

The Donner Party

Program Transcript

Alexis de Tocqueville (Actor, voice-over): It is odd to watch with what feverish ardor Americans pursue prosperity. Ever tormented by the shadowy suspicion that they may not have chosen the shortest route to get it. They cleave to the things of this world as if assured that they will never die, and yet rush to snatch any that comes within their reach as if they expected to stop living before they had relished them. Death steps in, in the end, and stops them before they have grown tired of this futile pursuit of that complete felicity which always escapes them.

Narrator: It began in the 1840s, spurred on by financial panic in the East, by outbreaks of cholera and malaria and by the ceaseless American hankering to move west. When the pioneer movement began, fewer than 20,000 white Americans lived west of the Mississippi River. Ten years later, the immigration had swelled to a flood and before it was over, more than half a million men, women and children had stepped off into the wilderness at places like Independence, Missouri, and headed out over the long road to Oregon and California. In places, their wagon wheels carved ruts shoulder deep in the rocky road. The settlers themselves knew they were making history. "It will be received," one emigrant wrote, "as a legend on the borderland of myth."

But of all the stories to come out of the West, none has cut more deeply into the imagination of the American people than the tale of the Donner Party, high in the Sierra Nevada in the winter of 1846.

Harold Schindler, Writer: Human endeavor and failure, blunders, mistakes, ambition, greed: all the elements. And if you call the rescue of the surviving parties a happy ending, it's a happy ending. But what about those that didn't make it, that -- terrible, terrible.

Joseph King, Historian: I think we're curious, you know, about people who've experienced hardship, who've gone through terrible ordeals, and certainly the Donner Party, you know, 87 people, went through a crisis the like of which few human beings have ever faced. And we're curious about that. It can tell us something, I think, about ourselves, about the limits of human experience.

Lansford W. Hastings (Actor, voice-over): March 3rd, 1846. The tide of emigration is unparalleled in the annals of history. The eyes of the American people are now turned westward and thousands are gazing with the most intense interest and anxiety upon the Pacific shores with the full determination to make one more, one last move more, to the far West.

Narrator: As 1846 began, thousands of Americans were on the move west, eager to bring Oregon, Texas, New Mexico and California into the American sphere. No one was keener to possess California than Lansford W. Hastings, an ambitious 27-year-old lawyer from Mount Vernon, Ohio, whose visions of empire would be the Donner Party's doom.

In 1842, he wandered west to California. What he saw there amazed him. He dreamed of taking California from Mexico and of establishing an independent republic with himself at its head. Hoping to send a tide of Americans flooding west to occupy the province, he published *The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California*. It painted California as a second Eden and advertised a new and faster route across the Great Basin, a shortcut no one had ever seen -- including Hastings himself.

Harold Schindler, Writer: Lansford Hastings was probably ambitious, probably very sure of himself. And he says, "Come with me. I'll take you. I've been there." And that is not quite the truth. It was good enough for him, but it killed people. It was a siren call and bad news. Bad news.

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Wallace Stegner, Writer: It's all mixed up with the romance and the so-called "heroism" of the westward migration and the big American dream. The American dream has some nightmares attached to it and this is one of the ways the American dream could go. The American dream probably resulted in for most of the people who followed it like a marsh light in disaster.

Slate: Spring

Narrator: On April 16th, 1846, nine brand-new covered wagons rattled slowly out of Springfield, Illinois, and headed west. The families of George and Jacob Donner and James Frazier Reed were off to make a new life for themselves in the valley of California. George Donner was a 62-year-old farmer who had migrated five times before settling in Springfield, where he and his older brother Jacob had made enough money never to have to move again. Then land fever swept Illinois and kindled the urge to move one last time.

The originator of the Springfield party was an intelligent, headstrong businessman named James Frazier Reed, who was proud of the fortune he'd made in Illinois, but convinced he could do even better out west. His wife, Margaret, suffered from terrible sick headaches they hoped would improve in a better climate. With them were their four children: Virginia, Patty, James and little Thomas. Margaret's elderly mother, Sarah Keyes, came, too, so sick with consumption she could barely walk, but unwilling to be separated from her only daughter.

The Donners and the Reeds made a lavish entourage, 32 men, women and children in all, counting the Reeds' two hired servants and the seven teamsters who had answered George Donner's ad to drive the big wagons. But the most extravagant luxury was the Reeds' family wagon, a two-story affair with a built-in iron stove, spring-cushioned seats and bunks for sleeping. It took eight oxen to pull the mammoth ark that 12-year-old Virginia Reed called "the pioneer palace car." No one had ever seen anything like it.

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Virginia Reed (Actress, voice-over): My father, with tears in his eyes, tried to smile as one friend after another grasped his hand in a last farewell. Mama was overcome with grief. At last we were all in the wagons. The drivers cracked their whips. The oxen moved slowly forward and the long journey had begun.

Narrator: Their immediate destination was Independence, Missouri, the main jumping-off point for the Oregon and California trails. Once beyond Independence, however, they were stepping off into the unknown. All they knew was that the long and dangerous journey would take them 2,500 miles across a huge, windswept plain, three great mountain ranges and half a dozen scorching deserts. Time was everything. The grueling journey couldn't begin until the spring rains had subsided and had to be over before snow blocked the Sierra Nevada Mountains. That spring, talk was everywhere of a new and faster way. In the bottom of Jacob Donner's saddlebag was a copy of Lansford Hastings's *Emigrant's Guide*, with its tantalizing talk of a faster route to the garden of the earth.

