



California State Parks

Video Transcript



The Longest Winter: The Donner Party Story

Donner Pass, a region of harsh granite and wind twisted pines, forms a low cut in the Sierra Crest and since pioneer times, a major route into California. Each day thousands of cars and trucks speed across the Sierra on a six lane interstate, following the smooth pavement westward as it drops downward into the fertile Sacramento Valley or eastward toward the desolate Nevada desert. When winter storms blanket the Sierra, powerful plows toss aside the snow, clearing the dark ribbons of pavement over the mountains.

Such storms are only a temporary inconvenience for modern travelers, and many will pause to enjoy the snowy view of Donner Lake and the surrounding peaks. At the east end of the lake, standing among the pine trees is a large statue commemorating a different group of travelers, travelers who came at a time before the freeway, when only a rutted wagon road crossed Donner Pass, when no snowplows disturbed the winter silence.

Before gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill, tales of California's sunny climate and bountiful farmland had filtered back to the east. The promise of adventure was enough to lure some into believing they'd find their future in California. It was a chance for a new start, away from the bitter cold winters of the Midwest, the malaria and cholera epidemics, and the continuing economic chaos of the eastern United States. The hope and dream for a better, easier life was all some of them, had and the exaggerated claims of California were hard to ignore.

By spring of 1846, vast numbers of settlers had headed their wagons westward. This increasing mass migration would move across two-thousand miles of unsettled wilderness. Ahead, lay five months of blistering desert, rough roads, and steep mountain slopes. There would only be Fort Laramie or Fort Bridger along the way to obtain limited goods at high prices.

With such a long journey ahead of them, the pioneers' small, canvas topped wagons were crammed with items necessary for life on the trail. Barrels of flour, salt, sugar, and coffee were some of the staples bouncing along next to cooking pots, tools, extra wagon gear, and their furniture. The emigrants also took along those things, which would make civilized life possible in California. They brought farming tools, stoves, paper goods, writing tools, books, spinning wheels and bolts of cloth, plus cherished mementos from homes and families they would probably never see again.

Most of the wagons were pulled by oxen. These slow, plodding beasts were sturdier and cheaper than horses, and if rations ran low, an ox represented food to sustain life. As lines of heavily laden wagons creaked westward over the prairies, companies grouped and regrouped. Although the settlers of 1846 could follow the crudely built emigrant trail, knowledge of the

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route was limited. Few of them knew exactly what to expect. They were farmers and merchants with few qualifications for frontier life.

George Donner and his brother Jacob were in their 60s, old to be uprooting their families, older still to be facing the hardships of an overland journey. In spite of the odds against them, their spirits responded to the westward call, and in April of 1846 they joined the stream of people bound for California.

The brothers started westward with three wagons apiece, and ten thousand dollars sewn into a quilt. With them went their friends, the James Reed family. Reed, a wealthy cabinetmaker from Springfield, started his journey with a heavy custom-built two-story wagon, later referred to as the "palace car."

At first, the journey seemed easy. The prairie was lush and green. Hunting was good. There was time for collecting wildflowers and time for singing around the evening campfire. Optimism prevailed.

Tamsen Donner wrote to friends back home: *Our journey so far has been pleasant, the roads have been good, the food plentiful. We feel no fear of Indians. And our cattle graze quietly around our encampment unmolested. Indeed, if I do not experience anything far worse than I have yet done, I shall say the trouble is all in getting started.*

As the wagons rolled through South Pass, in the Rocky Mountains, there was talk of a shortcut. A young land developer, named Lansford Hastings, had scouted the unknown country south of the Great Salt Lake. He enthusiastically promoted a new route, which he claimed would save travelers three-hundred-and-fifty miles. In an open letter passed among the in-coming wagons, Hastings offered to guide all interested parties.

Excited by the prospect of a shorter route, the Reeds and the Donners turned off the main road. They were eventually joined by other families: The Irish-born Breens, the Eddys, the Graves, the McClutchens, the German Keseberg family, the Murphys, and others. George Donner was elected captain, and, as tradition dictated, the new company would travel under his name. There were eighty-seven people in the Donner Party and of those, forty-two were children.

