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The tragedy of the Donner party constitutes one of the most amazing stories of the American West. In 1846 eighty-seven people -- men, women, and children -- set out for California, persuaded to attempt a new overland route. After struggling across the desert, losing many oxen, and nearly dying of thirst, they reached the very summit of the Sierras, only to be trapped by blinding snow and bitter storms. Many perished; some survived by resorting to cannibalism; all were subjected to unbearable suffering. Incorporating the diaries of the survivors and other contemporary documents, George Stewart wrote the definitive history of that ill-fated band of pioneers; an astonishing account of what human beings may endure and achieve in the final press of circumstance.

Ordeal by Hunger: The Story of the Donner Party Details

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From Reader Review *Ordeal by Hunger: The Story of the Donner Party* for online ebook

Tom Phillips says

This is one version of the Donner Party story. The writing, or the book itself may not be deserving of 5 stars, although it is well done and eminently readable. However, the historical story itself is one of the most heartbreaking and tragic in the American psyche. How could so much go so wrong for these people? If, when you think of the Donner Party, you only think cannibalism you are missing most of the story. How it got to that is the real story and how it all turned out. It is a story of the American west, but it has all the elements of a Greek tragedy. "...Never take no cutoffs and hurry along as fast as you can."

booklady says

Up until a couple of nights ago, lifetime reader that I am and far from young, I had never actually read anything on the Donner party. George R. Stewart's description of that terrible tragedy has remained the definitive account, which is saying something as it is also probably the best known and most widely recounted story of pioneer journeys ever.

Among Americans anyway, you only have to say, 'the Donner party' and the immediate association is cannibalism. That much I knew, but little else.

From the moment I picked up *Ordeal by Hunger* two nights ago, I have scarcely been able to think about, much less read anything else. Although I am not a believer in luck, the saying, 'if they didn't have bad luck, they had no luck at all' fits here.

Stewart's book was originally published in 1936, which was optimal because he was able to interview the last surviving witnesses and yet enough time had passed that everything hidden had been flushed out—by way of diaries, and other oral and written evidence, etc. My copy also included the 1960 update to the '36 edition as well as a forward which updated the '60 update.

Additional information has continued to come out, but less in the way of evidence to change known facts and more by way of new generation's perspectives on what actually happened. It is so easy to judge. I admit I was doing it all the while, sitting in my comfortable chair, in my warm—okay it is September—home with a full stomach.

The truth is, none of us knows what he/she would do under similar circumstances. And these were some of the most extreme circumstances I have ever read about. And there were SO many children and babies involved! Yes surprisingly more survived (47) than died (42). Also, it is unfortunate the cannibalism is what is best remembered. Rather the heroism of so many who braved untold misery to save not only themselves and their own families but even complete strangers—knowing full well the worst that could befall them—is what will stay with me.

Stewart would not have been a believable author if he was completely indifferent to everything that happened, but he did a fair job of relating events without undue prejudice. What he interjected of himself, caused me at least to consider him a reliable narrator.

A book, a story, not to be forgotten.

Bobbi says

I've never read anything by George Stewart before and discovered him by way of Wallace Stegner's "Big Rock Candy Mountain". This was truly a page turner and well written. It was written in 1936 so was probably the first book about that incident. He seems to have done a lot of research; quite a few of the people had left journals and of course about half of them survived. He mentions that one of the survivors was still alive at the time of his writing but he/she must have been pretty old as the ordeal took place in 1846. Stewart is a good writer so that added to the suspense of the story. There have been a lot of stories about the Donner Party but this one seems to be the real deal. I highly recommend it if you can find it. I plan to read more by Stewart.

Randolph says

True life horror story of the Donner Party emigrants that end up stranded in the Sierra Nevada mountains in 1846. Originally written in 1936 and revised in 1961, it pulls no punches while still maintaining an objectivity that avoids lurid sensationalism. A bit dated in style and ethnic sensitivity. It's a little like a Tolstoy novel because of the number of characters involved and the back and forth of the various parties and rescue missions.

You will never forget the vision of the rescuers finding some of the enfeebled, dead, and starving survivors at the bottom of a 25 foot snow and ice crater surrounded by the half eaten corpses of their neighbors and family, their entrails still in the stew pot over the fire.

At once a testament to both the heroism and desperation that humanity is capable of. Murder, greed, and selfishness are just the beginning.

It's a classic of survival literature that never fails to fascinate and hold us in suspense even as our stomachs churn.

Contains the Reed and Breen diaries as appendices as well as the 12 year old Virginia Reed's account of the harrowing journey.

