The Tragic Fate of the Donner Party, 1847

*In mid-April 1846, eight families gathered at Springfield, Illinois with a common goal – to find a better life beyond the Rockies. Numbering about thirty-two members that ranged in age from infants to the elderly, the* ***expedition*** *pointed their nine brand-new wagons west on a journey…*

*The trek had been organized by James Reed, a businessman who hoped to prosper in California… George Donner, a sixty-year-old farmer was chosen as the wagon train’s captain and the expedition took his name. They estimated it would take four months to accomplish their objective. As they traveled to the Mississippi River they joined other adventurers with the same goal until their* ***caravan*** *stretched for two miles while under way…   
  
Before leaving Illinois, James Reed had heard of a newly discovered route through the Sierra Nevada Mountains that promised to cut as many as 300 miles off their journey. It was at Fort Bridger that some eighty-seven members of the wagon train, including the Donner bothers and their families, decided to separate from the main body and travel this new route west. All of those who traveled the old route ended their journey safely. This was not the case with those who took the alternative path.*

*The* ***culprit*** *was snow. As the Donner Party approached the summit of the Sierra Mountains near what is now Donner Lake (known as Truckee Lake at the time) they found the pass clogged with new-fallen snow up to six feet deep. It was October 28, 1846 and the Sierra snows had started a month earlier than usual. They retreated to the lake twelve miles below… unable to move forward or back. Shortly before, the Donner family had suffered a broken axle on one of their wagons and fallen behind. Also trapped by the snow, they set up camp at Alder Creek six miles from the main group…*

*Patrick Breen was a member of the Donner Party and kept a diary of their ordeal during the winter of 1846-47… We join his story about three weeks after the Donner Party arrived at the blocked pass:*

Truckey’s Lake. November 20, 1846  
Came to this place on the thirty-first of last month; went into the pass; the snow so deep we were unable to find the road, and when within three miles from the summit, turned back to this ***shanty***on Truckey's Lake; Stanton came up one day after we arrived here; we again took our teams and wagons, and made another unsuccessful attempt to cross incompany with Stanton; we returned to this shanty; it continued to snow all the time. We now have killed most part of our cattle, having to remain here until next spring, and live on lean beef, without bread or salt. It snowed during the space of eight days, with little intermission, after our arrival, though now clear and pleasant, freezing at night; the snow nearly gone from the valleys.

November 21. Fine morning; wind northwest; twenty-two of our company about starting to cross the mountains this day, including Stanton and his Indians.

Nov. 23. Same weather; wind west; the expedition cross the mountains returned after an unsuccessful attempt.

Nov. 27. Still snowing; now about three feet deep; wind west; killed my last oxen to-day; gave another ***yoke*** to Foster; wood hard to begot.

Nov. 30. Snowing fast; looks as likely to continue as when it ***commenced***; no living thing without wings can get about.

Dec. 1. Still snowing; wind west; snow about six or seven and a half feet deep; very difficult to get wood, and we are completely housed up; our cattle all killed but two or three, and these, with the horses and Stanton's mules, all supposed to be lost in the snow; no hopes of finding them.  
  
Dec. 5. Beautiful sunshine; thawing a little; looks delightful after the long storm; snow seven or eight feet deep.

Dec. 6. The morning fine and clear; Stanton and Graves manufacturing snow-shoes for another mountain scrabble; no account of mules.

Dec. 9. Commenced snowing about eleven o'clock; wind northwest; took in Spitzer yesterday, so weak that he cannot rise without help; caused by starvation. Some have ***scanty*** supply of beef; Stanton trying to get some for himself and Indians; not likely to get much.

Dec. 14. Snows faster than any previous day; Stanton and Graves, with several others, making preparations to cross the mountains on snow-shoes; snow eight feet on a level.

Dec. 16. Fair and pleasant; froze hard last night; the company started on snow-shoes to cross the mountains; wind southeast.

Dec. 17. Pleasant; William Murphy returned from the mountain party last evening; Baylis Williams died night before last; Milton and Noah started for Donner's eight days ago; not returned yet; think they are lost in the snow.