But when the Donners arrived at Fort Bridger they found that Hastings had already left with a company of 66 wagons. There too, they found mountain man James Clayman, who warned them against the cutoff.

Song:

*This trip won't be worth much to anyone of you
who fails, to anyone who fails.
Listen to me, pilgrim,
Listen now and hear me good.
If those who've gone that way
could change their mind you bet they would.
It's closer as the crow flies,
But it's solid ice and snow.*

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*Once you start you can't turn back,
think twice before you go,
think twice before you go.*

But his warning went unheeded. The Donners and the others clung to their belief in Hastings and set out in pursuit of his shortcut, determined as ever to reach California by the quickest route. Four days out of Fort Bridger, the Donner wagons creaked to a halt at the mouth of Weber Canyon, which cuts abruptly through the Wasatch Mountain Range. In a bush, by the side of the trail, Hastings had left a note.

Ahead of them, it said, was a difficult and dangerous passage. He was unsure if even his own party could get through. Send a messenger ahead to him, the note advised and he would return to take them around by another way. Three riders caught up with the Hastings party, already safe on the western side of the mountains. But Hastings refused to return and guide them.

From a ridge, he vaguely indicated a better route, but he made it clear the late arriving Donner party was on its own. To avoid the canyon, they felled trees and hacked a new road directly over the brush and tree covered mountains. Wagons were hoisted up cliffs and double-teamed over ridges. Boulders were moved and streams forded. The labor exhausted them and eroded their morale. Tempers flared and arguments grew more intense and frequent.

In three weeks they had covered only thirty-six miles. At the end of August they descended into the Salt Lake Valley. Ahead, lay the desert. According to another message left by Hastings, it was forty miles long, a hard two-day drive.

Years later, Virginia Reed would write: *We prepared for the long drive across the desert and laid in, as we supposed, an ample supply of water and grass. The desert had been represented to us as only forty miles wide, but we found it nearer eighty. It was a dreary, desolate, alkali waste, not a living thing could be seen. It seemed as though the hand of death had been laid upon the country.*

Halfway across the barren land, with no water in sight, the desperately thirsty livestock stampeded. Many of the animals would not be recovered. Traveling day and night the group became separated. Wagons mired in the salty crust and were abandoned. Another week was lost. When the frightened emigrants regrouped, they found their remaining food would not be enough for the rest of the journey.

Charles Stanton, a bachelor, and William McClutchen, a family man, volunteered to ride ahead to Sutter's Fort in California for supplies. Meanwhile, the company continued to follow Hastings' directions. After a long, unnecessary detour around the Ruby Mountains, they reached the Humboldt River, flowing westward. There, on the last day of September, they rejoined the main trail. It was deserted.

Of all the companies bound for California, only the Donner Party remained east of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Truly alone and lacking strong leadership, they turned from a reasonably cooperative group into a cluster of bickering, quarreling families. On October 5, James Reed and John Snyder argued over the right of way up a hill. The dispute grew violent. Within

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fifteen minutes Snyder was dead of a knife wound. Friends maintained that Reed had acted in self-defense, but sentiment for lynching ran high in the divided camp. Lewis Keseberg propped up a wagon tongue to be used as a gallows, but instead Reed would be banished, sent alone into the desert. Two weeks later, Reed arrived in a California settlement. Where he began preparations for rescue a party.

The rest of the Donner Party struggled across Nevada, exhausted and disorderly, bordering on panic. Indians harassed them, stealing or killing some of their oxen. Household goods littered the trail as attempts were made to lighten the wagons. As the oxen gave out, the wagons themselves had to be abandoned. The struggle for survival grew more savage. An old man fell behind, and was not missed until nightfall. By then, those with the few remaining horses would not return for him, and he was left to die.

Thirst, too, took its toll. William Eddy, on foot and fearing that his infant children would perish, asked Patrick Breen for a share of water. When he refused, Eddy took the water, threatening to kill Breen if he interfered.

It was autumn when they reached Truckee Meadows, the present site of Reno. In 1846, it was still a wilderness, but there was grass and water. There too, they met Charles Stanton, and two of Sutter's Indian vaqueros, returning as he had promised with seven mules carrying beef and flour. McCutchen remained at Sutter's Fort, too ill to return. Stanton also brought news of a difficult mountain crossing ahead.

