



# The Donner Party & Donner Summit

Heroism, Pathos  
and the Human Spirit

We think of the “Donner” in Donner Summit and we think of the Donner Party: the wrong turn two times, bad luck, bad decisions made in ignorance, dietary issues, dissension, mendacity, evil, horror-filled, and unbelievable hardship. That’s a lot but there’s more. It’s also about tenacity, heroism, and the very best of the human spirit.

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Donner Summit Historical Society

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## Heroism, Pathos and the Human Spirit

We think of the “Donner” in Donner Summit and we think of the Donner Party: the wrong turn two times, bad luck, bad decisions made in ignorance, dietary issues, dissension, mendacity, evil, horror-filled, and unbelievable hardship. That’s a lot but there’s more. It’s also about tenacity, heroism, and the very best of the human spirit. Whereas most of the first list didn’t take place on Donner Summit, a lot of the second list did. Clearly, given that second list, Donner Summit is an elevated sort of place, metaphorically speaking.

The Forlorn Hope set out on December 16, heading for California and help. They left what would be called Donner Lake taking a huge risk. To get to California they would have to slog through the snow on Donner Summit and risk new storms without shelter. They would have to go without food and bear hardships unimaginable to us sitting comfortably reading this. What is it like to sleep in the snow in soggy and sodden clothing fearing what might come overnight, fearing what the weather might bring? What is it like to hike through the snow, sinking into it with each step, and to do it to exhaustion with no food or warmth at the end of the exertion? What is it like to starve slowly and be forced to eat leather shoelaces? What is it like to have a choice between death and eating human flesh? What is it like to know you have to keep going, you have to survive, not just for yourself but for the children or family members you’ve left behind at the lake and who are counting on you to get help? How can you possibly give up – as long as you live?

For the rescuees later on, what is it like, after months, to be given a chance for life after having watched others die, but to have that chance depend on your starving, exhausted, freezing body, emaciated body? How do you keep going, slogging through the snow step-by-step mile after mile, wanting to just fall over and sleep? How do you keep going, starving, wet, freezing, and exhausted?

Then there are the rescuers, leaving behind the relative comfort of California to head over the Sierra, into danger, in winter, at the mercy of the weather and their own stamina. They carried huge packs over the snow into which they must have been sinking with each foot, climbing thousands of feet, to rescue strangers. They saw the horrors of the starving people. They saw the horror of the dead

and partially eaten bodies. They saw caches of food left for the return trip robbed by animals. They went hungry. They must have become exhausted and dispirited, but those rescued, especially the children, were depending on them. How do you overcome physical weakness and exhaustion to save the people? How do you overcome the emotional toll of what you've seen and are seeing?

The story of the Donner Party is pathos. It is also amazing what people can overcome and what people can do for others. The stories of the Donner Party survivors and their rescuers are extraordinary.



## Setting the Stage

In the history of the Donner Party (lower case “h” history since this is not referring to Charles McGlashan’s book, [The History of the Donner Party](#)), December, 1846 was important. Most of the party had arrived at what would be called Donner Lake on October 31 (the rest of the party, including the Donners, was at Alder Creek, seven miles away). Some members of the party tried to get over the pass right away but failed. The snow was too much and people were exhausted both emotionally and physically. On November 3, 13, and 22 there were more attempts to escape the coming winter as people tried to get over Donner Summit, but they all failed. People were exhausted. It’s hard going uphill at altitude through the snow and everyone had to walk. The November 3<sup>rd</sup> attempt exemplifies the problems. Clearly there was an urgency to getting over the summit. Winter was coming. Some of the party were too panicked to even make the attempt to leave camp. Some tried to get over though, perhaps wishing they’d gone over a few days earlier when there was less snow. The animals were weak. There was three feet of snow on the ground. The animals could not pull the wagons so the oxen were packed with wagon contents. What could be left behind? There were arguments. The children had to be carried. They pushed through the snow but the snow was deep. Charles Stanton and one

of John Sutter's Indians went ahead and made it to the top. Breaking trail in deep snow is exhausting work. Doing it uphill, not knowing the route to take, is harder. The snow was chest deep at the summit but they'd made it. They returned to the rest of the party to galvanize them for the assault. Everyone was resting around a flaming dead tree. There was a measure of warmth. They would not leave the fire to climb the pass. Tomorrow would be soon enough. They were exhausted.

That night it snowed.

