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SP#34

## DONNER MONUMENT

(Summary by John Samuel Fox)

The Donner party, of 1846, formed part of a wagon train crossing on the regular trail from the Mississippi country to Oregon and California. This group of eighty-nine men, women, and children, traveling in twenty wagons and driving livestock along, separated from the main body of the train on July 20, 1846, to follow a supposed "cut-off" which would save three hundred miles and was reported to be easier to travel.

The party was composed of farmers and business men, country-folk and townspeople from the Middle West, all looking forward to a new start in California. Unfortunately, their training and backgrounds did not prepare them for the journey ahead. They lacked the knowledge and skills required of frontiersmen and mountain-men, and were unable to cope successfully with the strange new environment of the western mountains.

From the place near the Little Sandy River where they turned off the main trail, the group crossed the mountains into the Salt Lake Basin, traveled over the great salt plains, and made for the Truckee River by way



of the Humboldt. With the exception of the salt desert, almost all that country was rough and slow of passage. Roads had to be broken for the heavy wagons, food and water became scarcer, and the animals weakened and died.

It was not until October that the party reached Truckee Lake, now called Donner Lake, a few short miles east of the summit of the Sierra Nevada. The delays on the road had made them the last train in that year's migrations, just a few days too late to complete the journey, for the early snows blocked the pass. The road was hidden under snowbanks; men and animals were spiritless and exhausted; there was no alternative but to make camp for the winter.

All the hardships of emigration to the west coast were intensified for the Donner party during that winter. Their shelter consisted of three rude cabins and such of the wagons as were left. At best, these were inadequate for the hard mountain winter with its rain and snows, bitter cold and cutting wind. Above all, they had practically no food. A few oxen, cows, horses, and mules were left, but most of them strayed off to be buried in the deep snow, and the remainder were soon consumed. Boiled hides, grass, or the flesh of their dead became the sources of food. These men were not hunters or fishers,



so supplies could not be obtained in that way. Some attempt was made to cross the pass on snowshoes of their own making, but this also failed. A more terrible winter, during which death, madness and cannibalism were constant spectral guests, is not to be found in the annals of western history.

Help arrived in the early spring of the following year when rescue parties were able to break through from the western side of the mountains. The journey of the Donner party was completed between February and April as the survivors were escorted over the mountains and the others accounted for. Thus ended a most tragic tale of heroism and cowardness, sacrifice, love, horror, avarice, and toil.



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By John Samuel Fof

Snowbound on this lake during the winter 1846-1847,  
after a disastrous desert journey, many of the Reed-Donner  
party of 87 pioneers died from exposure and starvation here.  
Through heroic efforts of James Reed, Charles Stanton, and  
William Eddy, who crossed the summit and obtained help on the  
coast, the few survivors were rescued in March, 1847.