

= Donner Party =

The Donner Party (sometimes called the Donner @-@ Reed Party) was a group of American pioneers led by George Donner and James F. Reed who set out for California in a wagon train in May 1846 . They were delayed by a series of mishaps and mistakes , and spent the winter of 1846 ? 47 snowbound in the Sierra Nevada . Some of the pioneers resorted to cannibalism to survive .

The journey west usually took between four and six months , but the Donner Party was slowed by following a new route called Hastings Cutoff , which crossed Utah 's Wasatch Mountains and Great Salt Lake Desert . The rugged terrain and difficulties encountered while traveling along the Humboldt River in present @-@ day Nevada resulted in the loss of many cattle and wagons and splits within the group .

By the beginning of November 1846 , the settlers had reached the Sierra Nevada where they became trapped by an early , heavy snowfall near Truckee (now Donner) Lake , high in the mountains . Their food supplies ran extremely low and , in mid @-@ December , some of the group set out on foot to obtain help . Rescuers from California attempted to reach the settlers , but the first relief party did not arrive until the middle of February 1847 , almost four months after the wagon train became trapped . Of the 87 members of the party , 48 survived to reach California , many of them having eaten the dead for survival .

Historians have described the episode as one of the most bizarre and spectacular tragedies in Californian history and western @-@ US migration .

= = Background = =

During the 1840s , the United States saw a dramatic increase in pioneers , people who left their homes in the east to settle in Oregon and California . Some , such as Patrick Breen , saw California as a place where they would be free to live in a fully Catholic culture , but many were inspired by the idea of Manifest Destiny , a philosophy which asserted that the land between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans belonged to Americans and they should settle it . Most wagon trains followed the Oregon Trail route from Independence , Missouri to the Continental Divide , traveling at about 15 miles (24 km) a day on a journey that usually took between four and six months . The trail generally followed rivers to South Pass , a mountain pass in Wyoming , which was relatively easy for wagons to negotiate . From there , wagon trains had a choice of routes to their destination .

Lansford W. Hastings , an early immigrant , went to California in 1842 and saw the promise of the undeveloped country . To encourage settlers , he published The Emigrants ' Guide to Oregon and California . He described a direct route across the Great Basin which would bring emigrants through the Wasatch Mountains and across the Great Salt Lake Desert . Hastings had not traveled any part of his proposed shortcut until early 1846 on a trip from California to Fort Bridger . The fort was a scant supply station run by Jim Bridger and his partner Pierre Louis Vasquez in Blacks Fork , Wyoming . Hastings stayed at the fort to persuade travelers to turn south on his route . As of 1846 , Hastings was the second of two men documented to have crossed the southern part of the Great Salt Lake Desert and neither had been accompanied by wagons .

The most difficult part of the journey to California was the last 100 miles (160 km) across the Sierra Nevada . This mountain range contains 500 distinct peaks over 12 @,@ 000 feet (3 @,@ 700 m) high , and because of their height and proximity to the Pacific Ocean they receive more snow than most other ranges in North America . The eastern side of the range is also extremely steep . After leaving Missouri to cross the vast wilderness to Oregon or California , timing was crucial to ensure that wagon trains would not be bogged down by mud created by spring rains , nor by massive snowdrifts in the mountains from September onwards , and also that their horses and oxen would have enough spring grass to eat .

= = Families = =

In the spring of 1846 , almost 500 wagons headed west from Independence . At the rear of the train

, a group of nine wagons containing 32 members of the Reed and Donner families and their employees left on May 12 . George Donner , born in North Carolina , had gradually moved west to Kentucky , Indiana , and Illinois , with a one @-@ year sojourn to Texas . In early 1846 , he was about 60 years old . With him were his 44 @-@ year @-@ old wife Tamsen and their three daughters Frances (6) , Georgia (4) , and Eliza (3) , and George 's daughters from a previous marriage : Elitha (14) and Leanna (12) . George 's younger brother Jacob (aged 56) also joined the party with his wife Elizabeth (45) , teenaged stepsons Solomon Hook (14) and William Hook (12) , and five children : George (9) , Mary (7) , Isaac (6) , Lewis (4) , and Samuel (1) . Also traveling with the Donner brothers were teamsters Hiram O. Miller (29) , Samuel Shoemaker (25) , Noah James (16) , Charles Burger (30) , John Denton (28) , and Augustus Spitzer (30) .

James F. Reed , a 45 @-@ year @-@ old native of present @-@ day Northern Ireland , had settled in Illinois in 1831 . He was accompanied by his wife Margret (32) , step @-@ daughter Virginia (13) , daughter Martha Jane " Patty " (8) , sons James and Thomas (5 and 3) , and Sarah Keyes , Margret Reed 's 70 @-@ year @-@ old mother , who was in the advanced stages of consumption and died on May 28 ; she was buried by the side of the trail . In addition to leaving financial worries behind , Reed hoped that California 's climate would help Margret , who had long suffered from ill health . The Reeds hired three men to drive the ox teams : Milford (Milt) Elliot (28) , James Smith (25) , and Walter Herron (25) . Baylis Williams (24) went along as handyman and his sister Eliza (25) as the family 's cook .

Within a week of leaving Independence , the Reeds and Donners joined up with a group of 50 wagons nominally led by William H. Russell . By June 16 , the company had traveled 450 miles (720 km) , with 200 miles (320 km) to go before Fort Laramie , Wyoming . They had been delayed by rain and a rising river , but Tamsen Donner wrote to a friend in Springfield , " indeed , if I do not experience something far worse than I have yet done , I shall say the trouble is all in getting started . " Young Virginia Reed recalled years later that , during the first part of the trip , she was " perfectly happy . "

Several other families joined the wagon train along the way . Levinah Murphy (37) , a widow from Tennessee , headed a family of thirteen . Her five youngest children were John Landrum (16) , Meriam (" Mary , " 14) , Lemuel (12) , William (10) , and Simon (8) . Levinah 's two married daughters and their families also came along : Sarah Murphy Foster (19) , her husband William M. (30) and son Jeremiah George (1) ; Harriet Murphy Pike (18) , her husband William M. (32) and their daughters Naomi (3) and Catherine (1) . William Eddy (28) , a carriage maker from Illinois , brought his wife Eleanor (25) and their two children James (3) and Margaret (1) . The Breen family consisted of Patrick Breen (51) , a farmer from Iowa , his wife Margaret (" Peggy " , 40) and seven children : John (14) , Edward (13) , Patrick , Jr . (9) , Simon (8) , James (5) , Peter (3) , and 11 @-@ month @-@ old Isabelle . Their neighbor traveled with them , 40 @-@ year @-@ old bachelor Patrick Dolan . German immigrant Lewis Keseberg (32) joined with his wife Elisabeth Philippine (22) and daughter Ada (2) ; son Lewis Jr. was born on the trail . Two young single men named Spitzer and Reinhardt traveled with another German couple , the Wolfingers , who also had hired driver " Dutch Charley " Burger . An older man named Hardkoop rode with them . Luke Halloran was passed from family to family , a young man who seemed to get sicker with tuberculosis every day , as none could spare the time or resources to care for him .

