

# **The Perilous Journey of the Donner Party Study Guide**

**The Perilous Journey of the Donner Party by Marian Calabro**

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# Plot Summary

The Perilous Journey of the Donner Party tells the tale of the ill-fated journey of the Donner Party from Illinois to California in 1846. A series of bad choices and unfortunate incidents forced the group of several families and individuals to suffer through a terrible winter, stranded in the Sierra Nevada mountains.

In April 1846, a total of thirty-two people set out from Springfield, Illinois, guided by the promise of free land in California. Chief among these people were the Donner families (headed by George and Jacob) and the Reed family (headed by James).

A trip to Independence, Missouri proceeded without incident, and the train of covered wagons traveled into Wyoming. The group grew as more families joined. In July, despite warnings from a local frontiersman, James Reed and George Donner persuaded the Donner Party to take a shortcut route advocated by a pamphlet called the Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California. This pamphlet was written by a man named Lansford Hastings, who had designs on becoming emperor of California, but who had little frontier experience.

The shortcut, known thereafter as the Hastings cutoff, was a disaster, filled with treacherous steep terrain and thick forest. The party had to proceed very slowly, losing significant time.

The Donner Party next had to cross the Great Salt Lake Desert. Hastings again led the families astray, leaving them a note that said the desert would take only two days to cross. It actually took six days, and the harsh desert environment decimated livestock and oxen, forcing the party to abandon wagons. By the time they got back to the primary route to California, it was late September.

By late October, the Party traveled along the Truckee River across the Sierra Nevada mountains. They encountered massive snowdrifts and could not cross the summit of the mountain. Snow built up on either side of the wagon train, and they were essentially trapped for the winter in the mountains at Truckee Lake.

Setting up makeshift cabins and dwellings, the families did the best they could to survive the harsh winter. But food was extremely scarce, as all game animals had migrated out of the area. Lack of food caused several in the group to leave in order to hike to California. This group would be known as the Forlorn Hope. Tragically underestimating the distance to California, this group succumbed to terrible frostbite and starvation, and several people resorted to cannibalism. Only seven of fifteen members of the Forlorn Hope survived.

James Reed - who had been exiled from the wagon train for killing an oxen driver gone mad from hunger - made it on his own to California and frantically organized rescue teams. Meanwhile, the group at Truckee Lake spent months in the mountains, slowly dying off from the cold or hunger. Eventually, several at Truckee Lake also resorted to

cannibalism. Three rescue teams arrived in February and March to ferry survivors out of the mountains. Out of the ninety total members in the Donner Party, forty-three died.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

On April 15, 1846, a group of three families left Springfield, Illinois to travel twenty-five hundred miles to California. They would be known to history as the Donner Party. This included the families of George Donner, his brother Jacob Donner, and James Reed.

Around this time, the attraction of plentiful free land attracted many settlers to the West. Many Americans believed in a "manifest destiny", in which American culture was meant to spread all the way to the Pacific Ocean. At this time, California belonged to Mexico, but soon the United States would be warring with Mexico over its land. Settlers also did not care much that Native Americans lived on the land they intended to settle.

George Donner was the head of the party, a farmer of about sixty. Brother Jacob was a few years younger. With them came the family of James Reed, a wealthy merchant who made his fortune in the mill and furniture-making businesses. Reed fought alongside future president Abraham Lincoln against Indians in the Black Hawk War, and like Lincoln, Reed had political ambitions: he wished to lead all negotiations between the United States and Indian tribes west of the Rockies.

The Reeds had a luxury covered wagon known as the Pioneer Palace Car. It was bigger than most wagons and had heat from a built-in wood stove as well as beds and other amenities.

Each family brought three wagons along. The first wagon housed the family, the second wagon stored food, gunpowder, and other supplies for the journey, and the third wagon carried furniture and other goods for their new California home.

George and wife Tamsen brought their five daughters. Jacob Donner and wife Elizabeth brought seven children. James Reed and wife Margaret brought four children (including twelve-year-old Virginia), and ailing, bedridden grandma Sarah Keyes, whom no one expected to live long. Along with servants, a team of single young men came to act as "teamsters" to drive and whip the oxen pulling the wagons. All told, the group left Springfield with thirty-two people. The group left on April 15, and it is said that Abraham Lincoln's wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, was among the well-wishers who saw the party off.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

The first major landmark to reach was Independence, Missouri, about three hundred miles west of Springfield. Independence was a bustling trading post and town that acted as a jumping-off point for many settlers heading out into the frontier.

The trip to Independence was largely uneventful. The party camped each night by the Missouri River or its tributaries. There was plenty of work to do for everyone over five years of age. Women cooked, laundered, mended, and tended to children. Men tended the animals and hunted.

Breakfast consisted of cornmeal mush, grits, salt pork, and/or bacon. Lunch was bread (baked on the campfire) and beef jerky. Dried fruit was eaten to ward off scurvy. At nighttime, children would relax by playing ball and tag, and settlers would sing familiar songs around the campfire, such as "The Cumberland Gap".

May 1946 brought thunderous storms, and the wagons were slowed as oxen strained to pull wheels through thick mud. The party reached Independence on May 11, slightly behind schedule. Letters reveal that, while Tamsen was still enthusiastic about the trip, Margaret Reed and Sarah Keys were in "low spirits", and they wondered if the trip would not be "someday regretted", foreshadowing calamity.

