

## The Prairie Schooner

The Covered Wagon was long the main method of transportation in pre-industrial America. The covered wagon evolved from the heavier and sturdier Conestoga wagon used during the colonial migrations to the eastern part of the country. Once the rugged Appalachians had been conquered and opened out onto the moderate terrain of the Great Plains, massive migrations began heading west for land, gold, and hopefully a better future.

Any sturdy wagon would suffice. The box was usually 4 feet wide, 9 to 11 feet long and 2 to 3 feet deep (1.2 m x 2.7 to 3.4 m x 0.6 to 0.9 m). The box was set onto two sets of wheels, the front being smaller for easier turning. The wheels were wooden bounded by metal rims. The wheels and axels needed constant care: if the wheels dried out, the metal rims were in danger of falling off. The total length from the front tongue and yoke was about 23 feet (7 m). The box was waterproofed by painting or oiling. Five or six metal bows were be arched over the wagon and canvas stretched over them. This gave the covered wagon it's distinctive silhouette. With the canvas covering, it stood about 10 feet (3 m). The covering was often cantilevered out front and rear for better protection from the elements. Both ends could be tied off if necessary. The wagon's billowing canvas bonnet gave way to the nick-name "prairie schooner."

The typical covered wagon weighed 1,300 pounds (590 kg) and it could carry around 2,000 pounds of wares. Storage chests were often built inside the wagon and others lashed on the sides. Extra storage could be created by partitioning an area under a false floor and by sewing pockets onto the inside of the canvas hood. Covered wagon beds were narrow but they could be expanded by nailing boards across the wagon top extending over each side.

Covered wagons were mainly used for the transportation of goods. Other than small children who could ride in the wagon, migrants and oxen handlers walked along with the wagon. Covered wagons were usually not equipped with springs and the even ride over smooth ground was jarring. For shorter distances, horses could be used but for longer journeys two to four oxen were necessary.

A typical covered wagon carried the belongings for five people. Larger family groups often had two or three wagons.

For the migration west, up to 100 wagons gathered together to form "wagon trains." This was for mutual assistance and protection. Migrating usually began in the spring rendezvousing somewhere near the Missouri River. Companies were formed, officers elected, guides hired, and essential supplies collected while waiting for favorable weather.

The daily routine began early and usually ended around 4 pm. Then chores be tended to and animals grazed. Each night, the wagons would form up in a circle giving rise to the expression "circling the wagons." Having reached their destination, homesteading prairie families often used covered wagon for living until a permanent structure was built. Once the settlers were established, the wagon was converted into their ranch wagon giving it a second life.

However, until replaced by the Iron Horse – the new-fangled locomotive -wagon trains played an essential role in the development of the West. There were four major routes: the Santa Fe Trail, Oregon Trail, Smoky Hill Trail, and the Southern Overland Mail route. None of these trails was easy. Slow moving wagons became lost, crossing rivers was dangerous, and accidents occurred. Disease was a major cause of death in wagon migrations. Scurvy from the lack of fruits and vegetables took its toll as did cholera and smallpox.