= = Hastings Cutoff = =

To promote his new route , Hastings sent riders to deliver letters to traveling emigrants . On July 12 , the Reeds and Donners were given one of these letters . Hastings warned the emigrants that they could expect opposition from the Mexican authorities in California , and advised them therefore to band together in large groups . He also claimed to have " worked out a new and better road to California " , and said that he would be waiting at Fort Bridger to guide the emigrants along the new cutoff .

J. Quinn Thornton traveled part of the way with Donner and Reed , and in his book From Oregon and California in 1848 declared Hastings the " Baron Munchausen of travelers in these countries " .

Tamsen Donner , according to Thornton , was " gloomy , sad , and dispirited " at the thought of turning off the main trail on the advice of Hastings , whom she considered " a selfish adventurer " .

On July 20 at the Little Sandy River , most of the wagon train opted to follow the established trail via Fort Hall . A smaller group opted to head for Fort Bridger and needed a leader . Most of the younger males in the group were European immigrants and not considered to be ideal leaders . James Reed had been living in the U.S. for a considerable time , was older , and had military experience , but his autocratic attitude had rubbed many in the party the wrong way , and they saw him as aristocratic , imperious , and ostentatious . By comparison , the mature , experienced , American @-@ born Donner 's peaceful and charitable nature made him the group 's first choice . The members of the party were comfortably well off by contemporaneous standards . Although they are called pioneers , all but a few lacked specific skills and experience for traveling through mountains and arid land , and had little knowledge about how to deal with Native Americans .

Journalist Edwin Bryant reached Blacks Fork a week ahead of the Donner Party . He saw the first part of the trail , and was concerned that it would be difficult for the wagons in the Donner group , especially with so many women and children . He returned to Blacks Fork to leave letters warning several members of the group not to take the shortcut . By the time the Donner Party reached Blacks Fork on July 27 , Hastings had already left , leading the forty wagons of the Harlan @-@ Young group . Jim Bridger 's trading post would fare substantially better if people used the Hastings Cutoff , and he told the party that the shortcut was a smooth trip , devoid of rugged country and hostile Native Americans , and would therefore shorten their journey by 350 miles (560 km) . Water would be easy to find along the way , although a couple of days crossing a 30 ? 40 @-@ mile (48 ? 64 km) dry lake bed would be necessary .

Reed was very impressed with this information , and advocated for the Hastings Cutoff . None of the party received Bryant 's letters warning them to avoid Hastings ' route at all costs ; in his diary account , Bryant states his conviction that Bridger deliberately concealed the letters , a view shared by Reed in his later testimony .

On July 31 , 1846 , the party left Blacks Fork after four days of rest and wagon repairs , eleven days behind the leading Harlan @-@ Young group . Donner hired a replacement driver , and the company was joined by the McCutcheon family , consisting of 30 @-@ year @-@ old William , his 24 @-@ year @-@ old wife Amanda , two @-@ year @-@ old daughter Harriet , and a 16 @-@ year @-@ old named Jean Baptiste Trudeau from New Mexico , who claimed to have knowledge of the Native Americans and terrain on the way to California .

= = = Wasatch Mountains = = =

The party turned south to follow the Hastings Cutoff . Within days , they found the terrain to be much more difficult than described , and the drivers were forced to lock the wheels of their wagons to prevent them from rolling down steep inclines . Several years of migrant traffic on the main Oregon Trail had left an easy and obvious path , whereas the Cutoff was more difficult to find . Hastings wrote directions and left letters stuck to trees . On August 6 , the party found a letter from Hastings advising them to stop until he could show them an alternative route to that taken by the Harlan @-@ Young Party . Reed , Charles Stanton , and William Pike rode ahead to get Hastings . They encountered exceedingly difficult canyons where boulders had to be moved and walls cut off precariously to a river below , a route likely to break wagons . Hastings had offered in his letter to guide the Donner Party around the more difficult areas , but he rode back only part way , indicating the general direction to follow .

Stanton and Pike stopped to rest , and Reed returned alone to the group , arriving four days after the party 's departure . Without the guide they had been promised , the group had to decide whether to turn back and rejoin the traditional trail , follow the tracks left by the Harlan @-@ Young Party through the difficult terrain of Weber Canyon , or forge their own trail in the direction that Hastings had recommended . At Reed 's urging , the group chose the new Hastings route . Their progress slowed to about a mile and a half (2 @-@ 4 km) a day , and all the able @-@ bodied men were required to clear brush , fell trees , and heave rocks to make room for the wagons .

As the Donner Party made its way across the Wasatch Mountains , they were caught up by the Graves family , who had set off to find them . The Graves family consisted of 57 @-@ year @-@ old Franklin Graves , his 47 @-@ year @-@ old wife Elizabeth , their children Mary (20) , William (18) , Eleanor (15) , Lovina (13) , Nancy (9) , Jonathan (7) , Franklin , Jr . (5) , Elizabeth (1) , and married daughter Sarah (22) , plus son @-@ in @-@ law Jay Fosdick (23) , and a 25 @-@ year @-@ old teamster named John Snyder , traveling together in three wagons . Their arrival brought the Donner Party to 87 members in 60 ? 80 wagons . The Graves family had been part of the last group to leave Missouri , confirming that the Donner Party was at the back of the year 's western exodus .

It was August 20 by the time that they reached a point in the mountains where they could look down and see the Great Salt Lake . It took almost another two weeks to travel out of the Wasatch Mountains . The men began to argue , and doubts were expressed about the wisdom of those who had chosen this route , in particular James Reed . Food and supplies began to run out for some of the less affluent families . Stanton and Pike had ridden out with Reed but had become lost on their way back ; by the time that the party found them , they were a day away from eating their horses .

