

WEEKLY READING # 23
ARTICLE 1:
THE DONNER PARTY

By the mid-1800s land and opportunities in the East were no longer plentiful. Cholera outbreaks had become common place in the overpopulated eastern cities where sanitation was poor. People began to cast wistful eyes in a westerly direction. Thousands of pioneers packed family and belongings for the move west.

George Donner, a sixty-five year old farmer, was among those pulled by the lure of open spaces. Eagerly responding to a proposal by neighbor and businessman James Frazier Reed, Donner decided to move his family west. He promptly posted a bulletin in the Springfield Gazette that began "Westward Ho!" and promised free travel to California for up to eight able-bodied young men capable of driving a team of oxen.

The Donners and the Reeds left Springfield, Illinois on April 16th, 1846, for Independence, Missouri. Their party consisted of thirty-two people. The twenty-five hundred mile trip from Independence to San Francisco was expected to take four months. Survival would depend on nearly perfect timing: they could not leave until the spring rains stopped and they had to make it over the Sierra Nevada mountains before the first snows flew. Neither Donner nor Reed was worried; they would follow a new route over the mountains. A route touted by attorney Lansford Hastings as able to cut three to four hundred miles from the trip.

The Donner party left Independence on May 12th and became one in the thousands of wagon trains heading out that spring. There was hardship from the beginning. Thunderstorms soaked the trail daily, creating muddy bogs that mired the wagons and oxen down. Progress was limited to two miles a day.

Despite the poor beginning, they reached Fort Laramie on the edge of the Rockies just one week behind schedule. James Reed ran into an old friend, James Clyman, who had come through Hastings' pass on horseback. Clyman emphatically warned Reed to take the old route; the wagons would never make it through the pass. Reed respectfully declined the advice.

The wagon trains pressed on toward the Continental Divide. On July 17th a horseman rode up with a message from Hastings urging the emigrants to keep on to Fort Bridger where Hastings, himself, would be present to escort them over the new pass. Three days later the caravan came to the Little Sandy River where the old trail turned north to cross the Sierras well above San Francisco. While most of the pioneers elected to take the known route, Reed remained convinced that Hastings had been right about the shortcut. So the nine wagons comprising the Reed and Donner parties along with the eleven wagons of people who had elected to join them turned south towards Fort Bridger.

On arrival, they discovered Hastings had left with another wagon train. Undaunted, James Reed led the company of nine families and sixteen single men onto the new trail. The party remained in high spirits for the first week having made the excellent time of ten to twelve miles a day. Then on August 6th a note from Hastings urged them to find an alternate route, as the way ahead was impassable. Leaving the trail, the wagons started down the canyon. Their progress through the thick brush and cottonwood trees was grueling and agonizingly slow. When they reached the Great Salt Lake, they were a month behind in the journey and eighty miles of Great Salt Desert lay ahead.

It took the party five days to cross the desert. Wagons, were axle deep in a quagmire of wet salt, had to be abandoned. Oxen went mad from thirst and ran off or died. On the far side of the desert, an inventory of food was taken and found to be less than adequate for the six hundred mile trek still ahead. That night, as an ominous warning, the first snow powdered the mountain peaks.

They reached the Humbolt River on September 26th. The diversion had cost them an extra one hundred and twenty-five miles. Nerves were shattered and fights began to break out. James Reed killed a man in self-defense and was banished from the party. He left his family and rode on to California alone.

By October 19th a relief party loaded with extra food found the weary pioneers fifty miles from the summit and assured them that the pass wouldn't be blocked for at least another month. They were wrong.

October 31st, only one thousand feet from the granite peaks, on the edge of Truckee Lake, snow began to fall. The party raced to climb through the pass, but the women were too exhausted from carrying their children; the decision was made to stop for the night and cross the pass the next morning. Heavy snow continued falling. By morning the pass had been completely blocked by twenty-foot snowdrifts. The tired and hungry emigrants had arrived one day too late.

Over the next four months, the eighty-one remaining men, women, and children huddled together in two abandoned cabins*, make shift lean-tos, and tents. The cattle had all been killed and eaten by mid-December; one man had died of malnutrition. The people began to eat bark, twigs, and boiled hides.

In desperation, a group of nine men, five women, and a twelve year old boy packed scanty rations and on snowshoes made from oxbows and rawhide, set out to cross the pass for help. They called themselves the Forlorn Hope. Nine days later they realized they had become lost in the snow-covered mountains. Completely without food for three days and on the verge of starvation a suggestion was made to draw lots; the loser would sacrifice his life to save the others. Patrick Dolan drew the fatal slip, but no one could bring themselves to kill him. Malnutrition soon carried out what the group could not do. Two other men followed quickly. Ten members of the Forlorn Hope butchered their dead companions, then wrapped and carefully labeled the packages so no one would have to consume their relatives. The two Indians who had accompanied the

group as guides refused the gruesome nourishment and vanished into the woods.