The same day the Donners and the Reeds rolled west out of Springfield, Lansford Hastings prepared to head east from California, to see what the shortcut he was promoting was really like.

Harold Schindler, Writer: He'd heard that you could go south of the lake. The idea was to depart just before you got to Fort Bridger, going through the Wasatch, south of the lake, across the salt desert, through the Rubies into California. The problem was, he had never really done it, had never done it with a wagon, and yet it was his ambition to lead what people thought to be 7,000 wagons heading west that year. And Lansford Hastings was going to try to lead his share back.

James Clyman (Actor, voice-over): Mr. Hastings, our pilot, is looking for some force from the states with which it is designed to revolutionize California. He's anxious to try this route, but my belief is that it is very little nearer and not so good a road as that by Fort Hall.

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Tamsen Donner (Actress, voice-over): Independence. May 11th, 1846. My dearest only sister: I can give you no idea of the hurry of this place at this time. It is supposed there be 7,000 wagons this season. We go to California to the Bay of San Francisco, a four months trip. I am willing to go and have no doubt it will be an advantage to our children and to us. Farewell, my sister. You shall hear from me as soon as I have an opportunity.

Narrator: The Donners and the Reeds reached Independence, Missouri, in the second week of May. Heavy spring rains had turned the unpaved streets to mud. Wagons bogged to the hubs, drivers cursed and whipped the straining oxen. Emigrants hurried from store to store, purchasing supplies and anxiously inquiring after the latest news.

Edwin Bryant (Actor, voice-over): Singular as it may appear, there is as much electioneering here for the captaincy of this expedition as there is for the presidency of the United States.

Tamsen Donner (Actress, voice-over): We have some of the best people in our company and some, too, that are not so good.

Narrator: Day by day, week after week, wagons rolled out of Independence. The Donners and the Reeds got started on May 12th.

Edwin Bryant (Actor, voice-over): Not a living or a moving object of any kind appears upon the face of the vast expanse. The white-topped wagons and the men and animals belonging to them are the only relief to the tomb-like stillness of the landscape. A lovelier scene was never gazed upon, nor one of more profound solitude.

Narrator: A few days out, two riders overtook them. They brought mail from Independence and news that hostilities had broken out between the United States and Mexico on the Rio Grande. Each night violent thunderstorms broke over the wagon trains, scattering cattle and

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drenching the encampments. Each morning the skies cleared, but the trail had turned to mud. The Reeds' palace wagon had to be laboriously double-teamed over even moderate inclines, to the immense irritation of those forced to crawl along behind.

On May 27th, the wagon train came to a standstill on the east bank of the Big Blue River, too swollen by rain to be forded. The company went into camp to build a makeshift ferry. By then, the journey had become too much for Margaret Reed's mother.

Virginia Reed (Actress, voice-over): Grandma became speechless the day before she died. We made a neat coffin and buried her under a tree. We miss her very much. Every time we come into the wagon, we look at the bed for her.

Narrator: On May 31st, two days after the burial of Sarah Keyes, the last of the wagons was ferried safely over the Big Blue.

Tamsen Donner (Actress, voice-over): June 16th. We are now on the Platte, 200 miles from Fort Laramie. I never could have believed we could have traveled so far with so little difficulty. Indeed, if I do not experience something far worse than I have yet done, I shall say the trouble is all in getting started.

Narrator: On June 27th, just one week behind schedule, the Donners and the Reeds reached Fort Laramie, an isolated trading post in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. There, James Reed found an old friend from Illinois, a 54-year-old mountain man named James Clyman, who had just come east from California using Hastings's cutoff.

"We camped with them," Clyman remembered, "and continued the conversation until a late hour." Reed, anxious to make up for lost time, asked Clyman what he thought of Hastings's new route.

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James Clyman (Actor, voice-over): I told him about the great desert and the roughness of the Sierras and that a straight route might turn out to be impracticable. I told him to take the regular wagon track and never leave it. It is barely possible to get through if you follow it and it may be impossible if you don't.

Harold Schindler, Writer: Clyman, who had just been south of the lake on horseback coming east with Lansford Hastings, says, "Don't do it. Don't do it because you can't take wagons that way. Go the old route. Be safe. You'll perish." And Reed says, "There's a nigher route and we might as well take it."

Donald Buck, Historian: Why Reed didn't take the advice he got at Fort Laramie is, I don't know if there's an answer to that question. He was an intelligent man, decisive. I don't know. It's always, I guess, our insatiable desire to take a shortcut in life, thinking it'll get us there, and invariably it doesn't.

Narrator: The next day, Clyman bid Reed good-bye and continued east, moving fast down the Platte. On July 15th, he crossed the Big Blue River and came to the grave of Margaret Reed's mother. For a long time he stood looking down at the inscription, wondering what drove his countrymen west.