Lawyer says

Ordeal by Hunger: George R. Stewart's Story of the Donner Party

The Donner Party Monument, Truckee, California State Park

I happened to be in Reno, Nevada, in late March, 2012. It was strictly business, assisting a family with whom I have had a significant bond for many years. Casinos have no allure for me. However historical sites have drawn me to them like a magnet since childhood. I owe that to my grandfather with whom I would travel during summers on his business trips. As the rest of my family, he was a reader and was particularly

fascinated by the Great American West and the westward emigration beginning in 1846. So I first heard the tale of the ill-fated Reed-Donner Party from my grandfather. But I had never visited the site or had the opportunity to do so.

When we touched down in Reno on March 28, the weather was crystal clear. The skies were a magnificent blue. It was warm in Reno, but in the distance the white on the peaks of the Sierra Nevada was still clearly visible. Donner Pass is only about a forty minute drive from Reno. My traveling companions were game, we had a rental car, and off we went.

As we drove up into the mountains towards Truckee, California, the winds were howling. The rented Nissan reverberated in the stiff cross winds that whistled across the highway through the passes. One last winter storm was forecast. About a foot and a half of snow was forecast for that Saturday evening. Yet, the snow began to fall early. I stubbornly insisted we were so close to our destination that the ground temperatures were too warm for the snow to cause a problem so early in the day.

When we pulled into the parking lot of the Pioneer Emigrant Museum, there were two other cars there. I was in a light weight jacket, no hat, no gloves. Although the air temperature was 34 I would not have ventured to guess what the wind chill factor was. The photograph of the monument is much clearer than the view I had of it, although I stood directly in front of it. The snow was coming down so heavily that it was hard to keep your eyes open to take in too much of the scenery at once.

After all the obligatory photographs were taken, we ventured into the museum. Several books on the Donner Party were available, but I chose the Stewart volume. The Ranger nodded with approval. "Yes. You picked the right one. I've read them all. After all these years, this is still the best you'll find. Stewart was careful and very thorough."

I told the Ranger my first read about the Donner Party was, Mothers by Vardis Fisher. "Oh, my, we have requests for that all the time. It's been out of print for years. There's a copy of it over at the Truckee Public Library. That's where I read it. Mark my words, though, Stewart's the best. Now, I'm not trying to hurry you folks along, but I wouldn't advise going up to the summit. The chain requirements are on. I'd be headed on down before too long. I've been watching the temperature. It's dropping faster than predicted. You never know what the weather's going to do up in these mountains."

"Thank's, Ma'am. We'll take your advice and head back." Shortly after pulling back on I-80 East to Reno along came a chain of three snow plows. These days in the Sierra Nevada the highway departments are prepared to deal with the storms.

Visiting this isolated location on a cold and windy day with snow visibly accumulating by the minute made an impression on each of us that we most likely would not have experienced had we been there in mid summer in light clothing. I questioned how rash I had been in pressing on with the weather uncertain. Sometimes, the foolish are just lucky.

Needless to say, the Reed-Donner party had no idea what they were facing. Through the years the members of the Reed-Donner party have alternately been portrayed as greedy, lazy, stupid, or incompetent. Stewart destroys those inaccuracies through careful research and an understanding of the circumstances that led to the plight of the party.

If there's a villain responsible for the fate of the Donners and those families that traveled with them, it's Lansford Hastings, an entrepreneur who had traveled to and from California on more than one occasion. He developed the Hasting's Cut-Off which he vowed to cut 350 miles from the cross country trip from the Missouri jump off to California. However, Hasting's route crossed the Wasatch Mountains, the Great Salt Lake Desert, which he described as half the actual length of actual passage without drinkable water. Hastings

had written a highly touted travel book regarding California and the ease of the journey. George Donner had a copy of it. Additionally, Hastings charged each party \$10.00 to serve as guide for the journey. His guidance amounted to leaving posted signs and promises to return to retrieve those who had fallen behind on the journey. He didn't.

Stewart proposed that Hastings intent was to build his own constituency of voters in an effort to become the equivalent of the Sam Houston of California, as it was still in the hands of Mexico. After the Donner disaster, the Hastings cut-off was virtually abandoned. Subsequently, Hastings fell into disrepute after becoming a member of the California Confederacy Conspiracy. He died destitute, but not under the circumstances which his slap dash leadership resulted in to the Reed-Donner Party.

The party was comprised of eighty-seven members. Only forty-eight members survived. The dead included men, women, and children.

