

On July 4, 1852, a young man named Ezra Meeker found himself staring up at a huge granite monolith in central Wyoming. It was called Independence Rock, partially because westward-bound pioneers, like Ezra, knew that if they made it to this landmark on or before Independence Day, they stood a good chance of reaching their destination before winter came.

That day, Ezra was more concerned about keeping his wife and newborn baby alive than anything else, but he and the other pioneers in the area did take the opportunity to celebrate Independence Day. He also took the time to carve his name into the rock, like hundreds had before him, and hundreds would after. Then, he continued his way along the Oregon Trail.

In 1906, fifty-four years later, Ezra Meeker found himself concerned that the nation's memories of the Oregon Trail were beginning to fade. So, despite being 75 years old, he set out again, retracing his exact steps along the trail in an actual covered wagon. Along the way, he set markers and tablets, designating important landmarks and milestones. And once again, on July 4, he found himself staring up at Independence Rock. He was no longer able to climb to the top, as he could in his younger days, but he still inscribed a message for future generations to read:

The Old Oregon Trail, 1843-57

In 1916, now 85, Meeker traveled the trail again –this time in a Pathfinder automobile. Although the car was an absolute relic by modern standards, Meeker was probably amazed at how much faster and easier the route was compared to when he walked it on his own two feet. Along the way, he became one of the first advocates for a national highway system, so that *every* American could travel the width and breadth of our country.

The years passed. Technology improved. The country changed. But Meeker kept on traveling. And for his last trip over the Old Oregon Trail, in 1924 at the grand age of 93, Meeker finally did it in style – in an airplane.

Between Meeker's birth and his death, America celebrated 97 birthdays. We're sure Meeker was astonished at how much the nation changed during that time. It expanded, going from 30 states to 48. It grew, going from roughly 13 million people to over 120 million. It mechanized, with horses and covered wagons being replaced by trains, then cars, and finally aircraft. It modernized, thanks to the invention of the camera and the film projector. When Meeker was born, the *telegraph* was just coming into use. During his life, he would witness the birth of both the phone and the radio. (In fact, Meeker made an appearance on the radio one year before he died. He declared it a "new and wondrous invention."¹)

Most of all, the country progressed. During Meeker's life, slavery ended, women won the right to vote, and children swapped the coal mine for the classroom.

In a few years, America will have celebrated almost 100 more birthdays since Meeker died. If he were to see America today, we think he would be even more impressed! Meeker dreamed of a national highway. Today, we have 70 different interstates. Meeker appeared on the radio. Today, we have smartphones. Meeker flew in an airplane. Today, we have spacecraft. 48 states have become 50; 120 million people have become 330 million.

When the pioneers reached Independence Rock on the 4th of July, they couldn't possibly fathom how their country would change over the decades. Now, as we celebrate another birthday for our great nation, we wonder how it will continue to change. What amazing new inventions await us? What progress will we make, and our children after us?

There are many reasons to be grateful for the United States of America. But high at the top of our list is that we live in a country that is constantly changing, constantly moving, constantly *growing*. America never stands still. Neither do her people. That was true in Ezra Meeker's day, and it's true in ours.

And for that, we are grateful.

So, happy birthday America! We can't wait to see where you'll go – and how you'll grow – next. And to you, we wish a very happy Independence Day!

Sincerely,



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¹ "Meeker, Ezra," *HistoryLink.org*, 5/02/2006. <https://www.historylink.org/file/7737>