After Independence, the Donner Party teamed with a larger wagon train, captained by William Russell, for safety from Indians. Sarah Keyes died, to no one's surprise, on May 29. Crossing Nebraska, the train encountered high heat. Men brought back plenty of buffalo meat for food, as buffalo were plentiful in the plains. The party reached Fort Kearney, and then followed the slow-moving Platte River into Wyoming. The terrain forced them to cross the river several times, which was a very time-consuming process of swimming the livestock across and then resetting the wagon wheels.

Around June 28, frontiersman James Clyman met the Donner Party and warned them not to take a shortcut recommended to them by a book Donner and Reed had read, *The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California*. Donner and Reed dismissed Clyman's warnings, trusting in the book, which would prove to be a fateful mistake.

At the time, though, things went well. The party celebrated the Fourth of July. They bartered with local Sioux Indians, who were fortunately peaceful rather than warlike. And the wagon train kept growing. New members included the Irish-born Breen family from Iowa; bachelor Patrick Dolan; the William Eddy family from Illinois; and Levinah Murphy's family from Tennessee. Also along were the German-born Kesebergs and Wolfingers. The text notes that the Donner/Reed portion of the train did not get along well with neither the Murphys nor the Germans, perhaps due to class as well as cultural differences.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

James Reed was a particularly fierce advocate of following their Emigrants' Guide. The book suggested shaving about four hundred miles off the journey by going south around the Great Salt Lake instead of north along the beaten path to Fort Hall.

The Emigrants' Guide was written by a man named Lansford Warren Hastings. He had no personal knowledge of the shortcut he was urging in his book, which became known as the Lansford Cutoff. In fact, the Cutoff was an impossible route to take by wagon. Hastings was somewhat of a con man with delusions of grandeur. He wrote his book in order to attract people to California, where he dreamed of establishing an independent nation with himself as emperor.

On July 20, the Donner Party took an all-male vote on whether to take the Hastings Cutoff or the more established route to Fort Hall. The men voted to take the Cutoff, a victory for Reed. But in a slight to Reed, they also voted to make George Donner the official captain of the train. To clinch their decision, Reed got word that Hastings himself was in the area and had agreed to guide them through the Cutoff.

The last post before the Cutoff was Fort Bridger, headed by a man named James Bridger. Hastings was not around to guide the party; he was off with another wagon train. Furthermore, in a desperate attempt to drum up business, Bridger assured the Donner Party that the Cutoff was perfectly safe to travel. Bridger was depending on the cutoff for wagon traffic.

The Cutoff was a disaster, and some of the worst terrain in the West, with steep hills and ravines. Weber Canyon proved to be completely impassable, and James Reed rode off with two men to find Hastings and/or determine another route. Meanwhile, the Donner Party waited an entire week. Reed returned, with Hastings refusing to come with him. The party then had to clear a trail, cutting down one tree at a time, through the Wasatch Mountains. Fortunately, the Graves family arrived, also having taken the Cutoff, joining the Donner Party and making for a grand total of eighty-seven people, as by this time William Russell's wagons had gone far ahead of them to Fort Hall. The Donner Party was advancing a mere two miles a day. On August 25, a bachelor named Luke Halloran died of consumption, an ill omen for the rest of the trip.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

The Donner Party next had to cross the Great Salt Lake Desert. Hastings, leading another team, was days ahead of them. Hastings left a note at the beginning of the desert for them, indicating that it was only two days' travel across the desert. That was another fraudulent claim on the part of Hastings.

Water weighs so much that the train could only carry enough for two days. The crossing of the desert was instantly brutal. The alkaline dust in the air was a slow poison for the livestock and made human skin burn. Crossing a small mountain only resulted in more endless desert, followed by the "sink", where soft earth gave way to a layer of muck the wagons struggled through.

During this time, the Reed wagon team lagged behind the Donner and the other family's wagons. Reed went ahead of everyone on horseback to scout. He returned to his family's wagons to discover disaster: all but two of the eighteen oxen had stampeded away and escaped, driven mad by the need for water. Reed had to leave two wagons behind and pack everything in a single wagon.

Oxen throughout the Donner Party were dropping dead from thirst, hunger, and the effects of the dust. All in all, the party spent six miserable days in the desert, finally emerging at a site with water now called Donner Springs.

After more wasted days traversing the Ruby Mountains, the Donner Party finally emerged back onto the "main" route to California, along the Humboldt River on September 26. They were alone; all other wagon teams were already in California, as travel was timed to miss winter. And they still had the treacherous Sierra Nevada mountains to cross. To add significantly to their troubles, local Indians stole their horses and killed livestock, and they had to be constantly on guard against theft.

Running low on food, they sent two men named Charles Stanton and William McCutchen to a place called Sutter's Fort for supplies, and then traveled on. On October 5th, two oxen teams' yokes got tangled, and the driver of one team, John Snyder, lost his mind with rage. He threatened and attacked James Reed, who stabbed him with a knife. Snyder also inflicted wounds with a whip on Reed. Snyder soon bled out and died. By this time, the Donners and other families were again a day or so ahead of the Reeds.

