

**From Dreams to Nightmares
On A New Frontier**

The Donner Party

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“My father with tears in his eyes, tried to smile as one friend after another grasped his hand in a last farewell. Mama was overcome with grief. At last we were all in our wagons. The drivers cracked their whips. The oxen moved slowly forward and the long journey had begun.”¹ This quote by Virginia Reed (age 13) describes the departure of what would soon be known as the ‘ill-fated Donner Party’, which began with an attempt to conquer a new frontier. The story of the Donner expedition and tragedy is a frontier in history, because as a group they did something that had never been done before. Although many failed to reach their final destinations, they became famous. When the trek was finally completed, the Donner Party had become the most famous tragedy in the westward migration to a new frontier.

“California was a paradise. The exotic land had the most perfect climate in the world.”² This is how author, Richard Henry Dana described California after his travels there. His readers were awestruck by these descriptions. Another writer, John Marsh, bragged that people could do as they pleased in California without any interference from the Mexican government, who owned California in 1846.

Despite Marsh’s impressive descriptions, few Americans moved westward to join him. Most didn’t want to live under Mexican rule, and more importantly, there was no direct overland trail to California. Travelers had to either trek south through the desolate, hot desert or north through the grueling, mountainous Oregon Territory. The choice of sea travel was not feasible for most, as it was a 6,000-mile trip, very expensive, and took a long time.

Encouraged by the descriptions of “paradise,” explorers searched for passes through the mountains. It took many years of exploration to find a pass that had openings that were wide enough for the wagons. The site that was eventually found would become known as Donner Pass, elevation 7,088 feet.

¹ Murphy, Virginia Reed, Across the Plains in the Donner Party (North Haven, Connecticut: Linnet Books, 1996) p. 14.

² Ibid. p. ix

Around 1844, Lansford W. Hastings traveled extensively in California and wrote a book, *The Emigrants Guide to Oregon and California*. His writings depicted his travels to be much easier than they actually were. In an effort to promote his book and persuade people to move to the West Coast, he traveled throughout the Ohio Valley (which included territories of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, New York, and West Virginia). Under the façade of the book promotion, Hastings actually was trying to overthrow California's weak Mexican government. He hoped that by increasing the population, the people would revolt against Mexico and establish an independent republic, with himself as president.³

Hastings' book impressed three families in Springfield, Illinois so much that with the hired help of drivers and choregirls they made plans to travel to California in the spring of 1846. George Donner, his brother Jacob Donner, and a friend, James Reed, headed these families.

The reasons for moving to California were as different as the individuals who dared to go. George Donner and his third wife, Tamsen, traveled with their five children. Three of the children, Frances, Georgia, and Eliza were the couple's mutual children, while Elitha and Leanna Cumi were George's daughters from a previous marriage. George was not an ordinary emigrant, but a well-to-do farmer. Tamsen wanted to start an academy for girls and thought that California would be the perfect place to do so.

Jacob Donner and his wife Elizabeth brought their five children, George, Mary, Isaac, Samuel, and Lewis, and Mrs. Donner's two children from a previous marriage, Solomon and William Hook. The Donner family wanted to move to a warmer climate because Jacob's health was not good.

The Reed family consisted of James Reed, his wife Margaret and their children, Martha (called Patty), James Jr., and Thomas. Accompanying them was Mrs. Reed's daughter Virginia Reed, and mother Sarah Keys. James, a wealthy cabinetmaker, was facing financial problems due to the recession. Mrs. Reed was in poor health and wanted to move to a warmer climate.

³ Horn, Huston, *The Pioneers* (New York: Jona D. Manly, 1976) p.111.

Making every mistake that travelers could make,⁴ a wagon train was formed with the thirty-one people and nine wagons of the Donners and Reeds. Not only did they overload their wagons with assortments of fancy foods and liquors, they fitted their living wagons with such extravagant belongings as built-in beds and a stove. Other families, who were heading to California to seek opportunity, joined in along the way. Without the aide of guides or experience, the group grew to forty wagons and proceeded with confidence as the journey of “the Donner Party” began.

On April 15, 1846 the Donner Party left Springfield with only enough supplies to last six months. They felt it would only take them a half-year to reach Sutter’s Fort in California, their ultimate destination.

In the beginning of their pilgrimage food was abundant and travel proceeded smoothly. The men would go on buffalo hunts while they traveled through the plains. The party also dined on antelope, which are harder to catch. The emigrants always had to be cautious of Indian attacks. In order to protect themselves and their belongings, camp was set up in a certain order. Wagons would be placed in a circle with tents and fires surrounding them. The cattle were placed in the center of the circle, protecting them from thieves and predators, and to prevent them from straying.