The Donner Party was trapped at the lake that would be named for them. The snow was just getting deeper and the food was running out. This was beyond what they had ever experienced, ever heard of, or even ever dreamed of.

What was going through the minds of the members of the people trapped at the lake? Were there recriminations? If only we'd gone faster. If only (name the person) had not been so slow. If only we had not taken the short cut. What'll we do to Lansford Hastings when we get a hold of him. If only the snow would melt – we'd get over the Sierra quickly - we won't dawdle, we promise. Will it ever stop snowing? Will there be enough food? Will we have to stay here all winter? Can we survive? Was there anger at the family that appropriated the little cabin Moses Schallenberger and his friends had built two years before, leaving everyone else to scramble to build something for themselves? For the Reed Family, having lost their wagons, cattle, and father, they must have wondered additionally, where was Papa? (James Reed had been banished from the party weeks earlier and had gone ahead to California). Could they survive on the kindness of others? For Charles Stanton and the two Native Americans Sutter had sent back with him to bring food and hope to the party, they must have thought, why'd we come? Maybe too, they thought, "These people are worthless." We'll never get out of here.

If you put your mind to it you can come up with any number of thoughts or conversations. They must have been depressed at their prospects. They must have been frightened. They must have been uncomfortable crammed together without privacy into shelters hurriedly thrown together. Those shelters must have offered little protection against the storms, the cold, and the accumulating snow. As the winds howled before the snow fell and almost buried the shelters, the shelter sides must have shaken and the wind must have pierced the sides. All the people inside could do was bury themselves in filthy wet blankets and pray. The actual Donners, at Alder Creek,



were only in tents. There'd been no time to build anything less insubstantial. Little could any of them know that in a few weeks they'd be trying to eat the cowhides they'd thrown over their shelters.

## The Forlorn Hope

That sets the stage for the Forlorn Hope. On December 16, 1846, the Forlorn Hope left Donner Lake in another escape attempt. Seventeen members left the camp, fifteen wearing homemade snowshoes. They hoped their food would last six days and thought it might take ten days to get to California. They could survive a few days without food; that would be no problem. The youngest was 12 years old and the oldest 57 years old although most were in their teens and early twenties. The oldest woman was 23. Two people were a married couple. The oldest, Franklin Graves, took along two grown daughters and a son-in-law.

The snow was deep and even though the two without snowshoes stepped in the tracks of those in front, it was too much. They went back leaving fifteen to try to conquer the pass and get to California for help. What went through the minds of the two who turned back? They were tired, obviously, but now they had to retrace their steps through the snow, back to the unbearable conditions at Donner Lake.

What about the ones who continued on? What were they thinking? Four were fathers and three were mothers. They'd left their families behind. Franklin Graves had left behind his wife and seven other children. Which



was a better choice? Fight snow and weather to head for California to get help and maybe never see your children again, or stay at Donner Lake to protect the children? Could the people to whom the children were entrusted be trusted?

How far was it to Sutter's Fort? They'd been living in the snow for one and a half months and had little shelter and little protection. Now they'd be out in the open with only a few blankets. Walking the snow had been hard at the camp at Donner Lake. Now they would have to fight the snow for miles each day for days with little rest and little food. What about their families and friends left back at camp? Would they live? Would they be cared for? Could the Forlorn Hope bring back help – in time?

How does a parent make that choice to leave children behind? How can one bear to leave children to face starvation? How could one bear not to try to escape and get help in California? Was there a way to survive?

Climbing Donner Pass must have been excruciating. Walking in snow is hard. It's exhausting, step by step. Snowshoes make sinking less of a problem but those were amateurly made snowshoes. They probably didn't fit well. As one walks in snowshoes the snowshoes pick up snow making them heavier as the wearer picks up snow with each step. In addition, particularly at the start, the Forlorn Hope was going uphill, sometimes very steeply. That kind of snowshoe walking is even harder. The Forlorn Hope had to climb 1,000 feet to the pass. They were cold and tired but tired doesn't describe things. Exhaustion is an easy term but does not describe things adequately. Each step must have been excruciating. They must have aimed each step to fit into the previous person's steps so they would not waste energy compacting the snow with each step. It's just a bit easier but everyone's stride is different and if you step in the previous person's footprint you compress the snow a bit more, sinking just a bit more. Each step requires just a bit more lifting, a bit more energy.

The Forlorn Hope were full of hope though and it must have driven them. How far can it be to California? Mustn't it be downhill? They would save their families.

And they were worried.

