



The Perilous Journey of the Donner Party

Marian Calabro

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On April 14, 1846, the Donner Party set out from Springfield, Illinois, in search of a better life in the largely unsettled California territory. The trip started well but eventually questionable choices and infighting delayed pioneers' attempt to cross the Sierra Nevada until winter. As the impassable snows closed in and their supplies dwindled to nothing, the group faced an almost hopeless struggle for survival that would push some toward the final taboo of cannibalism. Nearly half the members of the Donner Party were children. This account, filled with selections from the survivors' letters and diaries, focuses on the children's experiences, making it uniquely compelling and accessible to young readers. Index, bibliography, chronology, group rosters, suggestions for further research.

The Perilous Journey of the Donner Party Details

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From Reader Review The Perilous Journey of the Donner Party for online ebook

Alicia says

The pacing of the book is what makes it a perilous read! I wish that the writing approach was different to keep the book moving and more active as readers follow along on this horrid journey across the "American" landscape that was yet to be all the United States. The tediousness, the family, the in-fighting between groups, the lack of food, the terrain. It all makes for a fascinating read that ends in a horrible tragedy that is what makes the Donner family so famous, but I'd take a documentary rather than this book unfortunately because the book doesn't do the story justice.

Pam says

Previous to reading this title, all I knew about the Donner party is that they got stuck in the mountains in the winter and resorted to cannibalism. Now I know that there were eventually 90 people total on the trip from Illinois to California, they left late and took longer than planned, and tried to take a shortcut that added many days to their trip. They were stuck on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada mountains when they decided to stay there over winter. The snow eventually was 20 feet deep, which made fishing and hunting impossible. They resorted to boiling strips of the hides of the butchered oxen, which they were using for shelter. The group was actually split up, with two encampments and a scouting group, and it seems that each group resorted to cannibalism. About half of the group survived the trip.

Elizabeth Ricks says

For my PowerPoint on the Donner Party. This is one of the better books.

Katie says

Fascinating and well told. I would recommend this for middle school and up.

Starlate says

This book makes me want: puke cry hide puke shudder not take for granted the invention of cars, airplanes and trains puke. They EAT! PEOPLE! HUMANS! Who used to be alive!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Gasp! Barf! Faint! I have a strong stomach, but this? This was revolting. Too much snow for me. It snows so much in the mountains, which from the cover obviously makes you know something went horribly wrong there. Too wrong for me. This book had me wondering what it was like to eat people, people you knew, and that's just not me. This book makes me feel like screaming **why me!?!?** at the sky, why did I have to read it? If I could

give the book half a star for true facts and pictures I would. I wish I had never read it. I hope I never remember it for the rest of my life. I only read this for school, and I'm kind of wondering if getting an F would be worth not reading it. Wait no, I've thought about it and it would be worth it.

Merwyn Haskett says

This review was originally posted at OlyForums - now a part of Everyday Olympia.

When it comes to reading books and writing reviews about them I have Goodreads to show off my blurbs and star ratings, and a unfortunately semi-defunct blog called The Taze Files where I put a bit more effort into it.

However, due to a irrefusable request from my good friend Onry, I'll share my thoughts on The Perilous Journey of The Donner Party by Marian Calabro right here - an Olyforums exclusive!

Most people know, or are at least vaguely familiar with, the story of an 1840's wagon train, stranded in Sierra Nevada snowdrifts up to 22 feet high, which had to resort to Cannibalism to survive. Most haven't learned what brought the party into what would be named Donner Pass in the first place.

It was many families, with the same number of reasons, making the trek to California. While every other pioneer was following the Oregon Trail, a small handful were turning Southwest with the assumption of free land from the Mexican Government. (A few years later gold would be found near John Sutter's mill and California would never be the same.)

