "Geophysical and Biological Investigations at the Box Elder Springs Site," there have been three adults and one infant burial uncovered at the site. Emigrant accounts, land owner reports and geophysical exploration of the site indicate that there are or were more graves present at the location.¹⁵⁷ Equal spacing between the known graves and their alignment also imply a limited level of planning.¹⁵⁸

Just as emigrants attempted to carry on traditions of nineteenth century burial practices of grave markers, shrouding or even coffins, the creation of small graveyards along the trails likely helped to alleviate the pain of leaving a fellow traveler buried alone on the trail as emigrant Samuel Word expressed after the death of a party member, "What a lonely place to leave a relative or friend – a bleak & desolate country no human habitation within 50 miles."¹⁵⁹ Keturah Belknap's statement that a burial her party made was "...near a settlement so it was not left there alone," shows that leaving the dead with others nearby was something emigrants considered to some degree.¹⁶⁰ W.W. Morrison, an early twentieth century researcher of the Oregon-California Trails, wrote in his notes concerning the grave of Rachel Pattison that:

¹⁵⁷ Adam S. Wiewel, "Geophysical and Biological Investigations at the Box Elder Springs Site" (MA Thesis, University of Wyoming, 2008), 1.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁵⁹ Samuel Word, *Journeys to the Land of Gold*, 80.

¹⁶⁰ Belknap, "The Commentaries of Keturah Belknap," 34.

...in 1908...the Ash Hollow Cemetery Association of near by Lewellen had acquired the slope where Rachel was buried, and also a point of bluff just a little above and west of her grave. By that time the site was pretty well established as a community burial place, and there was a substantial wire fence surrounding about an acre of ground, including Rachel's grave and a few other graves mostly graves of those who had lived in that vicinity and had been laid to rest near Rachel's grave [sic].¹⁶¹

This tradition of turning emigrant graves into community graveyards might also be used to explain the presence of wagon ruts through some existing cemeteries along western trails such as one in Overbrook, Kansas, near the Santa Fe Trail.¹⁶²

Most importantly the excavations of emigrant burials at Box Elder Springs provide a bioarchaeological examination of emigrant graves. Wiewel's thesis provides evidentiary insight into the burial circumstances regarding coverings and positions of the remains. According to the archaeological reports for the uncovered burials, the skeletons were "placed on [their] backs in a completely extended position" and the hands of one set of remains were resting on its abdomen."¹⁶³ In addition, the three adult burials were buried in an east to west orientation as Christian burial practices dictated.¹⁶⁴

The findings show the types of coverings used for the remains. Wiewel states that one set of remains had a "wooden coffin lid-like cover" constructed from juniper wood , which was "obviously six-sided and tapered towards the toes."¹⁶⁵ This description sounds like a typical nineteenth century coffin form and might signify that the emigrants performing the burial were making an attempt at providing a culturally proper burial.

¹⁶¹ W.W. Morrison, Research Notes, Rachel Pattison Grave Folder, Box 4, W.W. Morrison Collection, 1804-1977, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

¹⁶² "Overbrook Santa Fe Trail Hitching Post - Overbrook, Ks - Wagon Roads and Trails," Waymarking.Com. http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WM6D9C_Overbrook_Santa_Fe_Trail_Hitching_Post_Overbrook_Ks (30 March 2011).

¹⁶³ Wiewel, "Geophysical and Biological Investigations at the Box Eder Springs Site," 49.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 63.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

One of the other adult burials also showed a grave shaft in a “...hexagonal, tapered shape,” similar to early to mid-nineteenth century coffin shape.¹⁶⁶ Unlike the other two adult burials, the third burial had a rectangular grave shaft, but, like the first burial discussed, had a wood covering also created from juniper wood.¹⁶⁷ Each of these uncovered Box Elder Springs emigrant burials shows an attempt by the burial party to provide the dead with a either a wooden burial case or at least a grave shaft dug in the shape of a period coffin. While it is important to use diaries and letters to obtain information regarding burials performed on the trails, archaeological excavations of emigrant interment sites provide visible substantiation of actual burial practices for a limited, but accurate picture of emigrant deaths.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 63.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 64.

CONCLUSION

Although there is no lack of books and articles covering Oregon-California Trail history, few even lightly examine how emigrants dealt with mourning and burial on the trails. More importantly, there is a recurring belief that the requirement of continued speed and the lack of materials led to hasty, meaningless burials, and that due to the large number of fatalities, emigrants were detached from death. However, it is apparent from reading Oregon-California Trail diaries and letters that emigrant deaths could not be separated from the ritualized mourning practices of the nineteenth century.

Due to its nature as a Master's thesis, it was impossible to cover all aspects of nineteenth century death culture or of its expression on the western trails. Perhaps the most essential work to be done is an examination of non-white experience of death and mourning on the Oregon-California Trails. African-Americans, individuals of mixed race ancestry and Latin Americans were just some of the non-white travelers of the trails. Without the exploration of their understanding of death and how they carried those views with them on the way west, it is impossible to have a full understanding of emigrant culture. In addition, work needs to be done outside of the mainstream Christian experience of death on the trail, such as the way Mormon emigrants referenced their unique perspective regarding death or of how Jewish emigrants carried their death practices with them.

Furthermore, as this thesis did not take a gendered approach to nineteenth century mourning practices or trail life, work still needs to be done that explores how women viewed death on the trails from the perspective of nineteenth century gender roles or a

comparison of the ways in which men and women handled emigrant deaths. Although Carey R. Voeller's "'I have not told half we suffered': Overland Trail Women's Narratives and the Genre of Suppressed Textual Mourning," briefly examines how some female diary writers wrote about death on the trail, it does so from a literature perspective and, more importantly, from this thesis' conclusions, Carey does not accurately portray women's experiences with death.