James Clyman (Actor, voice-over): This stone shows us that all ages and all sects are found to undertake this long, tedious and even dangerous journey for some unknown object never to be realized, even by those the most fortunate. And why? Because the human mind can never be satisfied, never at rest, always on the stretch for something new, some strange novelty.

Narrator: Sarah Keyes had been a member of what would soon be called the Donner Party. She was the first to die.

Slate: Summer

Narrator: On July 17th, as the Reeds and the Donners toiled slowly up towards the Continental Divide, a lone horseman came riding down from South Pass, bearing an open letter from Lansford Hastings addressed to “All emigrants now on the road.” It urged them to press on in one group to Fort Bridger, where Hastings himself would be waiting to escort them over the new trail.

On July 18th, they crossed the Continental Divide. They were in what the mountain men called “Oregon country” now, 1,000 miles from Independence with more than 1,000 miles still to go. They moved on, spellbound by the altitude and the landscape and the endless sea of sage.

Donald Buck, Historian: Once you got beyond Fort Laramie, there was no turning back. A lot of emigrants turned back by the time they got to Fort Laramie, realizing they were into something that they didn’t want. But after that, you’re pretty much committed all the way. Even though you might like to be able to, there was hardly a chance or opportunity. It just wouldn’t work.

Narrator: On July 20th, the wagon train reached the Little Sandy River. It was the parting of the ways. Most of the emigrants heeded James Clyman’s warning and turned right, but 20 wagons, including the nine belonging to the Donners and the Reeds, turned left towards Fort Bridger and the entrance to Hastings’s cutoff.

The next day, the new party met to elect a captain. James Reed was the obvious choice, but his aristocratic manner and his wealth had rubbed too many families the wrong way. They chose George Donner instead.

One week later, the Donner Party rolled into Fort Bridger, two log cabins and a corral run as a trading post by a celebrated mountain man named Jim Bridger. Lansford Hastings wasn’t

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there. The promoter had started west a week earlier at the head of another group of wagons, leaving instructions for any emigrants who wished to follow along behind. They spent four days resting their oxen and making repairs.

James Reed (Actor, voice-over): July 31st, 1846. Hastings's cutoff is said to be a saving of 350 or 400 miles and a better route. The rest of the Californians went the long route, feeling afraid of Hastings's cutoff. But Mr. Bridger informs me that it is a fine, level road with plenty of water and grass. It is estimated that 700 miles will take us to Captain Sutter's fort, which we hope to make in seven weeks from this day.

Narrator: On July 31st, the nine families and 16 single men of the Donner Party left Fort Bridger and entered Hastings's cutoff. For a week they made good time, 10 sometimes 12 miles a day, working their way deeper into the rugged mountains, following the track of Hastings's wagons. Then on August 6th, at the bottom of Echo Canyon, the party came to a halt. Stuck in the top of some sage near the trail was a note. It was from Lansford Hastings. It stated that the road ahead was virtually impassable and advised them to wait until he could show them a better way. It took James Reed five days to find Hastings. When he did, the promoter refused to come back to lead the company himself, pointing out what he thought might be a more manageable route from a high peak, instead. The next day, with James Reed as their pilot, the party turned off the track into the tangled wilderness.

Harold Schindler, Writer: When they committed themselves to cross the Wasatch, when they decided legitimately to enter the great basin, to tackle Emigration Canyon, as we know it, and Echo Canyon, as we know it, they were eating up days that were vital to them and they had no way of knowing it.

Narrator: They crawled along, making scarcely two miles a day, fighting their way through a chaos of canyons choked with willow trees, cottonwoods and aspen. Time and again the hostile terrain brought them to a standstill while the men cursed and toiled and hacked a

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road through the dense undergrowth. It took six days alone to chop their way eight miles up Big Mountain.

Virginia Reed (Actress, voice-over): Finally we reached the end of the canyon, where it looked as though our wagons would have to be abandoned. It seemed impossible for the oxen to pull them up the steep hill and the bluffs beyond, but we double-teamed and the work was at last accomplished. Worn with travel and greatly discouraged, we reached the shore of the Great Salt Lake. It had taken an entire month instead of a week.

Narrator: On August 22nd the 87 members of the Donner Party spilled out of the mountains, exhausted and shaken. Some blamed Reed for the delay, but there was little time for recrimination. Summer was unraveling fast and there were still 600 miles to go.

James Reed (Actor, voice-over): Tuesday, August 25th. Luke Halloran died of consumption this evening. We made him a coffin and buried him at the forks of the road in a beautiful place.

Narrator: The worried emigrants hurried on, following the track of Hastings's wagons, west then sharply south for a few miles to a cluster of clear, fresh springs. There they found the tattered remnants of another note.

Eliza Donner (Actress, voice-over): Mother knelt down and began thoughtfully fitting the ragged edges of paper together. The process was watched with spellbound interest by the anxious group around her. The writing was that of Hastings and her patchwork brought out the following words. "Two days ...two nights ... hard driving ... across desert ... reach water."

Narrator: Taking on as much water and grass as they could, the emigrants climbed through a range of gnarled hills. Beyond them to the west stretched a glittering plain of salt. On August 30th they started across.