Even considering all that, Mary Ann Graves remarked afterwards, remembering the climb up to Donner Pass 1000 feet above the lake as she stopped to look back, "The scenery was too grand for me to pass without notice." Donner Pass is grand. Tourists admire it daily but how extraordinary it

must have been to remark on that and not her tired, cold, wet, and hungry person? Mary Ann also noted that someone else had said, “We were as near to heaven as we could get.” That’s touching but also full of dramatic irony because we know some of the horror to come. Many were much nearer heaven. They couldn’t even conceive of what was coming.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> the Forlorn Hope got to the top of Donner Pass and they camped just west building a log fire. The snow was twelve feet deep. Coffee and few strips of bacon were all they had after their exhausting day.

They went only six miles the next day after traveling all day. They had gotten through Summit Valley along “Juba creek” William Eddy said in his journal. That shows how hard travel in the snow can be. They were only able to go six miles despite their urgency. There were snow flurries and high winds but at least it wasn’t snowing – yet. Still, the travel must have been miserable, with no hope of respite at the end of the day.

About 11 on the night of the 19<sup>th</sup> it began snowing. The wind was blowing cold and furiously. Three days out from the lake the storm continued and “feet commenced freezing,” said Wm. Eddy. It snowed all day. The Forlorn Hope was without shelter except for blankets. Blankets must have become soaked as did clothing. They made about five miles that day perhaps to about today’s Kingvale.

On December 20 they were still in the vicinity. They struggled on through the snow. There was only one day of food rations left. Charles Stanton went snow blind. They could only go four miles. At this rate the original ten day estimate was hopelessly inadequate. Conditions were horrible but they didn’t even have enough food to go back and then who would rescue the Donner Party?

Here a little digression is in order for a little heroism. Charles Stanton had no family in the Donner Party. When the party was low on food somewhere in today’s Utah some weeks earlier, he’d volunteered to go ahead to Sutter’s Fort for help with another member of the party who did have family. The other fellow became sick and remained behind in California. Stanton, along with two Native Americans Sutter sent and some mules, returned to the Donner Party somewhere near today’s Reno. His sense of responsibility must have been great as was his sense of decency and heroism. He’d given his word. He and the two Native Americans were part of the Forlorn Hope. They had just covered the route so their leading would make getting to California less difficult. The landmarks don’t look the same in the opposite direction, especially after snowfall, though. A wrong turn got them into the

## Charles Stanton

“Then they wrapped their blankets about them and slept upon the snow till the morning light recalled them to their weary travel. On that morning of their fifth day out, poor Stanton sat late by the camp-fire. The party had set off, all but Miss G., and as she turned to follow her father and sister, she asked him if he would soon come. He replied that he should, and she left him smoking. He never left the desolate fireside. His remains were found there by the next party who passed.”

Eliza Farnham, California Indoors and Out, 1856  
quoted in The Donner Party Chronicles pg. 235

“And Mr. Stanton, who sacrificed his life to assist his companions – for he had no family or relations in the company – should be held in honored remembrance by everyone who can appreciate a noble act. [As we ascended the Sierra] the clouds on the mountains looked very threatening, but he naturally looked at the bright side of things, and assured us there was no danger, little thinking that the next summer’s sun would bleach his unburied bones, not far from that spot.”

John Breen  
quoted in Donner Party Chronicles pg. 235

“The noble Stanton was one of the party, and perished the sixth day out, thus sacrificing his life for strangers. I can find no words in which to express a fitting tribute to the memory of Stanton.”

Virginia Reed Murphy, 1891  
Across the Plains in the Donner Party

wrong river valley. Nothing looked familiar and all the party could do was head west. They had no maps to show a workable way.

On the fifth day out from Donner Lake the Forlorn Hope again awoke in the snow wrapped in blankets. What is that like to sleep in the snow covered only by a blanket? Can you even sleep or does exhaustion inure you to the cold? As the group got ready to move on, Charles Stanton sat back against a tree and lit his pipe. It was December 21. He was so worn out. He said he'd be along shortly. He didn't want to hold them up. Charles Stanton died somewhere below Cascade Lakes on Donner Summit where there is a marker today (see page 21). Wm. Eddy's journal said the food was gone.

On December 22 another storm hit the Forlorn Hope. It "snowd [sic] all last night Continued to Snow all day with Some few intermissions..." (Wm. Eddy). They stayed in camp all day. What do you do all day in camp with no food, huddled under a wet blanket?

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> they realized they'd made a wrong turn somewhere. The Indians were "bewildered."