Opinion was turning sharply against Reed. Many viewed Reed with disdain for his wealth, bossiness, and "hands-off" attitude. German Louis Keseberg demanded justice, and even set up a wagon so as to hang James Reed for murder. In the end, the group banished Reed from the group, and he had to travel on ahead, alone on horseback. The group promised to take care of the Reed family without its patriarch.





# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Soon after James' banishment, the group forced the Reeds to abandon their Pioneer Palace Car, given the lack of oxen. Meanwhile, James Reed traveled far ahead with a man named Walter Herron, to summon help from California.

On October 8, a Belgian man named Hardcoop was simply abandoned by the side of the road. He was old and was thought to be a burden by the Kesebergs, who had accommodated him. Some wanted to turn back to at least give the man a proper burial, but they pressed ahead.

The Donner Party reached the Humboldt Sink (after the river) in mid-October. From there, it was the Forty-Mile Desert to the Truckee River. This desert was a junkyard of goods and broken wagons from previous expeditions. William Eddy lost his own wagon at the beginning of the desert, after Paiutes Indians stole or killed most of his oxen. After emerging from the desert, Mr. Wolfinger was found murdered. Some claimed he was killed by Indians, but others felt he was killed by his foreign companions for his wealth and jewels.

In late October, Charles Stanton (who was sent off for provisions to Sutter's Fort earlier) arrived with desperately needed food. He also brought word that James Reed had crossed into California, and was organizing a rescue mission. Re-energized, the party traveled along the Truckee River ("truckee being a Paiute word for "very good") toward the Sierra Nevada. But, so spent by their travels, they took several days' rest, which proved to be disastrous. Along the way, a man named William Pike's pistol misfired while he reloaded it, killing him.

Travel got harder and harder along the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. It began to snow, much earlier than anyone had hoped. On the night of October 31, the group reached Truckee Lake. After another quarter mile, they would reach the summit of the Sierra Nevada and be treated to its much more gentle western slope. However, everyone was so exhausted that they stopped, despite Charles Stanton's urging. Also around this time, a Donner wagon snapped an axle, and George Donner had gashed his hand trying to fix it, losing a lot of blood.

The party waited until November 3 to try to cross the rest of the eastern range. By then, heavy snowfall had made the pass impassable. They were trapped in the Sierra Nevadas.

# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

The group camped near Truckee Lake. They could go neither forward nor backward. The Breen family took possession of an existing cabin that had been built the previous winter by pioneers. The Kesebergs erected a lean-to against the cabin. Other families built cabins from scratch. The Donner families had been slowed and made a camp at Alder Creek about five miles back. Not possessing the younger, stronger men of the other families, George and Jacob built shabby wigwam-style dwellings instead of cabins. George suffered from infection brought about by the gash on his hand. A total of eighty-one people were trapped near the lake.

Things were desperate, and food was scarce. All remaining animals were killed for food. Nineteen people set off for help nine days before Christmas. This group became known as the Forlorn Hope. It included some of the strongest and most able-bodied among them, including Patrick Dolan and Charles Stanton.

By Christmas, Jacob Donner and three Donner teamsters were dead from starvation and disease. Starving settlers took to boiling ox bones into a glue-like substance for food. The lake was frozen over, making fishing impossible, and most game animals had moved south to avoid the worst snowfall; thus, it was next to impossible to hunt for food.

The Reeds had to eat parts of an animal rug or boiled shoe leather. They had to kill and eat the family cat. Margaret Reed resolved to travel for help, but the Reeds were turned back by harsh weather. They were squabbles over food and the other scarce resources. Even ox hides used as roofing material for the shelters had to be cut up and boiled to be eaten. Frostbite was also an issue. The Reeds were very saddened when their beloved longtime servant, Milt Elliot, died in early February.

Ironically, or perhaps sadly, nearby Paiute Indians had been observing the Donner Party for most of their entrapment, but they were too scared of white people to introduce themselves or offer assistance.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

The Forlorn Hope party estimated it was thirty miles to California, so they packed six days of food. Their own story is also a miserable one. Sweeping snowstorms knocked them off course and slowed them, and they suffered from snow blindness from the snow reflections. Six days in, and nowhere near California, the group's leader, Charles Stanton, died.

Desperate for food, the solution of cannibalism was first broached by Patrick Dolan. They debated whether they should kill someone - either by drawing straws or in a duel - but in the end, they decided they should wait for someone to die. After a campfire literally melted the snow beneath it, "digging" a hole that sunk the people huddled around the fire deep into the snow drift, Patrick Dolan went mad and died. Three others died soon after of starvation and cold.

Dolan was roasted and eaten, though a few abstained. They froze the others for later consumption. Then, a man named William Foster suggested killing their two Indian companions, Luis and Salvador, for food. William Eddy rose up to strenuously object. Eddy told Luis and Salvador of Foster's plans and they ran away. However, they became weakened by themselves, and the group came across them. William Foster shot both Indians in their weakened state.

After thirty-three long days, the group half-dragged themselves to a group of Miwok Indians, who in turn brought the survivors to settlers in Bear Valley, south of Sutter's Fort. Out of fifteen members in the Forlorn Hope, all five women survived and only two of the ten men survived, William Eddy and William Foster.

