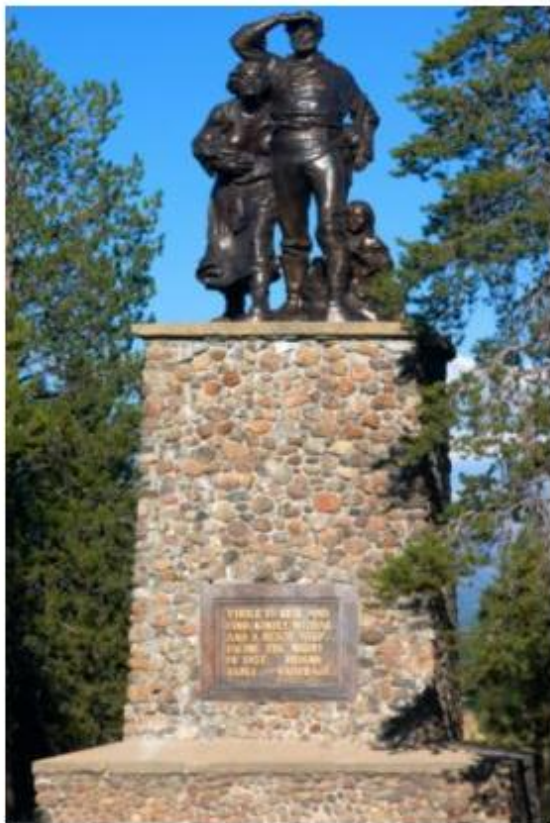


Left or Right?

*Revisiting the Choices Made by the Donner Party as
they Traveled West to California*



an *auto* SOCRATIC PRESS publication

Michael Lee Round

Left or Right?

Revisiting the Choices Made by the Democrat Party as they Trailed West to California



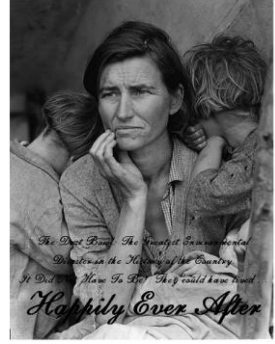
an auto SOCRATIC PRESS publication
Michael Lee Round

Before the Bough Breaks

The Civil War, the American Revolution, and the Logical Consequences of the Issue of Slavery



an auto SOCRATIC PRESS publication
Michael Lee Round



*The Best Friend The World Ever Needed
Dweller in the History of the Country
By Dr. Henry Mann To Be! They could have lived
Happily Ever After*



an auto SOCRATIC PRESS publication
Michael Lee Round

THE SOMNIAC EXCURSION SERIES

History as it was? History as it might have been! The Future as it might be?

Published by:
autoSOCRATIC PRESS
www.rationalsys.com

2010 Michael Lee Round

This is a “work-in-progress” book, with further proof-reading, documentation, and photo/text credits to follow.

Center for
auto SOCRATIC EXCELLENCE





THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

ROBERT FROST

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

PROLOGUE

We were a new country. Independence from England was declared in 1776, but we were still essentially a country *east* of the Mississippi River ... until the Louisiana Purchase *doubled* the size of the country.

Thomas Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark up the Missouri to find the Pacific Ocean. It was 1803.

Even this territory along the west coast wasn't part of the United States. "Oregon Territory" was unclaimed. South was Spanish territory. And Alaska? It belonged to Russia!

And yet, little more than 80 years later, the west was populated. More than one million Americans alone called California home.

The frontier trails west set the tone. "Manifest Destiny" and "Go West Young Man" sparked a mass emigration along the California, Oregon, and Mormon Trails.

Hundreds of thousands made the 2,000 mile walk to the west coast, before the transcontinental railroad, and railroads in general, made the route now passable in days and weeks, rather than months.

Hundreds of thousands of people – the greatest mass migration in American history.

Hardships were everywhere. The prairie land – the "Great American Desert" being passed over was Native American land, of course.

Indian attacks were always a threat. Sickness, however, proved a more formidable foe. Accidents could – and did – happen at any time. Thousands perished. It was rough going.

And when one talks of the Frontier Trails to the west and hardships, one party will always come up, signifying the danger inherent in the trip:

The Donner Party.

They were told, in 1846, to stay “on the main trail” to California. They, like Frost earlier recommended, did not. They chose “the road not taken”. The Hastings Cutoff. A shortcut.

They got stuck in the Sierra Nevadas and rode out the winter some have called the worst of all time. Twenty-two feet of snow. And of the 87 men, women, and children of the Donner Party, only 48 made it to California. To survive, the living fed off the dead. The Donner Party typically conjures up one word: *cannibalism*.

And the lesson that’s come down to us – the living – is:

“Don’t take no shortcuts”.

Is this a valuable lesson? Is it true in all contexts? Is there a time to, as Frost tells us, take “*the one less traveled*”? Yes, for the Donner Party, taking the Cutoff “*has made all the difference*”, but could the outcome have been different?

Let’s see for ourselves ...