Dec. 20. Clear and pleasant; Mrs. Reed here; no account from Milton yet. Charles Burger started for Donner's; turned back; unable to proceed; tough times but not discouraged. Our hope is in God. Amen.

Dec. 21. Milton got back last night from Donner's camp. Sad news; Jacob Donner, Samuel Shoemaker, Rhinehart, and Smith are dead; the rest of them in a low situation; snowed all night, with a strong southwest wind.

Dec. 23. Clear to-day; Milton took some of his meat away; all well at their camp. Began this day to read the 'Thirty Days' Prayers;' Almighty God, grant the requests of unworthy sinners!

Dec. 25. Began to snow yesterday, snowed all night, and snows yet rapidly; extremely difficult to find wood; uttered our prayers to God this Christmas morning; the prospect is appalling, but we trust in Him.

Dec. 27. Cleared off yesterday, and continues clear; snow nine feet deep; wood growing scarce; a tree, when felled, sinks into the snow and is hard to be got at.

Dec. 31. Last of the year. May we, with the help of God, spend the coming year better than we have the past, which we propose to do if it is the will of the Almighty to deliver us from our present dreadful situation. Amen. Morning fair, but cloudy; wind east by south; looks like another snow¬storm. Snow-storms are dreadful to us. The snow at present is very deep.

Jan 1, 1847. We pray the God of mercy to deliver us from our present calamity, if it be His holy will. Commenced snowing last night, and snows a little yet. ***Provisions*** getting very scanty; dug up a hide from under the snow yesterday; have not commenced on it yet."

Jan 3. Fair during the day, freezing at night. Mrs. Reed talks of crossing the mountains with her children.

Jan 4. Fine morning; looks like spring. Mrs. Reed and Virginia, Milton Elliott, and Eliza Williams started a short time ago with the hope of crossing the mountains; left the children here. It was difficult for Mrs. Reed to part with them.

Jan 8. Eliza came back yesterday evening from the mountains, unable to proceed; the others kept ahead.

Jan 15. Mrs. Reed and the others came back; could not find their way on the other side of the mountains. They have nothing but hides to live on."

References: This eyewitness account appears in: McGlashin, C.F., History of the Donner Party (1879, republished 1918): Hough, Emerson, The Passing of the Frontier (1920); Stewart, George R., Ordeal by Hunger, the Story of the Donner Party (1936).

"The Tragic Fate of the Donner Party, 1847" EyeWitness to History, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com (2009).

Vocabulary: ***expedition:*** a group of people going a journey together; ***caravan:*** a single file group of   
 wagons; ***culprit***: one guilty of a crime; ***shanty:*** poorly built cabin; ***yoke:*** a crossbar with a   
 double harness that connects oxen to the wagon; ***commenced:*** started; ***scanty:*** very little   
 or low; ***provisions:*** a stock of necessary food and supplies

After reading the passage, answer the following questions providing evidence from the document.

1. Where did the journey begin? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_How many people started the journey together? \_\_\_\_\_\_

2. When did this event take place? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

3. What was the purpose of their journey west? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

4. How do the words *expedition*, *journey*, and *caravan* help you to better understand the meaning of   
 word ***trek*** on line 5? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

5a. The word ***route*** on line 10 has multiple meanings. What is the meaning of the word in the context  
 of this document?  
 a. a highway b. an area given to a delivery person  
 c. a way of travel d. the underground part of a plant  
5b. Find a synonym for this word in lines 1-10? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

6. List two reasons the Donner Party was unable to cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains.   
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7. What are the main topics of Patrick Breen’s diary entries? Why do you think he kept writing about   
 the same thing? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
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8. In this set of entries, how many attempts are made to cross the mountains? Are any of the attempts  
 successful? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
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9. On line 55, the mood or feeling of the diary entries changes. What does the mood change to?   
 Provide evidence from the text to support your answer. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
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10a. What was the tragic fate of the Donner Party? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
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10b. Explain your thinking in 10a. What evidence in the text support your answer? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
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