At Sutter's Fort, James Reed was trying to get rescue teams organized. He was disrupted by the Mexican-American War, and actually fought in the Battle of Santa Clara on January 2. He also managed to file land claims for his future family homestead. Americans took Los Angeles from the Mexicans in the middle of January, and by January 31, a rescue team headed by a man named Aquilla Glover set out for Truckee Lake.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

There were two teams of rescuers, Glover's team and Reed's team, with Reed behind Glover. After three weeks of trudging in the snow, Glover's team arrived at Truckee Lake on February 18. The rescuers were shocked at the gaunt, hollowed-out faces of the survivors, thin from hunger.

Glover did not have enough food for the return trip for all forty survivors, so he had to leave with a portion of the survivors and leave the rest to be rescued by Reed's team. The Reeds left - minus toddler Tommy, who literally could not walk in the deep snow. Tamsen Donner refused to leave her husband, George, who was bedridden and dying of infection.

The first mention of cannibalism at Truckee Lake occurs on February 26, when Levinah Murphy dug up Milt Elliot in order to cut up and consume him. The Donners had already resorted to cannibalism weeks earlier at Alder Creek.

After six days, the Glover team met up with the Reed team, and James Reed had a tearful reunion with his wife and several children. But Reed quickly pressed on when he learned that two of his children were still at the lake. Glover returned the first group of survivors safely to a settlement called Johnson's Ranch. Tragedy struck here when a stepson of Jacob Donner, William Hook, shoveled food in his mouth and then died of agony because his body, starved for so long, couldn't digest it. The other survivors forced themselves to eat very slowly and with small portions.

Reed arrived at Truckee Lake and took another group of survivors, including his children, on March 3. A dozen or so stayed behind, as they were too weak or sickly to travel. Tamsen Donner again refused to leave her husband's side.

Reed's group was hit with a snowstorm, forcing several of the weaker members to stay behind for a third rescue team. Meanwhile, several of this sub-group died and were cannibalized. A third rescue group was led by Forlorn Hope survivors William Eddy and William Foster, eager to rescue their own family members at Truckee Lake. They arrived and learned their family members had died. Eddy and Foster rescued only four young children. Tamsen still refused to leave George, and a few more, including Louis Keseberg, were still too sickly to travel.

At this point, after Eddy and Foster left, there is conjecture that Keseberg killed Tamsen and ate her to regain strength. History may never know. At any rate, a fourth rescue team arrived in April and found only Keseberg alive at the site.

Out of the ninety total members in the Donner Party, forty-three died.

# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

Three months after the ordeal, Virginia Reed composed a letter to a cousin named Mary Keyes back in Springfield. She told of the entire series of events, and the letter became a valuable record for historians. Virginia Reed did not tell of her father's murder of Snyder, and she downplayed her own suffering. She was matter-of-fact about the cannibalism, though she was sworn that no member of the Reed family ever cannibalized. This would become important later, as the "cannibal" stigma was a severe one.

Four months after the ordeal, the U.S. Army sent troops to clean up the scene. Troops were horrified at the various body parts and bones. They dug a mass grave for the remains.

Virginia's letter, along with an account written by William Eddy, soon were reprinted in a few newspapers, including *The California Star*. Within a few years the Donner Party was the subject of two books. Naturally, the cannibalism aspect garnered the most attention. The Donner Party story did affect the number of emigrants traveling West for a few years, but that changed when gold was discovered near Sutter's Fort in 1849, causing a gold rush of "forty-niners". Hastings Cutoff got a deservedly bad reputation, and no one repeated the mistakes of the Donner Party by attempting it. Hastings himself ended his life in South America, after urging Americans to move to Brazil.

Travel improved when California became a state in 1850, and later with the Central Pacific Railroad in 1867. The Donner Party was commemorated in several ways over the proceeding decades. Truckee Lake was renamed Donner Lake, and the pass they were trapped in is called Donner Pass. Donner Memorial State Park was also established, where markers indicate the locations of the family cabins. The park's main attraction is a twenty-two foot high monument. It is twenty-two feet tall because the snow in the pass in 1847 was estimated at twenty-two feet deep.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

The Donner Party survivors, in the end, got what they came for - land and opportunity. Most survivors did not keep in touch for most of their lives, perhaps preferring to keep the tragedy buried in their minds. This chapter is dedicated to describing what happened to various members of the Donner Party after the ordeal.

Louis Keseberg never escaped a reputation as a murderer (of Tamsen Donner). While Keseberg denied it, some reported that he bragged about cannibalism and the delicious taste of human liver. Keseberg died at an old age as a recluse, hiding from a society that shunned him.

Mary Murphy, who lost many family members, was very despondent following the incident, but she soon married. The city of Marysville, California, is named after her. William Foster was never tried for murdering the Native Americans, as killing Native Americans was not considered a crime. He settled in what would be named Foster's Bar. William Eddy remarried and settled down. In later accounts, Eddy made himself out to be a hero, but historians have doubted the veracity of his account.

The Graves family was hit especially hard. Nancy Graves spent a lifetime being traumatized by the events, and never got over it. The Breens, meanwhile, amassed a fortune in the gold rush and became prosperous owning a ranch. The Donners were of course decimated in the ordeal, but the orphaned children found good homes. A couple of Donner children were adopted by the Reed family. Eliza Donner, three at the time of the ordeal, wrote a book about the experience of the group.