= = = Great Salt Lake Desert = = =

Luke Halloran died of tuberculosis on August 25 . A few days later , the party came across a torn and tattered letter from Hastings . The pieces indicated that there were two days and nights of difficult travel ahead without grass or water . The party rested their oxen and prepared for the trip . After 36 hours they set off to traverse a 1 @,@ 000 @-@ foot (300 m) mountain that lay in their path . From its peak , they saw ahead of them a dry , barren plain , perfectly flat and covered with white salt , larger than the one which they had just crossed , and " one of the most inhospitable places on earth " according to Rarick . Their oxen were already fatigued and their water was nearly gone .

The party pressed onward on August 30 , having no alternative . In the heat of the day , the moisture underneath the salt crust rose to the surface and turned the soil to a gummy mass . The wheels of their wagons sank into it , in some cases up to the hubs . The days were blisteringly hot and the nights frigid . Several of the group saw visions of lakes and wagon trains , and believed that they had finally overtaken Hastings . After three days , the water was gone , and some of the party removed their oxen from the wagons to press ahead to find more . Some of the animals were so weakened they were left yoked to the wagons and abandoned . Nine of Reed 's ten oxen broke free , crazed with thirst , and bolted off into the desert . Many other families ' cattle and horses had also gone missing . The rigors of the journey resulted in irreparable damage to some of the wagons , but no human lives had been lost . Instead of the promised two days journey over 40 miles , the journey across the 80 miles of Great Salt Lake Desert had taken six .

None of the party had any remaining faith in the Hastings Cutoff as they recovered at the springs on the other side of the desert . They spent several days trying to recover cattle , retrieve the wagons left in the desert , and transfer their food and supplies to other wagons . Reed 's family incurred the heaviest losses , and Reed became more assertive , asking all the families to submit an inventory of their goods and food to him . He suggested that two men should go to Sutter 's Fort in California ; he had heard that John Sutter was exceedingly generous to wayward pioneers , and could assist them with extra provisions . Charles Stanton and William McCutchen volunteered to undertake the dangerous trip . The remaining serviceable wagons were pulled by mongrel teams of cows , oxen , and mules . It was the middle of September , and two young men who went in search of missing oxen reported that another 40 @-@ mile (64 km) long stretch of desert lay ahead .

Their cattle and oxen were now exhausted and lean , but the Donner Party crossed the next stretch of desert relatively unscathed , and the journey seemed to get easier , particularly through the valley next to the Ruby Mountains . Despite their near hatred of Hastings , they had no choice but to follow his tracks , which were weeks old . On September 26 , two months after embarking on the cutoff , the Donner Party rejoined the traditional trail along a stream that became known as the Humboldt River . The shortcut had probably delayed them by a month .

= = Rejoining the Trail = =

= = = Reed banished = = =

Along the Humboldt , the group met Paiute Native Americans , who joined them for a couple of days but stole or shot several oxen and horses . By now , it was well into October , and the Donner families split off to make better time . Two wagons in the remaining group became tangled , and John Snyder angrily beat the ox of Reed 's hired teamster Milt Elliott . When Reed intervened , Snyder turned the whip on him . Reed retaliated by fatally plunging a knife under Snyder 's collarbone .

That evening , the witnesses gathered to discuss what was to be done . United States laws were not applicable west of the Continental Divide (in what was then Mexican territory) and wagon trains often dispensed their own justice . But George Donner , the party 's leader , was a full day ahead of the main wagon train with his family . Snyder had been seen to hit James Reed , and some claimed that he had also hit Margret Reed , but Snyder had been popular and Reed was not . Keseberg suggested that Reed should be hanged , but an eventual compromise allowed Reed to leave the camp without his family , who were to be taken care of by the others . Reed departed alone the next morning , unarmed , but his daughter Virginia rode ahead and secretly provided him with a rifle and food .

= = = Disintegration = = =

The trials that the Donner Party had so far endured resulted in splintered groups , each looking out for themselves and distrustful of the others . Grass was becoming scarce , and the animals were steadily weakening . To relieve the load of the animals , everyone was expected to walk . Keseberg ejected Hardkoop from his wagon , telling the elderly man that he had to walk or die . A few days later , Hardkoop sat next to a stream , his feet so swollen that they split open , and he was not seen again . William Eddy pleaded with the others to find Hardkoop , but they all refused , swearing that they would waste no more resources on a man who was almost 70 years old .

Meanwhile , Reed caught up with the Donners and went on with one of his teamsters , Walter Herron . The two shared a horse , and they were able to cover 25 ? 40 miles (40 ? 64 km) per day . The rest of the party rejoined the Donners , but their bad luck continued . Native Americans chased away all of Graves ' horses , and another wagon was left behind . With grass in short supply , the cattle spread out more , which allowed the Paiutes to steal 18 more during one evening ; and several mornings later , the Paiutes shot another 21 . So far , the company had lost nearly 100 oxen and cattle , and their rations were almost completely depleted . One more stretch of desert lay ahead . The Eddys ' oxen had been killed by Native Americans and they were forced to abandon their wagon . The family had eaten all their stores , but the other families refused to assist their children . The Eddys were forced to walk , carrying their children and miserable with thirst . Margret Reed and her children were also now without a wagon . But the desert soon came to an end , and the party found the Truckee River in beautiful lush country .

They had little time to rest , and the company pressed on to cross the mountains before the snows came . Stanton found the company (one of the two @-@ man party who had left a month earlier to seek assistance in California) , and he brought mules , food , and two Miwok Native Americans named Luis and Salvador . He also brought news that Reed and Herron , although haggard and starving , had succeeded in reaching Sutter 's Fort in California . By this point , according to Rarick , " To the bedraggled , half @-@ starved members of the Donner Party , it must have seemed that the worst of their problems had passed . They had already endured more than many emigrants ever did . "

= = Snowbound = =

== = Donner Pass == =

Faced with one last push over mountains that were described as much worse than the Wasatch , the ragtag company had to decide whether to forge ahead or rest their cattle . It was October 20 and they had been told that the pass would not be snowed in until the middle of November . William Pike was killed when a gun being loaded by William Foster was discharged negligently , an event that seemed to make the decision for them ; family by family , they resumed their journey , first the Breen , then Kessebergs , Stanton with the Reeds , Graveses , and Murphys . The Donners waited and traveled last . After a few miles of rough terrain , an axle broke on one of the Donners ' wagons . Jacob and George went into the woods to fashion a replacement . George Donner sliced his hand open while chiseling the wood , but it seemed a superficial wound .

