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Unfortunate Emigrants

Kristin Johnson

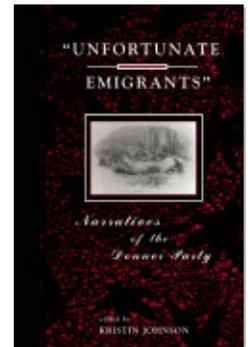
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LETTER FROM CALIFORNIA.

The following letter, written by Miss Mary Ann Graves, who was one of the sufferers in the California mountains, to Levi Fosdick, of this county, father of Jay Fosdick, one of the party that perished, will we are sure be read with interest. She is a daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Graves who also perished in attempting to reach the settlements through the deep snows. Mr. Graves resided about one mile from this village, and had a good farm and a comfortable home. He left with \$800 in money and a good out-fit for his long and perilous journey. What become of his money does not appear: we presume it was lost with the general wreck of the party.⁶ Miss Graves writes that she has changed her name, having married a Mr. Pyle. The name of her residence does not appear in the date, but we suppose it to be at or near the Sacramento river. The letter is dated

“May 22d, 1847

Dear Friends: I take this opportunity of relating to you our sad fate. Our travels and sufferings are too horrible to relate. The number of our family now living is only eight.⁷ We are all orphan children in a strange land without friends or relatives.

We were caught in the California mountains, in the snow, the 4th of November, where we remained until the 16th of December. During this period we subsisted on our few remaining cattle, which were very poor. The number of our company was 81. There were 25 or 30 men, and but 4 survived to reach the settlement.⁸

6 See Thornton, note 96, above, for the fate of the Graves money.

7 Two of Mary's siblings, Jonathan and Elizabeth, died not long after this letter was written.

8 Mary is somewhat mistaken here; presumably she is counting the four men who were rescued from the camps (Noah James, Baptiste, Patrick Breen, and Louis Keseberg) and does not include Eddy and Foster, who snowshoed out with the

“UNFORTUNATE EMIGRANTS”

On the 16th of December 15 of us had snow shoes prepared; and we started with 8 pounds poor beef each,⁹ to endeavor to cross the mountains, reach the settlement, and procure assistance. The distance was 150 miles. We made good progress until the 8th day, when we got lost. It commenced raining and continued until the next day at night—then commenced snowing and continued three days and nights. Father died on Christmas night at 11 o'clock in the commencement of the snow storm. During that storm we had neither fire nor food. When it was over we started, (leaving 4 of our number there,) and travelled on until the 5th of January, subsisting on human flesh. Jay died, the idol of his loving wife. Sarah and myself were now the only members of our family [in this party of 15]¹⁰ left. Two Indians were killed,¹¹ whose flesh lasted until we got out of the snow and came where Indians lived. Thence we subsisted nine days on acorns when we obtained relief from the settlements, being the 18th of January. 7 out of 15—2 men and 5 women—reached the settlements.

We related the situation of those remaining at the camp, & 10 men went to their relief. On reaching the camp many were found dead from starvation. Mother and the 7 children were alive. The men could not bring the small children—they took only those that could walk. Mother and the small children remained behind. On returning they met another company pushing over the snow as fast as possible, to save those that were yet behind—(the snow was 30 to 40 feet deep.) Mother and children were found yet alive. They took them, and travelled 15 miles, when a snow storm came on and they had to stop. They run out of provisions; and the men were obliged in order to save their own lives, to leave the company and make their way thro' with frozen feet—some of them have lost their feet. Mother and Franklin died before relief could reach them.

On Mary's river a quarrel took place between John Snyder and an overbearing Irishman, in which the latter stabbed the former.¹²

I have told the bad news, and bad as it is I have told the best. No tongue can exceed in description the reality.

Forlorn Hope. William McCutchen, James F. Reed, and Walter Herron had left the company before it was trapped in the snow.

9 This amount indicates that the Forlorn Hope was better provided for than has been described in other sources.

10 Original editor's comment.

11 This appears to be the earliest published reference to the killing of Luis and Salvador for food.

12 Mary Graves was not alone in calling Reed "overbearing"; see Frances H. McDougall, "The Donner Tragedy Once More: Reply to Mr. Reed," in this volume.

MARY ANN GRAVES

I will now give you some good and friendly advice. Stay at home,—you are in a good place, where, if sick, you are not in danger of starving to death. It is a healthy country here, and when that is said all is said. Horses and cattle running wild on the commons are abundant. You can live without work if you are a complete rascal; for a rascal you must be to stand any chance at all. In the number of rogues this country exceeds I believe any other.

There is no timber here. All kinds of fruit are cultivated. Oats and clover grow wild from 1 to 6 ft. high. Wheat is raised in abundance—corn not much raised. Onions grow that measure 8 inches in diameter. It is a good climate.¹³

I have said enough in favor of the country—as much and perhaps more than I ought.

Mary Ann Graves.”

13 Here one of Hastings's victims vindicates at least some of the claims with which he had enticed emigrants to California.