The Reed family did not lose a family member, and they settled in San Jose. James made a fortune in real estate and gold. The Reeds helped to make San Jose the significant city it is today. Virginia Reed became a Roman Catholic - to the chagrin of her parents - and she eloped with a U.S. Army officer. Virginia lived well into old age and had nine children. At age fifty-seven, Virginia wrote a book about the Donner Party, and otherwise adjusted exceedingly well.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

This chapter discusses the Donner Party legacy. Descendants of the Donner Party have struggled over the generations to shrug off the "cannibal" label. An important supporter in this effort was Charles Fayette McGlashan, who was the first to write a book-length history of the party. Thirty years later, McGlashan tracked down survivors and assembled the accounts. Unlike previous lurid accounts which distorted facts, McGlashan stuck to the facts and treated the cannibalism matter-of-factly, though he did tone down certain grisly details.

In 1996, descendants of the Donner Party gathered on the shores of Donner Lake to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the start of the Donner Party journey. It drew 450 people from all around the United States. The vast majority of Donner Party descendants dismiss any insults or mocking about cannibalism. They are instead proud of their ancestors' courage in the face of adversity. At this commemoration, actors presented dramatizations, and covered wagons were paraded around. Margaret Reed's Christmas soup was served, and a mock trial of Louis Keseberg was held, as to the matter of whether or not he murdered Tamsen Donner. He was found not guilty. The author, who attended this commemoration, interviewed several descendants, and most expressed great pride and admiration for their ancestors.

The author next analyzes whether the Donner Party tragedy could have been averted, and what was to blame. Some have blamed Lansford Hastings for leading the party astray. Others have blamed James Reed and his stubbornness. Still others say that it was a confluence of factors - poor management, bad weather, and just plain bad luck - and that blame cannot and should not be assigned.

In the end, the author believes the Donner Party saga is compelling because it's a human drama, and it speaks to us as human beings. It asks the question, "What would you have done if trapped in the Donner Party predicament?"

The author next makes a brief comparison between the Donner Party and a group of rugby players whose plane crashed in the Andes in 1972. These people also resorted to cannibalism. Even though the 1972 incident is comparatively recent, there are several similarities between the two ordeals, and both incidents show that nature can still conquer human technology.





# Characters

## James Reed

James Reed was forty-five years of age in 1846 when the Donner Party formed. He was a successful merchant who enjoyed success in the furniture-making and mill businesses, and he was known to be a wealthy man. With George and Jacob Donner, he agreed to form a wagon train to travel to California.

Reed fought in the Army with Abraham Lincoln, and Mary Todd Lincoln was there to bid farewell to the Donner Party when they headed West. Like Lincoln, Reed had political aspirations, and he hoped to become the chief negotiator between Native American tribes and the United States for all territory west of the Rocky Mountains. Reed preserved to leave the hard work on the trail to a variety of young bachelors and servants he hired. As such, he acquired a reputation for being somewhat of a snob.

Ever confident, Reed read the "Emigrants' Guide" prior to departing, and he convinced the Donner Party to take the Hastings Cutoff, as indicated in the guide. This would prove to be the first of several crucial mistakes for the party. Reed fancied himself the leader of the party, but in a vote, the men designated George Donner as the captain of the wagon train. This was a figurative slap in the face to Reed.

When attempting to stop John Snyder from abusing oxen, James Reed killed the man with a knife, presumably in self-defense. With the wagon train dispensing its own justice, Reed was exiled by the group for the act and was forced to travel to California on horseback without his family. Reed hurried to California and spent the next weeks trying to convince settlers to help him rescue the Donner Party. The Mexican-American war delayed his efforts, but eventually Reed was able to venture into the Sierra Nevada mountains to reunite with his family. Reed later went on to even greater prosperity in real estate and gold mining in San Jose.

## Lansford Warren Hastings

Hastings was the author of "The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California". James Reed and George Donner purchased the book in Springfield and used it to make decisions in their journey to California. Most importantly, they chose to take the Hastings Cutoff instead of the more well-known wagon trail in order to save time. Instead, they lost precious time, leading to their entrapment in the Sierra Nevadas.

Hastings was a lawyer, described as "part visionary and part fraud" (p. 43). The "Emigrants' Guide" was supposedly culled from Hastings' own experiences on the trail, but in fact he was no frontiersman, and he had never personally taken the route he advocated in the book. The "Emigrants' Guide" was essentially propaganda for Hastings to develop a following of California settlers. Hastings envisioned that these settlers he had guided would back him in his bid to make California an independent nation, where





he would be crowned emperor. Hastings visited California in 1843 and felt he could wrest control of it from Mexico for himself.

To realize his dream, Hastings lectured towns about the paradise of California and its untold riches, intentionally downplaying the merits of Oregon. While Hastings had a magnetic personality and was a powerful speaker, he lacked the resources and leadership abilities to make his dream a reality. He refused to help the Donner Party when it got in trouble, and in fact significantly harmed them by posting a fraudulent notice that the Great Salt Lake Desert would take only two days to cross, when in reality it took six.

## **Virginia Reed**

Virginia was James Reed's twelve-year-old daughter. She survived the trip. Her later account of the ordeal in a letter to her cousin was an important early document for historians to make sense of the Donner Party saga.

## **Tamsen Donner**

Tamsen Donner was the wife of Donner Party captain George Donner. She refused to be rescued as she would not leave her dying husband. There is doubt as to whether she died of the cold or starvation, or whether she was murdered and possibly cannibalized by Louis Keseberg.