Snow began to fall . The Breen made it up the " massive , nearly vertical slope " 1 @, @ 000 feet (300 m) to Truckee Lake , 3 miles (4 @. @ 8 km) from the summit , and camped near a cabin that had been built two years earlier by another group of pioneers . The Eddys and Kessebergs joined the Breen , attempting to make it over the pass , but they found 5 ? 10 @- @ foot (1 @. @ 5 ? 3 @. @ 0 m) drifts of snow , and were unable to find the trail . They turned back for Truckee Lake and , within a day , all the families were camped there except for the Donners , who were 5 miles (8 @. @ 0 km) below them ? half a day 's journey . Over the next few days , several more attempts were made to breach the pass with their wagons and animals , but all efforts failed .

== = Winter camp == =

Sixty members and associates of the Breen , Graves , Reed , Murphy , Kesseberg , and Eddy families set up for the winter at Truckee Lake . Three widely separated cabins of pine logs served as their homes , with dirt floors and poorly constructed flat roofs that leaked when it rained . The Breen occupied one cabin , the Eddys and Murphys another , and Reeds and Graveses the third . Kesseberg built a lean @- @ to for his family against the side of the Breen cabin . The families used canvas or oxbide to patch the faulty roofs . The cabins had no windows or doors , only large holes to allow entry . Of the 60 at Truckee Lake , 19 were men over 18 , 12 were women , and 29 were children , 6 of whom were toddlers or younger . Farther down the trail , close to Alder Creek , the Donner families hastily constructed tents to house 21 people , including Mrs. Wolfinger , her child , and the Donners ' drivers : 6 men , 3 women , and 12 children in all . It began to snow again on the evening of November 4 ? the beginning of a storm that lasted 8 days .

By the time the party made camp , very little food remained from the supplies that Stanton had brought back from Sutter 's Fort . The oxen began to die and their carcasses were frozen and stacked . Truckee Lake was not yet frozen , but the pioneers were unfamiliar with catching lake trout . Eddy , the most experienced hunter , killed a bear , but had little luck after that . The Reed and Eddy families had lost almost everything and Margret Reed promised to pay double when they got to California for the use of three oxen from the Graves and Breen families . Graves charged Eddy \$ 25 ? normally the cost of two healthy oxen ? for the carcass of an ox that had starved to death .

Desperation grew in camp and some reasoned that individuals might succeed in navigating the pass where the wagons could not . On November 12 , the storm abated and a small party tried to reach the summit on foot , but found the trek through the soft , deep powder too difficult , and returned that same evening . Over the next week , two more attempts were made by other small parties , but both quickly failed . On November 21 , a large party of about 22 persons made an attempt and successfully reached the peak . The party traveled about 1 @. @ 5 miles (2 @. @ 4 km) west of the summit , but this trip too was aborted , and they returned to the lake on November 23 .

Patrick Breen began keeping a diary on November 20 . He primarily concerned himself with the weather , marking the storms and how much snow had fallen , but gradually began to include references to God and religion in his entries . Life at Truckee Lake was miserable . The cabins were cramped and filthy , and it snowed so much that people were unable to go outdoors for days . Diets

soon consisted of oxhide , strips of which were boiled to make a " disagreeable " glue @-@ like jelly . Ox and horse bones were boiled repeatedly to make soup , and they became so brittle that they would crumble upon chewing . Sometimes they were softened by being charred and eaten . Bit by bit , the Murphy children picked apart the oxhide rug that lay in front of their fireplace , roasted it in the fire , and ate it . After the departure of the snowshoe party , two @-@ thirds of the emigrants at Truckee Lake were children . Mrs. Graves was in charge of eight , and Levinah Murphy and Eleanor Eddy together took care of nine . Emigrants caught and ate mice that strayed into their cabins . Many of the people at Truckee Lake were soon weakened and spent most of their time in bed . Occasionally one would be able to make the full @-@ day trek to see the Donners . News came that Jacob Donner and three hired men had died . One of them , Joseph Reinhardt , confessed on his deathbed that he had murdered Wolfinger . George Donner 's hand had become infected , which left four men to work at the Donner camp .

Margret Reed had managed to save enough food for a Christmas pot of soup , to the delight of her children , but by January they were facing starvation and considered eating the oxhides that served as their roof . Margret Reed , Virginia , Milt Elliott , and the servant girl Eliza Williams attempted to walk out , reasoning that it would be better to try to bring food back than sit and watch the children starve . They were gone for four days in the snow before they had to turn back . Their cabin was now uninhabitable ; the oxhide @-@ roof served as their food supply , and the family moved in with the Breens . The servants went to live with other families . One day , the Graveses came by to collect on the debt owed by the Reeds and took the oxhides , all that the family had to eat .

= = = " The Forlorn Hope " = = =

The mountain party at Truckee Lake began to fail . Spitzer died , then Baylis Williams (a driver for the Reeds) , more from malnutrition than starvation . Franklin Graves fashioned 14 pairs of snowshoes out of oxbows and hide . A party of 17 men , women , and children set out on foot in an attempt to cross the mountain pass . As evidence of how grim their choices were , four of the men were fathers , and three of the women mothers who gave their young children to other women . They packed lightly , taking what had become six days ' rations , a rifle , a blanket each , a hatchet , and some pistols , hoping to make their way to Bear Valley . Historian Charles McGlashan later called this snowshoe party the " Forlorn Hope " . Two of those without snowshoes , Charles Burger and 10 @-@ year @-@ old William Murphy , turned back early on . Other members of the party fashioned a pair of snowshoes for Lemuel on the first evening from one of the packsaddles that they were carrying .

The snowshoes proved to be awkward but effective on the arduous climb . The members of the party were neither well @-@ nourished nor accustomed to camping in snow 12 feet (3 @.@ 7 m) deep and , by the third day , most were snowblind . On the sixth day , Eddy discovered that his wife had hidden a half @-@ pound of bear meat in his pack . The group set out again the morning of December 21 ; Stanton had been straggling for several days , and he remained behind , saying that he would follow shortly . His remains were found in that location the following year .

