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## Unfortunate Emigrants

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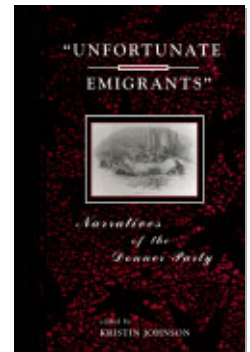
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# THE DONNER TRAGEDY.

## A THRILLING CHAPTER IN OUR PIONEER HISTORY

(WRITTEN FOR THE PRESS.)

The sufferings of the Donner party, who were snowed in, and detained on the mountains more than three months, in the winter of 1846-7, has been much talked about, and some garbled stories have been published; but from the very nature of the case, anything like a true history was difficult to come at. My informant, who was one of the general company to which the Donner party originally belonged, says that she has never seen anything like a true or competent history of that most horrible period in the lives of those unfortunates. The following she is ready to vouch for, as truth; and if anyone desires further information, or confirmation of what is already given, her name and address will be at their service.<sup>1</sup>

By retracing, though but in idea, the difficult and dangerous steps of the early emigrants, we are enabled more fully to appreciate the homes of comfort, competence and beauty, to which they have led us.

In the year 1846, about the 1st of May, 500 emigrants, under the guidance of Wm. Fowler, left Independence, Missouri, bound for California and Oregon. They all continued in one company until they reached Big Blue River, when the decline of pasturage made it necessary to separate into small companies, that of Mrs. C—being piloted by Wm. Fowler.<sup>2</sup> They were all in advance of the Donner party, but after crossing the Salt Lake Desert the latter nearly caught up with them.

On going over the mountains, the Read and Donner Company, when they came to the Devil's Canyon, known as Hasting's Cut-off, sent some men forward to examine the route. On their return, they represented the

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1 It is unfortunate that McDougall did not provide more information about her informant, as virtually nothing is known about Mrs. Curtis.

2 William Fowler, Jr., together with his father and brother, had gone to Oregon in 1843, then to California the following year. They settled in the Napa Valley, where they became prominent landowners. Fowler went east in 1845 to bring out the rest of the family, returning in 1846. He is mentioned in Harlan's account, in this volume.

pass impracticable; and leaving the old road, they attempted to vent their way around the high peak, felling, or removing such timber as impeded their progress. In this toilsome work they spent eighteen days, thus exhausting their time, strength and provisions. This detention was one of the chief causes of their being caught in the snow, and of all their subsequent sufferings.

Read and McCutchins [Herron] came to their [the Curtises'] camps nearly starved, having made a meal of wheel-grease and mustard, taken from Mr. C-'s wagon, which he had left on the mountain, intending to go back for it.

### A Night in the Snow.

At night, Mr. C-, finding that his cattle had gone off, set out in pursuit of them, leaving his wife alone in that wild and horrible place.<sup>3</sup> But the brave heart of the heroic woman was not easily to be dismayed. Patiently, hopeful, resolutely she watched the night through, with a kind of latent faith that her husband would be preserved, though he was exposed and unsheltered to the pitiless snow storm, which, soon after he left, began raging with great fury; and the dismal howling of their faithful dog, heightened the horrors of the scene. But the brave heart fainted not; and every little precaution the occasion prompted or required, was patiently and quietly taken. She trimmed the fire; she watched and adjusted the warming and drying garments; she heated and replenished the evaporating tea; and several times during the night she went out with a long-handled iron scraper to scrape the snow from the tented roof, lest it should be broken down by the weight, and leave her without shelter.

Morning came; for the most protracted periods of anxiety and anguish must some time have an end; and aided by the earliest light, the straining eyes of the lonely watcher went out over the wild, for sight or sign of the wanderer; but no track appeared on the mountain road, that lay, still and solemn as death, draped in a winding sheet of spotless snow. Still she hoped—still she believed—that her husband would yet come; and once more, and again and again, she went to the place of lookout; but over all the ghastly whiteness of the scene no form of life appeared.

Book look yonder, up the mountain road, to the remotest point of sight! Is that a man? a horse? Do they move? At first sight the motion was slow, so faint as to be nearly imperceptible. Ah, yes! her faith is rewarded at last. He is living! He comes! She flew to meet him, with whatever speed she could make through the depths of snow, and found him greatly exhausted

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3 According to Thornton, at the head of Bear Valley.

and nearly insensible. He was soon put to bed, and by help of warm blankets, heated stones and hot drink, he partially revived and was able to give a coherent account of himself.