As George Stewart forthrightly noted:

“It is a long road and those who follow it must meet certain risks; exhaustion and disease, alkali water and Indian arrows will take a toll. But the greatest problem is a simple one, and the chief opponent is Time. If August sees them on the Humboldt and September at the Sierra — good! Even if they are a month delayed, all may yet go well. But let it come late October, or November, and the snowstorms block the heights, when wagons are light of provisions and oxen lean, then will come a story.”

It should be noted that although Hastings had traveled his route three times, this expedition was the first trip attempted with wagons. Because of the distinct differences of travel by wagons pulled by oxen, anyone hitting the Sierra Nevada after the passes filled with snow was likely doomed.

As with any group of human beings, those comprising the Reed-Donner party responded to their trial as any group--some with bravery and generosity and some with selfishness to the extent their own self preservation led to the death of comrades. That some survivors resulted to cannibalism of the dead is without doubt. That two Indian members of a relief party were murdered for food is true. Whether Keseberg, whose first name is lost to us, the last survivor to be rescued by a third relief party murdered Tamsen Donner, the widow of the Party Captain, George Donner will remain a mystery.

Virginia Reed, aged twelve wrote of her experiences to a cousin back east on May 16, 1847. In part she said,

“I have not rote you half of the truble we have had but I have rote you enuf to let you now tht you down now what truble is but thank god we have all got throw and the onely family that did not eat human flesh we have left everything but i dont cair for that we have got throw with our lives...”

In the New York Times of February 3, 2008, Dana Goodyear reviewed *Desperate Passage: The Donner Party's Perilous Journey West*, by Ethan Rarick, Oxford Press. While noting that Rarick had done his homework, Goodyear reinforced the opinion that Stewart's original work remains the standard for study of one of the most controversial disasters of Western Emigration. I have to agree. Highly recommended. This is a solid **4.5 Star read**.

Jenni Wiltz says

I read this book faster than any work of fiction I've read in the past year. Stewart tells the tale well, generating suspense despite the fact that most of us know how this one turns out. The story is so gripping that I couldn't put it down. Stewart describes the terrain with an expert eye because he performed excavations in the area while researching the book. I appreciated the fact that he told this more as a narrative than an analysis--no blame for the bad decisions that led to this tragedy, for example. He doesn't ignore the fact that there were bad decisions, but he's not interesting in assigning fault. He's empathetic enough to know it doesn't matter.

The main text was published in 1930, with an afterword written for this 1960 reprint. For the most part, Stewart's prose holds up. There are a couple of questionable passages where he devolves into folksy frontier-speak for a few sentences ("Californy") just for emphasis, but they come across as an affectation because there's (a) no reason for it, and (b) no transition between the serious prose and the frontier-speak. The added material for the 1960 reprint includes a letter of Virginia Reed's, the diary of Mr. Reed, and a summary of what's happened to some of the survivors since the first edition.

Stewart tries hard not to play favorites in terms of casting heroes and villains in the story. He mostly succeeds. It's hard not to be moved by his admiration for Reed (and Reed's daughter Patty). He gives Keseberg a fair shake, which is more than I can say for a Donner-inspired novel I came across recently.

Overall, Stewart handles the tragic and sensational elements with panache and taste.

Mauoijenn ~ *Mouthy Jenn* ~ says

This was a fascinating tale of true strength and bravery like no other I have read. My boyfriend is a truck driver so he drives Donner's Pass a lot and he has told me about it, so when I saw the made for TV mini series on the Weather Channel over Thanksgiving, I knew I would want to read more about this ordeal. Boy, what an ordeal. I mean being in cold freezing snowy weather when people were dropping like flies and then eating them in order to survive. I WOULD DIE IN A HEART BEAT. Excellent book and an interesting tid-bit in history.

Kurt says

Most people know at least a little bit about the Donner party of 1846. Probably all of them know something about the cannibalism. The whole story of the Donner Party is so much more fascinating and important than the sensational tidbits that might get tossed around in casual conversation.

Ordeal By Hunger was written in 1936 -- 90 years after the events it describes -- and vividly tells the story of hardships endured by a handful of rugged individuals and families who followed their dreams and sought out the adventure of a new life in the unsettled and disputed territory of California. One decision -- that of following the unproven but shorter Hastings Cutoff rather than the traditional California Trail -- precipitated and (one could argue) directly caused their future calamities.

This is a book that I would recommend to almost everyone (except, of course, for young children and the very squeamish). It made me, more than ever, appreciate what we have today and realize the true strength and endurance of the human spirit and its desire to explore and its will to survive.