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Harold Schindler, Writer: Well, you wouldn't want to get caught out in the salt desert. Even today it's a man-killer. But for people who thought they could go through in two days and equip a wagon with grass and water foolishness. In the heat of the day, the moisture under the surface bubbles to the top, turns it into a gumbo. If you're in a wagon, you can count on going down a couple of feet in some of those things. I'm not saying a few inches, but you can go right up to the hubs.

Narrator: On the third day the water ran out. That night, crazed with thirst, the Reeds' oxen bolted into the desert and could not be found. The family took what belongings they could carry and started out.

Virginia Reed (Actress, voice-over): Papa carried Thomas and all the rest of us walked. We got to the Donners' wagon and they were all asleep, so we laid down on the ground. We spread one shawl down and spread another over us and then put the dogs on top. The wind blew very hard and if it had not been for the dogs, we would have frozen.

Narrator: The next day the shattered emigrants stumbled out of the salt desert. It had been a disaster. It had taken them five days to cross the 80-mile desert Hastings had assured them was only half as wide. Several emigrants had almost died of thirst. Thirty-six oxen were lost. Wagons would have to be abandoned, the Reeds' "pioneer palace car" among them.

Eliza Donner (Actress, voice-over): Anguish and dismay now filled all hearts. Husbands bowed their heads, appalled at the situation of their families. Some cursed Hastings for the false statements in his open letter and for his broken pledge at Fort Bridger. They cursed him also for his misrepresentation of the distance across this cruel desert. Mothers in tearless agony clasped their children to their bosoms with the old, old cry, "Father, Thy will, not mine, be done." It was plain that try as we might, we could not get back to Fort Bridger. We must proceed, regardless of the fearful outlook.

Virginia Reed (Actress, voice-over): An inventory of provisions was taken and it was found that the supply was not sufficient to last us through to California. As if to render the situation more terrible, a storm came on during the night and the hilltops became white with snow.

Narrator: Someone would have to ride ahead to California and bring back relief. A big Missouri farmer named William McCutcheon and Charles Stanton, a bachelor from New York, volunteered. Finally, on September 26th, the Donner Party reached the Humboldt River where the shortcut rejoined the old trail. Hastings's cutoff had proved not only more treacherous than the older route, it was 125 miles longer, as well.

Wallace Stegner, Writer: They did seem to be doomed. Everything went wrong for them and then they had started so blithely, with such big expectations and such loads of possessions and everything. They were going into the new country and win it by storm. But they made the great mistake of listening to Lansford Hastings. He was the one who caused all their trouble because they lost their way in the Wasatch and they lost half of their animals and a lot of their hope, crossing the desert south of Great Salt Lake.

Narrator: In early September, Lansford Hastings rode into Sutter's Fort at the head of a battered train of 80 wagons. Except for the Donner Party, all the emigrants of 1846 had made it safely through to California.

Slate: Fall

Donald Buck, Historian: By the time they get certainly onto the Humboldt River, tempers are pretty frayed, very easy to trigger off, and there's a lot of incidents, anger. Again, I think that's a human condition. When we're under an enormous amount of stress, very often that can bring out the most heroic in us and it can also bring out, you know, the worst in us.

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Narrator: On October 5th, the emigrants were doubling their teams up a steep, sandy hill when the Graves family wagon became entangled with the Reed wagon. Tempers flared and the Graves driver, John Snyder, began beating the oxen with the butt of his bullwhip. James Reed hurried over to stop it, but only enraged Snyder further, who struck him savagely on the head with his whip. Reed drew his hunting knife and, as Snyder raised his arm to strike again, drove it into the teamster's chest just below the collarbone. Snyder staggered a few yards up the hill and died.

Tamsen Donner (Actress, voice-over): Mr. Reed and family were taken to their tent and guarded by their friends. An assembly was convened to decide what should be done. The majority declared the deed murder and demanded retribution.

Narrator: A German emigrant named Lewis Keseberg propped his wagon tongue on end and demanded that Reed be hanged from it. When Margaret Reed begged for mercy, the company chose banishment instead. At first Reed refused to go, but there was no choice. The next day he helped bury John Snyder, then rode west out of camp.

Virginia Reed (Actress, voice-over): We traveled on, but the hours dragged slowly along. Every day we would search for some sign of Papa, who would leave a letter by the wayside. But a time came when we found no letter and no trace of him.

Narrator: The Donner Party limped down the Humboldt as fast as it could go. Everyone who still could walked beside the wagons now to spare the exhausted oxen. They were racing against time and the weather, desperate to get over the mountains and into California before snow blocked the heights. There was no sign of Stanton or McCutcheon or of the relief they promised to bring from Sutter's Fort. With the death of Snyder and the banishment of James Reed, the Donner Party was coming apart.

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On October 7th, Lewis Keseberg turned an aging Belgian emigrant named Hardkoop out of his wagon. No one else would take him in. The old man fell farther and farther behind and was last seen sitting by the road, unable to walk.

On the night of October 12th, Paiute Indians killed 21 oxen with poisoned arrows. The company had now lost more than 100 head of cattle. From the bluffs above the river, they could hear the Paiutes laughing at their plight.

On October 16th, the battered party finally reached the Truckee, the narrow, rushing river that served as gateway to the Sierra.