He had followed the cattle about twelve miles, and brought them to the brow of the long hill that overlooked their encampment; but in his weak and exhausted state he could not get them over the brink, from which they drew back in terror. Finally he became bewildered and lost in the storm. He had stood all night, hugging his horse to keep up animal life; and it was with the greatest difficulty that he was able to regain his seat in the saddle, and keep it until he reached the camp.

Mrs. C., being informed where the cattle were, put on snow-shoes and a pair of pantaloons and after a hard walk up the mountain side, found the cattle, and drove them down without any difficulty.

### A Strange Proceeding.

That afternoon, for fear of being snowed in they killed an ox; and while they were preparing some of the meat for supper, Reed and McCutchins came to the camp with two Indians and 30 horses, sent by Gen. Sutter for the relief of the suffering party. During the night the Indians took two of the best horses and decamped; and in the morning Mr. Reed, with his companion, set off for the snow-bound company following the trail of the cattle about 12 miles. After traveling as far as the oxtrail reached, they concluded it was not safe to proceed further, and returning to the camp of Mr. C., staid all night. But instead of hastening forward to the relief of the sufferers, who were but a short days travel back, Mr. Reed left his provisions at the wagon of Mr. C., and returned to Sutter's Fort, Mr. and Mrs. C. accompanying them. Here was another great and terrible mistake, to say the least. This was about the middle of November; and had Mr. Reed pushed forward to the rescue of the sufferers, including his own wife and children more than 80 persons might have been spared three months of suffering, so horrible as to defy description. We cannot conceive of them. There were, doubtless sufficient reasons for this strange behavior but at the time the whole proceeding was draped in impenetrable mystery.<sup>4</sup>

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4 Mrs. Curtis's greatest criticism deserves some discussion. When Reed and McCutchen discovered that they could take their packhorses no farther than Bear Valley, they turned back. Mrs. Curtis faults them for not pushing ahead on foot, as the First Relief did later; but the First Relief had more manpower, more provisions, and were equipped with snowshoes. In addition, the lake was farther away than Mrs. Curtis believed.

## Snowed In.

Do any of you imagine what these two simple words may mean? Go with me then, to the Donner camp; and we shall see. Is this a company of ghastly spectres that haunt the snowy wilderness with the writhing memories of inconceivable, inscrutable suffering? Their wild eyes burn in the sockets; and the dilating pupil nearly covers the iris. They are dying of starvation; and even on the wan and wasted features of the dead, the biting expression of the horrible hunger still remains.

They are now taking their morning meal and yonder gentle matron—Mrs. Reed—ever more thoughtful for others than herself, is cutting off strips of raw hide, and dividing them into small pieces; and the children come around her with their little tin cups, to receive the precious morsel that may sustain life a little longer. O God! that *little longer* will lay many of them to rest in the sheltering snows!

They had killed all their animals; and their skins had been providentially saved. Hence the supply of raw hides. But at length even this became scarce, and, compared with what followed, was a luxury. Old boot and shoes, bits of saddles or harness, and fragments of leather in every form, were now gathered and rigidly economised. One of the company, who was a child at the time, but afterwards married and lived at San Jose, gave quite an account of the interior of the camp at this period. She said that she and a sister had a quarrel, and almost a fight, for the possession of a little shoe that one of them had found. She declared, too, that she, herself, had eaten a piece of her mother!<sup>5</sup> It is believed, that, driven to the last extremity they devoured the bodies of their dead. But enough is known to show that their sufferings were drawn out to the most terrible strain that human anguish could support, or human strength endure. Let us then, leave these awful secrets undisturbed and gently draw a curtain over the revolting scene.

Mr. and Mrs. Brene [Breen], with their nine [seven] children, had encamped eight or ten miles behind the Donner party; and between the two camps there was kept up such an interchange of neighborly kindness, as the circumstances would allow. By this means the dreadful condition of the Donner camp became known to Mr. & Mrs. Brene. By a careful and wise economy, they had made their provisions hold out; and thus they were able, not only to sustain themselves, but to assist others. They took Mrs. Reed with her four children, and one adopted child, home to their

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5 This may be a reference to Nancy Graves, who attended school in San Jose. She was severely traumatized by being told, after the fact, that she had partaken of her mother's body at Starved Camp; Eliza Donner Houghton to C. F. McGlashan, August 8, 1879.

camp, and kept them until relief arrived.<sup>6</sup> Let no one say that economy is an ignoble virtue, remembering that by its help, six precious lives were saved. The woman who could look upon her own nine children and give to others what would shorten their allowance—possibly bring them to starvation—must have a great heart indeed. It has been said, that there is no greater love than this, that a man should die for his friends; but this is by far a nobler action and a diviner love. Mrs. Brene was, indeed, a noble woman; and her name should be inscribed in golden lettering on the page of history. By such high examples, the world is made happier and better; for she who could give to another what her own children might soon suffer for, deserves and must soon receive; the *crown of virtue*.

