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Unfortunate Emigrants

Kristin Johnson

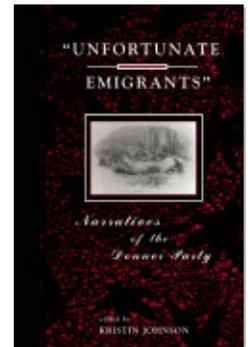
Published by Utah State University Press

Johnson, Kristin.

Unfortunate Emigrants.

Utah State University Press, 1996.

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TRAGIC STORY OF THE DONNER PARTY

Calistoga, Calif.

Dear Editor—I have finished my story, but perhaps you will not like it. I did the best I could. Grandma told it to me, then I wrote what I could remember of it to suit myself, but she says I did not put in a thing that was not true, and I have left out a great deal that is too sad to tell—the way they suffered and the things they had to eat. I am sure I did not want to. I have tried to write it just as I would tell it, but I am afraid I have made a great many mistakes. If you do not think it is good enough or it is too long, please send it back to me just as it is for I want to keep it. This the first time I ever wrote to any paper like this. But I wrote a composition on California at one time and received a first prize. I remain

Your Interested Reader,
E. Maybelle Sherwood

The Story

In the spring of 1846, F. W. Graves sold his home near Lacon, Marshall county, Illinois, to a Mr. Sparr and left with his family for California. His reason for coming was the desire to find a warmer climate. His home in Illinois was a good one, and after it became the property of Mr. Sparr, was laid off into a town, now Sparland.

Mr. Graves was the father of eleven children, two of whom died before they started for California. Grandma was the fifth child. Her name was Lovina. When she left her home she was nearly twelve years old. She now has one brother [W. C. Graves] and one sister [Nancy Graves Williamson] living.

They traveled alone until they reached St. Josephs a town on the Missouri river. All this side of the Missouri river was then Indian country. The families tried to form in companies, so that travel would not be so

dangerous. From there they came on in company with other families: The Tuckers and Richies [Ritchies] being among them. Both families now live in Napa county.¹

The party divided at Fort Bridger, part going to Oregon and the remainder coming to California. It seems the families that started to Oregon again divided, part coming to California, the rest going on to Oregon. In the first division Grandma's people came on toward California and overtook the Donner party about four days travel with heavy wagons from Fort Bridger. The captain of the Donner party was then seeking the new road or shortcut to California, when they overtook heavy wagons from his company. It was not exactly a short-cut they were seeking, but an easier and more pleasant road. Their plan was to avoid the steep and disagreeable Weaver [Weber] canyon.² Grandpa Cyrus came to California just a few days ahead of the Donner party, but through the Weaver canyon.³ He said they had to lift their wagons over boulders and even over fallen trees in coming through the canyon, this road was so rough.

The principal reason the Donner party had such a hard time was because they were taking a new road that had never been used, and they had to cut trees and clear it. Many bridges had to be built. All this, of course, took time. They were delayed for months in making the road. One entire week was spent in camp, the men going ahead building the road and bridges, then returning to the camp at night.

After joining the Donner party, all was trouble. Being so delayed, they were caught in the deep snow at the Sierras and were compelled to camp at a large lake, which is now known as Donner lake. Here they built their cabins and prepared to spend the winter, if necessary, but hoped that the snow would thaw and thus enable them to reach California before spring. Their cabins were built of logs, shed fashion, with oxen hides stretched over them (for they had been compelled to kill their oxen on entering camp, and to salt the meat and pack it in the snow for their winter's use, having no other way to keep it). This made than a passably good shelter. The snow was so deep it more than covered their cabins and the occupants had to cut steps in it to get out and get their wood. They cut the trees off close to the snow. After it thawed, they could see tall stumps from fifteen to

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- 1 They were members of the Smith company. Reason P. Tucker and Matthew Dill Ritchie were active in the Donner relief efforts. Lovina's sister, the widowed Sarah Graves Fosdick, married Ritchie's son William in 1848; the name is generally spelled "Ritchie" in early sources, but "Ritchey" is favored by descendants.
 - 2 This is the third statement from a member of the Graves family that they overtook the Donner party while Reed was off seeking Hastings.
 - 3 The Enoch Cyrus family, accompanied by two married daughters and their husbands, seem to have traveled with the Pyles.

“UNFORTUNATE EMIGRANTS”

twenty feet and higher from the ground. By this, they could see plainly how deep the snow had been during the winter. Five feet of snow fell on Christmas night.

Grandma says she distinctly remembers going with one older brother and sister to the lake to fish. The ice was so thick they had to cut a hole in it about a foot and a half square, through which they dropped their lines, but they could not catch a thing. They could see the fish plainly, but caught nothing. It was very hard for them to go away without any fish for they were very hungry.⁴

They spent Christmas in camp and made an attempt to celebrate it. Being farmers, they had a supply of beans for seed. As their provisions were nearly gone, they used some of these, and with boiled tripe, had a very good dinner. They fared far worse before they reached the level plains of California.

A party of about eighteen strong men and women left the camp soon after the cabins were built to bring aid to their friends. These people suffered very much, and only a few survived to report their condition and send aid to the camp.

During this time those remaining at the camp were suffering for provisions and several died. They were very glad when the relief party reached them. As soon as possible about twenty of the stronger came out of the mountains with the first relief party and met the second relief party going in after the others. Grandma and one brother [William C.] and sister [Eleanor] came out with the first relief party.

This was about February, but her father, two sisters and brother-in-law came out in the first party that left the camp, hunting relief. Her father and brother-in-law died, but both sisters survived.

Her mother and younger brother [Franklin] were in the last party that came out. Both died. Mrs. Graves had with her money they had received for their farm, and when she felt she could not go any farther she hid the money under a big rock near a tree. Several of the party returned to where they had seen her stop, and searched for the money, but they could not find it. It was found several years ago by some men who were prospecting. Grandma has some of it, because it was divided among the children of the Graves family.

There was much suffering in the last party coming out, because a heavy storm came upon them and they had no shelter, therefore several died. The party before did not have such a hard time, although the snow was very deep, and they were often cold and tired because they had to walk.

4 The question of why the members of the Donner party failed to catch any fish in the lake has never been resolved, but whatever the problems initially may have been, the emigrants eventually became too weak to make the effort.

The Donner party consisted of (as near as can be stated) ninety persons, of which forty-two died. The remainder reached the level of California, after many days of suffering and almost starvation.

After leaving the mountains, most of the survivors suffered with mountain fever. Johnathan and Elizabeth Graves had it and both died.⁵ They were on the American river near Sacramento at the time. Many of the people in the camp died from cold as much as hunger.

After coming out of the mountains, the survivors went all over California, so I will not attempt to follow them any farther.

⁵ In 1875 W. C. Graves told the editor of the *Russian River Flag* that the two youngest Graves children died in the summer of 1847.