The possibility of dying on the trail was a reality for all Oregon-California Emigrants. Illness, injuries and accidents, complications from childbirth and even murder could take the life of a traveler during the journey. Nineteenth century medical care was limited and unable to provide competent solutions to medical crises on the trail and what care was provided in the form of calomel or laudanum might cause more harm than good. When a death did occur, rather than turn away from their cultural understandings of the death and mourning process, white Oregon-California Trail emigrants continued to embrace them. While insufficient supplies and time led to alterations in burial practices, burial services and mourning rituals, emigrants did their best to continue the accepted nineteenth century cultural and middle class, Christian religious norms.

Death was a common occurrence in nineteenth century American life. Infant mortality rate and low life expectancies meant that every family dealt with death on a frequency twentieth century society would find difficult to grasp. Preparations of the deceased for burial and showing of the body before burial were likely to occur at home and nineteenth century individuals were brought closer to the process of death and mourning than contemporary people. It is this closeness and frequency of death during

the period that explains Oregon-California Trail emigrant's sometimes brief mentions of a death on the journey or their inclusion of a death in with other daily minutia.

Nineteenth century Christian religious concepts of death are heavily reflected in emigrant accounts of the trip. The post-Second Great Awakening views of death as a release from life and pain, especially when children died, are found in descriptions of trail deaths. Comforting consolations regarding meeting dead loved ones in heaven or that a death is the will of God and uncontrollable are also widely found in accounts as shown by Abigail Jane Scott's, Samuel Word's, Mary Ringo's reflections on deaths of family and wagon party members. The idea of a "good death" also followed emigrants on the trail. This concept espoused being prepared for death, for the dying to accept their passing and for the dying to comfort the family and friends attending them. Just as Christians living in a settled community in the nineteenth century used these ideas to remove the fear of death, trail emigrants took these beliefs with them on the way west.

The collection of memento mori's (such as locks of hair or mortuary photographs) are not commonly found in Oregon-California Trail emigrant writings. The absence of mortuary photography is most likely due to the lack of available means to take photographs on the trail as early photography took time and supplies not easily available to emigrants. One account that does mention taking the likeness of the deceased is that of Elizabeth Elliot in the description of her son's death, but even here it is not actually done, just wished for. The lack of taking locks of hair from deceased family members and friends who died on the trail is less explainable, but at least one account, that of Lydia Milner Waters, does mention the author taking a lock of hair to give the young wife of a deceased man.

Burials on the Oregon-California Trails also commonly showed that emigrants attempted to recreate nineteenth century burial standards even with a distinct lack of supplies and time. Emigrants attempted to provide some form of covering for the deceased before laying the body in the ground ranging from bed clothes wrapped around the corpse to wood taken from wagons or furniture made into a makeshift coffin. Burial locations were important to emigrants as seen by their discussions of the pain of leaving the dead alone on the remote plains or describing the beauty of the burial spot and the plants growing nearby. Nineteenth century burials typically took place in a tended, park like cemetery near other family members, so it is understandable that emigrants soothed themselves with descriptions of attractive burial locations on the trail. Some even found solutions to leaving the deceased alone on the trail by placing their body near other emigrant burials like those at Box Elder Springs.

There were instances of hasty burials where corpses were placed in shallow graves, but the assumption that the majority of emigrant burials resembled this is erroneous. The accounts read for this thesis showed few instances of haphazard burials. The accounts either provided little or no description of the burial or provided enough detail to see that the burial was not hasty. It may be that previous scholars took the accounts that provide little mention of a burial after a death and incorporate them into the “hasty burial” category. But, without more information it is impossible to make much of a guess as to what actually occurred after these deaths and it is unfair to include them in either burial type.

As shown, archaeological excavations of emigrant burial sites provide a revealing look at the burial process on the trails. Future use by historians of excavation reports

related to emigrant burials would help provide a better picture of how emigrants handled death on the trails by giving historians hard evidence for burial practices that is less open to interpretation as written source material may be.

In *Law for the Elephant: Property and Social Behavior on the Overland Trail*, John Phillip Reid argues that rather than leave behind the laws of the eastern states for a lawless life in the West, emigrants carried the laws and legal customs of the East with them on the trail. He writes that rather than create their own trail customs:

The emigrants did not have the time to let the new evolve from the old. They could not be guided by custom of the trail, for there was no trail custom. They had little choice but to do what they in fact did do. They turned to the law of the eastern states, the law they thought they had left on the banks of the Missouri River, but which they had, in truth, carried with them across the plains...¹⁶⁸

This same argument may be made for the way white emigrants traveling west carried with them the death culture of the East. Travelers on the Oregon-California Trail may have feared the possibility of death on the trail and the difficulty of dealing with such an occurrence far away from family and friends; however, these pioneers still made their best effort to react to death in a manner consistent with cultural norms. Even when they were unable to perform the same rituals available to them in a settled community, emigrants used the best available items to fashion coffins. They attempted to see the beauty in the location they buried their dead, and they used nineteenth century customs and, sometimes, nineteenth century Christian religious beliefs, to emotionally deal with the deaths of family and friends.

¹⁶⁸ John Phillip Reid, *Law for the Elephant: Property and Social Behavior on the Overland Trail* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1997), 363.

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