

The tragic story of the donner party



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On April 16, 1846, nine covered wagons left Springfield, Illinois on a 2500 mile journey to California, in what would become one of the greatest tragedies in the history of westward migration. The Donner-Reed party had set out for a journey that normally took four to six months, but after trying a new route, called Hastings Cutoff, rugged terrain left the group snowbound in the Sierra Nevada. Aside from the fact the Donner-Reed party decided to take the path less traveled by the party also had a couple other disadvantages that led to the tragic event. The Donner Party was unable to successfully migrate to California due to some major reasons which were that this particular party may have lacked in experience and leadership, it consisted of the inadequate type of members, and ultimately they foolishly attempted to travel by a route that was much more dangerous than the one that previous parties had endeavored.

By 1840, nearly 7 million Americans, 40 percent of the nation's population, lived in the trans-Appalachian West (Westward Expansion). People decided to migrate west for many reasons, many people decided that they would leave their homes in the East, to pursue economic opportunity. Another factor that contributed to westward expansion was the discovery of gold, which led to America's gold rush. Also in 1845, John O'Sullivan, a journalist, published a document called Manifest Destiny, which posed the idea that "that America had a divine obligation to stretch the boundaries of their noble republic to the Pacific Ocean (Manifest Destiny)." Emigrants, usually traveled by long ox-drawn wagons, which were a requirement for pioneer settlement. It was pretty common for large amount of people, who intended to reach the same destination, to join in large caravans and would elect a leader. This

caravans would then be known as parties or companies. “ As of 1846, when the Donner Party set out, the usual wagon route headed west from St. Louis to Fort Bridger in Wyoming, then northwest into Idaho before turning southwest through Nevada and on to California (Diamond).” During the time that the Donner Party decided they would begin their migration, there was speculation about a new route that would cut nearly 400 miles off the trip and save time. This new route was explained in *The Emigrants’ Guide to Oregon and California* by Lansford W. Hastings, and was later known as the Hastings Cutoff. The problem was that Hastings, though claiming the shortcut was surely secure and efficient, he had never traveled by it (Shortcut that Wasn’t).

The Donner Party did not set out as a single whole group of emigrants of Springfield Illinois, in fact only the Donner brothers and the Reeds set out from Springfield. They began their trip with a much larger group of emigrants lead by Col. Russell. It wasn’t until they reached the headwaters of the Sweetwater River, where George Donner was elected as the new leader, by a large amount of emigrants, who had now decided that this new company was going to travel to California through the Hastings Cut-off. When the emigrant train reached the Wasatch Mountains east of the Great Salt Lake the final stragglers arrived, thus completing the Donner Party (Rosen). The two brothers George and Jacob Donner, were considerably prosperous elderly farmers, and had no apparent reason or need to migrate to California. From German descend and originally from North Carolina, they had already migrated by wagon from the Atlantic to the Mississippi. After hearing about California, and all of its marvelous wonders, they agreed to migrate one last

time. George, now in his early sixties, brought his third wife, Tamsen who was about forty five as well as their three children Frances, Georgia, and Eliza. George also brought two daughters from a previous marriage, Elitha Cumi and Leanna. As for Jacob Donner, the younger of the two age fifty six, brought his wife Elizabeth of forty five years of age, as well as their five children, George, Mary, Isaac, Samuel, and Lewis. Mrs. Donner also brought two children from a previous marriage, Solomon Hook and William Hook (Rosen). The other family that left Illinois was the Reeds, which consisted of James Frazier Reed, who was forty six years of age, and his wife Margaret W. Reed of thirty two years, and their three children, Martha, James Jr., and Thomas. Mrs. Reed was also accompanied by her mother Sarah Keyes, and elderly woman of seventy five years, as well as a daughter she had from a previous marriage Virginia Backenstoe Reed (Rosen).