It was poor information, fraudulent travelogues, infighting, politicking - poor wagoning habits and plain bad luck that brought the pioneers to a trap for nearly five months. After the food was gone they ate the remaining livestock, then the family pets. After that was the boots, the book bindings - a bear rug was toasted over an open fire - and then the ox-hides which were used for tarps. When nothing else was left they ate each other in desperation.

A lot of the story is brought to life from the letters and journals kept by Virginia Reed, aged 13 when she was living through this. Her spelling is atrocious (women in the 1840's only needed to know how to get married and do housekeeping) but her ability to convey what she and the rest were experiencing is haunting. The situation brought out the extremes in horror and humor, hope and despair, cowardice and bravery, kindness and absolute cruelty.

It's coincidental that I was reading this when I did. I heard of it merely because it was the first book on a booklist I'm attempting to tackle. Turns out I'll be riding a train this weekend across the Great Salt Basin (which nearly killed them first), through Donner Pass and on to Sacramento where the Reed's ended up (some of the streets were named for them.)

Loaded with pictures, this book is easy for older kids to read while being able to maintain an adult's interest. The final taboo is gruesome enough not to be a sugarcoating without crossing the line into sensationalism. It shows a modern world, unaccustomed to deadly hardships, what our Grandparents had to go through to bring us where we are today.

Arliegh Kovacs says

I picked this one up at the library when I was looking for some non-fiction books. This is thoroughly researched and written so teens and up can understand it.

There were so many mistakes made that become understandable given what the people expected to happen and why they made the choices they did.

It made me realize that I have many 'what ifs' in my own life and inspired me about the necessity for turning back when I see that I've made a bad choice.

I especially liked this excerpt from a letter written by Virginia Reed (a young survivor) to her cousin in Illinois: [I left the spelling as it was printed from the full letter] "Never take no cutoffs and hurry along as fast as you can."

John says

For this book being over 20 years old, it still packs a punch; I will not be forgetting this book, any time soon!

Joe says

Here are the types of children who will benefit from reading this book, although a combination of all three types would probably be best.

#1. **The Precocious And Brave History Nerd.** Fearless pioneers partaking in manifest destiny forge through the unforgiving wilderness of the Wild West. Will they hack through the impenetrable Wasatch Mountains in time? Should they befriend the Natives? Will the forty-mile desert destroy or invigorate the pioneers? The first two-thirds of this book is for *you* , PABHN!

#2. **Language Geeks.** Get ready to salivate (poor choice of words, I agree) over the lush language, particularly in the ominous and liberal foreshadowing that Calabro so heavily relies on. It's effective, too, in that the horror around the corner always seems to be nipping at the party's heels. Like your buddy the History Nerd, Language Geek will love the first 2/3 of *The Perilous Journey of the Donner Party*.

#3. **The Child With A Cast-Iron Stomach.** And then, as we all know, cannibalism arrives. Although Calabro handles the subject gently - or as gently as one can handle describing the consumption of human flesh - it is very much not for the weak-willed. Even incidents preceding the cannibalism (like Edgar Breen's sickening fall from a horse) are horrifically blunt. As the desperation of the Donner Party mounts, so too does the tension, and Junior Gorehounds will probably enjoy the ride.

Calabro thoughtfully includes brief descriptions of the lives of the survivors in their later years and peppers the retelling with historical documents, photographs, and drawings that add to the humanity - and inhumanity - of the journey.

Shreyas Isukapalli says

This book is slow book and if you like an action packed book with constant action then don't read this book.

Cait S says

I continue to be fascinated by every book about the Donner Party that I can get my hands on. And I also continue to come out of them with the same singular thought:

"Okay, but why do we let white men decide anything?"