### Relief Itself Horrible To Behold.

About the middle of February, seven men and women, finding their condition intolerable, left the Donner Camp, hoping to reach the valley in safety; and out of the fourteen, only five women and two men, came into Mr. Johnson's ranch, then the first house on this side of the mountains, one-half of the whole number having perished by the way.

Mr. Johnson, on hearing the great distress of the snow-bound company, sent a messenger to Sutter's Fort, with an account of their terrible sufferings. When the news came in, the citizens volunteered for the rescue of the sufferers. Gen. Sutter, with his well-known promptness and liberality, offered them horses and provisions; and without delay seven men were despatched, Messrs. [Aquila] Glover, O'Brien, Montgomery, Curtis and three others, whose names are not remembered.<sup>7</sup>

These seven brave men set off on their difficult and perilous undertaking, and pursued their journey as far as Bear valley, with their horses and packs. But finding their route thence impassible for horses, they resolved to take as much as each man could carry and proceed on foot. Leaving the horses and the remainder of the provisions with one of their number, the six men, each with a heavy load on his back, boldly set foot on the trackless mountain, and on the second day reached the Donner camp, when the desperate fate of the unfortunates was discovered. No description can give any

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6 The Reeds moved in with the Breens in mid-January. The reference to the “adopted child” is puzzling—the Reeds took in the orphaned cousins Mary and Frances Donner afterwards in California, but neither girl stayed in the Breen cabin.

7 The identity of Mrs. Curtis's “O'Brien” is a mystery; Montgomery may be Moutrey; but, although Jotham Curtis assisted for a time in the relief efforts, he never reached the camps, nor was he paid for his labor.

competent idea of this horrible scene. Some were snow blind, others insane, others dying, others dead; while the wasted forms and ghastly looks of all presented a most shocking sight.

Language cannot describe the features of the living when they saw that relief had actually come. Some became nearly insensible or delirious from excess of joy; others were still as death in the intense strain of another moment's waiting; while many faces were distorted by a crazy, foolish, almost demoniac laugh, horrible to behold. They swallowed the small pittance allowed, almost without mastication, and held out their trembling hands for more. Great caution was necessary in order to avoid the ill effects of a giving them too much at a time, but the madness of their hunger soon began to subside.

Fortunately the news spread rapidly over all the then inhabited parts of the state. At San Jose another expedition was fitted out; and, with Mr. Reed at their head, they set off with sufficient food to bring the sufferers in. By the time this new supply arrived their former stock of provisions was exhausted, and now comes the task of getting the sufferers, all weak and emaciated, into some settlement.

Three were left behind to their fate; a Dutchman by the name of Reesburgh [Keseberg], old Mrs. Donner, and a child that Mrs. McCutchins, one of the fourteen who went out, had left behind. The child died the next day; and Mrs. Donner was probably murdered by the Dutchman. She had about her several thousand dollars in specie, and, not being permitted to take it with her, she preferred to stay with it, and with a true miser-feeling, loving her money better than life, she surrendered herself, hugging her purse to the last.<sup>8</sup>

A party of men who afterwards visited the camp, found the old lady with her throat cut, and a bucket near by which had been used to catch her blood. Part of the body was sliced into steaks to sustain the life of the murderer. This Resburgh was afterwards tried for the murder; but on the discovery of gold he came up from the Bay, where he had been sojourning since his acquittal, and opened an eating house at Fort Sutter, which was well known as *Cannibal Tent*.<sup>9</sup>

A touching little incident is related of these times. On the passage from the camp to Fort Sutter, Mr. Brene and one of his little daughters became very faint, and it was feared that they would die. It was proposed to Mr. Read that they should stop and light fires, and try to restore them. He treated the matter coolly, not to say gruffly, saying he didn't think it worth

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8 This is another version of Wise's story that the emigrants cared more for their property than their lives, which Farnham also told of Elizabeth Donner.

9 Keseberg did in fact open a restaurant in Sacramento, but "Cannibal Tent" is not recorded elsewhere as its nickname.

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while to take much trouble about it. On hearing his, his little girl took him by the hand, saying in the sweet earnestness of a grateful child, “Papa, if it hadn’t been for Mr. Read [Breen] we should all have been dead!” The sight of the sweet pleader brought the lesson home to his heart. He instantly ordered a halt; when they kindled fires on each side of them, administered remedies, and the sufferers were saved.

F. H. MCD.