Later in their travels, the group led by Captain Russell met up with many wagon trains all rushing to get to California or Oregon to seek their fortune and the rich farmland that was awaiting them. For miles and miles all one could see was a long line of wagons, stretching out of sight in the distance.

As the journey continued, the Donner Party began to encounter delays and difficulties and were continuously plagued with hardship. These setbacks contributed to their tragic fate. The first big delay was the Big Blue River (in present-day Kansas), which was so swollen that it was impossible to cross. After several unsuccessful attempts to cross the river they waited for it to subside and finally a week later, rafts were used to carry to the wagons across. When they got to the Dry Sandy River, time wasn’t lost; cattle were, by poisoned water. Luckily, they didn’t lose as many cattle as they eventually did in the Great Salt Lake Desert. The train wouldn’t have lost as many if the party had chosen to continue on the Old Fort Hall road, which was the road traveled by

⁴ Cleland, Robert Glass, Pathfinders (Los Angeles & San Francisco: Powell Publishing Co., 1929) p.350

thousands of wagons going to California or Oregon. Had not so many cattle died, the Donner Party's survival rate might have been greatly improved.

The tragic timeline began on July 25th when the company reached Fort Bridger in Wyoming. The group, now numbering eighty-nine persons, voted to take the Hastings Cutoff, a supposed shortcut to save 350 miles, because the group was eager to reach California. The Russell Party and other emigrants chose to stay on the established Old Fort Hall road. George Donner was elected as the new wagon master and it was at this point that the group officially became known as the Donner Party. It was there that Hastings was to meet the group to lead them over Hastings Cutoff. Mr. Bryant, a member of the Donner Party, went ahead to check out the trail. After doing so, he gave Jim Bridger a letter to deliver to the Donner Party warning them not to take the Hastings Cutoff. Mr. Bryant was unaware that Bridger worked for Lansford Hastings, and therefore failed to deliver the letter in hopes of keeping the party headed to California. However, Hastings Cutoff wasn't traveled by hundreds of wagons, as everyone thought; in fact it was an untried route! It seemed as if Hastings would go to any lengths to get people into California, which turned out to be fatal for the members of the Donner Party.

Approaching Webber Canyon, it was obvious that only the smallest wagons could cross. Charles Stanton and Mr. McCutchen went ahead in search of a better route. Upon returning to camp, they reported that they had found a pass through the Wahsatch Mountains. This was the party's first difficult encounter on Hastings Cutoff. It proved tough, but they were eventually able to pass. These mountains were difficult to cross because there was no real path and they had to build a trail as they went along.

Crossing the Great Salt Lake Desert was the second big delay. The party had only prepared for a forty-mile trip across the desert, but it turned out to be closer to eighty miles. Most of the cattle died of exhaustion or thirst, and some were lost. James Reed went ahead alone to find water. Soon the oxen were dropping from exhaustion and were unhitched and driven ahead. James met the cattle and drivers and instructed them to go for the water and then return to camp. The Reeds then waited all day for the return of the cattle, while the other wagons persevered on the without them. The Reeds had to go on foot through the desert and came upon the wagon of Jacob Donner. After realizing all their cattle had been lost except one ox and a cow, they knew that they would have to

abandon their palace car. The palace car was a two-story wagon complete with beds, a stove, seating area, a library, and everything that they would ever need.⁵ Losing cattle had negative affects, which would become apparent later.

On September 18, 1846, Charles Stanton and McCutchen were sent ahead, only this time it was for provisions at Sutter's Fort. Stanton sent a message back to he party that told of harsh mountains ahead and suggested that the party rest for about four days. This advice turned out to be catastrophic. On October 31st a severe storm, which was much earlier than normal, hit the Sierras and ended the last chances of reaching California by winter. In fact, it was the earliest storm on record for the Sierras.⁶ If only the group would have started traveling one day earlier, they might have made it. There were three attempts made at crossing the pass before giving up. The Donner Party was stuck in the Sierras. Once the party realized that they would be snowbound, why didn't they turn back to the Nevada desert where they could hunt and fish? Maybe it was in their minds that California meant civilization. The lands they had passed through were unknown, and therefore were to be feared.⁷ Most of the group was trapped at Truckee Lake (later known as Donner Lake), and those were the lucky ones. At least they had makeshift cabins that had been built by previous frontier settlers. Jacob and George Donner weren't so lucky, they were trapped six miles north of the lake at Alder Creek. They were separated because the Donner's had a broken axle and didn't want to delay the others, so they urged them to go on. They built brush shelters against the trees;⁸ this was their only protection. All of these unfortunate people spent the winter in the freezing cold with little to eat. Cannibalism was widely practiced among the members of the Donner Party. They ate the bodies of their dead companions to sustain life. It has been suggested that two Native Americans were sacrificed. Faced with starvation, they had done what was necessary to survive. Adults sacrificed food for the sake of the children.