Desperately tired, the group rested for five days to gather strength. The weather grew more threatening and a light snow fell. On October 25, they broke camp in groups and pulled for the Sierra Crest, some fifty miles away. Snow flurries continued, marking the start of an early winter in the Sierra. At Alder Creek, while shaping a piece of timber to repair a broken axle, George Donner sliced open his hand. Although they were still fifteen miles from the pass, the Donner families stopped and hastily constructed crude shelters against the storm. Their teamsters and servants stayed with them. Twenty-five people would be snowbound that winter at Alder Creek.

The main party found the pass solidly covered with snow. They made three attempts to cross the bleak barrier. All failed. The snow was too soft, the oxen too weak, and the journey had been too long. They retreated to the lake they had passed a few miles below the summit. Still hoping a thaw would open the pass, the group settled in for the winter.

There were three widely scattered cabins made of logs and roofed with ox hides. Each of them housed at least two families, and visiting between the cabins would be rare.

Early storms continued to batter the settlers. The few scrawny oxen wandered off, and as food grew scarce, hungry men probed for their carcasses in the deep drifts. The Donner Party members were not mountain men. They could not catch the fish they saw in the ice-clogged creek, and there was little game. William Eddy shot a grizzly bear, but by December, most of the families were on starvation rations.

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They had no way of knowing that James Reed and a companion had driven a thirty-horse pack train out of Sutter's Fort. His rescue party had floundered to within eighteen miles of the summit before being forced to turn back.

By now, the stronger members trapped east of the snow covered fortress began planning their own rescue efforts. In mid-December, fifteen people started for the valley settlements. The ten men and five women, walking on crude snowshoes they had fashioned from ox-bows, hoped to cover the fifty miles in six days. Each carried one blanket and a few handfuls of jerky.

Five days out, Charles Stanton, the only one who knew the route was overcome with exhaustion and snowblindness. Sensing his own destiny and to avoid delaying the others, this courageous man stayed behind to die. Without him, the snowshoers lost their way in the steep canyons of the American River. On Christmas Eve a storm hit. They sat out the three-day blizzard huddled under a pile of blankets. Four died. With nothing left to eat, hunger drove the survivors to the desperate act of using the bodies of their companions for food.

One month later, an emaciated William Eddy, being helped by Indians, appeared at the door of a cabin in the Sacramento Valley. A few miles back on the trail were the remaining five women and the other man who lived through their ordeal. They had survived thirty-three days on one deer and the bodies of those who had perished.

Relief would be slow in coming for the Donner Party. Storms continued to ravage the mountains, effectively sealing them off above four-thousand feet. Few were willing to risk their lives in what might be a futile effort, and ironically, the Bear Flag Rebellion had drained manpower from the settlements.

The camp at Donner Lake lay buried under 20 feet of snow and the passes were choked with tremendous drifts. At no time in the next one hundred years, would there be a winter to equal the one of 1846.

Year's later, Virginia Reed, reflecting on her experiences wrote: *The storms would often last ten days at a time, and we would cut chips from the logs inside our cabins in order to start a fire. We would drag ourselves through the snow from one cabin to another and some mornings snow would have to be shoveled out of the fireplace before a fire could be made. Children were crying with hunger and mothers were crying because they had so little to give their children.*

But there were brighter moments too. Mrs. Reed hid away scraps of food in order to cook a Christmas dinner for her children.

She had laid away dried apples, some beans, a bit of tripe and a small piece of bacon. The cooking was watched carefully and when we sat down to dinner, mother said, 'Children, eat slowly, for this one day you can have all you wish.' So bitter was the misery relieved by that one bright day, that I have never since sat down to a Christmas dinner without my thoughts going back to Donner Lake.

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By February, the fifty-two survivors in the mountains were reduced to eating boiled ox-hide and bones that had previously been discarded.

The first in a series of rescue parties arrived at the lake on February 18. The seven men traveled on snowshoes, carrying what provisions they could on their backs. They left with twenty-one people, only those fit enough to walk. Even so, not everyone made it down the mountain.