If the journey of the Forlorn Hope does not sound miserable so far, just wait. On the 24<sup>th</sup> the "storm recommenced with greater fury; extinguished fires," said Wm. Eddy. The storm had increased so much they could not travel. As the storm raged around them they sat in a circle covered by blankets. John Sinclair, Alcalde of Northern California, who interviewed members of the Forlorn Hope (and whose report is included in Edwin

"How heart-rending must have been their situation at this time, as they gazed upon each other, shivering and shrinking from the pitiless storm !" [sic]

John Sinclair,  
Alcalde of Northern California,  
who interviewed the Forlorn  
Hope survivors

[The Forlorn Hope] made snow-shoes, and fifteen started, ten men and five women, but only seven lived to reach California eight men perished. They were over a month on the way, and the horrors endured by that Forlorn Hope no pen can describe nor imagination conceive."

Virginia Reed Murphy  
Across the Plains with the Donner Party, 1891

Bryant's What I Saw in California) said Wm. Eddy suggested they all sit in a circle on a blanket. Their feet pointed in to the center of the circle and blankets were spread over their heads. Snow and wood held the blankets down on the outside of the circle. Snow fell and closed off openings. Body heat made the cold less unbearable. The group sat that way for 36 hours while the storm raged. Once the storm had abated one member of the party found some cotton stuffing in her cape that was still miraculously dry. It served as tinder to start a fire. How does one bear that kind of thing?

On Christmas Day only eleven of the 15 were still alive. Mary Ann Graves said, "Father died on Christmas night at 11 o'clock in the commencement of the snow storm."

December 26 Wm. Reed said, "Could not proceed; almost frozen; no fire." They'd been four days without food and only a little food before that.

December 27 the Forlorn Hope cut flesh from a dead companion's body, "roasted it by the fire and ate it, averting their faces from each other and weeping." (Donner Party Chronicles pg 238) The two Native Americans refused to eat. Lemuel Murphy, aged 12, died.

Alcalde Sinclair captured some of the pathos, "How heart-rending must have been their situation at this time, as they gazed upon each other, shivering and shrinking from the pitiless storm ! Oh ! how they must have thought of those happy, happy homes which but a few short months before they had left with buoyant hopes and fond anticipations ! Where, oh where were the green and lowery plains which they had heard of, dreamt, and anticipated beholding, in the month of January, in California ? Alas ! many of that little party were destined never to behold them. Already was death in the midst of them." [sic]

January 1, 1847 the Forlorn Hope turned into the American River drainage

"... they resumed their journey, their feet being so swollen that they had burst open, and although they were wrapped in rags and pieces of blankets, yet it was with great pain and difficulty that they made progress... Every foot of that day's struggle was marked with the blood from their feet."

J. Quinn Thornton, 1849  
The Donner Party Mountain Camp  
1846-47

away from a better route in the Yuba/Bear River drainage. There were only ten members. They carried dried human flesh. Their feet were bloody and frostbitten.

January 17 Wm. Eddy arrived at Bear Valley. The seven surviving members of the Forlorn Hope, five women and two men, had been rescued a few days earlier by Miwok Indians. Two Native American boys helped Eddy to the nearest settler's house where Harriet Ritchie broke into tears when she saw him. He was staggering and emaciated. Four people from Bear Valley retraced Eddy's bloody footprints to find the other six survivors lying in the mud. It had taken 33 days for the Forlorn Hope to travel from Donner Lake over Donner Summit and down to Bear Valley.

News spread about the fate of the Donner Party trapped in the mountains. Rescue parties were formed. People who could have easily stayed comfortably in California, with plenty of food, would endure the hardship of carrying heavy packs uphill through the snow. They would endure hunger, cold, exhaustion, and the horror of seeing the camps at Donner Lake.

## **Starved Camp Rescuers and Heroism**

There were four rescue parties that set off to cross the mountains to Donner Lake.

The first relief party arrived in Summit Valley on February 18. They'd traveled eight miles that day and five the previous day. It's hard going through the snow, uphill, with a heavy pack. Snow was thirty feet deep on the summit. The next day they arrived at Donner Lake.