The group became lost and confused . After two more days without food , Patrick Dolan proposed that one of them should volunteer to die in order to feed the others . Some suggested a duel , while another account describes an attempt to create a lottery to choose a member to sacrifice . Eddy suggested that they keep moving until someone simply fell , but a blizzard forced the group to halt . Antonio the animal handler was the first to die ; Franklin Graves was the next casualty .

As the blizzard progressed , Patrick Dolan began to rant deliriously , stripped off his clothes , and ran into the woods . He returned shortly afterwards and died a few hours later . Not long after , possibly because 12 @-@ year @-@ old Lemuel Murphy was near death , some of the group began to eat flesh from Dolan 's body . Lemuel 's sister tried to feed some to her brother , but he died shortly afterwards . Eddy , Salvador , and Luis refused to eat . The next morning , the group stripped the muscle and organs from the bodies of Antonio , Dolan , Graves , and Murphy and dried it to store for the days ahead , taking care to ensure that nobody would have to eat his or her relatives .

After three days ' rest , they set off again , searching for the trail . Eddy eventually succumbed to his hunger and ate human flesh , but that was soon gone . They began to take apart their snowshoes to eat the oxbide webbing and discussed killing Luis and Salvador for food , before Eddy warned the two men and they quietly left . Jay Fosdick died during the night , leaving only seven members of the party . Eddy and Mary Graves left to hunt , but when they returned with deer meat , Fosdick 's body had already been cut apart for food . After several more days ? 25 since they had left Truckee Lake ? they came across Salvador and Luis , who had not eaten for about nine days and were close to death . William Foster shot the pair , believing that the flesh of the Native Americans was the group 's last hope of avoiding imminent death from starvation .

On January 12 , the group stumbled into a Miwok camp looking so deteriorated that the Native Americans initially fled . The Miwoks gave them what they had to eat : acorns , grass , and pine nuts . After a few days , Eddy continued on with the help of a Miwok to a ranch in a small farming community at the edge of the Sacramento Valley . A hurriedly assembled rescue party found the other six survivors on January 17 . Their journey from Truckee Lake had taken 33 days .

= = Rescue = =

= = = Reed attempts a rescue = = =

James Reed made it out of the Sierra Nevada to Rancho Johnson in late October . He was safe and recovering at Sutter 's Fort , but each day he became more concerned for the fate of his family and friends . He pleaded with Colonel John C. Frémont to gather a team of men to cross the pass and help the company , in return for which Reed promised that he would join Frémont 's forces and fight in the Mexican @-@ American War . Reed was joined by McCutchen , who had been unable to return with Stanton , as well as some members of the Harlan @-@ Young party . The Harlan @-@ Young wagon train had arrived at Sutter 's Fort on October 8 , the last to make it over the Sierra Nevada that season . The party of roughly 30 horses and a dozen men carried food supplies , and expected to find the Donner Party on the western side of the mountain , along the Bear River below the steep approach to Emigrant Gap , perhaps starving but alive . When they arrived in the river valley , they found only a pioneer couple , immigrants who had been separated from their company and were near starvation .

Two guides deserted Reed and McCutchen with some of their horses , but they pressed on farther up the valley to Yuba Bottoms , walking the last mile on foot . Reed and McCutchen stood looking up at Emigrant Gap , only 12 miles (19 km) from the top , blocked by snow , possibly on the same day that the Breens attempted to lead one last effort to crest the pass from the east . Despondent , they turned back to Sutter 's Fort .

= = = First relief = = =

Much of the military in California were engaged in the Mexican @-@ American War , and with them the able @-@ bodied men . For example , Colonel Frémont 's personnel were occupied at that precise time in capturing Santa Barbara . Throughout the region , roads were blocked , communications compromised , and supplies unavailable . Only three men responded to a call for volunteers to rescue the Donner Party . Reed was laid over in San Jose until February because of regional uprisings and general confusion . He spent that time speaking with other pioneers and acquaintances , and the people of San Jose responded by creating a petition to appeal to the U.S. Navy to assist the people at Truckee Lake . Two local newspapers reported that members of the snowshoe party had resorted to cannibalism , which helped to foster sympathy for those who were still trapped . Residents of Yerba Buena , many recent emigrants , raised \$ 1 @, @ 300 (\$ 33 @, @ 000 as of 2015) and organized relief efforts to build two camps to supply a rescue party for the refugees .

A rescue party including William Eddy started on February 4 from the Sacramento Valley . Rain and

a swollen river forced several delays . Eddy stationed himself at Bear Valley , while the others made steady progress through the snow and storms to cross the pass to Truckee Lake , caching their food at stations along the way so that they did not have to carry it all . Three of the rescue party turned back , but seven forged on .

On February 18 , the seven @-@ man rescue party scaled Frémont Pass (now Donner Pass) ; as they neared where Eddy told them the cabins would be , they began to shout . Mrs. Murphy appeared from a hole in the snow , stared at them and asked , " Are you men from California , or do you come from heaven ? " The relief party doled out food in small portions , concerned that it might kill them if the emaciated immigrants overate . All the cabins were buried in snow . Sodden oxhide roofs had begun to rot and the smell was overpowering . Thirteen people at the camps were dead , and their bodies had been loosely buried in snow near the cabin roofs . Some of the emigrants seemed emotionally unstable . Three of the rescue party trekked to the Donners and brought back four gaunt children and three adults . Leanna Donner had particular difficulty walking up the steep incline from Alder Creek to Truckee Lake , later writing " such pain and misery as I endured that day is beyond description . " George Donner 's arm was so gangrenous that he could not move . Twenty @-@ three people were chosen to go with the rescue party , leaving twenty @-@ one in the cabins at Truckee Lake and twelve at Alder Creek .