## **George Donner**

George was the captain of the Donner Party wagon train. While fixing a broken wagon axle, he cut his hand badly. The cut developed into an infection, and he suffered a slow and painful death trapped in the Sierra Nevada with his family.

## **James Clyman**

Clyman was a well-known Western explorer. He urged the Donner Party not to take the Hastings Cutoff because he had personally traveled through the region and found it to be extremely difficult terrain. His advice went unheeded.

## **Louis Keseberg**

Keseberg was a German-born emigrant who joined the Donner Party along the way to California. He wanted to hang James Reed for killing John Snyder, and he developed a reputation as a murderer of Tamsen Donner (though he denied it, and it was never proven).



## **Charles Stanton**

Stanton was a young man who was sent to Sutter's Fort for provisions. He returned with much-needed food for the Donner Party and then tried to urge them past the summit of the Sierra Nevada mountains. He became trapped with the rest of the party, and eventually he created the Forlorn Hope party to try to escape. He died while with the Forlorn Hope.

## **William Eddy**

Eddy was a member of the Forlorn Hope party. He lost his family to cold and starvation. He abstained from cannibalism while with Forlorn Hope, and later wrote an account of his experiences.

## **William Foster**

Foster was a member of the Forlorn Hope party. He urged the group to kill the two Native Americans in the group, Luis and Salvador, for their meat. He did in fact eventually murder the two men. He survived the ordeal and settled in California.

## **Luis and Salvador**

Luis and Salvador were two Native Americans who accompanied the Forlorn Hope party. William Foster suggested killing them for their meat, and they fled. However, they were later found in a weakened state by Forlorn Hope, and William Foster killed them in cold blood.



# Objects/Places

## Springfield, Illinois

Springfield was where the Donner Party embarked from in April 1846. The Donner and Reed families were prominent members of the Springfield community.

## The Pioneer Palace Car

This ultra-luxurious and spacious wagon was owned by the wealthy Reed family. It had beds and a built-in stove, among other amenities. The Reeds were forced to give up the car after a dearth of oxen forced the Donner Party to abandon wagons.

## The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California

This guidebook was written by Lansford Warren Hastings as a means to lure settlers to California (as opposed to Oregon). Hastings advocated a shortcut on the route he had never taken, and otherwise spoke as if he was an experienced frontiersman. James Reed relied on Hastings' advice, with tragic consequences.

## Hastings Cutoff

This route, advocated by Lansford Warren Hastings, was a southern shortcut around the Great Salt Lake in modern-day Utah. It featured treacherous terrain, including the Great Salt Lake Desert and the Wasatch Mountains. By taking this route, the Donner Party lost precious time and many oxen and livestock.

## The Great Salt Lake Desert

The Donner Party was convinced that it would only take two days to cross the Great Salt Lake Desert. It wound up taking six days. In that time, in the harsh and waterless desert, the group lost many oxen and livestock, dealing them a great blow and causing further delay.

## Sutter's Fort

Sutter's Fort was a California outpost owned by John Sutter. It was the nearest outpost to the Donner Party after they emerged from the Hastings Cutoff. William McCutchen and Charles Stanton were sent ahead of the wagons to fetch provisions from Sutter's Fort.



## **The Forty-Mile Desert**

The Donner Party crossed this tough terrain before arriving at Truckee River and the Sierra Nevadas. The desert had become a kind of graveyard for abandoned wagons, furniture, and other items that previous wagon trains had to abandon during their trips.

## **Truckee Lake**

Nestled in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Truckee Lake was the place the Donner Party had to stop at for the winter, as they could not cross the mountain summit into California due to snow. This was the scene of extreme starvation, many deaths, and cannibalism.

## **Forlorn Hope**

This group of fifteen men and women broke from the Truckee Lake group to attempt to find California and arrange a rescue. This group was the first to engage in cannibalism. Only seven people of the Forlorn Hope survived the extreme cold and starvation.

## **History of the Donner Party: A Tragedy of the Sierra**

This history was the first account of the Donner Party saga to use more fact than fiction. It was written by Charles McGlashan, who was sympathetic to the Donner Party survivors.



# Themes

## The Two Villains of the Donner Party

Author Calabro places the blame for the Donner Party tragedy at the feet of two men: James Reed and Lansford Hastings, with Hastings taking the majority of the blame. Hastings is painted as a delusional, power-hungry man who wrote his "Emigrants' Guide" only to lure prospective loyal followers to California, where he dreamed of establishing an independent nation, with himself as emperor. And when the Donner Party caught up with Hastings on the trail, he refused to help them.

Furthermore, Hastings left a deceptive note at the threshold to the Great Salt Lake Desert, promising the Donner Party that the desert would take only two days to cross. It took a total of six days, and the time in the desert decimated the party's livestock and oxen, dealing the Donner Party a blow it could not recover from.

Hastings is not the singular villain, however. James Reed is characterized as stubborn and foolish for following Hastings' guide so blindly, even after frontiersman James Clyman, who personally traveled through the Hastings Cutoff, warned the party against taking the shortcut. Wealthy and imperious, Reed left all the hard work on the trail to the servants, earning the ire of other members of the Donner Party. In a queer twist of fate, James Reed was exiled from the wagon train, and he was able to make it to California on his own. He was then able to redeem himself somewhat by organizing rescue teams and braving the Sierra Nevadas again in order to rescue his family and others.