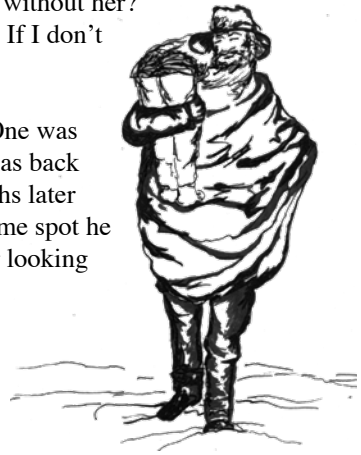
"Are you men from California or are you from heaven?" a woman asked Reasin "Dan" Tucker of the relief party. He wrote, "At sundown we reached the Cabins and found the people in great distress such as I have never witnessed there having been 12 deaths and more expected every hour the sign of us appeared to put life into their emaciated frames."

On February 22 thirty people including the rescuers left Donner Lake. Two returned to the lake and 28 got to the top of the pass. The next day Patty Reed (9) and Tommy Reed (5) returned to Donner Lake with two rescuers. They were too weak to go on. Imagine their mother's choice; two of her four children could not go on. Should she continue with the other two or go back to the lake? Could the oldest two survive the journey without her?

Could the youngest two survive at the lake without her? Patty said at parting, “Good bye, Momma. If I don’t see you again, just do the best you can.”

Days later two in the rescued party died. One was three year old Ada Keseburg. Her father was back at the lake and could not travel. Two months later when he was rescued and camped at the same spot he reached into the snow to pull out a familiar looking piece of cloth – his daughter’s dress.

A food cache left by the rescuers was found empty. Animals. About noon on the 26<sup>th</sup> they ate shoestrings. A little later they met four men with food and the party feasted on dried beef.



“I cannot describe the death like look they all had Bread Bread Bread was the begging of every child and grown person...”

James Reed on finding his family

On the 27<sup>th</sup> the second relief party met the first. It was led by James Reed who had been banished from the Donner Party months before after a knifing. In the first relief party he found his wife and two oldest children. He said, “I cannot describe the death like look they all had Bread Bread Bread was the begging of every child and grown person except my wife. I gave what dare and left for the scene of desolation” at Donner Lake. There he found his two other children. They were alive. Mrs. Reed’s

gamble had paid off.

Some miles further on near Bear Valley, Virginia Reed said “We camped that night and ate the bread my father had brought for us. We were out of the snow, could see the blessed earth and green grass again. How beautiful it looked. We stayed a day or so, getting the horses and mules ready to ride. No more dragging over the snow, when we were tired, so very tired, but green grass, horses to ride, and plenty to eat.” (Across the Plains in the Donner Party)

Reed brought out more people from the lake on March 3 and led them up the pass to Summit Valley on March 5 to what would be called “Starved Camp.” Reed said,

“The sky look like snow and everything indicates a storm god forbid wood being got for the night and Bows for beds of all, and night closing fast, the clouds still thickin terror terror I feel a terrible foreboding but dare not communicate my mind to any, death to all if our provisions do not come, in a day or two and a storm should fall on us, very cold, a great lamentation about he cold.” [sic]

The storm did hit them. It was heavy, blinding, and the winds howled. People cried and prayed. The four rescuers kept the fire fed. James Reed became snow blind. The last of the provisions the rescuers had brought with them was eaten – one spoonful of flour per person.

“My dreaded Storm is now on us comme[nce]d Snowing in the first part of the night and with the snow commen[nce]d a perfect Hurricane in the night. A great crying with the children and with the parents praying crying and lamentations on acct of the cold and the dread of death from the Howling Storm the men up nearly all nigh making fires, some of the men began to pray several became blind I could not see even the light of the fire when it was blazing before me.” (James Reed)

The storm raged dropping another foot of snow. The men were up all night feeding the fire. There was no food.

“it has snowed already 12 inches, still the storm continues the light of Heaven, as it ware [sic]shut in from us the snow blows so thick that we cannot see 20 feet looking against the wind. I dread the coming night.” (James Reed Donner Party Chronicles) (Ordeal by Hunger.)