Katya Mills says

Stewart focuses on forming an accurate logistical picture of the travels and trials of 87 members of the Donner Party against a harsh environment, whose wagon train came together around July 1846 near the Great Salt Lake and headed to California over a newly inspired yet little tested route over a dangerously steep pass in the Sierra Nevadas, which the trusted and well-traveled Hastings recommended they try in order to save 300 miles had they taken the known (and therefore safer) emigration trail around the mountains. Unfortunately the going is rough in Utah and Nevada, and they are doomed to hunker down and camp beside what is now known as Donner Lake. This tale of tragedy and triumph ends in April 1847, after several relief parties (often comprised of family members of the original caravan) made successful rescues over the course of the long and brutal winter featuring several devastating storms packing snow 30+ feet in some parts. Amazingly, 42 of the 87 characters (many of whom are painted in thin brushstrokes by the author, but just enough to begin caring about them) make it out of the mountains and down to Sutter's Fort in Sacramento, a lush valley ripe for settling, and the promised land which was the basis for most of the families making the trip in the first place. Many, including the Donners, had been farmers in the midwest, and envisioned taking a grand adventure in a well-orchestrated way (books and goods and kitchen utensils and blankets all packed into wagons driven by teams of oxen with cattle and pack animals behind) providing comfort for the many women and children, some as young as one year old. The families were mainly of Irish and German and English descent, and we get a glimpse into the different and resourceful ways they survive, as the elements ultimately cause each family to fall back on itself for support. As a city dweller in the 21st century, I could only marvel at the kind of grit and determination displayed by these pioneering folk 200 years ago. As the winter progressed, the snowbanks rose far above the chimney tops of the cabins they built lakeside. Game was scarce. Only timber and religion were of endless supply to them. The ones who were snowed in at the camps had mostly to combat slow starvation and cramped conditions. They lived off of rawhide before resorting to cannibalism as a last resort on the well-preserved bodies of the dead in the snow. Some went mad. The ones who ventured out from time to time in last ditch efforts to cross the towering pass to the 100 mile or so stretch of canyons and valleys which lay on the other side to take them down to Sacramento, showed incredible tenacity and spirit. Others were selfish and cowardly, and abandoned all scruples in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Such was the kind of language the author used to recount the stories. A bit old-fashioned but powerful nevertheless, and kept me reading well past my bedtime!

Here are some vivid images circling my mind still, well portrayed by the author. A man wrapped in blankets propped up against a snowbank beside a campfire, smoking the last of tobacco after saying goodbye and courageously telling the hikers to go on without him, and left behind to die alone in the mountains. Five women who made it over the pass on snowshoes, coming into an Indian camp looking like skeletons on broken frostbitten feet and half-clothed, being taken into warming huts and given acorns to break the starvation. A father returning two months after leaving his children in the camp, on a relief mission funded by the rudimentary California-Mexican government, and finding his 8 year old daughter sitting on the edge of the roof of the cabin he built for them, her feet scraping the receding snowbanks. In the time he was absent, he had survived war, flood, fire, starvation, cold, and thirst. Unlike the others, his entire family would survive the ordeal and live to tell. Another image of a group of nine hikers, long starved, mostly young children, holding on for dear life in the midst of a snowstorm in the mountains, 30 feet down in a hollow made by a campfire which grew and ultimately sunk down into the snow by the heat, and made a space large enough for all of them to climb down into, to stay warm until days later when they were found. One who had

died there had their liver and heart taken for boiling for sustenance of the remainder. Solitary men and women at Sutter's Fort, finally arrived, gazing back to the foothills every day, wishing and wondering whether their loved ones were still alive on the other side.

Katherine Addison says

Ordeal by Hunger is, um, "Dated" is the kindest word I can think of. The naivete of Stewart's racism is almost charming--except for the part where it makes me want to throw the book across the room. He's also prone to sentimentality about the heroism of the men of the party and the pathos to be milked from the plight of the women and children, and I object to the explicit trivializing of the children's experiences and equally explicit privileging of the men's: "There is the story, for instance, of how little Eliza Donner cried herself to sleep that next night because Miller had promised her a piece of loaf sugar if she would walk a certain distance, and then had harshly told her that there was no sugar. And then how, the morning after, he would have beaten her because she would not walk, if Foster and Eddy had not peremptorily stopped him. But after all, this is only the pathos of childhood, not the tragedy of strong men in the struggle with death. And before we judge Miller too harshly, we must recall his heroism when on the night of the storm he labored with McCutcheon to keep the fire going. The man had been in the snow for nearly three weeks, and had been to the lake twice; if his nerves were frayed out, we may forgive him." (201). Eliza Donner was three years old and had been trapped in increasingly desperate, grotesque, and outright horrific situations for nearly six months. I can do the math, even if Stewart can't. Also, if we go by his own definition--"the tragedy of strong men in the struggle against death"--I think Eliza's mother, Tamsen Donner, deserves far more attention than he gives her. There's no excitement or romance to Tamsen Donner's heroism; Stewart is really not interested in the people who stayed in the camp by Truckee Lake, only in those who crossed the pass, and thus Tamsen Donner, who refused more than once to make the journey because she would not leave her dying husband, is mostly off his radar. And her death, mysterious and grotesque as it is--she survived everything only to die and be eaten by Keseberg (who very possibly murdered her) less than a month before he was taken out--seems to me every bit as tragic (if we *must* assign a valuation to such things) as that of Stanton, who made it safely to California *twice* and died because he came back to help the rest of the party.

