

# DEATH OF LAST SURVIVOR RECALLS TRAGIC STORY OF DONNER PARTY

SAN FRANCISCO, Dec. 14.—The recent death at Byron, California, of Mrs. Frances E. Wilder, a daughter of Captain George Donner, has recalled the tragic story of the Donner party, forty-two of whom perished in deserts and mountains in the winter of 1846-47, while en route to California. Only a half-dozen survivors remain today to tell the tale of that most disastrous of all migrations of the Argonauts, in which they participated as children.

Among these half-dozen are three sisters of Mrs. Wilder, children of the captain from whom the party took its name. They are Mrs. Eliza P. Houghton of Los Angeles, 78; Mrs. Leana App of Jamestown, California, 86; and Mrs. Elitha C. Wilder of Bruceville, California, 89. A daughter of James F. Reed, a member of the party, who forced his way over the snow-capped Sierra mountains and then returned with relief for his dying companions, is living at Capitola, California. Her name is Mrs. Mattie Lewis and she is a bright-eyed lady, 77 years young.

Of all the companies that made their way by ox wagons on the Overland Trail across desert and mountain to California before the railroad linked East with West, the experiences of the Donner party were the worst. Theirs was the greatest loss of life, and it was attended by a slow starvation during the six months they were held in the high Sierras that finally drove the stronger members of the party to that last expedient of man—feeding upon his own kind.

Of the eighty-eight men, women and children that started with or joined the Donner party, forty-two perished. Six died in the deserts of Utah and Nevada, and thirty-six succumbed to the horrors of the mountain camps.

All the suffering and loss of life may be ascribed to the primary mistake in taking a southerly course around the Great Salt Lake from Fort Bridger, Wyoming, instead of the usual course around the northern end. The rocky passes in the Wasatch mountains of Utah delayed them one month; the sands of the Great American Desert and the Humboldt Sink stalled their wagons and starved their cattle.

The party was in starving condition when it reached Truckee Meadows, site of the present city of Reno, Nevada, October 19, 1846. The emigrants were met there by Charles T. Stanton, who had preceded them to California, and returned with two Indians, Luis and Salvador, bringing five mule loads of provisions. After some delay the party pushed on, but October 23 found themselves stalled in snow at the foot of precipices at an elevation of 6,000 feet from which the trail rose in one mile and a half 12,000 feet to the summit, where two to five feet of snow lay. They were in a pocket of the mountains. A snowfall began that in a week placed ten feet of snow about them.

Some were at Prosser Creek, some at Alder Creek and some at Donner Lake. They erected tents and brush-wood huts, about which they wrapped rubber coats and quilts. There were at this time 81 persons in the camps, 24 men, 16 women and 43 children. In the subsequent happenings the women showed the greater courage and endurance. Of the fifteen only five died, and four of these gave their lives to aid or comfort their children or companions.

On December 16 the "forlorn hope" started over the snow on foot. It consisted of nine men, five women and a boy. Six days later Stanton, the rescuer, gave out and was abandoned. A storm that began Christmas Day halted them a week. Three men died and were eaten. January 4, another man succumbed and was eaten. William Foster pursued and shot the Indians, Luis and Salvador, who were eaten. The party came out of the Snow January 1, were aided by Indians who gave them acorn bread and helped them to Johnson's Rancho. They had been 32 days coming from Donner's Lake, and eight had died. Two men survived and all the five women.

The experiences of the four relief parties, from the first that left Sutter's Fort, February 5, to the last, April 13, were similar to those of the "forlorn hope" party. Going in on their return trips. In several instances these caches were destroyed by wild animals, so that the return trips with the emaciated, weakened Donner party became struggles with death, in which many died and were eaten by their starving companions.

The fourth and last relief party started from Johnson's Rancho, April 13. They had been promised by the alcalde half of the fortune of several thousand dollars in money and goods which George Donner was supposed to possess.

The seven men of the party under William O. Pallon, reached Donner Lake in four days. Lewis Keseberg was the only one alive of the many who had not been able to accompany the relief parties who had preceded them. Of Keseberg, the relief men demanded money, accusing him of having robbed, killed, and eaten George Donner and his wife. Tamsen, Keseberg finally gave them \$500 which he said Mrs. Donner had requested him to give to her children should he reach California.