John Breen (Actor, voice-over): The weather was already very cold and the heavy clouds hanging over the mountains to the west were strong indications of an approaching winter. Some wanted to stop and rest their cattle. Others, in fear of the snow, were in favor of pushing ahead as fast as possible.

Narrator: On October 19th, their food was nearly all gone when Charles Stanton finally returned from Sutter's Fort with seven mules loaded with food, two Indian guides and news that the high pass of the Sierra wouldn't be blocked by snow for another month. The emigrants' hopes rose. They were going to make it, after all. They camped for five days 50 miles from the summit, resting their oxen for the final push.

The party started up the river again. On October 31st, the front axle of George Donner's family wagon broke. Cutting timber for a new one, George gashed his hand and the family fell further behind. The rest of the party hurried on towards the summit.

John Breen (Actor, voice-over): We pushed on as fast as our failing cattle could haul our almost empty wagons. At last we reached the foot of the main ridge near Truckee Lake. It

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was sundown. The weather was clear, but a large circle around the moon indicated an approaching storm.

Narrator: That night they camped 1,000 feet beneath the dark, granite summit, waiting anxiously for the Donner wagons to catch up, praying that the weather would hold. The Donners didn't come and up on the summit during the night, it began to snow. The next morning the party made a frantic dash for the pass, but five feet had already fallen higher up and the wagons began to slip on the steep, rocky ascent.

Virginia Reed (Actress, voice-over): Despair drove many nearly frantic. The farther we went up, the deeper the snow got. The wagons could not go. The mules kept falling down in the snow head foremost and the Indian said he could not find the road. The women were so tired carrying their children that they could not go over that night.

Narrator: Stanton and one of the Indians made it as far as the summit, then turned back. The exhausted emigrants they were guiding could go no farther. As darkness came, they sat or lay huddled against the side of the mountain. The wind picked up. The temperature dropped and the snow and sleet came lashing down.

Virginia Reed (Actress, voice-over): We made a fire and got something to eat. Ma spread down a buffalo robe and sat up by the fire. The Indians knew we were doomed and one of them wrapped his blanket about him and stood all night under a tree.

Narrator: When they awoke next morning, the pass was completely blocked. They had come 2,500 miles in seven months to lose their race with the weather by one day, only 150 miles from safety at Sutter's Fort in California. They retraced their steps to the lake and started building a winter camp. Down by the lake and up on the dark summit above them it snowed and it snowed and it snowed.

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George McKinstry (Actor, voice-over): November 6th, Sutter's Fort. All things remain quiet here. The weather is bad. I am fearful the snow is too deep for the last company of emigrants to cross the mountains.

Narrator: For weeks, the Americans at Sutter's Fort had waited anxiously for the Donner Party to come in. They were shocked when, in late October, James Reed stumbled out of the mountains more dead than alive. Desperate to save his family, Reed pressed John Sutter for horses and supplies and rushed back up into the mountains. Two days out it started to rain. Higher up the rain turned to snow. Twelve miles from the summit Reed could go no further and turned back again to Sutter's Fort for help. This time, Sutter had none to give. Every able-bodied man in the valley had gone south to fight the Mexicans. The relief effort would have to wait.

Slate: Winter

Narrator: On November 20th, 1846, an Irish emigrant named Patrick Breen began to keep a diary.

Patrick Breen (Actor, voice-over): Friday, November the 20th, 1846. Came to this place on the 31st of last month that it snowed. We went out to the pass, the snow so deep we were unable to find the road, then turned back to the shanty on the lake. We now have killed most of our cattle, having to stay here until next spring. It snowed during the space of eight days with little intermission.

Narrator: The 81 members of the Donner Party -- 25 men, 15 women and 41 children, including six nursing infants -- were now huddled miserably in two makeshift winter camps. The Breens and their seven children took over an abandoned shack not far from Truckee Lake. Peggy Breen did what she could to calm the younger children. Lewis Keseberg built a rough lean-to for his family against one side of the Breen shack. Nearby, the Eddys crowded into a

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hastily constructed log cabin with the Murphys, the Fosters and the Pikes. A second drafty cabin housed the family of Franklin Graves at one end and Margaret Reed and her four children at the other.

Six miles away, on Alder Creek, the two Donner families huddled in tents where the storm had caught them.

Tamsen Donner (Actress, voice-over): We had not the first thing to eat. We seldom thought of bread, for we had not any since I remember. Ma made arrangements for some cattle and the cattle was so poor they could not get up when they laid down.

Narrator: During breaks in the storm, they scanned the summit, hoping to see a relief party inching its way down. No one came. Two more attempts to get over the pass ended in failure, the emigrants floundering in the 20-foot drifts. Thin and pale with hunger, three-year-old Eliza Donner whiled away the short winter days.

Eliza Donner (Actress, voice-over): After the first storm, a little sunbeam stole down the steps and made a bright spot upon our floor. I sat down under it, held it on my lap, passed my hand up and down in its brightness. I gathered up a piece of it in my apron and ran to my mother. Great was my surprise when I carefully opened the folds and found that I had nothing to show.

Narrator: On Thanksgiving, it began snowing again.

Patrick Breen (Actor, voice-over): Sunday, November the 29th. Still snowing, now about three feet deep. Killed my last oxen today.

