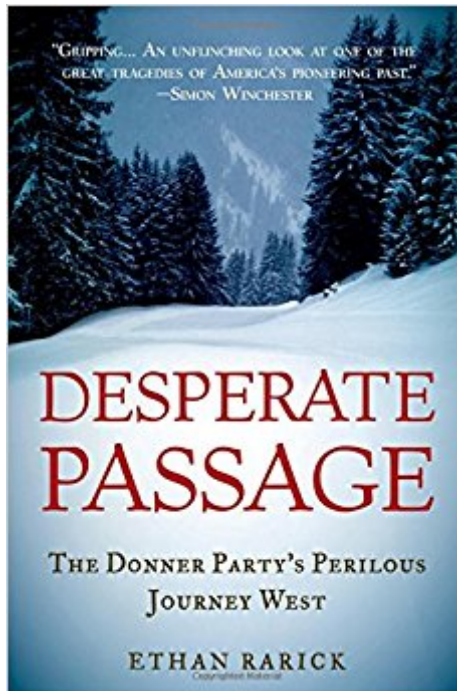




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# Desperate Passage: The Donner Party's Perilous Journey West



## Synopsis

In late October 1846, the last wagon train of that year's westward migration stopped overnight before resuming its arduous climb over the Sierra Nevada Mountains, unaware that a fearsome storm was gathering force. After months of grueling travel, the 81 men, women and children would be trapped for a brutal winter with little food and only primitive shelter. The conclusion is known: by spring of the next year, the Donner Party was synonymous with the most harrowing extremes of human survival. But until now, the full story of what happened, what it tells us about human nature and about America's westward expansion, remained shrouded in myth. Drawing on fresh archaeological evidence, recent research on topics ranging from survival rates to snowfall totals, and heartbreaking letters and diaries made public by descendants a century-and-a-half after the tragedy, Ethan Rarick offers an intimate portrait of the Donner party and their unimaginable ordeal: a mother who must divide her family, a little girl who shines with courage, a devoted wife who refuses to abandon her husband, a man who risks his life merely to keep his word. But Rarick resists both the gruesomely sensationalist accounts of the Donner party as well as later attempts to turn the survivors into archetypal pioneer heroes. "The Donner Party," Rarick writes, "is a story of hard decisions that were neither heroic nor villainous. Often, the emigrants displayed a more realistic and typically human mixture of generosity and selfishness, an alloy born of necessity." A fast-paced, heart-wrenching, clear-eyed narrative history, *A Desperate Hope* casts new light on one of America's most horrific encounters between the dream of a better life and the harsh realities such dreams so often must confront.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"His is the first significant book, written, like Stewart's, in a novelistic mode and likely to gain popular readership, to incorporate this new data...Rarick's account is not really about science; it's about humanity...Rarick has done his homework."--New York Times Book Review

"This sober, unflinching look at one of the great tragedies of America's pioneering past tells us a great deal that is new about the Donner Party's trials. Rarick scythes away the myths of one of the nation's better-known sagas, and offers up this horrific but ennobling tale in all its freshly researched detail. Readers take heed: this is a tough book, but a gripping one."--Simon Winchester, author of Krakatoa

"Rarick takes an evenhanded and thorough approach to the story of the Donners' covered-wagon migration across the country and their winter entrapment in the Sierras. His telling is evocative and easy to read."--Seattle Times

"Desperate Passage is the most up-to-date narrative history of the Donner Party available today and as such is a welcome addition to the literature. General readers, especially those who know of the Donner party only as the cannibal wagon train, will undoubtedly find it a fascinating read."--Overland Journal

"Many books tell the Donner story, but none digs as deep for the truth as Ethan Rarick's Desperate Passage: The Donner Party's Perilous Journey West...With personal details...bringing a human touch to the story, Desperate Passage succeeds in rescuing the Donner Party from 162 years of infamy."--Tacoma News Tribune

"A history of the first rank--precise, restrained and compelling...Desperate Passage makes a gripping tale, and Rarick makes a scrupulous guide."--Cleveland Plain Dealer

"With a reporter's doggedness and a scholar's thoroughness, Rarick has clarified the historical details...Rarick makes this compelling frontier drama all the more so."--National Geographic Adventure Magazine

"A clean, chilling cautionary story of misjudgment and perseverance...Rarick deals with this most extreme of issues [cannibalism] with the evenhandedness and lack of melodrama that characterize the book throughout."--Houston Chronicle

"A well-written, copiously documented account."--Deseret Morning News

"Reads like a novel, and for those who are drawn to American history...coupled with one of the most grisly survival tales in history, then this is the absolute book for you."--Monsters and Critics website

"Desperate Passage is a wise book, not only a horror or an adventure story but a universal and timeless tale about acts of desperation performed by average people under extreme conditions--a situation that can befall coal miners in Utah, soccer teams in the Andes, occupants of the World Trade Center, or readers of the book."--Philip L. Fradkin, author of Wallace Stegner and the American West