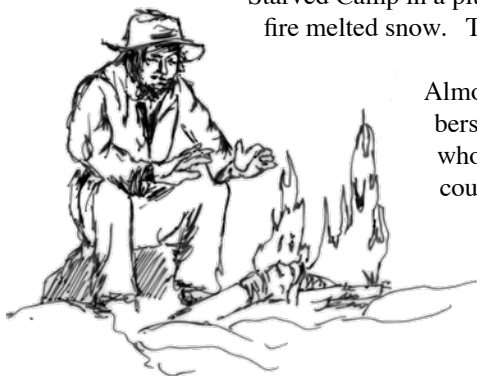
The fire melted snow and sank into a deepening pit. “Freezing [sic] was the cry of the mothers... to their little starving freezing children,” “night closing fast and with it the Hurricane increases.” (James Reed Donner Party Chronicles)

“the cries and prayers continue all night of all the crying I never heard nothing ever equaled it” and then the fire almost completely died; only two men were able to do anything about it. “All might have perished had not Bill McCutchen (he’d accompanied Stanton to California for help but had fallen ill and could not return) kept the fire going.” (Donner Party Chronicles)

The storm lasted for three days, during which Isaac Donner (5) died while lying between his 7 year old sister, Mary and 10 year old Patty Reed. Once the storm was over the Reeds continued on, leaving thirteen people at



Starved Camp in a pit that was getting deeper as the fire melted snow. Two more at Starved Camp died.



Almost all of the rescue party members were heroes (except for a few who went along to see what they could steal\*).

One of the rescuers particularly stands out though.

The third rescue party followed the second. It was led by William Eddy and William Foster who had left the lake three months before on snowshoes as part of the Forlorn Hope. They came across the second rescue party, the Reeds, somewhere near today's Cisco Grove. The Reeds had no food.

The third rescue party decided to continue on to Starved Camp and see whom they could rescue. Eddy and Foster at that point paid two of the other men \$50 each to accompany them on to Donner Lake. They were desperate to save their children. John Stark also continued on but without pay, "I will go without any reward beyond that derived from the consciousness of doing a good act."

The rescuers then found Starved Camp, on Donner Summit somewhere in Summit Valley. The location has never been ascertained. The eleven people at Starved Camp had just been lying in the deep pit in the snow with no food for seven days. There were dead partially cannibalized bodies though.

It was a horror.

There, eleven people were in a deep snow pit formed by their fire melting

\* Parenthetically, two "rescuers" Charles Stone and Charles Cady agreed that for \$500 they would take three of Tamsen Donner's children to safety. The three girls said goodbye to their parents. Cady and Stone dropped the children off at Donner Lake and headed for Donner Summit with the money. They ignored Starved Camp – "their packs stuffed with booty." (Donner Party Chronicles)

The "... driving snow, which fell so thick as to make it impossible to see beyond a few feet. The cold was so intense as to make it impracticable to chop more than a few minutes without returning to the fire to warm. The party had all lain down, and were seeking to shelter themselves beneath their blankets. The driving snow soon covered them up... The men, women, and children, were all so cold as to be in great danger of freezing. Mr. Reed had become snow-blind... The children were all crying. One of the women was weeping - another praying. A portion of Mr. Reed's men were also praying. ... [Two men] were alternately struggling to save the expiring coals, and swearing at the others urging them to leave off praying and go to work for the purpose of saving the fire; assuring them that all would inevitably perish before morning. Mrs. Brinn's [Breen] voice was heard above the roaring of the storm, the weeping of the women and children, the prayers of some of the men and the swearing of others" exhorting the men to keep the fire going.

J. Quinn Thornton  
The Donner Party Mountain Camp 1846-47

"With the storm came a perfect hurricane. The crying of half-frozen children, the lamenting of the mothers, and the suffering of the whole party was heart-rending ; and above all could be heard the shrieking of the storm King. One who has never witnessed a blizzard in the Sierra can form no idea of the situation... Three days and nights they were exposed to the fury of the elements."

Virginia Reed Murphy  
Across the Plains in the Donner Party, 1891

Elizabeth Graves was dead at Starved Camp. Franklin Graves, age 5, was dead and there had been cannibalism: “her little child about 13 months old, sat by her side with one arm upon the body of its mangled mother, sobbing bitterly, ma, ma, ma.”

Wm. Eddy

J. Quinn Thornton interviewed Wm. Eddy in 1847 for his book, The Donner Party Mountain Camp 1846-47.

the snow down perhaps twenty feet to bare ground. Steps had been cut into the walls of the pit. The survivors had been there for days and it was amazing any were alive. William Eddy, describing what they’d found said, “The picture of distress was shocking indeed.” Eddy and Foster continued on to Donner Lake to save their own children. When they arrived they discovered their children were dead and had been partly eaten.

The remaining rescuers discussed what to do and took a vote to save only two of the children in Starved Camp. That might have been all they could manage. The others would have to stay behind.