The rescuers concealed the fate of the snowshoe party , informing the rescued immigrants only that they did not return because they were frostbitten . Patty and Tommy Reed were soon too weak to cross the snowdrifts , and no one was strong enough to carry them . Margret Reed faced the agonizing predicament of accompanying her two older children to Bear Valley and watching her two frailest be taken back to Truckee Lake without a parent . She made rescuer Aquilla Glover swear on his honor as a Mason that he would return for her children . Patty Reed told her , " Well , mother , if you never see me again , do the best you can . " Upon their return to the lake , the Breens flatly refused them entry to their cabin but , after Glover left more food , the children were grudgingly admitted . The rescue party was dismayed to find that the first cache station had been broken into by animals , leaving them without food for four days . After struggling on the walk over the pass , John Denton slipped into a coma and died . Ada Keseberg died soon afterwards ; her mother was inconsolable , refusing to let the child 's body go . After several days ' more travel through difficult country , the rescuers grew very concerned that the children would not survive . Some of them ate the buckskin fringe from one of the rescuer 's pants , and the shoelaces of another , to the relief party 's surprise . On their way down from the mountains , they met the next rescue party , which included James Reed . Upon hearing his voice , Margret sank into the snow , overwhelmed .

After these rescued emigrants made it safely into Bear Valley , William Hook , Jacob Donner 's stepson , broke into food stores and fatally gorged himself . The others continued on to Sutter 's Fort , where Virginia Reed wrote " I really thought I had stepped over into paradise " . She was amused to note that one of the young men asked her to marry him , although she was only 12 years old and recovering from starvation , but she turned him down .

= = = Second relief = = =

On March 1 , a second relief party arrived at Truckee Lake . These rescuers were mostly experienced mountaineers who accompanied the return of Reed and McCutchen . Reed was reunited with his daughter Patty and his weakened son Tommy . An inspection of the Breen cabin found its occupants relatively well , but the Murphy cabin , according to author George Stewart , " passed the limits of description and almost of imagination " . Levinah Murphy was caring for her eight @-@ year @-@ old son Simon and the two young children of William Eddy and Foster . She had deteriorated mentally and was nearly blind . The children were listless and had not been cleaned in days . Lewis Keseberg had moved into the cabin and could barely move due to an injured leg .

No one at Truckee Lake had died during the interim between the departure of the first relief party and the arrival of the second relief party . Patrick Breen documented a disturbing visit in the last week of February from Mrs. Murphy , who said that her family was considering eating Milt Elliott .

Reed and McCutchen found Elliott 's mutilated body . The Alder Creek camp fared no better . The first two members of the relief party to reach it saw Trudeau carrying a human leg . When they made their presence known , he threw it into a hole in the snow that contained the mostly dismembered body of Jacob Donner . Inside the tent , Elizabeth Donner refused to eat , although her children were being nourished by the organs of their father . The rescuers discovered that three other bodies had already been consumed . In the other tent , Tamsen Donner was well , but George was very ill because the infection had reached his shoulder .

The second relief evacuated 17 emigrants from Truckee Lake , only three of whom were adults . Both the Breen and Graves families prepared to go . Only five people remained at Truckee Lake : Keseberg , Mrs. Murphy and her son Simon , and the young Eddy and Foster children . Tamsen Donner elected to stay with her ailing husband after Reed informed her that a third relief party would arrive soon . Mrs. Donner kept her daughters Eliza , Georgia , and Frances with her .

The walk back to Bear Valley was very slow ; at one point , Reed sent ahead two of the men to retrieve the first cache of food , expecting the third relief to come at any moment , a small party led by Selim E. Woodworth . A violent blizzard arose after they scaled the pass . Five @-@ year @-@ old Isaac Donner froze to death , and Reed nearly died . Mary Donner 's feet were badly burned because they were so frostbitten that she did not realize she was sleeping with them in the fire . When the storm passed , the Breen and Graves families were too apathetic and exhausted to get up and move , not having eaten for days . The relief party had no choice but to leave without them .

Three members of the relief party stayed , one at Truckee Lake and two at Alder Creek . When one , Nicholas Clark , went hunting , the other two , Charles Cady and Charles Stone , made plans to return to California . Tamsen Donner arranged for them to carry three of her children to California , perhaps for \$ 500 cash , according to Stewart . Cady and Stone took the children to Truckee Lake but then left alone , overtaking Reed and the others within days . Several days later , Clark and Trudeau agreed to leave together . When they discovered the Donner girls at Truckee Lake , they returned to Alder Creek to inform Tamsen Donner .

William Foster and William Eddy , both survivors of the snowshoe party , started from Bear Valley to intercept Reed , taking with them a man named John Stark . After one day , they met Reed helping his children , all frostbitten and bleeding but alive . Desperate to rescue their own children , Foster and Eddy persuaded four men , with pleading and money , to return to Truckee Lake with them . Halfway there they found the crudely mutilated and eaten remains of two children and Mrs. Graves , with one @-@ year @-@ old Elizabeth Graves crying beside her mother 's body . Eleven survivors were huddled around a fire that had sunk into a pit . The relief party split , with Foster , Eddy , and two others headed toward Truckee Lake . Two rescuers , hoping to save the healthiest , each took a child and left . John Stark refused to leave the others . Stark picked up two children and all the provisions , and assisted the nine remaining Breens and Graveses to Bear Valley .

= = = Third relief = = =

Foster and Eddy finally arrived at Truckee Lake on March 14 , where they found their children dead . Keseberg told Eddy that he had eaten the remains of Eddy 's son , and Eddy swore to murder Keseberg if they ever met in California . George Donner and one of Jacob Donner 's children were still alive at Alder Creek . Tamsen Donner had just arrived at the Murphy cabin , and she could have walked out alone but chose to return to her husband , even though she was informed that no other relief party was likely to be coming soon . Foster and Eddy and the rest of the third relief left with four children , Trudeau , and Clark .

Two more relief parties were mustered to evacuate any adults who might still be alive . Both turned back before getting to Bear Valley , and no further attempts were made . On April 10 , almost a month since the third relief had left Truckee Lake , the alcalde near Sutter 's Fort organized a salvage party to recover what they could of the Donners ' belongings . The belongings would be sold , with part of the proceeds used to support the orphaned Donner children . The salvage party found the Alder Creek tents empty except for the body of George Donner , who had died only days earlier . On their way back to Truckee Lake , they found Lewis Keseberg alive . According to him , Mrs.

Murphy had died a week after the departure of the third relief . Some weeks later , Tamsen Donner had arrived at his cabin on her way over the pass , soaked and visibly upset . Keseberg said that he put a blanket around her and told her to start out in the morning , but she died during the night .

The salvage party were suspicious of Keseberg 's story , and found a pot full of human flesh in the cabin along with George Donner 's pistols , jewelry , and \$ 250 in gold . They threatened to lynch Keseberg , who confessed that he had cached \$ 273 of the Donners ' money at Tamsen 's suggestion , so that it could one day benefit her children . On April 29 , 1847 , Keseberg was the last member of the Donner Party to arrive at Sutter 's Fort .