Monday, November the 30th. Snowing fast, about four or five feet deep. Looks as likely to continue as when it commenced. No living thing without wings can get about.

December the 1st, Tuesday. Our cattle all killed but three or four of them. The horses and Stanton's mules gone, supposed lost in the snow. No hopes of finding them alive.

Narrator: They began to mix what little meat remained with anything they could chew and swallow -- boiled hides, charred bones, twigs, bark, leaves. On December 15th one of the Reeds' hired men, Balis Williams, died of malnutrition.

Slate: The Forlorn Hope

Narrator: In mid-December, 15 of the strongest emigrants -- five women, nine men and a boy of 12 -- resolved to make another attempt to break out. An old Vermont farmer, Franklin Graves, fashioned crude snowshoes from oxbows and rawhide. On December 16th, with William Eddy and the Indians Lewis and Salvadore in the lead, they started out for the summit. They took six days' starvation rations apiece. They called themselves "the forlorn hope." With each step, they sank a few inches into the 20-foot drifts, but the crude snowshoes buoyed them up. It took two grueling days to scale the summit. Once over the pass, the sun began to blind them. On the sixth day their food ran out. Charles Stanton, too blind and weak to carry on, urged his exhausted friends to go on without him. He was last seen sitting in the snow, calmly smoking his pipe.

By the ninth day out, they were hopelessly lost high in the California mountains. On Christmas Eve, it began to snow again.

Mary Graves (Actress, voice-over): What to do we did not know. Some of those who had children and families wished to go back, but the two Indians said they would go on. I told them I would go, too, for to go back and hear the cries of hunger from my brothers and sisters was more than I could stand. I would go as far as I could, let the consequences be what they might.

Narrator: Darkness came and somehow they managed to light a fire. They had been three days without food of any kind and most of them were far gone. Even in their delirium they knew they were dying.

Eliza Donner (Actress, voice-over): Even the wind seemed to hold its breath as the suggestion was made that were one to die, the rest might live. Then the suggestion was made that lots be cast and whoever drew the longest slip should be the sacrifice. The slips of paper were prepared and Patrick Dolan drew the fatal slip.

Narrator: No one had the heart to kill him.

Jesse Quinn Thornton (Actor, voice-over): About 11:00, the storm increased to a perfect tornado and in an instant blew away every spark of fire. The company were now engaged in imploring God for mercy and relief. That night's bitter cries, anguish and despair never can be forgotten.

Narrator: Somehow William Eddy got his dying companions to sit together in a ring and pulled blankets over them. A canopy of snow quickly covered the starving group. Antonio, a Mexican teamster, died. Franklin Graves was next. He died in the arms of his daughters Mary and Sarah. Patrick Dolan went insane and had to be held down by his companions. At last he slipped into a coma and died. 12-year-old Lem Murphy lay shuddering, all but dead. It stopped snowing. William Eddy crawled out of the white tomb where the dead and dying emigrants lay and managed to relight the fire. Someone cut the flesh from the arms and legs of Patrick Dolan. They roasted the meat and ate it, averting their faces from each other and weeping. Only the two Indians, Lewis and Salvadore, refused to eat. The hideous food revived them. The 10 surviving members of the "forlorn hope" butchered what remained of their four dead friends, wrapped and carefully labeled the pieces so that no one had to eat their kin, and staggered on through the wilderness, cursing Lansford Hastings.

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Three days later there was again nothing left to eat. William Foster proposed murdering the Indians for food. William Eddy tried to talk him out of it, then told Lewis and Salvadore of the white man's plan. The Indians stood disbelieving for a moment, then silently disappeared into the snowy woods.

Slate: The Lake

Patrick Breen (Actor, voice-over): Monday, December the 21st. Milt got back last night from the Donner's camp. Sad news. Jacob Donner, Sam Shoemaker, Joseph Rhinehart and James Smith are dead. The rest of them in a low situation. Snowed all night.

Thursday, December 31st. Last of the year. May we, with God's help, spend the coming year better than the past, which we propose to do if almighty God will deliver us from our present dreadful situation. It is our prayer, if the will of God sees it fitting for us. Amen. Freezing hard every night. Looks like another storm. Snow storms are dreadful to us.

Narrator: On January 10th, 1847, the United States Marines took Los Angeles from the Mexicans. In all but name, California now belonged to the United States. With the fighting over, James Reed rushed to San Francisco to raise money and men for the relief of his family and friends.

At sunset on January 17th in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, Harriet Ritchie heard a knock on the door of her family's cabin. In the doorway stood a bleeding skeleton of a man. In a faint voice he asked if he could have some bread. Harriet burst into tears and helped William Eddy into bed. The six other survivors of the "forlorn hope" lay a short way up the trail. Only two of the 10 men had made it through. All five women had survived.

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When he was well enough to speak, William Eddy told a hellish story. He spoke of the camp of death and of wandering 18 days more, lost in the deep mountain snows; of Sarah Fosdick, who had to watch her husband die, then see his heart roasting on a stick; of the bloody footprints that led them to where the Indians Lewis and Salvadore, who had fled as far as they could, were lying side by side in the snow, too weak to move; how William Foster, insane, shot each of the men through the head and how the starving survivors used the murdered men for food. The alarm went out.