John Stark could not stand that. That meant that nine people, mostly children, would die on the mountain, exposed to the elements down in a very deep hole in the snow. John Stark decided he would save all nine, “Already shouldering a backpack with provisions, blankets, and an axe, he picked up one or two of the smaller children, carried them a little ways, then went back for the others. Then he repeated the whole process. Again and again. To galvanize morale, he laughed and told the youngsters they were so light from months of mouse-sized rations that he could carry them all simultaneously, if only his back were broad enough.” Once they were out of the snow he would eat and rest he said, but not before. He saved all nine. That is extraordinary and that is heroism. It was also heroism he never got

According to H. H. Bancroft’s History of California, John Stark became county judge of Napa Co. 1850-51; a member of the legislature in 1851 and 1855-56; and lived near Calistoga from 1851 to 1868; and lived in or near Guenoc, Lake Co., from 1868 until his death.

Charles McGlashan, History of the Donner Party, said that Stark was sheriff of Napa Co. for six years and that he died instantaneously of a heart attack while pitching hay from a wagon. John and Mary Jane Stark had 11 children, six of whom were alive in 1879 when McGlashan published his book.

“...The question was put to each man by name, and as the names were called, the dreadful ‘aye’ responded. John Stark’s name was the last one called, because he had, during the discussion of the question, strongly opposed the proposition for abandonment, and it was naturally supposed that when he found himself in so hopeless a minority he would surrender. When his name was called, he made no answer until some one said to him: ‘Stark, won’t you vote?’ Stark, during all this proceeding of calling the roll, had stood apart from his companions with bowed head and folded arms. When he was thus directly appealed to, he answered quickly and decidedly: “No, gentlemen, I will not abandon these people. I am here on a mission of mercy, and I will not half do the work. You can all go if you want to, but I shall stay by these people while they and I live.

“Stark was finally left alone. To his great bodily strength, and unexcelled courage, myself and others owe our lives. There was probably no other man in California at that time, who had the intelligence, determination, and what was absolutely necessary in that emergency, the immense physical powers of John Stark. He was as strong as two ordinary men. On his broad shoulders, he carried the provisions, most of the blankets, and most of the time some of the weaker children. In regard to this, he would laughingly say that he could carry them all, if there was room on his back, because they were so light from starvation.”

from the manuscript of Hon. James F. Breen  
quoted in Charles McGlashan’s  
History of the Donner Party, 1879

contemporary credit for.

James Breen later said, “To his great bodily strength, and unexcelled courage, myself and others owe our lives. There was probably no other man in California at that time, who had the intelligence, determination, and what was absolutely necessary to have in that emergency.”

## **For More:**

Ordeal By Hunger

George R. Stewart

Desperate Passage

Ethan Rarick

Donner Party Chronicles

Frank Mullen

Saving the Donner Party

Richard Kaufman

Deceived

Peter Limburg

Best Land Under Heaven

Michael Wallis

Across the Plains in the Donner Party Virginia Reed Murphy (1891)

History of the Donner Party

Charles McGlashan

Winter of Entrapment

Joseph King

Indifferent Stars Above

Daniel James Brown

The Donner Party Mountain Camp, 1846-47 J. Quinn Thornton (1848)

(contemporarily published under the name of Camp of Death)



Sign memorializing Charles Stanton near the outflow of Cascade Lakes. Note the upper right corner the little sign on the tree noting the “Forlorn Hope.” Photo by George Lamson.





Picture above: Lawrence and Houseworth #778 “Stumps of Trees Cut by Donner Party 1846” in Summit Valley Library of Congress LCUSZ62-27607

According to the original photographer, Alfred A. Hart (this is also his photo #133) the photo shows the depth of the snow when the trees were cut for firewood by members of the Donner Party. Whether those members were part of the Forlorn Hope, Starved Camp, or one of the rescue parties is a question. Where exactly in Summit Valley the location is, is also unknown. The stumps could still be seen in 1915 when the author of Lake of the Sky, George Wharton James, drove his car up Coldstream Valley, up Coldstream Pass, and down to Summit Valley. He remarked that they were the stumps of the Donner Party.



The picture above is a stereograph. When placed in a device like the one to the left, viewers had a stereo view. These were the living room entertainment centers in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

## Modern Reflection on the Emigrant Crossing of Donner Summit

I thought that a clever title which would lend gravitas to the subject about to be undertaken here.