= = = Response = = =

News of the Donner Party 's fate was spread eastward by Samuel Brannan , an elder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter @-@ day Saints and journalist , who ran into the salvage party as they came down from the pass with Keseberg . Accounts of the ordeal first reached New York City in July 1847 . Reporting on the event across the U.S. was heavily influenced by the national enthusiasm for westward migration . In some papers , news of the tragedy was buried in small paragraphs despite the contemporary tendency to sensationalize stories . Several newspapers , including those in California , wrote about the cannibalism in graphic exaggerated detail . In some print accounts , the members of the Donner Party were depicted as heroes , and California a paradise worthy of significant sacrifices .

Emigration to the west decreased over the following years , but it is likely that the drop in numbers was caused more by fears over the outcome of the ongoing Mexican @-@ American War than by the cautionary tale of the Donner Party . In 1846 , an estimated 1 @,@ 500 people migrated to California . In 1847 , the number dropped to 450 and to 400 in 1848 . The California Gold Rush spurred a sharp increase , however , and 25 @,@ 000 people went west in 1849 . Most of the overland migration followed the Carson River , but a few forty @-@ niners used the same route as the Donner Party and recorded descriptions about the site .

In late June 1847 , members of the Mormon Battalion under General Steven Kearny buried the human remains , and partially burned two of the cabins . The few who ventured over the pass in the next few years found bones , other artifacts , and the cabin used by the Reed and Graves families . In 1891 , a cache of money was found buried by the lake . It had probably been stored by Mrs. Graves , who hastily hid it when she left with the second relief so that she could return for it later .

Lansford Hastings received death threats . An emigrant who crossed before the Donner Party confronted Hastings about the difficulties they had encountered , reporting : " Of course he could say nothing but that he was very sorry , and that he meant well " .

= = = Survivors = = =

Of the 87 people who entered the Wasatch Mountains , 48 survived . Only the Reed and Breen families remained intact . The children of Jacob Donner , George Donner , and Franklin Graves were orphaned . William Eddy was alone and most of the Murphy family had died . Only three mules reached California ; the remaining animals perished . Most of the Donner Party members ' possessions were discarded .

A few of the widowed women remarried within months ; brides were scarce in California . The Reeds settled in San Jose and two of the Donner children lived with them . Reed fared well in the California Gold Rush and became prosperous . Virginia wrote an extensive letter to her cousin in Illinois about " our trubels getting to Callifornia " , with editorial oversight from her father . Journalist Edwin Bryant carried it back in June 1847 , and it was printed in its entirety in the Illinois Journal on December 16 , 1847 , with some editorial alterations .

Virginia converted to Catholicism in fulfillment of a promise which she had made to herself while observing Patrick Breen pray in his cabin . The Murphy survivors lived in Marysville . The Breens made their way to San Juan Bautista where they operated an inn and became the anonymous subjects of J. Ross Browne 's story about his severe discomfort upon learning that he was staying

with alleged cannibals , printed in Harper 's Magazine in 1862 . Many of the survivors encountered similar reactions .

George and Tamsen Donner 's children were taken in by an older couple near Sutter 's Fort . Eliza was three years old during the winter of 1846 ? 1847 , the youngest of the Donner children . She published an account of the Donner Party in 1911 , based on printed accounts and those of her sisters . The Breens ' youngest daughter Isabella was one year old during the winter of 1846 ? 1847 , and was the last survivor of the Donner Party . She died in 1935 .

The Graves children lived varied lives . Mary Graves married early , but her first husband was murdered . She cooked his killer 's food while he was in prison to ensure that the condemned man did not starve before his hanging . One of Mary 's grandchildren noted that she was very serious ; Graves once said , " I wish I could cry but I cannot . If I could forget the tragedy , perhaps I would know how to cry again . " Mary 's brother William did not settle down for any significant time .

Nancy Graves was nine years old during the winter of 1846 ? 1847 . She refused to acknowledge her involvement even when contacted by historians interested in recording the most accurate versions of the episode . Nancy reportedly was unable to recover from her role in the cannibalism of her brother and mother .

Eddy remarried and started a family in California . He attempted to follow through on his promise to murder Lewis Keseberg , but was dissuaded by James Reed and Edwin Bryant . A year later , Eddy recollected his experiences to J. Quinn Thornton , who wrote the earliest comprehensive documentation of the episode , also using Reed 's memories of his experiences . Eddy died in 1859 .

Keseberg brought a defamation suit against several members of the relief party who accused him of murdering Tamsen Donner . The court awarded him \$ 1 in damages , but also made him pay court costs . An 1847 story printed in the California Star described Keseberg 's actions in ghoulish terms and his near @-@ lynching by the salvage party , reporting that he preferred eating human flesh over the cattle and horses that had become exposed in the spring thaw . Historian Charles McGlashan amassed enough material to indict Keseberg for the murder of Tamsen Donner , but after interviewing Keseberg he concluded that no murder occurred . Eliza Donner Houghton also believed Keseberg to be innocent .

As Keseberg grew older , he did not venture outside , for he had become a pariah and was often threatened . He told McGlashan , " I often think that the Almighty has singled me out , among all the men on the face of the earth , in order to see how much hardship , suffering , and misery a human being can bear ! "

= = Legacy = =

The Donner Party episode was insignificant in comparison with the hundreds of thousands of emigrants to Oregon and California , but it has served as the basis for numerous works of history , fiction , drama , poetry , and film . The attention directed at the Donner Party is made possible by reliable accounts of what occurred , according to Stewart , and the fact that " the cannibalism , although it might almost be called a minor episode , has become in the popular mind the chief fact to be remembered about the Donner Party . For a taboo always allures with as great strength as it repels " . The appeal is that the events focused on families and ordinary people , according to Johnson , writing in 1996 , instead of on rare individuals , and that the events are " a dreadful irony that hopes of prosperity , health , and a new life in California 's fertile valleys led many only to misery , hunger , and death on her stony threshold " .

The site of the cabins became a tourist attraction as early as 1854 . In the 1880s , Charles McGlashan began promoting the idea of a monument to mark the site of the Donner Party episode . He helped to acquire the land for a monument and , in June 1918 , the statue of a pioneer family was placed on the spot where the Breen @-@ Keseberg cabin was thought to have been , dedicated to the Donner Party . It was made a California Historical Landmark in 1934 .