"Rarick illuminates this classic America stage through a deftly told drama of courage and cowardice...with a fascinating cast ranging from the iconic American Everyman to the astonishing scoundrels."--Van Gordon Sauter, former President, CBSNews

"Like the foreboding passages in an operatic overture,

the ordeal of the Donner Party warned Americans that tragedy could not be banished from this newly acquired province. In this meticulously detailed narrative, Ethan Rarick presents the full horror and bravery of a dystopian episode that would forever qualify the California experience."--Kevin Starr, University of Southern California, author of *Americans and the California Dream*"The story of the ill-fated Donner Party's trek across the country is the reverse image of Lewis and Clark's: seemingly everything that could go wrong, did go wrong--from bad leadership to disastrous choices, from fatal accidents to murderous fights, and finally a ghastly ordeal in the Sierra snows. It's a remarkable story for all generations, and with the advantage of updated research and a keen eye for detail, Ethan Rarick builds a quick-moving narrative."--Dayton Duncan, author of *Out West: An American Journey Along the Lewis and Clark Trail*

Ethan Rarick has written about politics, crime, business and sports throughout the West. His work has appeared in many publications, including the *Los Angeles Times* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and he is the author of *California Rising: The Life and Times of Pat Brown*. He lives in Berkeley, California.

The story of the Donner Party joins the ranks of those whose lives are touched by tragedy, courage and cowardliness, yet there is more to the story of the Donners and the others who attempted to make it across an unforgiving terrain at a time when there was little or no help. Ethan Rarick writes from his research in letters, diaries and newspapers of the day, as well as accounts of survivors who lived to tell the harrowing tale of life and death that most people will never experience. At a time when "going west" meant leaving friends and loved ones as well as the safety of the familiar behind, the Donners left Independence, Missouri on May 11, 1846 for their goal two thousand miles away in California. Rarick's account of the legendary trek of the families who met the extremes of human survival and how they confronted it will leave the reader asking, was it worth it? The Donner's story is part of an American tragedy which has been covered in half-truths and myths, but which Rarick beautifully and heartbreakingly illustrates here.

I have always enjoyed reading about the pioneer experience. I had heard about the Donner party and how they became stranded. This book has brought their ordeal to life for me in a vivid, thought-provoking way. Much of it is based on surviving diaries. I wonder how I would have fared under such conditions. I am about 3/4ths of the way thru the book, and don't want it to end--although of course I DO want them (those who endured) to reach safety. It is a hard story to

read, but also good that it has been preserved and being told. Another point that keeps hitting me: this was not all that long ago. Look how far our country has developed since then.

I was quite impressed with this book. The story starts at the beginning of the westward journey, describing in great detail the conditions of the trip across the American west from Missouri and onwards. Well-documented are each fateful decision made by the Donner Party that slowed down their journey and led to their entrapment in an early winter storm in the high Sierras. This takes the reader halfway through the book, and then the narrative slows down to describe the tenacious escape attempts and survival techniques of the emigrants as they either make their way to the warmer climates of the lowlands or lose hold of life in their snowy prisons. The author does an excellent job stitching together primary and secondary sources, and filling in where needed with perspectives from other relevant historical situations. Most importantly, the author describes other well-documented examples of survival cannibalism (such as in shipwreck situations), where the Donner Party's record fails to explain the process of making that choice and the feelings once the step was taken. This additional context helps the reader understand the social understanding of the survival tactic and empathize more closely with the necessity of these desperate measures. The book is a bit of an apology for the emigrants. The story has been much sensationalized, and the author clearly makes the case that many of the more lurid stories - particularly those that appeared in the press shortly after the ordeal - were more editorial embellishments than eye-witness accounts. A very thorough and engaging account that provides an honest perspective on the Donner Party story. I highly recommend it, especially for Californians of almost any age.

Living in the shadow of the Sierra's, I grew up knowing the story of the Donner party. Rarick's book presented information on the entire party from the start of their journey to the fateful winter in the mountains. I enjoyed learning about the rest of the party members and the other trials and tribulations they endured prior to reaching the Sierras. I thought sometimes the sidebar stories detracted from the main story but understand the author was trying to paint a detailed picture. Well worth reading if you have an interest in the westward migration of the pioneers. Made me really appreciate how dedicated, tough, and persistent these pioneers were.

This is not the first book I have read chronicling the tragic story of the Donner Party, but it is certainly the best! Ethan Rarick's writing style is easy to read and completely engrossing! He includes many interesting details about survival under starvation conditions, snow fall and other

weather information, along with his very factual accounting of what really happened in the Sierra Nevada Mountains during the winter of 1846-47. He relies heavily upon actual accounts from the people directly involved, uses common sense to fill in gaps in the narrative, and dispels long-held myths along the way. My family lives near the Sierras, traveling often to the areas where this tragedy happened, and have read the author's references to the present day locations of those events with interest. Mr. Rarick's extensive research into every detail of this fateful journey shows in this remarkable book. Anyone who wants to know the true story of the Donner Party should read this book! (Written by Anne Sterling)

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