



The Donner Party Survivors



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"Well, Ma, if you never see me again, do the best you can."

- 8-Year-old Martha (Patty) Reed taking leave of her mother and rescuers to return to the cabin at Donner Lake to care for her 3-year-old brother.

Starvation is an enduring aspect of the human condition and reduces the capacity to withstand environmental stresses, including cold. In the history of the American west the experience of the Donner Party, a group of emigrants trapped with inadequate food stores in the Sierra Nevada mountains in the winter of 1846-1847, has fascinated generations with its tales of privation, cannibalism, and heroism.

Despite the high level of interest in the Donner Party, little attention has been paid to epidemiologic aspects of the disaster and how factors such as age, sex, and social support affected survival. Although these events occurred over a century and a half ago, they hold contemporary relevance as political and natural upheavals cause starvation and forced migration in present-day populations.

In the United States of the mid-1840s, population growth and economic instability led many to conclude that their futures lay farther west, in Oregon and California. Contributing to this was the view that it was the "manifest destiny" of the United States to encompass the rest of the North American continent west of the Mississippi River. California was of particular interest because of its fertile lands and the likelihood that it would soon pass from Mexican possession. Thousands packed up their belongings in prairie wagons and gathered in Independence, Missouri, to embark on the Emigrant Road.

Travelers risking their lives and fortune to travel west had a relatively narrow window of time. They would have to leave in the spring and traverse the Great Plains to cross the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada before the winter snows. They were encouraged by expansionist politicians, newspaper editors, and pamphleteers. One of these was Lansford W. Hastings, whose book, *The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California*, proved fatally influential for the Donner Party.

California-bound emigrants usually traveled northward into present-day Idaho before turning south and west to California. Hastings championed a new route - the Hastings Cutoff - that appeared to shave 350 to 400 miles from the journey. He proposed leaving the main Emigrant Road at Little Sandy Creek in present-day Wyoming, proceeding to Fort Bridger, traveling south of the Great Salt Lake and through the Salt Desert, and rejoining the main California Trail in Nevada.



The Donner Party

At Little Sandy Creek, a group of emigrants coalesced and decided to follow the Hastings Cutoff. The company elected as their leader a prosperous farmer from Springfield, Illinois, Captain George Donner.

At Fort Bridger, the emigrants stopped to rest in late July 1846. From there a connecting trail was their last chance to turn north and rejoin the main Emigrant Road. But many in the group had read Hastings's pamphlet describing the shortcut and, eager to push on, ignored warnings to rejoin the main trail. On July 31, 1846, the Donner Party headed west on the Hastings Cutoff.

Almost immediately, the group experienced unanticipated hardships. They had to hack a road through the Wasatch Mountains, which took them about three weeks. Crossing the Great Salt Desert, which Hastings had described as a two-day journey of 40 miles, was in reality an 80-mile journey requiring five days. Finally they meandered through the Ruby Mountains of eastern Nevada before rejoining the California Trail. The "shortcut" took nearly two months of precious time and was actually 125 miles longer than the original Emigrant Road.

From the time the Donner Party chose the Hastings Cutoff, social cohesiveness unraveled as difficulties multiplied. One person was simply left behind to die when he became unable to walk; members were unwilling to carry him in a wagon. Arguments erupted. James Reed killed a man during an altercation. Initially threatened with hanging, he was banished from the party. He and a companion crossed the Sierra Nevada ahead of the company and before the winter snows. Ironically, his expulsion contributed to the party's salvation because he organized relief efforts that later brought in survivors.

A Disastrous Snowstorm

Aware of their peril should they fail to cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains before the winter snows, the remaining emigrants pushed on with increasing desperation. They had been weakened by the delay and had lost numerous oxen and wagons. Struggling through early snows, the party reached the crest of the Sierra near Truckee Lake (now Donner Lake) on November 3, 1846. Exhausted from their ordeal, they halted, intending to make the final crossing, now within sight, in the morning. These plans were dashed by a heavy snowstorm the night of November 3. When the emigrants looked around them the following morning, they were surrounded by 3-meter high drifts of new snow. Defeated, they turned back to Donner Lake to establish camp.

The party now consisted of 81 persons huddled in makeshift shelters near the lake. Of 88 persons who left Independence in the spring, 6 had died (3 of trauma, 2 of "consumption," and 1 abandoned in the wilderness), 3 had crossed the mountains in advance of the party, and the party had been joined by 2 Native American guides sent by Capt. John Sutter.