At the Donner Summit Historical Society (DSHS) there is no risk or discomfort we won't endure in the pursuit of local history (See "Adventures in History - Death Defying Re-enactment" in the July, '15 [Heirloom](#) for example.) and so there we were in November retrieving the 20 Mile Museum sign that marks Roller Pass. It had snowed a few days before and it had scarcely warmed up so most of the new snow had not melted. What little had melted had refrozen into ice making footing treacherous but our readers are paramount and so we kept on.

Did you know that an average of 34 feet of snow falls each winter on Donner Summit? Did you know that snow avalanches trapped people in the old days, like three Chinese workers who were so overrun and who appeared with shovels still in hand, standing behind a rock, after spring snow melt?

It's two miles up the Pacific Crest Trail toward Mt. Lincoln and to Roller Pass (see the November, '11 [Heirloom](#)) where the sign sits in summer and fall. Getting up there leaves time for ruminating while ambulating producing ambulatory ruminations, but I digress. It was November 6 and the snow got deeper the higher we went. It was not easy going like a summer hike might be. Snow is hard to walk through. Each step sinks into the snow and each foot has to be pulled out for each next step.

Late October/early November was the same time of year that emigrants crossed the Sierra and for many emigrants the conditions were the same for us as for them. There was snow and ice.\* The emigrants, of course, were encumbered by oxen, wagons, mules, horses, and all their worldly goods left after jettisoning things at the 40 Mile Desert in Nevada.

They'd experienced all kinds of hardships: accidents, the death of friends and family, the Nevada desert, cattle rustling by Indians, disease, and human nature. They were running short of food. Wagons had broken down. Many

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\*for some emigrants, who traveled quickly. There was no snow. For others, there was little. For the Donner Party, which tried for the Summit on October 31, there were a couple of feet. For the Stephens Party of 1844, the first wagon train to California to arrive with wagons, they arrived at Truckee Lake (this was before the Donners arrived in 1846) and there was a foot of snow at the lake and more up top. The Stevens Party got over the pass at the end of November.

had been abandoned. Possessions had been left behind. Then, leaving the desert, finally finding water, they saw the Sierra for the first time. The sight struck terror in some. It would prove to be the hardest part of the entire journey.

As they approached the mountains they were feeling desperate. Winter was coming and now there was this barricade in their way. Then, for many, it began to snow. Of course, after 1846, they knew about the Donners. Hiking up to retrieve the sign, because, as said above, there was lots of ruminating time, we considered the emigrant experience. The temperature was the same – in the low 30's. There was some snow. There was ice. It was slippery and the snow made walking challenging. We were fresh though. We'd slept in soft beds. Breakfast was good, hot, and tasty. Hot showers were at our command. Our clothes were clean., waterproof and warm. We'd be rewarded with civilization in just a couple of hours.

The emigrants were exhausted and desperate. Their clothes were worn, wet, and did not keep out much of the cold. They'd been sleeping on the ground for months and they'd walked across most of the continent. They had to get over the mountains and to California before weather made it impossible. That could happen anytime. Their food was almost gone. They had, maybe, a little flour and jerky. Maybe there were some dried peas. It was the same food meal after meal. We slipped on the ice as they must have done. We trudged through the snow as they must have done. We stopped to catch our breath as they must have done. They were desperate though; we just had to get a sign. They had to keep the oxen and wagons moving. We just had to go a couple of miles. They had to keep encouraging the children and each other.

In the end we got the sign and headed back downhill, just like the emigrants, but without the encumbrances except for the sign and a screwdriver. At home the sun was streaming through the sunroom windows. A lunch was waiting as would, later, a warm shower, soft bed, a good dinner, and a glass of wine. The emigrants of 1850 or so were still walking. They'd go to bed that night, after the summit crossing, on the ground. Their blankets would be covered with ice in the morning. Their exhaustion might have inured them to the cold. They hadn't changed clothes in many weeks or longer. The food was the same as yesterday but maybe just a bit less.

Then they discovered that even though they were heading downhill, the trip from the summit was far from easy. It was some of the hardest part of the journey (see "It Wasn't All Downhill..." in the December, '13 [Heirloom](#)).

They were heading for California though, the land of their dreams, the land of their hopes, the land of their futures. They'd sacrificed so much they couldn't stop. The effort had to be worth it.



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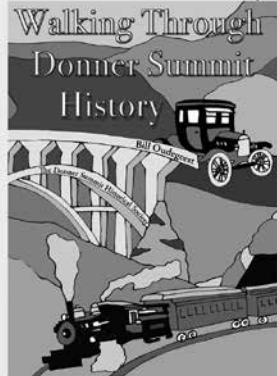
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