Charles T. Stanton, who had returned by mule, organized a group of the healthiest people (including Margaret and Virginia Reed) to go over the pass. Another storm came through, so the group was forced to return to the lake. Nearly two months later Stanton

⁵ Calabro, Marian, The Perilous Journey of the Donner Party (New York: Clarion Books, 1999) p.22.

⁶ "The Donner Party: Dire Necessity & Forlorn Hope" Online.

⁷ Laxalt, Robert, Nevada, A History (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1977) p.10.

⁸ Cleland, Robert Glass, Pathfinders (Los Angeles & San Francisco: Powell Publishing Co., 1929) p.356.

organized another group, which he called “The Forlorn Hope.” Ten men and five women left Donner Lake on December 16th, 1846, on improvised snowshoes. Stanton was the only one who knew the trail. They only carried rations to last them six days. One day it had stopped snowing and the sun was shining, leaving them only the fear of becoming snow-blind. One morning when the group was leaving their camp, Stanton didn’t get up and said that he would catch up later. Knowing he was finished, he lay by the fire and died. Stanton died after his third crossing of the pass. One month later, two men and five women arrived at a settlement. Women seemed to have a higher survival rate than men because women usually have more fat to live off of, and are generally smaller, requiring less food.⁹

The party at the lake continued to have hope of survival. As the situation deteriorated, they continued to pray. An entry in Patrick Breen’s diary written on New Year’s Eve, 1846 reads, “Thursday 31st last of the year, may we with Gods help spend the comeing (sic) year better than the past which we purpose to do if Almighty God will deliver us from our present dreadful situation which is our prayer if the will of God sees it firing for us Amen...” As the winter dragged on, Patrick Breen wrote in his journal about the children (and adults) dying and yet, continuing to have an optimistic outlook “...Wedddd. (February) 10th beautiful morning...Milt Elliot died las (sic) night at Murphys Shanty about 9 O’clock PM: Mrs. Reid went there this morning to see after his effects. J. Denton trying to borrow meat for Graves had none to give they have nothing but hides all are entirely out of meat but a little we have our hides are nearly all eat up but with Gods help spring will soon smile upon us...”¹⁰

Somehow, Margaret Reed managed to keep her family alive on a diet of boiled ox hides and mice. The Reed family claimed they were able to survive the winter without resorting to cannibalism. Virginia Reed recounted in her diary “...we had to kill little Cash the dog and eat him. We ate...everything about him...”¹¹

In late February, the first rescue party came. One woman said, as rescuers approached, “Are you men from California or men from heaven?”¹² The rescuers took

⁹ *ibid.* p. 356.

¹⁰ “Patrick Breen’s Diary” online.

¹¹ “The Donner Party Transcript” online.

¹² Horn, Huston, The Pioneers (New York: Jona D. Manly, 1976) p. 117.

twenty-one able people across the pass. They took adults and children, although some were separated from their parents. The second rescue party was led by James Reed, who had earlier been banned from the original group because he had killed someone in self-defense. Five remained at the cabins and six at Alder Creek. While crossing the pass, the rescue party had to wait out a three-day storm at a make-shift camp now known as Starved Camp. The third rescue party came and only two people were able to make the journey, but neither went. Tasmen Donner didn't go because she refused to leave George's dying side and Keseberg was suffering from a bad foot. The final rescue party came to collect belongings and found only Keseberg was alive. He was surviving on Tasmen Donner¹³ (although he never admitted to it). The final rescue was April 21, 1847. All of the Reed and Breen families survived, although the winter of 1846-1847 was the worst on record in the Sierras. In the end, forty-eight members of the Donner Party arrived in California over what is now known as Donner Pass. The others, forty-one in all had died along the way. Although at first glance, the Donner Party story may appear to be more campfire legend than a frontier in history, its significant place in history cannot be erased. No matter how vile Lansford Hastings' intentions of promoting migration to California may have been, the end result was the beginning of the creation of the Western states. No other journey, short of Columbus' discovery of the New World, can compare to the impact of this daring adventure in travel. Lessons were learned, trails were improved, and travel became easier for future emigrants. If American pioneers hadn't taken these chances, our nation would have never expanded. The saga of the Donner Party is one of amazing human endurance and remembered as a tale of humans being tormented by extreme adversity. Some hailed as heroes and others doing what they had to do, in order to survive in a savage frontier.

¹³ Calabro, Marian, The Perilous Journey of the Donner Party (New York: Clarion Books, 1999) p., 122.