## Cannibalism

In the mind of most modern readers, the Donner Party is instantly associated with a single thing: cannibalism. Author Calabro directly addresses this "stereotyped" feature of the Donner Party, and explicitly aims to offer the reader a broader understanding of the events leading to the cannibalism, and of the actual cannibalism itself.

Calabro first makes it clear that cannibalism was only practiced as an extreme last resort. Cannibalism first occurred in the Forlorn Hope party, after terrible starvation. Even then, the notion of eating the dead was fiercely debated among the group, with several refusing to participate entirely, such as William Eddy. In any case, all initially agreed to cannibalize only those who had fallen dead naturally, and not to kill anyone. Furthermore, it was taboo to eat one's own family member, and meat was apportioned very carefully according to this "unspoken taboo". This taboo was also observed at Truckee Lake with the main party.

On the other hand, Forlorn Hope member William Foster suggested the group kill two Indians, Luis and Salvador, for their meat, in perhaps the darkest moment in the Donner Party history. Like Foster, Louis Keseberg comes across as somewhat bloodthirsty in



nature, and the author theorizes that Keseberg may have eaten Tamsen Donner between rescue attempts.

In modern times, Donner Party descendants still deal with the stigma of being descended from cannibals. However, as revealed in the last chapter of the book, descendants appear to easily ignore any kidding or insulting about cannibalism. Many descendants view their ancestors as heroes who did what they had to to survive.

## The Harm of Infighting

Author Marian Calabro stresses the human drama of the Donner Party tragedy and how group loyalty quickly splintered. This is intentionally contrasted to the initial weeks of the journey, through Missouri, in which everyone got along exceedingly well.

The first signs of trouble occurred in late June, in which the patriarchs debated whether or not to take the Hastings Cutoff. The matter was put to a vote among the men, and the women had no say. James Reed later reported his own wife's sorrow and ill will, and how she felt the entire trip was a mistake. In the same round of voting, Reed himself was rebuked when George Donner was voted as captain of the wagon train. These votes and debates foreshadowed dire trouble ahead.

On October 5th and thereafter, building tensions erupted when James Reed killed oxen driver John Snyder in self-defense. Members of the party were sharply divided as to how to handle Reed. Some, like Louis Keseberg, resenting Reed for his "hands off" attitude to trail work and his bossy attitude, wanted to string him up. Eventually, Reed was exiled, and the group, for better or worse, lost a significant leader.

Infighting turned deadly when a man named Hardcoop was simply abandoned on the side of the road for being perceived as a burden. Heated arguments arose about whether to go back to retrieve him or at least give him a decent burial. Morale was on a steady decline at this point. When Charles Stanton arrived to attempt to lead the Donner Party out of the mountains, internal divisions and exhaustion overwhelmed the party, and they refused to cross the summit of the mountains before it was too late.

Finally, infighting was evident after the Donner Party became trapped in the mountains. Families isolated themselves and hoarded precious food, arguing over pelts or other goods. And a group (Forlorn Hope) became fed up and tried to brave the wilderness alone. By the new year, internal divisions had decimated the Donner Party.



# Style

## Perspective

Author Marian Calabro had written several history books for children prior to this book, and she has a special interest in American history and biography. As the book is intended for young readers, Calabro writes with simple sentences and vocabulary. There also seems to be an effort to spare the young reader some of the more grisly details about the extreme hunger and eventual cannibalism of the Donner Party, though Calabro certainly does not shy away from addressing the issue of cannibalism head on.

On that topic, it is clear Calabro wishes to complicate the readers' notion that the Donner Party is simply about cannibalism. The author wishes to share the broader story of the Donner Party and show that cannibalism only came about after a long series of unfortunate events and as a last resort to lethal hunger.

The author particularly relies upon the accounts of survivor Virginia Reed in numerous quotations, and indeed much of the early narrative of the book follows Virginia's own journey closely. Likely, Virginia Reed was chosen to fulfill this role because she was twelve years old at the time, and she thus offers a child's perspective to which the intended young reader might relate.

Calabro places much of the blame for the tragic trip on Lansford Warren Hastings, the guidebook writer who had recommended the shortcut that started the Donner Party's problems. Calabro casts Hastings as a megalomaniac, a misguided profiteer who had foolish dreams of establishing his own kingdom in California.

## Tone

Calabro's tone is objective and patient, with a willingness to guide the young reader through difficult concepts and a time and place that may not be familiar to them. Frequent quotations from Virginia Reed help to acclimate the reader to the atmosphere of 1846, including the excitement and trepidation associated with the journey.

Historical quotations most often provide color and human emotion; rarely are they relied upon to provide plot points of the narrative. And Calabro is not really interested in deconstructing or interpreting contemporary documents. Often she simply lets the speaker of the quotation speak for himself or herself, after she has properly introduced the quotation. In any case, Calabro does not overly rely on the historical record; she crafts her own narrative from the information she has gleaned. In this way, she is more a storyteller and less a pure presenter of information. With this approach, the history of the Donner Party is made vivid and accessible.