Although the journey west was never an easy one for any one, many Americans would still attempt the trip, because they believed that the promise of free land worth the risk. Along the way every party would have to face something they were just not prepared for. The most difficult thing was it is was nearly impossible for these parties to predict what exactly it would be. Every household had to face the fact that the burden of carrying all of their belongings on such a long trip over rough terrain added to the hardship. They had to bring food, such as flour, beans and coffee, along with their larger possessions like furniture and stoves (McGill). Other complications that many emigrant needed to endure were things such as rivers being nearly impassable, wagons got stuck and were difficult to pull out, wagon wheels and other running gear were easily damaged through the stress of the

weather and rough terrain and even gun accidents wounded some pioneers (McGill). Emigrants were also racing time, because they would not want to get caught out on the road during the winter. Emigrants would also be in constant fear that Natives would come and raid their caravans, like it had already happened on many occasions. The wide range of weather was also a factor that Americans needed prepare for as they would have to endure harsh cold mountainous areas, as well as a extremely hot and dry desert conditions.

The Donner party had a few more disadvantages than other parties, much of the party was composed of farmers and a high proportion of women, elderly and children (Ficklin). Previous parties were led by experienced mountain men, whereas the Donner party was, because of their decision to travel by Hastings Cutoff, to be led by a man that had never traveled by the route they were going to take. In fact Lansford Hastings, the supposedly guide, was never really a part of the Donner party he would just leave notes to advise the followers of what to do. Along the way the Donner party lost much precious time and suffered through severe desert conditions. The physical condition of both humans and animals began to deteriorate as did their emotional stability (Ficklin). On another occasion their livestock was poisoned by Natives, and many people were left no other option than to abandon their heavy wagons, leaving behind large quantities of supplies (Shortcut that Wasn't). In many cases, because they were traveling by a route that was not so common, they constantly needed to carve a trail through thick trees and boulder-strewn ground for their wagons to drive by, which was much more time consumption than what they expected (Donner

Party). Ultimately what most affected the Donner party, was the arrival of an early winter, unprepared they were forced to stop and construct many makeshift cabins, with whatever was left of their wagons (Shortcut that Wasn't).

The Donner party's journey went well until the group reached southwestern Wyoming. It was in there, where the emigrants met James Clyman, who had just traveled by the cutoff in reverse. He warned them not to take the cutoff as it was the "most desolate country" in the world. "Take the regular wagon track and never leave it," he advised (Shortcut that Wasn't). Even then Reed would not change his mind about trying to cut time of the exhausting trip, and after weighing his options, he decided to ignore the seasoned wilderness explorer and use the shortcut (McGill). At Little Sandy River, west of Fort Laramie, the Donner-Reed party split from the rest of the families that they had traveled with since Missouri. There the Donner party veered left towards Fort Bridger in present day Wyoming and traveled towards Hastings Cut-off. Almost a month later, they reached the Great Salt Lake and the barren Salt Lake Desert. According to the guidebook, the desert was 40 miles across. In fact, it was 80 miles wide. It took five days to cross. It was not until late September that the weary group rejoined the main trail in eastern Nevada. The shortcut turned out to have been 125 miles longer than the regular route—and it cost them dearly(Shortcut that Wasn't) That September, they found that they were falling behind schedule and autumn was dangerously close. Frustrations and fears soon became evident. Reed got into a fight with a teamster named John Scheider, and killed him. Although nobody knows for sure, it is thought that Reed killed Scheider in self-defense, but the party

banished their former leader from the company anyway (McGill). Reed did not give up, but began to make his way to California alone to find help for his family and the rest of the party.

The Donner Party had finally reached the Sierra Nevada Mountains outside of California in mid-October. Although now the weather was turning cold, and the emigrants grew weary about the how close winter had gotten. They were 50 miles from the summit of the Sierras on October 19, when their food began to run out. There the emigrants decided to make camp for five days in order to rest their oxen to making that last push for the summit(McGill). The group reached Truckee Lake, just below the summit, as heavy snow began to fall. The snow was the start of a heavy blizzard. Now five feet of snow blocked their route over the Sierras. They found it impossible to bring the wagons through the snow, and the guides could not even find the road. They were only 150 miles from Fort Sutter in California, but after traveling for six months, they had lost the race against the weather by one day(McGill). The dejected party returned to Truckee Lake and made camp while they considered their options. Cabins, lean-tos and shacks were built to protect the people from the elements. The family of George Donner was forced to remain farther behind the rest of the party to make wagon repairs at Alder Creek. Sometimes, several families were forced to share a tiny cabin. The party also began butchering their remaining cattle to feed the 81 people, 25 men, 15 women and 41 children, including six babies, trapped at the lake (McGill). On various occasions, attempts were made to cross the summit into California and summon help, but none were successful. The condition of the Donner Party was becoming desperate. They were rapidly exhausting their

