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Unfortunate Emigrants

Kristin Johnson

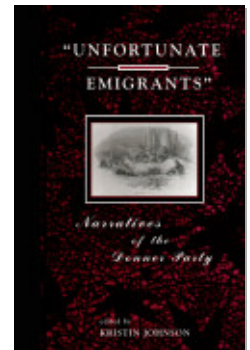
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STATEMENT OF WILLIAM MCCUTCHEN

F. H. McDougal's "Donner Tragedy" contains the following:—"Reed and McCutchen came to their camp nearly starved, having made a meal of wagon grease and mustard taken from Mr. C-s wagon, which he had left on the mountain, intending to go back for it."

I left the Donner party in company with *Mr. Stanton* some distance west of Salt Lake desert for California, for the purpose of obtaining a supply of provisions, and to return with them to the company. I did not see *Mr. Reed* after leaving the company, until he arrived at Capt. Sutter's, therefore I could not have made a meal of wagon grease with him. My account of what the writer styles "a strange proceeding" is, that Mr. Reed and myself arrived at a camp at the upper end of Bear Valley, in the evening, finding a Mr. and Mrs. Curtis the sole occupants. They exhibited great emotion on our arrival. Mr. Curtis said it was a voice from heaven, and that we were angels sent to them, that they were out of provisions; and the only thing we found in their camp to eat, was a portion of a dog baking in a small oven. We supplied them from the provisions we were taking to the Donner party. It was storming when we arrived at Curtis' camp, and continued the next day.

The following day we started up the mountain following a track made by oxen, and camped about five or six miles from their camp. During the night our two Indians left us returning to the valley. I followed them as far down as Curtis camp. Finding they had been there and had left for Ordway's [Cordova's], I returned to our camp reaching there about 12 P.M. Next morning we proceeded still further on until finding it utterly impossible to proceed further, on account of the depth of the snow, we returned and in the evening reached the camp of Mr. Curtis. Here we remained for the night. Next morning after cacheing our provisions, and some of Curtis' goods, we proceeded down the valley to Johnson's, accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. Curtis.

I state that it was utterly impossible for any two men to have done more than we did in striving to get in to the people. A company of men might have succeeded.

The statement of Mrs. Curtis in regard to myself is a base falsehood. She never was in the mountains at the emigrant camp, and Mr. Curtis was never there to my knowledge. If Mr. Reed and myself had succeeded in

packing to the party all the provisions we could have carried, what relief would it have been to the emigrants? It would not have been a mouthful for them, there being about 80 persons at the emigrants' encampment.

"About the middle of February, seven men and women, finding their situation 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 Johnson's ranch, then the first house on this side of the mountains."

My wife came out with this party; they started from the emigrants' camp the last [15th] day of *December* and were 31 *days* getting through to Johnson's.

"There were left behind to their fate: a Dutchman by the name of Reesburg (Keysburg), old Mrs. Donner and a child that Mrs. McCutchen, one of the fourteen who went out, had left behind. The child died next day."

There were left behind, when we started on our return, Mr. and Mrs. Geo. Donner, Mrs. Jacob Donner, and Keysburg, with two of our men to take care of them.

My child was dead before the Glover party reached the emigrant camp, and when we succeeded in getting in, Mr. Reed and myself buried the remains.

Starved Camp.

We arrived at this camp about 3 o'clock in the afternoon; this camp was under the peak at the head of the Yuba River. The Glen [Glover] party had made it when returning from the Donner party. Every thing necessary for building a fire on the snow was here. A storm commenced this night and continued until about noon of the third day. The second night Mr. Reed became snow blind and chilled through; he had overexerted himself in securing shelter for the party. Now there was only Mr. Miller and myself who were able to do anything; the rest of the men were disheartened, and would not use any exertion; in fact they gave up all hope, and in despair, some of them commenced praying. I d-d them, telling them it was not time to pray but to get up, stir themselves and get wood, for it was a matter of life and death to us in a few minutes. The fire was nearly out; the snow in falling off the trees had nearly extinguished it before discovered; it was only rekindled by the exertion of Mr. Miller and myself. After we got the fire started I was so chilled that in getting warm I burned the back out of my shirts, having four on me; only discovering the mishap by the scorching of my skin.

On the third day about noon, the snow ceased falling, and it was agreed that all who were able should leave, all the provisions being consumed the day before. The day after our arrival at this camp Mr. Reed divided the

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remaining flour. A spoonful as each person's share, “young and old,” and it was four days in all before we got anything to eat.

Persons may ask why we camped here. Simply, it was a good place to stop: all of us were fatigued with the exertion made in climbing the mountain and packing the children; and the adult portion of the emigrants were so weak, even if we had wished to proceed further, they could not. There was no proposition made to Mr. Reed to stop here or elsewhere, by Mr. Brien or anyone else on account of the sickness of himself or daughter. It was the general desire of all.

All who were able started to leave, except Mr. Brien and family. He said that if they had to die he would sooner die in camp than on the way; he was repeatedly urged to come, but positively refused. Then Mr. Reed called myself and others to witness, that if any of Mr. Brien's family died, their death be upon him and not upon us. Mr. Brien had only one daughter; she was an infant.

Before leaving, we did everything in our power for those who had to remain, cutting and leaving wood enough to last for several days.

After leaving here, we traveled about five miles, then stopped. During this five miles travel all of us were frost bitten except Mr. Miller. After traveling all the next day, making about ten miles, we camped on the Yuba river. At this camp Mr. Woodworth, hearing the noise made by the party in camping, sent a man to us, requesting that we should come down to his camp, but most of us having lain down, refused, only asking of him to send us something to eat, which he did. From here we made our way into Bear Valley, in company with Mr. Woodworth, he returning; but his party, Mr. Miller and two others of ours, whose names I have forgotten, returned to the Donner camp.

WM. MCCUTCHEN.
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