The State of California created the Donner Memorial State Park in 1927 . It originally consisted of 11 acres (0 @.@ 045 km2) surrounding the monument . Twenty years later , the site of the Murphy

cabin was purchased and added to the park . In 1962 , the Emigrant Trail Museum was added to tell the history of westward migration into California . The Murphy cabin and Donner monument were established as a National Historic Landmark in 1963 . A large rock served as the back end of the fireplace of the Murphy cabin , and a bronze plaque has been affixed to the rock listing the members of the Donner Party , indicating who survived and who did not . The State of California justifies memorializing the site because the episode was " an isolated and tragic incident of American history that has been transformed into a major folk epic " . As of 2003 , the park is estimated to receive 200 @, @ 000 visitors a year .

= = = Mortality = = =

Most historians count 87 members of the party , although Stephen McCurdy in the Western Journal of Medicine includes Sarah Keyes ? Margret Reed 's mother ? and Luis and Salvador , bringing the number to 90 . Five people had already died before the party reached Truckee Lake : one from tuberculosis (Halloran) , three from trauma (Snyder , Wolfinger , and Pike) , and one from exposure (Hardkoop) . A further 34 died between December 1846 and April 1847 : twenty @-@ five males and nine females . Several historians and other authorities have studied the mortalities to determine what factors may affect survival in nutritionally deprived individuals . Of the fifteen members of the snowshoe party , eight of the ten men who set out died (Stanton , Dolan , Graves , Murphy , Antonio , Fosdick , Luis , and Salvador) , but all five of the women survived . A professor at the University of Washington stated that the Donner Party episode is a " case study of demographically @-@ mediated natural selection in action " .

The deaths at Truckee Lake , Alder Creek , and in the snowshoe party were probably caused by a combination of extended malnutrition , overwork , and exposure to cold . Several members became more susceptible to infection due to starvation , such as George Donner , but the three most significant factors in survival were age , sex , and the size of family group that each member traveled with . The survivors were on average 7 @.@ 5 years younger than those who died ; children aged between 6 and 14 had a much higher survival rate than infants and children under the age of 6 , of whom 62 @.@ 5 percent died , including the son born to the Kesebergs on the trail , or adults over the age of 35 . No adults over the age of 49 survived . Deaths were " extremely high " among males aged between 20 and 39 , at more than 66 percent . Men have been found to metabolize protein faster , and women do not require as high a caloric intake . Women also store more body fat , which delays the effects of physical degradation caused by starvation and overwork . Men also tend to take on more dangerous tasks and , in this particular instance , the men were required to clear brush and engage in heavy labor before reaching Truckee Lake , adding to their physical debilitation . Those traveling with family members had a higher survival rate than bachelor males , possibly because family members more readily shared food with each other .

= = = Claims of cannibalism = = =

Although some survivors disputed the accounts of cannibalism , Charles McGlashan , who corresponded with many of the survivors over a 40 @-@ year period , documented many recollections that it occurred . Some correspondents were not forthcoming , approaching their participation with shame , but others eventually spoke about it freely . McGlashan in his 1879 book History of the Donner Party declined to include some of the more morbid details ? such as the suffering of the children and infants before death , or how Mrs. Murphy , according to Georgia Donner , gave up , lay down on her bed and faced the wall when the last of the children left in the third relief . He also neglected to mention any cannibalism at Alder Creek . The same year McGlashan 's book was published , Georgia Donner wrote to him to clarify some points , saying that human flesh was prepared for people in both tents at Alder Creek , but to her recollection (she was four years old during the winter of 1846 ? 1847) it was given only to the youngest children : " Father was crying and did not look at us the entire time , and we little ones felt we could not help it . There was nothing else . " She also remembered that Elizabeth Donner , Jacob 's wife , announced one

morning that she had cooked the arm of Samuel Shoemaker , a 25 @-@ year @-@ old teamster . Eliza Donner Houghton , in her 1911 account of the ordeal , did not mention any cannibalism at Alder Creek .

Archaeological findings at the Alder Creek camp proved inconclusive for evidence of cannibalism . None of the bones tested at the Alder Creek cooking hearth could be conclusively identified as human . According to Rarick , only cooked bones would be preserved , and it is unlikely that the Donner Party members would have needed to cook human bones .

Eliza Farnham 's 1856 account of the Donner Party was based largely on an interview with Margaret Breen . Her version details the ordeals of the Graves and Breen families after James Reed and the second relief left them in the snow pit . According to Farnham , seven @-@ year @-@ old Mary Donner suggested to the others that they should eat Isaac Donner , Franklin Graves , Jr . , and Elizabeth Graves , because the Donners had already begun eating the others at Alder Creek , including Mary 's father Jacob . Margaret Breen insisted that she and her family did not cannibalize the dead , but Kristin Johnson , Ethan Rarick , and Joseph King ? whose account is sympathetic to the Breen family ? do not consider it credible that the Breens , who had been without food for nine days , would have been able to survive without eating human flesh . King suggests Farnham included this into her account independently of Margaret Breen .

According to an account published by H. A. Wise in 1847 , Jean Baptiste Trudeau boasted of his own heroism , but also spoke in lurid detail of eating Jacob Donner , and claimed he had eaten a baby raw . Many years later , Trudeau met Eliza Donner Houghton and denied cannibalizing anyone , which he reiterated in an interview with a St. Louis newspaper in 1891 , when he was 60 years old . Houghton and the other Donner children were fond of Trudeau , and he of them , in spite of their circumstances and the fact that he eventually left Tamsen Donner alone . Author George Stewart considers Trudeau 's accounting to Wise more accurate than what he told Houghton in 1884 , and asserted that he deserted the Donners . Kristin Johnson , on the other hand , attributes Trudeau 's interview with Wise to be a result of " common adolescent desires to be the center of attention and to shock one 's elders " ; when older , he reconsidered his story , so as not to upset Houghton . Historians Joseph King and Jack Steed call Stewart 's characterization of Trudeau 's actions as desertion " extravagant moralism " , particularly because all members of the party were forced to make difficult choices . Ethan Rarick echoed this by writing , " ... more than the gleaming heroism or sullied villainy , the Donner Party is a story of hard decisions that were neither heroic nor villainous "