The fourth relief started back next day, Keseberg following them as well as he could with an injured leg. Each night he managed to make camp, and finally reached civilization. To the end of his life he was an object of accusation and aversion, although most survivors and historians agree that he was innocent.

The brightest part of the story was the heroism of the women. Of the five who died, Mrs. Donner gave her life to be with her husband at his death. Mrs. Jacob Donner remained with her four children; Mrs. Graves stayed for the sake of four little ones, and Mrs. Murphy cared for her son and three grandchildren until too ill to accompany the rescuers.

To the zeal of Mrs. Patrick Breen was mainly due the rescue of her husband and eleven children who had been left in the snow while the relief party went forward for help when they discovered a cache had been destroyed. Mrs. Breen kept fires burning, nursed children with a little sugar and water and kept them alive until rescue came. She would not feed upon the bodies of some who had died, nor did the children with her knowledge.

The efforts of James F. Reed, undoubtedly saved many lives. Banished to the desert in Nevada, for having fatally stabbed James Snyder when Snyder struck Mrs. Reed with a whip while the two men were fighting, Reed made his way by horseback over the mountains to California ahead of the Donner party. Although he did not fully realize the seriousness of their condition, he caused the first relief party to be dispatched, and himself led the second expedition.

### BONDS BRING PREMIUM

PRESCOTT—Three hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of 6 per cent water bonds issued by the city of Prescott under the bond election held Jan. 10, 1920, last night were sold to Bosworth, Chanute & Co. of Denver, for par and accrued interest plus a minimum of \$3675.

The price paid for each \$1000 bond is \$1010.50 and accrued interest, the sale, of course, being subject to the approval of the bond buyers' attorneys. The money will be available within a week or two, and will be used to provide the water mains and provide additional water supply for the city.—Courier.

### All in a Nutshell

Elijah Johnson, sage of a small Alabama town, was trying to make clear in the mind of a friend just what constitutes oratory.

"It's jest like dis," he elucidated. "Ef you says black am white, dat's foolish. But ef you says black AM white, and bellers like a bull and pounds de table with bofe yo' fistses, dat am oratory!"

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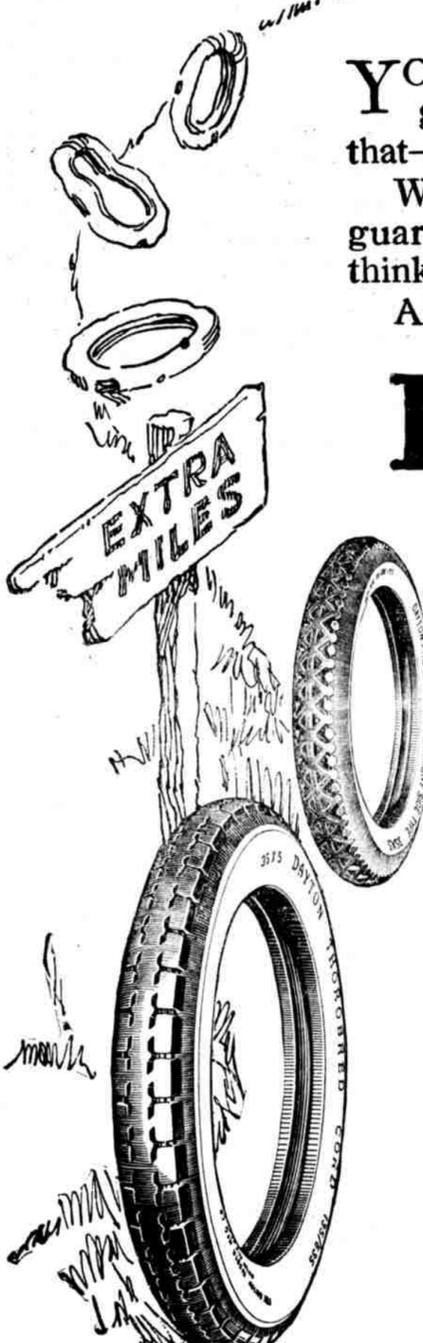
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