But honestly, I object to the imposition of narrative values onto history. Making it into a story--particularly making it into the story of "strong men in the struggle against death"--obscures the truth. Eighty-seven people were trapped on the wrong side of the pass. Forty-two of them (by my count) were children under 18 (and thirty of those forty-two were under 12), and one of the most dreadful aspects of the situation is what happened to those children as their parents either died or left them behind--or in the case of the little Donner girls, tried to send them ahead. Neglect and starvation were the best they could hope for without their parents' protection (and at least one parent turned against her own child before she herself died), and some of them didn't even get that much, such as Harriet McCutchen, age 1:

Seared into her [Patty Reed's] memory was the plight of the McCutchen baby, after its mother had departed with the snowshoers: 'When the lice (pardon me, sir) were literally eating it up alive. It had scratched, broken the skin over its little bones.'

The adults in the cabin, apparently recognizing the child's fate, but with euthanasia not part of their philosophy, tied its hands down so that it could no longer scratch, and let it cry until the crying ceased. (244)

And notice the way Stewart dehumanizes Harriet McCutchen (he never calls her by name except in the roster of the Donner Party appended on pp. 291-2, behind both his narrative and the primary documents). He applies Victorian sentimentality to children where he can; where he can't, he treats them as almost sub-sentient. Unimportant.

And, yes, many of these problems are due to this being a book written in 1936, and, yes, I will be looking for more recent scholarly work. But this is a good object lesson in the distortions created by the insistence on creating a narrative out of history, especially a narrative with value-judgments inherent in its structure, and in the distortions created by the patriarchal bias that says Men Are Important. I don't for a moment deny that the men's experience is as important as the women's or as important as the children's. I just deny that some animals are more equal than others.

Emily says

I think that this book does an amazing job of sticking by the details and accurate interpretation of the journals and letters written by the members of the Donner-Reed party. After reading some chapters I feared I would have nightmares! The whole struggle is UNBELIEVABLE! I felt by reading this book published in 1936 that it was a trip back into different time when the author could provide an authentic view of the type of people in the party. I would recommend this book to anyone with slight interested in the Donner Party story. I could hardly put the book down.

Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

Gripping account of the Donner Party's struggle to survive during the winter of 1846 in the Sierra Nevada mountains, by an author who interviewed that last living survivors of the party. I couldn't believe what they suffered before they even got to Donner Pass, much less afterward. I read the book all in one sitting-- just couldn't put it down. Incredible! Highly recommended!

Hapzydeco says

Today, "Ordeal By Hunger" is rather dated if only because there are no visuals. The maps are poorly detailed. But for those yet unaware of this historical footnote, "Ordeal By Hunger" should be the first step towards understanding the dark side of the human experience. Thus, there is wisdom to be found in these pages.

Chuck says

This book goes beyond words. It is inspirational and disgusting at the same time. It highlights all the best of mankind's soul, but also the worst. The book was written in 1936 when one of the Donner Party was still alive but author Stewart apparently had also researched in great detail the diaries and the journals of the settlers involved in this tragic event. He tells the story in such complete detail it makes you feel like you were there and knew everyone personally. He shares with us the bravery of the of the settlers as well as the rescue teams and makes it clear that the leaders of this expedition made many mistakes on their journey. Of the eighty some members of the Donner party only about half survived, but most that did went on to successful lives. There are no words that can adequately explain the inspirational and soul searching aspects of this book other than to highlight that it reveals kindness, thoughtfulness as well as selfishness at its best and worst revealed by the harshest of circumstances. Needless to say, an excellent insightful book.

Julia says

This book absolutely blew me away. I had heard of the Donner Party and knew something of their fate, but nothing can prepare you for their full story.