Michael says

The Perilous Journey of the Donner Party is a non-Fiction book written by Marian Calabro . A non-fiction book is a book that is written about a true event, a time in history, or factual information. The Donner Party was a group of people made up of a few different families who lived in Springfield, Illinois. They had a great life where they were but they still wanted more. America had recently taken over California and there was a lot of cheap land there. So, on April 15th in 1846, a few families packed up their wagons and headed off to California, where they hoped to start a new life with much land for all of them. As they started off on their trip, part of the group wanted to take the normal trail to California that most people take, but another part of the party wanted to take a cutoff called Hastings Cutoff that some of them read about in a book. Apparently this "shortcut" might save them 300 miles. It took a while, but finally one part of the group convinced the other part to take this cutoff. They finally arrived at the Ruby Mountain Range where the cutoff began and they took it. As they were part of the way down the road, they realized that there was no real trail and it was not an actual trail (meaning a real path). It was too late to turn back so they decided to keep on going (Not the best decision that they made). After passing through a giant desert and deserting one of their big wagons, they arrived at their biggest obstacle, the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range. This mountain was too steep for wagons to climb so they had to abandon the wagons. They kept a little bit of their livestock with them but not that many. As they finally got to the top of the mountain, they began to cross the Range. Snowstorms that brought down 22 feet of snow came day and night. They could not go far in this weather so they made camp. Sooner or later, they ran out of food to eat so they ate anything that they could get their hands on. They ate their dog, Cash, and even ate the hides from the cattle that they used for ceilings in their poorly constructed cabins. Eventually, their lives were at hand. They were all sick and cold and there was too much snow for them all to cross the mountain range. A few people tried to cross and made it but only a few at a time. Finally, they came to their last resort, to eat the dead. If you were there, do you think you would be able to do the unthinkable and eat the dead? Many people kept diaries, which is what proof we have left today. The cutoff that they took ended up being a long-cut, not a short-cut.

Overall, this book was a great book and easy to understand. There were many pictures and captions that gave you an idea of what the people went to. The book was made in chapters and the last few chapters were about the legacy that the Donner party left and about all of the survivors. I think that this book was very good and I am usually not the biggest non-fiction reader but for a book in that genre, I was surprised by how entertaining it was and all of the great detail really surprised me. I would definitely recommend this to anybody who likes an interesting non-fiction book with many fun facts and descriptive pictures and does not

mind a bit of gory details. Thanks, and I hope that you enjoy this as much as me.

Claire Alexander says

Manageable version of the Donner Party saga. Doesn't hold back, but not overdramatized. A good amount of detail about what it was like to travel at that time in North American History. It's a bit Reed-oriented, with a lens that may distort the story: much of it is told from over the shoulder of Virginia Reed. We don't get the perspective of, say, Tamsen Donner. Still, it's a good read.

Bailey says

I first chose this book because I'd heard a little about the Donner's in social studies. It wasn't exactly my first choice for a nonfiction book, and that made it even worse. It was almost 200 pages of slow writing. It was absolutely boring and it lost my attention from the very first page. I was desperate to get a nonfiction book over with, so I decided to finish. It was a horrible decision, I even fell asleep reading it. I now know about just as much as I did before I read this book. The writing was boring and hard to follow. I'm proud that I got it over with, but I wouldn't recommend this book at all.

Carol says

This is a child's book, so I selected it because I expected it would treat the subject gently enough for children. I didn't want to read something that would dwell on the repulsive. What I really wanted to learn was the entire story from beginning to end. I got what I was hoping for. It begins in Illinois explaining why the families decided to go and how they packed to leave. The last chapter tells how all of the survivors spent their lives until they eventually died. While it didn't dwell on the horror, it treated it in a very straightforward manner. It explained what was known and what was conjecture. It described conflicting reports of what happened. It examined motivations, and seemed to try to support the reader to make it through reading about the almost unfathomable. Kudos to the author for her sensitivity in telling such a difficult story. I had been camping at Donner Lake, and felt that I just had to learn the story. Up until then I'd never wanted to read about it because I knew I would be nauseated. This book makes it pretty clear that eating human flesh was the only option, and in context of the rest of the misery may not have even been the worst or most disgusting of their experiences. Eating mice and shoelaces doesn't sound that great either.