Calabro's emphasis is split between the factual events of the narrative - where the Donner Party was on a certain date, how many cattle died, et cetera - and the human



drama inherent in the situation. She characterizes the major "players" of the Donner Party in clear, simple terms. The author makes sure to interpolate how members of the party may have felt or what may have motivated them to take certain actions.

## Structure

The Perilous Journey of the Donner Party is broken into eleven chapters. The narrative proceeds in chronological order, and chapters are roughly divided according to significant legs of the Donner Party journey from Springfield to California. For example, chapter three, "Shortcut to Danger," describes the tragic decision to take the Hastings Cutoff, while chapter seven, "The Last Taboo," discusses the worst of the trip in which several members of the party cannibalized the dead.

The narrative extends beyond the California trip itself. Chapter nine, "Looking Back, Looking Ahead," explains how survivor Virginia Reed composed a long letter which would serve as an important historical document about the journey. Chapter ten, "The Survivors," reveals what became of the survivors of the trip years later, while chapter eleven, "The Donner Party Legacy," examines how descendants of the Donner Party view the history and what they do to commemorate the anniversary of the ill-fated journey.

Throughout the book, there are several quotations from historical sources to add flavor and context, particularly the account of survivor Virginia Reed. Numerous photographs and maps of the trip are also included. Additionally, a full list of travelers, the deceased, and survivors is provided, along with supplementary material such as Virginia Reed's letter to her cousin Mary Keyes, which recounts the entire journey.





## Quotes

"Compared to today, little information about California was available in the way of travel planning. People relied mostly on hearsay, letters, and reporters (often published in newspapers) that drifted back from the West. Basically, you went to Missouri - where the United States ended - and went on following the Oregon Trail until you turned left for California at a place called Fort Hall."

Chap. 1, p. 19

"In a wagon train or party that had joined forces for practical reasons, people couldn't ignore one another. They had to communicate and work together at certain tasks. Nonetheless, the original Springfield families and the newcomers kept a certain psychological distance from each other. Traveling together was basically a business arrangement."

Chap. 2, p. 41

"Hastings, a lawyer, was part visionary and part fraud. He had delusions of greatness. Born and raised in Ohio, he somehow decided he was meant to be the president or emperor of California, which he first visited in 1843. Hastings felt he could win California from Mexico and establish it as an independent nation."

Chap. 3, p. 43

"Some of the hills were so steep that the wagons threatened to somersault. Then the Donner Party would lock the wagon wheels, slide straight downhill, and pray. Other times they would have to yoke all the oxen to one wagon, pull it uphill, and return for the next; or they used chains and pulleys to winch themselves upward. Some of the land was so rocky that the clatter of their wheels resounded for miles. And they wondered if Indians, hostile ones, were listening and watching."

Chap. 3, p. 52

"Soon the group was plagued by clouds of alkaline dust, raised by its own motion, which made it hard to see ten feet ahead. Worse, alkali is caustic; the fine powder settles into the skin and burns it. The travelers began to feel as if they had rolled in fire."

Chap. 4, p. 60

"Driven by the will to survive, the Donner Party sank to new depths. Not only did they leave Hardcoop behind - no doubt to die - but he would remain unburied. That had been unthinkable until now. Leaving a dead body exposed was what 'savages' did, in their view."

Chap. 5, p. 75



"To be trapped in the mountains, to endure subzero temperatures at night, to face the likelihood of starving or freezing to death - this knowledge must have stirred the deepest terror. But the emigrants didn't sit and cry. They began building homes for the winter. After all, they had a chance."  
Chap. 6, p. 88

"William Foster wanted to kill Luis and Salvador for food. Maybe he blamed them for the fact that the Forlorn Hope was still lost and wandering; they had come from Sutter's Fort and were supposed to know the mountains. Like many whites of the time, Foster may have felt that Native Americans were expendable."  
Chap. 7, p. 109

"Those who cannibalized seem to have observed the instinctive rule: they carefully identified the remains so that people would not have to eat their own relatives. Under this code of honor the Donners might have cannibalized less, because many people at Alder Creek were related."  
Chap. 8, p. 118

"Seeming to realize even then that the Donner Party would forever be branded as cannibals, Virginia took pains to separate her family from the others. She didn't blame anyone for deeds done from necessity, but she also didn't want anyone to regard the Reeds as ghouls."  
Chap. 9, pp. 127-128

"The Donner Party survivors created good lives for themselves in California. Generally, they got what they came for - land, opportunity, and prosperity - which seemed to make their sufferings worthwhile. The disaster always shadowed them; it made them famous, or notorious, insofar as fame existed before mass media. But it didn't rule their lives."  
Chap. 10, p. 139

"The [Donner Party] saga is particularly American. It says so much about the essence of the United States - about our restless spirit and hunger for land, our class and race divisions, our violence, our strength, our nerve. It reminds us that frontiers and obstacles come in all varieties and that the will to survive is our most primal instinct."  
Chap. 11, p. 163

## Topics for Discussion

What role did Lansford Warren Hastings play in the tragedy of the Donner Party?

Why was the Donner Party forced to stop in the Sierra Nevada Mountains?

What was the Forlorn Hope, and what became of this group?

Why was James Reed exiled from the group?

Describe some of the things the Donner Party used for food during the worst portions of their ordeal.

What happened to the Donner Party while traveling through the Great Salt Lake Desert?

How do modern descendants of the Donner Party commemorate the tragedy? How do they view their ancestors?