food supply, and the weather kept growing worse. They ran out of cattle before December. On December 15, the first death from malnutrition occurred at Truckee Lake. Seventeen people, led by William Eddy, decided to make one last attempt at crossing the path. The seven men including the Native guides, Luis and Salvador, five women and one boy were equipped with crude snowshoes and six days worth of rations.

Another blizzard struck on December 25, and the remaining emigrants huddled around a small campfire, aware that they would probably not survive. Then the idea that if one was killed and eaten, the others might survive was brought up. So they decided to draw lots to determine who would be sacrificed for the group, but after the drawing they could not bring themselves to kill the loser (McGill). The heavy snow continued, finally smothering the fire. During the night, three men of the group died. The survivors butchered the corpses and ate them, except for Luis and Salvador, who refused. The leftover meat was wrapped and carefully labeled, so that no one would eat a relative. As the group continued wandering through the wilderness, they used up the saved meat. Feeling the grip of starvation again, they turned on the Native Americans. Luis and Salvador were shot, butchered and consumed. By the time the band reached civilization on January 17, 1847, only seven people were left, two men including Eddy and five women. The rest had perished and been eaten (McGill). By that time, the exiled James Reed had reached Fort Sutter in late October. He had attempted to reach his family, but was forced to turn back because of the snow. He had trouble raising a rescue party because most of the local men were away fighting in the Mexican War. Reed even traveled to San Francisco

to gather a group, but it would be four months before he could reach Truckee Lake (McGill). Conditions at the lake continued to grow worse after the last group left. Food began to run out, and the people were forced to eat the hides of their dead cattle. Malnutrition swept through the camp, and people began to die. Twelve of the approximately sixty people at the lake had died by February, and some of the survivors had gone insane from the conditions(McGill).

The tale of Eddy's group and the work of James Reed had brought awareness to the troubles of the people at Truckee Lake. Now relief party was organized and finally set out, while a second party led by James Reed headed for the lake. The first relief party reached the trapped people on February 19, and was horrified at the sight of the emaciated survivors. Due to limited supplies, it was only possible for about twenty people to accompany the relief party when it left the lake, and no food could be spared for those left behind.

Margaret Reed and two of her children left the lake, while the entire Donner family stayed behind. James Reed reached the lake with his relief party soon after encountering his wife on the trail. He gathered all the survivors he could safely take, about eighteen, and headed back across the pass.

Unfortunately, his party was trapped by yet another blizzard. Four of the group died in the storm, before being saved by a third relief party from Fort Sutter. This third party continued to the lake where they found less than 10 people left alive. Among those still at the lake were George Donner and his wife Tamsen and their children Georgia, Frances and Eliza. George was too ill to be moved, and Tamsen refused to leave him. The children, however, accompanied the third party when it left. A fourth rescue party was sent to

save the few people left at the lake, but it was delayed for a month by the ninth blizzard to hit the area that winter. When it reached the lake, only Lewis Keseberg was still alive. The Donner-Reed party had started out with 87 members. There were 41 deaths and 46 survivors. Two thirds of the men in the group died, while two thirds of the women and children survived to reach California(McGill).

Newspapers told the horrifying story to the whole country. Those who lived through the experience gave such differing accounts of what they witnessed and went through that it was difficult to learn what really happened. Accusations of murder and cannibalism were almost impossible to verify. The entire nation was repulsed by the tales, and the march of westward expansion was briefly halted, until the lure of gold once again drew pioneers to the West Coast (McGill).