Daniel Rhoads (Actor, voice-over): February 3rd. They gave the alarm that the people would all die without assistance. It was two weeks before any person would consent to go. Finally, we concluded we would go or die trying, for not to make any attempt to save them would be a disgrace to us and California as long as time lasted.

Narrator: On February 5th, the first small relief party left Johnson's ranch and struggled slowly up into the snowy mountains. A second party, led by James Reed, was two days behind them.

Patrick Breen (Actor, voice-over): Friday, February the 5th. Peggy very uneasy for fear we shall all perish with hunger. We have but a little meat left and only part of three hides. Mrs. Reed has nothing left but one hide and it is on Graves' shanty. Eddy's child, Margaret, died last night.

Monday, the 8th. Spitzer died last night about 3:00 o'clock. We will bury him in the snow. Mrs. Eddy died on the night of the 7th.

Wednesday, the 10th. Milt Elliot died last night at Murphy's shanty. Mrs. Reed went there this morning to see after his effects.

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Virginia Reed (Actress, voice-over): Everyone had gone to bed, but I could not sleep. Looking up through the darkness with my hands clasped, I made a vow that if God would send us relief and let me see my father again, I would be a Catholic.

Narrator: One afternoon Peggy Breen motioned Margaret Reed outside to tell her that her daughter, Virginia, was dying. They were all dying.

On February 19th, 1847, seven freezing, exhausted men of the first relief party struggled over the summit and came within sight of the lake.

Daniel Rhoads (Actor, voice-over): At sunset, we crossed Truckee Lake on the ice and came to the spot where we had been told we should find the emigrants. We looked all around, but no living thing except ourselves was in sight. We raised a loud hello. And then we saw a woman emerge from a hole in the snow. As we approached her, several others made their appearance, in like manner coming out of the snow. They were gaunt with famine and I never can forget the horrible, ghastly sight they presented. The first woman spoke in a hollow voice, very much agitated, and said, "Are you men from California or do you come from heaven?"

Narrator: The rescuers were shocked by what they found. 12 emigrants had died and bodies lay everywhere on top of the snow, covered with quilts. 48 still clung to life, but some had gone mad and others were too far gone to be revived. Somehow, Margaret Reed had managed to keep all her children alive. So had Peggy Breen and Tamsen Donner. So far, none of the survivors at the lake had been forced to eat human flesh.

There was no time to waste. The rescuers could take only 24 of the starving emigrants out with them. The Breens agreed to wait for the next relief party. So did the Donners. George was too sick to move and Tamsen would not leave his side. On February 22nd, the first relief

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party started back. There was almost no food to spare for the 31 desperate people left behind.

Patrick Breen (Actor, voice-over): Friday, February the 26th. Hungry times in camp. Mrs. Murphy said she thought she would commence on Milt and eat him. I don't think she has done so yet. It is distressing.

Narrator: The ordeal of the Donner Party was far from over. For two more months four relief parties battled the terrible snow and cold of the Sierra Nevada to try to save the starving emigrants. The scenes enacted in the mountains during those two months would never be forgotten. When the first relief party left the lake, eight-year-old Patty Reed volunteered to stay behind to care for her three-year-old brother Thomas, who was too small to walk through the huge drifts. "Well, Ma," she told her anguished mother, "if you never see me again, do the best that you can."

Virginia Reed (Actress, voice-over): We went over a great, high mountain, as steep as stair steps, in snow up to our knees. Little James walked the whole way over in snow up to his waist. He said every step he took he was getting nigher Pa and something to eat.

Narrator: Two children had died and more were failing fast when the first relief party caught sight of something moving towards them through the trees. It was the second relief party. James Reed was leading it.

James Reed (Actor, voice-over): Here I met my own wife and two of my little children. Two still in the mountains. I cannot describe the death-like look of them. "Bread, bread, bread" was the begging of every child and grown person.

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Narrator: When she heard her husband's voice, Margaret Reed stumbled in the snow and almost fainted. They had been separated for five months. Reed was certain his family had perished.

When James Reed and the second relief party reached the lake, Patty and Thomas were still alive. The rest of the camp was a shambles. 10 more emigrants had died and the survivors had begun to eat the dead.

James Reed (Actor, voice-over): Among the cabins lay the fleshless bones and half-eaten bodies of the victims of the famine. There lay the limbs, the skulls and the hair of the poor beings who had died from want and whose flesh preserved the lives of their surviving comrades who, shivering beneath their filthy rags and surrounded by the remains of their unholy feast, looked more like demons than human beings. They had fallen from their high estate, though compelled by the fell hand of dire necessity.

Narrator: The fiercest storm of the winter broke over the second relief party as they struggled to cross the mountains. For two days the emigrants and rescuers huddled around a fire that sank slowly into the snow. It was there that the third relief party found them, 10 days later.

Relief Party member (Actor, voice-over): The picture of distress was shocking indeed. They had consumed two children of Jacob Donner. Mrs. Graves's body was lying there with almost all the flesh cut away from her arms and limbs. Her breasts were cut off, her heart and liver taken out. Her little child, about 13 months old, sat at her side, one arm upon the body of its mangled mother, sobbing bitterly, crying, "Ma! Ma! Ma!"