Further Reading on Covered Wagons

**Daily Life in a Covered Wagon** by Paul Erickson.

**If You Traveled West in A Covered Wagon** by Ellen Levine.

**Heart of the Trail: The Stories of Eight Wagon Train Women** by Mary B O'Brien.

**Westward Expansion** by Terresa Domnauer.

**Woman's Voices from the Oregon Trail** by Susan G Butruille.

**The Oregon Trail** by Mel Friedman.

**GLENCOE MODELS**

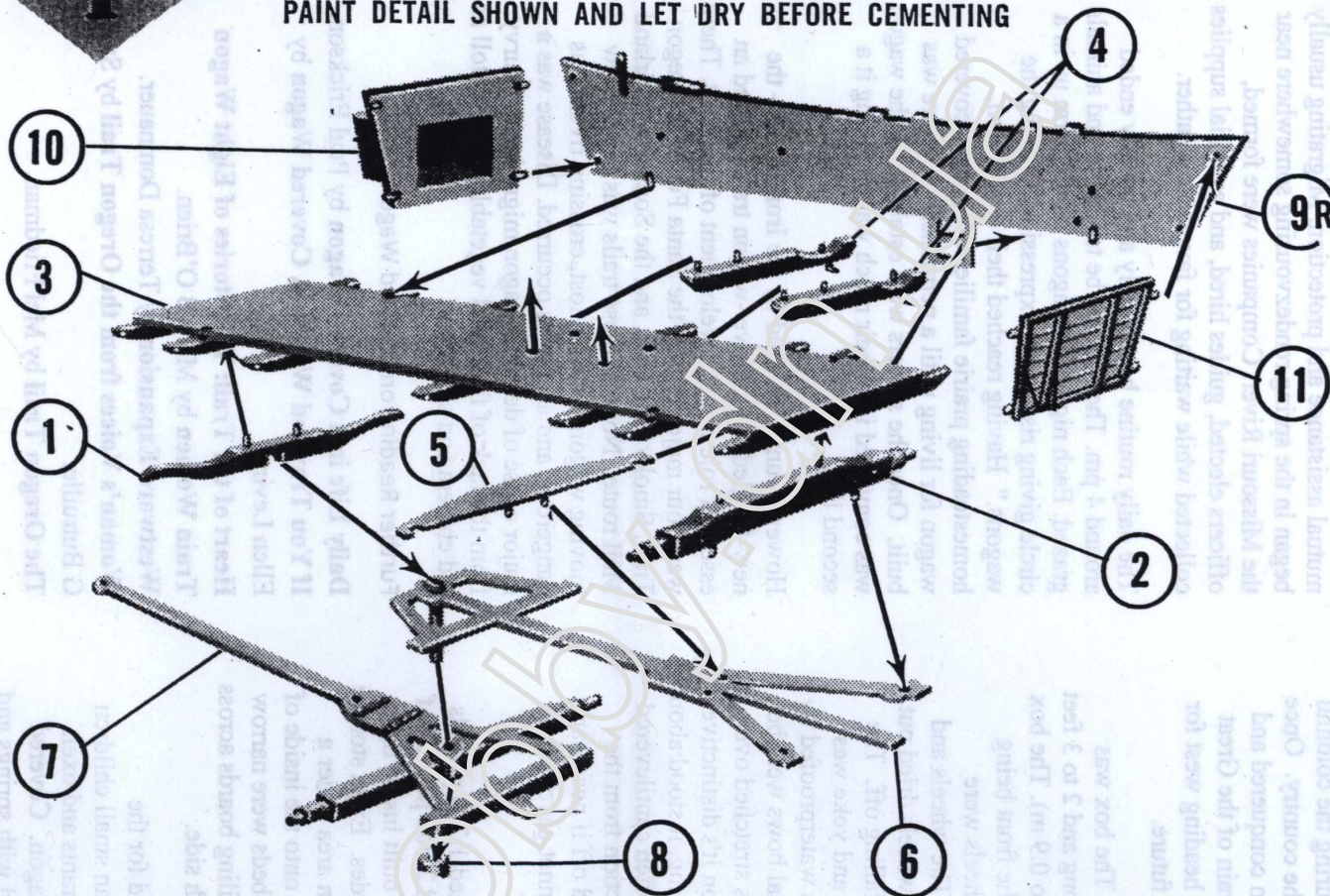
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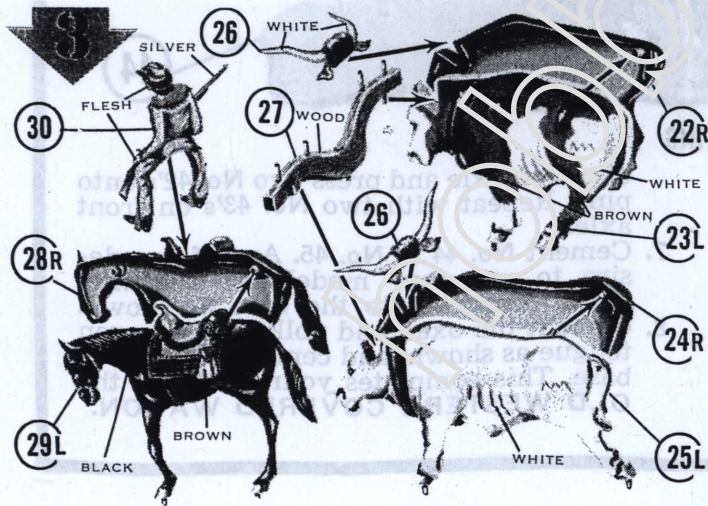
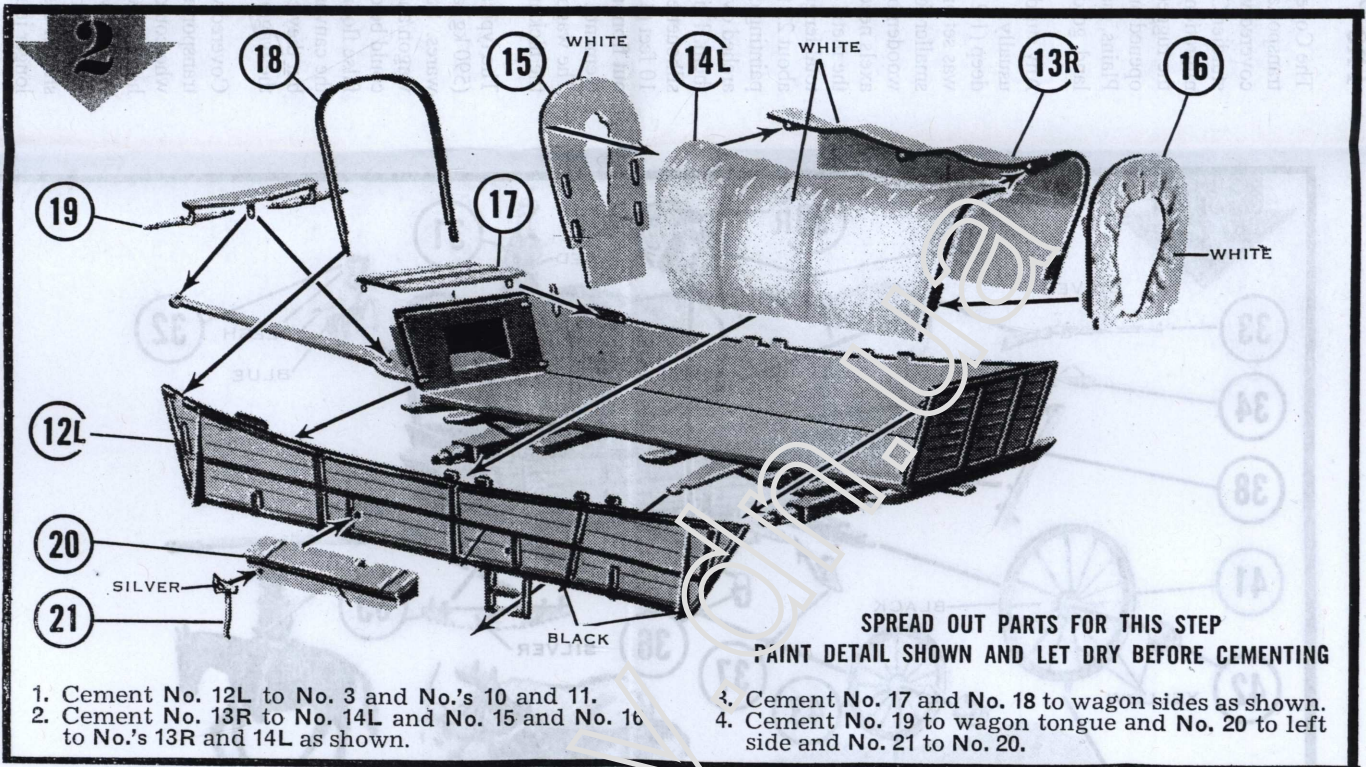
**SPREAD OUT PARTS FOR THIS STEP**  
**PAINT DETAIL SHOWN AND LET DRY BEFORE CEMENTING**