Eighteen days after they had started from the main camp, six survivors of the Forlorn Hope stumbled to a cabin and repeated the horrendous tale of death and cannibalism. Fort Sutter was notified that there were people on Truckee Lake who needed immediate rescue, but it would be nearly a month before the first search party reached them.

On February 19th, the rescue team found forty-eight survivors at the camp. Bodies had been spread on the snow and covered with quilts. No one at the camp had yet been forced into cannibalism, instead subsisting on boiled rawhide. The noble resolution would not last.

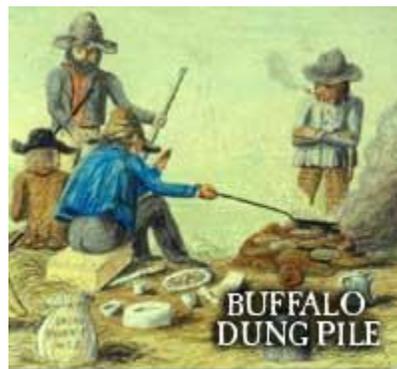
It took four relief parties two months to get all the survivors out. The second relief party, led by James Reed, reported that when they arrived at the camp, “half-eaten bodies” littered the ground and the survivors “surrounded by the remains of their unholy feast, looked more like demons than human beings.”

Reed had been spectacularly lucky, his wife and all four children had survived the ordeal. All of the Donners, except one child, died. Eighty-seven people had started over the new passage to California. Two thirds of the women and children along with one third of the men had survived. Forty-one people had died.

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ARTICLE 2:
ODD STORIES ALONG
THE OREGON TRAIL

Fun with Buffalo Dung

If you think frisbees were invented in the 1960s, you're wrong--by about a hundred years. Children on the Oregon Trail threw frisbee-like devices back in the mid-1800s. But they weren't made of plastic--they were made of buffalo dung.



During the great western migration, the entire Great Plains region was covered with buffalo chips--they were unavoidable. And yes, kids occasionally tossed them about in a frisbee-like manner. But the chips had a much more practical purpose for the emigrants--they were burned for fuel.

There was no firewood along much of the Trail, so the only alternative was dried buffalo dung. Even though the pioneers were hardy, they didn't much enjoy gathering up bushels of chips every night.

The chips burned surprisingly well, and produced an odor-free flame. Usually, each family had its own campfire, but sometimes everyone contributed their chips for one big bonfire.

The \$100 Drink of Water

Would you spend \$100 for a glass of water? Some pioneers on the California Trail did. Dying of thirst in the middle of the desert, they had no choice.

Although it's unlikely anyone on the Oregon Trail paid that much for water, the cost of other supplies was often exorbitant. For example, at the start of the journey, flour could be purchased for \$4 a barrel, but further along the price rose to a \$1 per pint. Sugar cost up to \$1.50 per pint and coffee was over \$1 per pint.

Surprisingly, other items were amazingly cheap. At Ft. Laramie for example, bacon could be purchased for a penny per pound. Those emigrants with excess bacon often considered it worthless and dumped it by the side of the road. One pioneer reported seeing ten tons of abandoned bacon on one pile.

The basic laws of supply and demand caused the wide disparity in prices. Because most wagon trains had large supplies of bacon, it had little trading value. Liquor, on the other hand, was in short supply, thus commanding a high price.

The Cow that Started a War

It started innocently enough. A pioneer's cow wandered into a Sioux camp. If the emigrants had gone after the cow, it's likely the amiable Sioux would have simply returned it. Instead, the emigrants went to Ft. Laramie, (in Wyoming) where they told an overzealous Lt. Grattan what happened. He and 29 soldiers then set out to punish the tribe. In the meantime, hungry Sioux did what you might expect--they ate the cow.



When Grattan and his men arrived at the Sioux camp, the chief offered a horse in exchange for the cow--more than a fair trade. Grattan's response? He ordered his men to fire at the Sioux. Surprisingly, the chief ordered his warriors to withhold their fire, thinking Grattan now had his revenge and would leave. Grattan's response? He shot again, and killed the chief. This time the Sioux fought back, killing 21 soldiers.

The unfortunate result was that a number of tribes continued guerrilla attacks, and the military plotted a major retaliation. Years of hostility ensued and many innocent people died. All because of a wandering cow.