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Unfortunate Emigrants

Kristin Johnson

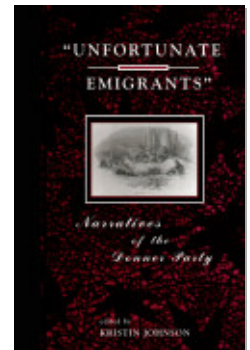
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IMMIGRANTS TO CALIFORNIA.

—We publish the following extract of a letter from Gov. Boggs, one of the recent immigrants to California, addressed to his brother-in-law, Col. A. Boone, of this territory, giving a succinct account of the sufferings of the recent immigration to that country:

“You have heard, no doubt, something of the misfortune and suffering of Reed and Donna’s² companies in the mountains. They went, you know, Hasting’s Cut-off—nearly half of them perished in the California mountains. Those that lived had to use the bodies of their friends who died for food. The following are the names of those who perished as far as I can learn: Jacob Donna and wife and some of his children—three of his children got in. Pike was accidentally shot by Foster with a revolving pistol, and died. Wolfinger and all the Dutch, (except Wolfinger’s wife and Mrs. Keesburg,) Dolan, Antonio the Spaniard that started with us,³ Milt. Elliott, Stanton, Denton, Shoemaker, Mrs. Eddy and her two children, the foolish fellow that was with Reed,⁴ a Mr. Elliott [Graves] and his wife, and a Mr. Fosdick, son-in-law of Mr. Elliott [Graves],⁵ a little chunky Dutchman by the name of Charly that drove one of Geo. Donna’s wagons.⁶ George

2 It is not clear whether the phonetic spelling “Donna” reflects the Donner brothers’ pronunciation of their name or Boggs’s own dialect.

3 Very little is known about Antonio. According to Eliza W. Farnham, he joined the Donner party at Fort Laramie; that may have been because Boggs, with whom he was traveling, had changed his destination to Oregon.

4 Three of Reed’s hired men perished. Since Boggs names Smith and Elliott, the third can only be Baylis Williams. Patty Reed Lewis much later described Williams as an albino who slept in a wagon by day and did odd jobs by the campfire at night. Evelyn Wells, “The Tragedy of Donner Lake,” *San Francisco Call*, June 14, 1919.

5 Boggs’s confusion about the Graves family can be attributed to the fact that he had not known them on the trail; they had joined the Donner party after the companies broke up at the Little Sandy.

6 “Dutch Charley” Burger is usually reported to have been a teamster for Kesenberg, but other sources support Boggs.

Donna and wife, and Keesburg, and Mrs Murphy, and a young child of Geo. Donna's⁷ were left in the mountains by those who went out to their relief, they not being able to travel, and we suppose they have all perished; a child also of McCutcheon's; Smith, one of Reed's drivers, also perished. Those that got in were Mr. Reed and wife and all his children; Brinn, the Irishman,⁸ and all his children and wife; Eddy and Foster; Mrs. Foster and Mrs. Pike, and a single daughter of Mrs. Murphy; one [two] of Mrs. Murphy's little boys; three of Geo. Donna's girls; three of Jacob Donna's children; McCutcheon and wife and Mrs. Fosdick; Mrs. Wolfinger and Mrs. Keesburg. There were about eighty souls in the company; about forty got in, some of them badly frozen and entirely destitute. Mr. Reed lost every thing but a little clothing. The snow was from 5 to 30 feet deep. Mr. Reed had come in to Sutter's ahead of his company after provisions &c., and returned, but couldn't get to them on account of the snow until he came back again, raised a party of men and returned.—Lieut Woodworth and old Greenwood, with parties, also went out to their relief. There were two camps of the sufferers in the mountains, and the camps were eight miles apart. Geo. Donna, wife and child were left at the farthest camp, and Mrs. Murphy and Keesburg at the other camp unable to travel. A party has since gone out to save these five, but returned, being unable to get to them, so they must have perished."

7 The child left behind, evidently Jacob Donner's son Samuel, is mentioned in Selim E. Woodworth's letter in the *California Star* of April 3, 1847.

8 "Brinn" or "Brin" for "Breen" occurs in Thornton's account and several other early documents.