

# Western Wagons

Stephen Vincent Benét



A New Beginning, Duane Byers, Courtesy of the artist

▲ **Critical Viewing** What do the expressions on the faces of the couple in the painting reveal about their emotions? **[Infer]**



They went with axe and rifle, when the trail was still to blaze,  
They went with wife and children, in the prairie-schooner days,  
With banjo and with frying pan—Susanna, don't you cry!  
For I'm off to California to get rich out there or die!

- 5 We've broken land and cleared it, but we're tired of where we are.  
They say that wild Nebraska is a better place by far.  
There's gold in far Wyoming, there's black earth in Iowa,  
So pack up the kids and blankets, for we're moving out today!

- 10 The cowards never started and the weak died on the road,  
And all across the continent the endless campfires glowed.  
*We'd taken land and settled—but a traveler passed by—*  
*And we're going West tomorrow—Lordy, never ask us why!*

- We're going West tomorrow, where the promises can't fail.  
O'er the hills in legions, boys, and crowd the dusty trail!  
15 We shall starve and freeze and suffer. We shall die,  
and tame the lands.  
But we're going West tomorrow, with our fortune in our hands.

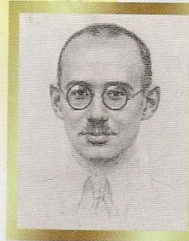
### Reading Strategy

#### Relating to What You Know

Why does the poet insert "Susanna, don't you cry!" in this stanza?

## Stephen Vincent Benét

(1898–1943)



A poet, short-story writer, and dramatist, Stephen Vincent Benét had his first collection of poetry published when he was only seventeen years old. Benét grew up in a literary family. His father read poetry to the children, and Benét's brother, William Rose, and sister, Laura, also were writers.

Benét often wrote on historical themes. *A Book of Americans*, which he wrote with his wife Rosemary Carr, consists of poems on historical characters. His epic poem on the Civil War, *John Brown's Body*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1929.

## Review and Assess

### Thinking About the Selection

1. **Respond:** Does the life of a westward pioneer appeal to you? Explain.
2. (a) **Recall:** With what items do the pioneers travel?  
(b) **Analyze:** Why are these items important to the pioneers? (c) **Interpret:** How do these details help you understand the meaning of the phrase "the trail was still to blaze"?
3. (a) **Recall:** To what places do the people in "Western Wagons" want to go? (b) **Infer:** Why do they want to go to these places? (c) **Apply:** What qualities characterized the age of westward expansion?
4. (a) **Recall:** In line five, what do you learn about the life of the pioneers? (b) **Interpret:** What do you think drives the pioneers to keep moving?
5. (a) **Make a Judgment:** What do you think is the most compelling reason most of the pioneers had for moving on? (b) **Evaluate:** Do you think the rewards of their move are worth the risks they face? Explain.