The Forlorn Hope

As their situation grew increasingly desperate, 15 members - 10 men and 5 women - attempted to hike over the pass on snowshoes and on to Sutter's Fort in Sacramento. Calling themselves the "Forlorn Hope," the group left in mid-December, taking six days' rations. Beset by snowstorms, they lost their way and wandered for 33 days before coming to a small settlement. Eight men and none of the women perished. Those who survived resorted to cannibalism and were able to kill game en route. In addition, they were helped by members of a Native American village. Ironically, the two Native American guides from Fort Sutter were consumed after probably being murdered by a member of the group.

With the arrival of these survivors, efforts for rescue attained new urgency. On February 18, 1847, the first relief party reached the lake. The rescuers surveyed a scene of misery and destruction. Corpses lay piled in the snow, and the survivors were gaunt skeletons, barely subsisting on boiled animal hides. Over the next two months, several relief parties journeyed to the camp. Because of the difficulty in reaching the lake, they were unable to

bring in large stores of food and brought out only small groups of the strongest survivors. Paradoxically, the situation for those remaining grew more desperate, and the group resorted to cannibalism. On April 21, Lewis Keseberg, the last remaining member of the party, left Donner Lake.

The Donner Party experience provides an opportunity to examine the effects of simple demographic characteristics - sex, age, whether traveling alone or with family - on the likelihood of survival under severe conditions. Based on contemporary accounts, 42 of 90 persons died - nearly 50 percent.

The high mortality was not evenly distributed among the members, however. There is a clear age effect, with highest mortality among the very young and persons older than 35 years. Men were at double the risk of mortality compared to women, and persons traveling alone were at double the risk of those traveling with family.

The immediate cause of death cannot be ascertained for most individuals. Although several deaths were related to trauma, most were due to complications of starvation and hypothermia or other rigors.

Why the increased death rates among the very young, the old, men, and those traveling alone? I believe the answers are based in both biologic and social factors. Biologically, the extremes of age are associated with less stamina and vigor. In cold environments with insufficient food, men have greater caloric needs and less body fat for insulation and energy than do women. Loners may have been less fit biologically - explaining their loner status - and thus less hardy than persons traveling as families.

Sociologically, women probably benefited from a division of labor that left the most demanding work to men as well as from a culture of protection. My personal view is that women were also shrewder. The council that decided to take the Hastings Cutoff was entirely male. I cannot imagine a mother looking at her brood and all her possessions in a wagon and agreeing to go on a risky and untried trail to save a week of travel time. Those traveling with family also appear to have benefited from the care and protection given family members, leaving loners without a support network.

Cannibalism is one of the best-known aspects of the disaster, but its effect on survival is difficult to ascertain based on these data. Because of the strong social stigma attached to it, information may not be reliable.

Although the Donner Party disaster occurred long ago, it retains relevance because the factors associated with increased mortality likely have a biologic basis or are due to enduring behavioral characteristics. Two risk factors for mortality observed in this study - age and male sex - cannot be altered or mitigated, but they could identify high-risk groups in starvation-affected populations. Family structure was an important independent determinant of mortality, which suggests intervention strategies for similar disasters. Specifically, measures to keep family groups intact so they may draw on their internal support network may improve survival.

Epilogue

Over a century and a half have elapsed since the Donner Party disaster, yet the story possesses an enduring power and immediacy. The last members of the original party survived into the 1930s, well within the scope of living memory. These events left many visible threads in the fabric of the West. Truckee Lake was renamed Donner Lake. A museum and memorial statue showing the depth of the snow (6.7 meters) in that winter of 1846-1847 have been established near the encampment.

Several members of the party went on to become prominent figures in California. Patrick Breen kept a diary that provides an invaluable firsthand account of the disaster; this document is kept at the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. James Reed became a leading citizen in San Jose. His daughter, Martha (Patty), had weakened during an initial rescue attempt and had to return to Donner Lake, subsequently to be

rescued by her father. Throughout her journey she carried a doll, now on display at Sutter's Fort in Sacramento.

An interesting historical footnote is that the last person to be rescued from the site, Lewis Keseberg, was vilified by a public deeply offended, in part, by his uninhibited and lurid descriptions of his cannibalism during the ordeal. He settled in Sacramento and opened a restaurant - an ironic career choice, considering the basis for his notoriety. He died in 1895, at the age of 81, at the Sacramento County Hospital, which later became the University of California, Davis, Medical Center.

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