

Friend on the Trail

Chapter One - by Kay Hively

Very gently Martha lifted her mother's head and held a cup of water to her lips. Only a few trickles of the water found their way into the sick woman's mouth. But Martha O'Connor had learned not to give up.

Again and again, she put the cup to her mother's lips. Each time a little more water made it between the parched lips. When the cup was empty, Martha eased her mother's head back onto the bed. Then she bathed her mother's face and neck with cool water.

As she lovingly washed the hot face, Martha prayed for her mother. The only things Martha could do for her mother were give her water and keep her as cool as possible.

For two days Mrs. O'Connor had been down with fever. Twelve-year-old Martha was kept busy caring for her mother and for her baby sister, Ruth. Some of the women in the wagon train had helped as much as they could. But these women had their own problems because many other people were sick, too. Just yesterday one of the Mackenzie boys had died.

Everyone had stopped for the little boy's funeral. Martha and her father had gone to the burial. While her father helped cover the grave, Martha held baby Ruth.

Ruth was only 2 months old. She slept during the service, even though Mrs. Mackenzie cried loudly over the loss of her son. Everyone knew it was difficult to leave the boy's grave alone on the open plains.

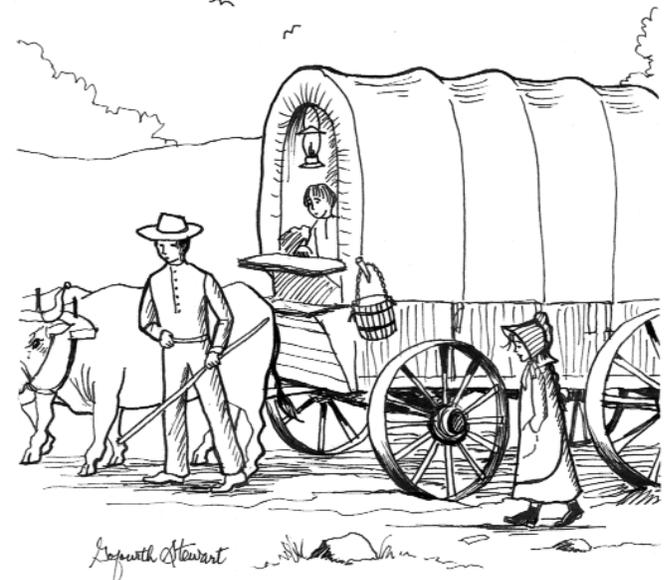
Martha finished wiping her mother with the cool cloth then she checked on little Ruth. The baby was sound asleep in her little

box. Martha had already given Ruth plenty of milk. The old cow tied to their wagon was the only one on the train that was still giving milk. Old Blue gave enough milk for everyone who really needed it.

Now that her mother was sleeping again, Martha climbed out of the wagon. Because it did not stop very often, Martha had learned how to safely climb in and out of the wagon while it was moving. Only the very young and the sick were allowed to ride. Everyone else walked to save the strength of the oxen. Many of the travelers had walked every step of the way from Independence, Missouri, where the wagon train started.

As Martha walked along beside the wagon, she could see blue-colored mountains off in the distance. They didn't seem far away, and just beyond them was the place they would homestead in Oregon. Martha's father had said it would be at least two more days before the wagon train would reach the mountains. The settlers believed that mountain air would break the fever and make everyone healthy again. So the wagon train was moving as fast as the oxen could go.

Martha was tired but daylight would last two more hours. She could not stop and rest until it was time to make camp.



Author Kay Hively and Illustrator Billie Gofourth-Stewart are both of Neosho, Missouri. Produced in partnership with this newspaper and the Missouri Press Foundation with support from Verizon Foundation. Copyright 2002.

Classroom Extensions

Things to Think About and Do -

- The wagon train was going to Oregon. Where did it start? On a map, measure the distance from Independence, Missouri, to Oregon City, Oregon. How many states did the Oregon Trail pass through?
- Make a covered wagon using materials that can be found around your home or in your classroom. Some items you might use are paper, glue, wood, paper clips, and cardboard.

Next Week: Chapter Two – Night Visitor