



The Expedition of the Donner Party and Its Tragic Fate

Eliza P. Donner Houghton

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One of the main reasons people yearned for new forms of transportation is because of the most notorious and tragic disasters in the history of westward travel. While people still romanticize the Wild West, many Americans are still all too familiar with the fate of the Donner Party, a group of 87-90 people that met with disaster in the Sierra Nevada mountain range during the winter of 1846-1847. The party knew the journey would take months, but early snowfalls in the mountains left dozens of people trapped in snow drifts that measured several feet, stranding them in a manner that made it virtually impossible for them to go any further for several weeks. Inevitably, as the Donner Party's supplies began to run low, there was little hope of acquiring new provisions high up in the mountains, and even worse, their location and the technology of the time also made it virtually impossible for relief expeditions to reach them. Due to exposure and lack of food, the health of many in the party began to deteriorate quickly in the tough winter conditions, and the animals brought along with the group died at alarming rates. Most of the men who set out to try to get help died en route, while the families back in camp tried to cope with dozens of deaths suffered by young and old alike.

All the while, the plight of the Donner Party made news across the nation, even before the surviving members were rescued and brought to safety, and by the time the doomed expedition was over, less than 50 of them made it to California. As writer Ethan Rarick summed it up, "more than the gleaming heroism or sullied villainy, the Donner Party is a story of hard decisions that were neither heroic nor villainous".

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