

Back in Time The Hastings Cutoff and Highway 80 Tragedy of the Donner Party

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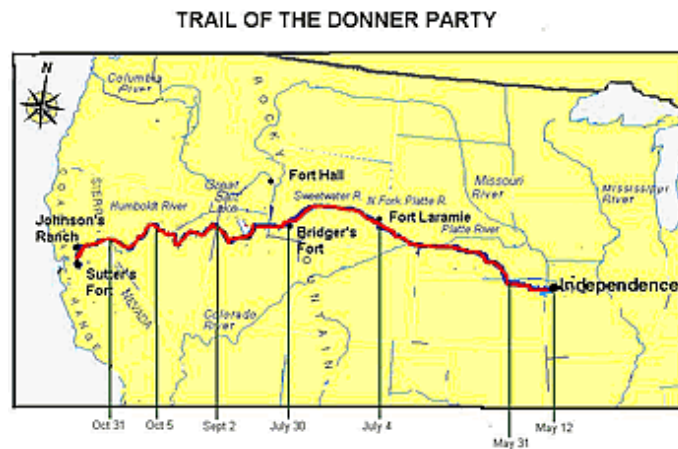
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Back in Time

The Hastings Cutoff and Highway 80 Tragedy of the Donner Party

By Rickie Longfellow

More than 155 years ago one of the worst tragedies in American travel occurred during the westward migration. The 1840s wagon train journey to California usually began at Independence, Missouri, around the first of May. Taken into consideration were rainfalls that could wash out roads and flood riverbanks, immature grass to feed livestock, or grass that would be eaten by previous wagon trains if they left too early. Travelers had about 123 days to go 2,200 miles and be on the other side of the Sierra Nevada Mountains before October ended. If not, they ran the risk of being stranded in artic-like conditions.



Stranded in the early snows of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, nearly half the travelers died of starvation and illness. Even today Interstate 80 has to be closed occasionally due to heavy snows and blizzards.

On April 15, 1846, the families of James Reed and George and Jacob Donner departed from Springfield, Illinois to start a new life in California. About 100 miles from Independence, Missouri the group of 31 joined a large wagon train. The trip was long, hardships were many and roads and trails were intermittent, muddy and sometimes non-existent. In June of that year the wagon train had reached Fort Laramie, Wyoming. It is there that the Reed, Donner and other families decided to take the Hastings Cutoff. The Cutoff would shave 300 miles off their journey, rejoining the California Trail on the other side of the Sierra's. Considering a wagon could travel 12 miles in a good day, then 300 miles meant they could arrive more than a month early. James Clyman, a traveler returning from the Hastings Cutoff, advised against it.

However, in early July the group of 87 travelers in 23 wagons led by George Donner left the wagon train to follow the Hastings Cutoff to California. A few weeks prior to their departure, a group of 60 to 75 wagons took the route and another traveler assured the Donner party that it was a good route to follow. After crossing the Great Salt Lake Desert in Utah, the Donner party stopped at Truckee's Meadows, present day Reno, Nevada, to rest, but soon continued on. During a snowstorm they stopped and set up camp at the east end of Truckee Lake, now named Donner Lake, California, 13 miles northwest of Lake Tahoe. There they remained during the winter of 1846 to 1847, and it is there

that nearly half of them died from starvation and illness before rescue parties, which failed repeatedly due to blizzards and deep snows, finally were able to reach them. They took the survivors to Sutter's Fort, California by the route that is now known as Donner Pass.



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Following the old wagon trails, today's Interstate 80 begins in San Francisco and passes through Sacramento, cresting at Donner Summit and following the main emigrant trail to California that so many followed during the gold rush of 1848 to 1849. I-80 is the main east-west interstate artery in northern California, running parallel to the railroad and following the same route that prehistoric peoples used. Portions of I-80, the old US 40 and the Lincoln Highway, in the Big Bend-Donner Lake area, are still open as a scenic route during the summer months. The intense snowfall in this area, however, presents the same hazards as it did in the days of the Donner Party tragedy. It is so heavy that the roads have to be closed occasionally.

Internet Sites:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/donner/maps/index.html>

http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=503

<http://www.elkorose.com/wagonsho.html>

<http://www.sierranavadaphotos.com/geography/roads/>

<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/trailofthe49ers/life.htm>

<http://www.utahcrossroads.org/DonnerParty/>

<http://www.donnerpartydiary.com/>

<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/trailofthe49ers/trail.htm>