Narrator: When the third relief party reached the lake, only seven emigrants remained alive. Tamsen Donner was among them, still remarkably strong for all she'd been through. George,

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who was dying, begged her to leave. Tamsen refused. She would not let her husband die alone.

The fourth relief party was delayed one full month by the ninth and final blizzard of what was the worst winter ever recorded in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. They found Lewis Keseberg in his cabin, delirious, surrounded by the half-eaten dead. No one else was alive. Tamsen Donner's body was never found. Keseberg confessed to eating her remains.

On April 21st, the last relief party left the lake. On April 25th, they reached Bear Valley. All of the survivors of the Donner Party had now come out of the mountains. It had been one year almost to the day since the Donners and the Reeds had left their homes in Springfield, Illinois.

John Breen (Actor, voice-over): It was long after dark when we got to Johnson's ranch, so the first time I saw it was early in the morning. The weather was fine. The ground was covered with green grass. The birds were singing from the tops of the trees and the journey was over. I could scarcely believe that I was alive. The scene that I saw that morning seems to be photographed on my mind. Most of the incidents are gone from memory, but I can always see the camp near Johnson's ranch.

Virginia Reed (Actress, voice-over): California, May 16th, 1847. My dear cousin: I take this opportunity to write to you to let you know that we are all well at present. I am going to write to you about our troubles in getting to California. We had good luck till we come to Big Sandy. We had to stay in the California mountains all winter without Pa. We had not the first thing to eat.

Narrator: Of the 87 men, women and children in the Donner Party, 46 survived, 41 died: 5 women, 14 children and 22 men, counting John Sutter's Indians, Lewis and Salvadore, who had risked their lives to save the emigrants. Two thirds of the women and children made it through. Two thirds of the men perished. Of all the families, the Donners suffered the most.

All four adults and four of the children died. All of the Reeds survived. So did all of the Breens.

The story of the Donner disaster quickly spread across the country. Newspapers printed every word of all the letters and diaries, along with wild tales of men and women who had gotten to enjoy eating human flesh. Emigration to California fell off sharply and Hastings's cutoff was all but abandoned.

Then, in January, 1848, gold was discovered in John Sutter's creek. By late 1849, more than 100,000 people had rushed to California to dig and sift near the streams and canyons where the Donner Party had suffered so much. In 1850, California entered the union as the 31st state. Year by year, traffic over what was now called Donner Pass increased. The lake became a tourist attraction and a favorite vacation spot year-round. The terrible ordeals of the Donner Party passed into history and legend. Relics from the camps, bits of china, buttons and nails, wood shavings from the cabins became popular souvenirs. Almost a century later, trees the emigrants had shorn off at snow level still stood as a vivid reminder of the fierce winter of 1846.

Wallace Stegner, Writer: Oh, it's got everything. It's a Greek tragedy. It's a great test of human character. Some people came through it heroically and some of the people in that party were far from heroes and they got worse as the conditions got worse, so that it was as if the sheep and the goats, the blessed and the unblessed, sorted themselves out against a background of terrible hardship and tragedy.

Narrator: Most of the men, women and children of the Donner Party were rapidly absorbed into the population of California. Mary Graves, survivor of the "forlorn hope," was married in May, before the snows had even melted. The Breens settled in San Juan Bautista, where Patrick became a prominent rancher. Alone among the survivors, Lewis Keseberg spoke openly of eating human flesh and was reviled as a man-eater and ghoul. During the Gold Rush, he

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made his fortune and in 1851 opened a restaurant in Sacramento. George and Tamsen Donner's orphaned children were soon split up. Eliza and Georgia were adopted by a Swiss couple who lived near Sutter's Fort.

Virginia Reed (Actress, voice-over): My dear cousin: We are all very well pleased with California. It is a beautiful country. It ought to be a beautiful country to pay us for our trouble getting there. Tell Henrietta if she wants to get married to come to California. She can get a Spaniard anytime.

Narrator: To her father's dismay, Virginia Reed kept the vow she'd made in the cabin by the lake and converted to Catholicism. When eight-year-old Patty Reed arrived in California, she pulled from her ragged dress a little bundle. In it was a lock of her grandmother's hair and a tiny doll she had carried with her all the way from Springfield. She died in 1931 at the age of 93. James Reed never spoke in public of the killing of John Snyder. He settled his family in San Jose, made money in real estate and gold and became one of the town's leading citizens. Margaret Reed's sick headaches disappeared and never returned.

Lansford Hastings moved to San Francisco and went back into law, but was too restless to make a go of it. During the Civil War he proposed leading an army west to seize Arizona for the Confederacy. After the war he published *The Emigrants' Guide to Brazil* and died in 1870 trying to establish a colony of ex-Confederates in South America.

Virginia Reed (Actress, voice-over): Oh, Mary. I have not wrote you half of the trouble we've had, but I have wrote you enough to let you know what trouble is. But thank God, we are the only family that did not eat human flesh. We have left everything, but I don't care for that. We have got through with our lives. Don't let this letter dishearten anybody. Remember, never take no cutoffs and hurry along as fast as you can.

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