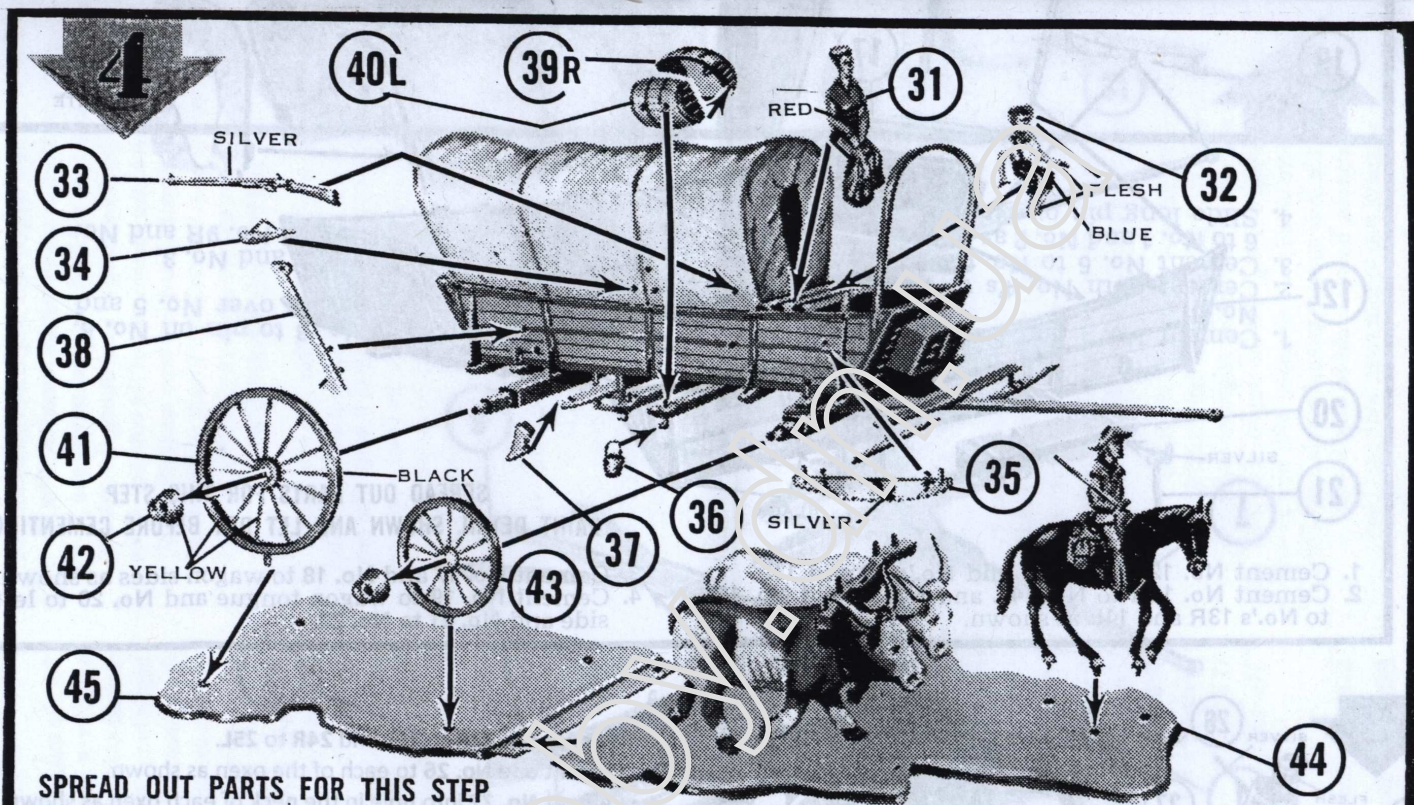
1. Cement No. 1 and No. 2 to underside of No. 3.
2. Cement both No. 4's to No. 3 as shown.
3. Cement No. 5 to No. 6, then cement No. 6 to No. 1 and No. 2 as shown.
4. Slide long pin on No. 6 through hole on

- No. 7 and cement No. 8 to pin on No. 6.
5. Slide bracket on No. 9R over No. 5 and cement No. 9R to No. 3.
6. Cement No. 10 to No. 9R and No. 3.
7. Cement No. 11 to back of No. 9R and No. 3 as shown.









**SPREAD OUT PARTS FOR THIS STEP  
PAINT DETAIL SHOWN AND LET DRY BEFORE CEMENTING**

1. Cement No. 31 and No. 32 to seat
2. Cement No. 33 and No. 34 to cover as shown.
3. Cement No. 35 to wagon side and No. 36 to barrel rests.
4. Cement one No. 37 to each end of brake bar and No. 38 to wagon side.
5. Cement No. 39R to 40L and onto barrel rests.
6. Slide one No. 41 to each end of rear axle, apply a small amount of cement to end of pin on axle and press two No. 42's onto pins. Repeat with two No. 43's on front axle.
7. Cement No. 44 to No. 45. And if you desire to use your model for a mantel piece, cement it to the base as shown.
8. Cement the oxen and yolk to the wagon tongue as shown, and cement outrider to base. This completes your model of the OLD WESTERN COVERED WAGON.