

The Donner Tragedy

Everyone who traveled west by wagon train faced many **hardships** and difficulties. Considering the weather, mountains, deserts, lack of water, little food, hostile natives, sickness, and disease, it's a wonder so many actually completed the journey.

One of the most tragic stories was of a group of 87 men, women, and children who left Illinois in a wagon train headed for California in April 1846. For a time, they traveled with a much larger group. They then learned of an untried route recommended in *The Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California*, which claimed the route would cut 300 miles from the journey. So the group, which was led by George Donner, split off from the larger party to try the new route.

Rather than being a shortcut, the route they chose caused many delays as they hacked a trail through the Wasatch Mountains in Utah and faced an 80-mile stretch of desert. They were **harassed** by hostile natives who stole their oxen. Arguments among members of the party led to several killings. Some wagons had to be abandoned along the way.

By the time they reached the Sierra Nevada Mountains, it was late in the season. Their supplies were running low. An intense, early **blizzard** forced them to turn back from the attempted crossing.

Some members of the party took shelter in an abandoned cabin, some built crude cabins, and others lived in tents while blizzards raged, day after day. In spite of several attempts to cross the mountains, only one group succeeded, and only seven of the 15 survived to reach Sutter's Fort, a distance of over 100 miles away. Rescuers tried many times to return for the rest of the group, but were unsuccessful because of the weather.

When rescue parties finally arrived four months later, those who were still alive



were sick and starving. In desperation, some had resorted to cannibalism to survive. Of the original party, only 47 lived to see California.

One survivor, Virginia Reed, later wrote about the terrible winter they had spent waiting for rescue. "The **misery** endured during those four months at Donner Lake would fill pages and make the coldest heart ache."

In 1911, the book *The Expedition of the Donner Party and Its Tragic Fate*, written by Eliza Poor Donner Houghton, the youngest daughter of George and Tamsen Donner, was published. In the book, Eliza writes, "... I have always believed, that no one was to blame for the misfortunes which overtook us in the mountains. The dangers and difficulties encountered by reason of taking the Hastings Cut-off had all been **surmounted**—two weeks more and we should have reached our destination in safety. Then came the snow! Who could foresee that it would come earlier, fall deeper, and linger longer, that season than for thirty years before? Everything that a party could do to save itself was done by the Donner party..."

Narrative

(Excerpt from H.A. Wise, *Los Gringos, or, An Inside View of Mexico and California, with Wanderings in Peru, Chili, and Polynesia*. New York: Baker and Schribner, 1850. As found in Kristin Johnson, ed., "Unfortunate Emigrants": Narratives of the Donner Party. Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996, pp. 134–135.)

Previous to our arrival in the waters of San Francisco, a frightful incident transpired amidst the California mountains, which goes far to surpass any event of the kind heard or seen. . . . It relates to a party of emigrants, whose shocking inhuman cannibalisms and sufferings exceeded all belief. The news first reached us in Monterey, and also that a party had been despatched to succor them. From an officer of the navy in charge of the expedition [Woodworth], and from one of the survivors, a Spanish boy, named Baptiste, I learned the following particulars: The number of emigrants were originally eighty; through a culpable combination of ignorance and folly, they loitered many weeks on the route, when, upon gaining the sierra, the snows set in, the trails became blocked up and impassable, and they were obliged to encamp for the winter; their provisions were shortly exhausted, their cattle were devoured to the last horse's hide, hunger came upon them, gaunt and terrible, starvation at last—men, women and children starved to death, and were eaten by their fellows—insanity followed. When relief arrived, the survivors were found rolling in filth, parents eating their own offspring, denizens of different cabins exchanging limbs and meat—little children tearing and devouring the livers and hearts of the dead, and a general apathy and mania pervaded all alike. . . . One Dutchman actually ate a full-grown body in thirty-six hours! another boiled and devoured a girl nine years old, in a single night. The women held on to life with greater tenacity than the men—in fact, the first intelligence was brought to Sutter's fort, on the Sacramento by two young girls. . . . There were thirty survivors, and a number of them without feet, either frozen or burnt off, who were placed under the care of our surgeons on shore. . . . The cause of all this suffering was mainly attributable to the unmeaning delay and indolence attending their early progress on the route, but with every advantage in favor of emigration, the journey in itself must be attended with immense privation and toil. The mere fact, that by the upper route there is one vast desert to be travelled over, many hundred miles in width, affording very little vegetation or sustenance, and to crown the difficulty, terminated by the rugged chain of Californian mountains, is almost sufficient in itself to deter many a good man and strong, from exposing his life and property, for an unknown home on the shores of the Pacific.

Letter

(Excerpts from a letter by Virginia Reed, May 16, 1847, as found in George R. Stewart, *Ordeal by Hunger*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986. Original spelling and grammar have not been corrected.)

My Dear Cousin,

I take this opportunity to write to you to let you now that we are all Well at present and hope this letter may find you all well to My Dear Cousin I am going to write to you about our trubels geting to California. We had good luck we come to big Sandy there we lost our best yoak of oxens we come to Brigers Fort & we lost another ox we sold some of our provisions & baut a yoax of Cows and oxen and thay perswaded us to take Hastings cutof over the salt plain thay said it saved 3 Hundred miles. we went that road & we had to go through a long drive of 40 miles With out water Hastings said it was 40 but i think 80 miles. . . . We had to walk all the time we was a travling up the truckee river. . . . it was rain g then in the Vallies and snowing on the mountains so we went on that way 3 or 4 days till we come to the big mountain or the California Mountain the snow then was about 3 feet deep there was some wagons there thay said thay had attempted to croos and could not. well we thought we would try it so we started and thay started again with those wagons the snow was then up to the mules side the farther we went up the deeper the snow got so the wagons could not go. . . . we stoped there the 4 th of November and staid till March and what we had to eat i cant hardley tell you. . . . we had nothing to eat but ox hides o Mary I would cry and wish I had what you all wasted Eliza had to go to Mrs. Graves cabin & we staid at Mr. Breen thay had meat all the time. & we had to kill littel cash the dog & eat him we ate his entrails and feet & hide & evry thing about him o my Dear Cousin you dont now what trubel is yet. Many a time we had on the last thing a cooking and did not now wher the next would come from but there was awl weis some way provided there was 15 in the cabon we was in and half of us had to lay a bed all the time there was 10 starved to death then we was hadly abel to walk we lived on little cash a week and after Mr. Breen would cook his meat we would take the bones and boil them 3 or 4 days at a time. . . . there was but [2] familes that all of them got [through] we was one O Mary I have not rote you half of the truble we have had but I have rote you anuf to let you now that you dont now what truble is but thank god we have all got throw and the onely family that did not eat human flesh we have left everything but i dont cair for that we have got throw with our lives but Dont let this letter dish[e]a[r]ten anybody never take no cutofs and hurry along as fast as you can.