Those at the camps who awaited the arrival of the next rescue party were little better off than before. The relief effort had become a race against time, and, for many, a few days would spell the difference between life and death.

James Reed, leading the second relief party, returned with more men. On visiting the camps at Alder Creek he found his old friend, George Donner, dying of an infected cut on his hand. He was shocked to discover evidence of cannibalism both there and at the lake camps. Storms battered Reed's group on the way down. Death and cannibalism once more took their toll.

Only two families would survive intact, the Reeds and the Breens. William Eddy was not so lucky. When he arrived at the lake, with the third relief party, his wife and children were dead. He brought out the last able survivors. Of those still able to move about, only Lewis Keseberg, at Donner Lake, who was suffering from a bad foot . . .

. . . and Tamsen Donner, who refused to leave her dying husband, at Alder Creek, remained behind. It was March 13.

A month later, as the snow melted and solidified, several men came to salvage what they could of the emigrants' belongings. They found Lewis Keseberg still alive. Although ox meat had been exposed by the melting snow, he had been subsisting for several days on the body of Tamsen Donner.

Forty-seven of the eighty-nine people in the Donner Party lived to reach the settlements, forty-two did not. Some of the survivors, like James Reed and Patrick Breen, went on to become prominent citizens in the new state of California. For others, the experience indelibly marked the rest of their lives. Lewis Keseberg was haunted, until his dying day, by accusations of despicable acts he may or may not have committed.

In June 1846, after the war in California, eastward bound General Kearny passed the Donner camps. Captain W. O. Fallon, riding with the general wrote: *A more revolting and appalling spectacle I never witnessed. The remains were, by order of General Carnee, collected and buried under the superintendence of Major Swords. They were interred in a pit, which had been dug in the center of one of the cabins for a cache. These melancholy duties to the dead being performed, the cabins, by order of Major Swords, were fired, and with them, everything connected with this horrid and melancholy tragedy was consumed.*

Near the cabins, tall stumps of trees, whose tops had been cut off for building winter shelters, once stood like totem monuments. They were silent reminders of the awesome potential of a sudden snowstorm forming snowdrifts twenty or more feet deep, and freezing everything in its

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path. The stumps have gradually decayed over the years. Now there's a tall, permanent column facing the summit in all kinds of weather. It's a remembrance to those frontier pilgrims who were forced to cope with winter's cruelest elements and deprived of nearly all their basic needs for too long. In some cases, their courage went beyond measure, while in others, the dark side took them in and human dignity was abandoned.

The Donner Memorial Pioneer Statue marks the site of the Breen cabin. Its twenty-two-foot-high stone base represents the depth of the huge snow pack of 1846. From there, a two-hundred-yard walk upstream leads to the large boulder which formed one wall of the Murphy cabin. The Graves' cabin site is across Interstate 80, and the Donner family camps at Alder Creek . . .

. . . are only a few minutes away by car.

Present day hikers occasionally follow sections of the Emigrant Trail. It is however becoming more difficult to find as time slowly erodes the pioneers' pathway to the West.

Winter need not be feared at Donner Lake. For most, the easy drive up from the valley takes only a few hours. On sunny winter days, the Donner Lake area is filled with skiers and snow enthusiasts. But when storms rage down from Donner Pass, the deserted lakeshore becomes an ominous reminder of the tragedy, which occurred here, in the long winter of 1846.

From among the journals and personal accounts written about this historical human event, perhaps the greatest warning was passed along for future emigrants through the wisdom of a twelve-year-old child.

Virginia Reed, a survivor of the Donner Party recorded history in a letter to her cousin in the East, when she penned with her homespun grammar: . . . *I have not wrote you half of the trouble we have had, but I have wrote you enough to let you know that you don't know what trouble is . . . We have left everything. But I don't care for that. We have got through with our lives. But don't let this letter dishearten anybody. Never take no cutoffs and hurry along as fast as you can.*

Song

*Let 'em roll
let the wagons roll
California here I come,
so let the wagons roll.
Let 'em roll,
let the wagons roll,
California here I come
so let the wagons roll.*

Running Time: 27 minutes
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