

Ordeal by Hunger

by George R. Stewart

StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 3

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Discussion questions

Stewart says the Donner tragedy was unique in the history of the westward migrations—no more typical, he insists, than the maiden voyage of the Titanic was typical of transatlantic crossings. He also tells us that apart from proving Hastings' shortcut to California was a fraud and helping to carve out a new route to Salt Lake City, the Donner Party experience was of no historical consequence. Why then has it remained so memorable an episode in American history and legend?

Much has been said about the trait of “rugged individualism” that supposedly existed in settlers of the American West—a quality some say still defines our national character. How did this trait help or hurt the Donner Party?

Additional readings

- Louise Clappe. *The Shirley Letters: From the California Mines 1851-1852*, 1970.
- Bret Harte. *The Luck of Roaring Camp*, 1879.
- J.S. Holliday. *The World Rushed In*, 1981.
- Virginia Reed Murphy. *Across the Plains in the Donner Party*, 1996.
- Sarah Royce. *A Frontier Lady: Recollections of the Gold Rush and Early California*, 1977.
- George R. Stewart. *The California Trail*, 1962.
- Mark Twain. *Roughing It*, 1872.

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Ordeal By Hunger: The Story of the Donner Party

by George R. Stewart

“The misadventure of the Donner Party,” George R. Stewart writes, “constitutes one of the most amazing stories of that land of amazing stories, the American West.” Reader be warned: this book may be difficult to read because it recounts in detail the spiraling tragedy of a group of ill-fated California-bound settlers, half of whom died along the trail. The few who did complete the journey survived almost unimaginable human deprivations, including being forced by starvation into cannibalism.

Reader be encouraged: also within this dark account “runs the scarlet thread of courage and the golden thread of heroism,” says the author. For many, the Donner Party disaster has been reduced to a ghoulish folk tale. But historian Stewart painstakingly traces the facts of this real-life drama, casting a more informed and compassionate light on these events as a worthy reminder of “what human beings may achieve, endure, and perpetuate in the final press of circumstance.”

What went wrong? The Donner Party originated in a fairly typical emigrant train of wagons heading westward in 1846 along the Oregon Trail. With 20 wagons and 87 settlers, the group was truly a “microcosm of humanity”: middle-class farmers and their families from Illinois, teamsters, servants, Irish and German immigrants, and a number of independent adventurers who joined along the way. In July of 1846, these 20 wagons made the fateful decision to separate from a larger group and leave the established trail in favor of a new shortcut to California.

The new route, south of Salt Lake and across the desert, had been publicized by Lanford Hastings, a youthful adventurer and respected author of emigrant guides. But Hastings’ route, though perhaps shorter, was much more treacherous, and the Donner Party wasted precious weeks cutting timbers, clearing away boulders, and building the trail in front of them as they pushed westward. At times, they gained no more than a mile a day.

Next the party faced the three day and three night-long ordeal of crossing the salt flats, followed by a grueling push through long, repetitious miles of desert. Cattle, oxen and horses died of thirst and exhaustion. The travelers became more and more dispirited, quarreling among themselves as provisions became scarce. Wagons broke down; family treasures were jettisoned to lighten the load; more than one hundred horses, cattle and oxen were lost to Indians. One man killed another in

what might be argued as self-defense, but the survivor was banished after nearly being hanged.

By the time the Donner Party reached the mountain passes of California, it was the middle of October. Time had run out; snow at higher elevations already blocked the passes. Still, the group pushed on until a succession of winter storms halted their progress entirely. By early November, they were forced to erect crude shelters—three log huts—in which 79 people huddled in desperation, certain they would starve as the snow continued relentlessly.

The image of the noble pioneer is present throughout American history. Ordinary people who ventured westward, enduring extraordinary circumstances in the wilderness, were thought to be strengthened physically and purified in character by their experiences. In some instances, this may have been true. Many in the Donner Party responded courageously to life-threatening circumstances. Tamsen Donner, for example, was ever charitable to her fellow travelers, sharing provisions and lending support however she was able. She cared tenderly for her children, combing their hair daily amid the squalor of their primitive hut. In the end, she sacrificed her own life, sending her children on alone with the rescue party because she could not desert her husband on his deathbed.

Other members of the party, such as James Reed, displayed almost unimaginable bravery and determination in returning or attempting to return to camp on rescue missions of pitiable consequence. They are proof that within the spectrum of possible human responses to extreme stress is the choice to risk one’s life for others. But the opposite response is also possible. Evidence suggests that Lewis Keseberg may have murdered Tamsen Donner before cannibalizing her body. The would-be rescuers who abandon the Donner children after plundering their meager belongings prove that under extreme stress, some willingly sacrifice others for their own survival.

In the end, 47 people out of 87 survived. Five died along the trail through the desert. Thirty-four (plus two Indians sent to aid them) died in the mountains. One small child, after miraculously surviving the winter in camp, was carried out by rescuers, but died tragically upon arriving safely at the fort on the other side of the pass.

Those who had survived through long months under the deep snow had first eaten dogs, mice, their own shoes and the hide roofs of their huts. Finally, seized by the delirium of near starvation, they began to cut up, cook, and consume the bodies of their dead.

In 1869, not long after the Donner Party disaster, the trip west across the continent was simplified greatly by the completion of the transcontinental railroad. Today, the lake near the Donner camp (formerly Truckee Lake) is called Donner Lake in honor of this much discussed event in western history, and there is a wide highway across what is still known as Donner Pass.

It is difficult to imagine what motives propelled settlers west in spite of the dangers along the way—and in the case of the Donner Party, especially—what forces enabled them to persevere in the face of the overwhelming odds against them. Some in the Donner group, like other emigrants before and after them, were motivated by gleaming promises of economic gain and greener pastures elsewhere. Some were driven by a thirst for adventure. But as “flatlanders,” they were ignorant of dangers they would face in the mountains, and they lacked the leadership of experienced guides, for which they paid dearly.

Americans live in a very mobile culture. How much of the restless pioneer spirit—always seeking a better life in some new place down the road—is still within us? How difficult do we expect the journey to be? What price are we willing to pay?

About the author

George R. Stewart (1895-1980) was a professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, for nearly 40 years. He wrote a number of novels set in California, such as *Fire* (1948) and *Storm* (1941), but *Ordeal by Hunger: The Story of the Donner Party* remains his best-known work.