Chapter 1

I watched a recent documentary regarding the movement west in the 1800s, and the tragedy of the Donner Party, who left Illinois in 1846 for the beautiful land of California. Their trip taking far longer than expected, they hoped to make up for lost time by taking a “shortcut”, which ended up not being a shortcut at all.

The Party got caught in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and had to resort to cannibalism to survive.

The lesson to be learned? *Stay on the main route.*

After eventually getting to California, Virginia Reed, 12-year-old surviving daughter of James Reed, reiterated this point in a letter to her cousin back in Springfield, Illinois:

“Don’t take no shortcuts and hurry along as fast as you can.”

I finished a glass of milk and went to bed, feeling sorry for the Donner Party, but also *not* feeling so sorry for their making an obviously wrong choice.

How could they put their families at great risk taking an unproven route when thousands of others had taken “the” path successfully?

I woke up the next morning, got dressed, and went outside. *What was this? Where was I?* Was it happening again?

Having gone through the experience at the Battle of Gettysburg (and the subsequent re-writing of the Constitution), I was used to my waking moments directing my dreams, but I can only get so use to this. *It seems so real!*

I walked down the dirt road towards a young man yelling: “Newspapers! Two cents!”

That gave me an idea right off I was quite a bit back in history. But *where? When?*

The paper told me: March 19, 1846. I flipped through the pages of the Sangamo Journal and happened upon an ad:

“Westward ho! Who wants to go to California without it costing them anything? As many as eight young men, of good character, who can drive an ox team, will be accommodated by gentlemen who will leave this vicinity about the first of April. Come, Boys! You can have as much land as you want without costing you anything. The government of California gives large tracts of land to persons who move there. The first suitable persons who apply will be engaged.”

It was signed: George Donner.

What an opportunity! All I had to do was pass along the future words of Virginia Reed and history would be changed!

Or would it?

Too often I've had people tell me, "*Do you know what you should do?*" How do I handle this advice, most often not asked for? Not well, most of the time.

And if it doesn't work for me, what makes me think it will work talking to them? When I give it a moment's thought, it sounds ridiculous. They've been researching the route. They have a book and a map. They have their lifetime of experience behind them. And what do I have? Who am I? Not only would they not listen to me, likely they'd run me out of town!

But is the alternative to say nothing? I can't do that. I know their fate, after all. An idea comes to mind: ride along, biding my time until the opportunity presents itself to warn them off the Shortcut.

Maybe I shouldn't offer my advice right away. Maybe if I rode along, I could find a way to convince them "to stay on the main trail". Maybe ... I decided to go along to California! But was I qualified?

The ad was looking for "a young man of good character". *I'm certainly that!* However, I didn't have much experience with ox teams – *who does these days?* Since I had to fabricate my background anyways, I might as well embellish my skills as well.

I found George Donner and James Reed, the leaders of the team, hunched over a map of the Oregon and California from the expedition of John Fremont:



I introduced myself as Clyde Johnson, recently in from the east coast where I was a teacher. Fortunately, I also was a ranch-hand, and, having seen their advertisement, wanted to sign on as help and travel west.

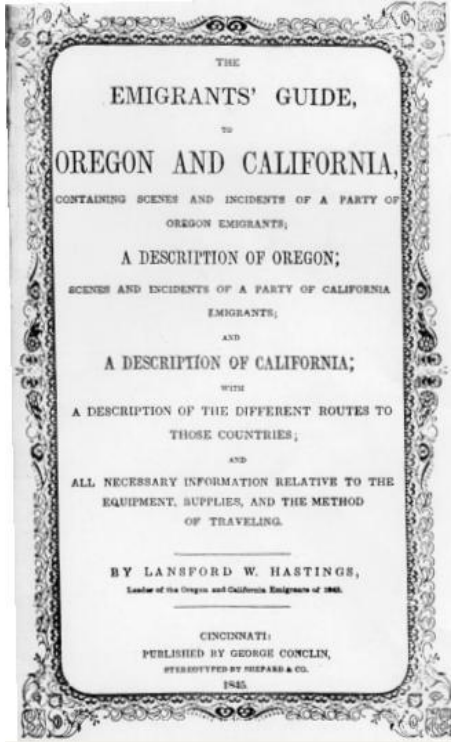
They looked me over, asked about my background and ability to handle horses and oxen, and, convinced I was fit for the job,

welcomed me aboard. “We’re leaving mid-April. That ought to give you plenty of time to get ready and work with our teams of oxen.”

As I excused myself, Donner and Reed returned to their discussion. Reed was holding a book. It was “The Emigrants’ Guide to Oregon and California”, by Lansford Hastings:

“Look, George. It says right here: ‘The most direct route, for the California emigrants, would be to leave the Oregon route, about two hundred miles east from Fort Hall; thence bearing west southwest, to the Salt lake; and thence continuing down to the bay of St. Francisco, by the route just described.’”

Donner was hesitant: “But do we know anything about this route, or are we just taking this Hastings’ word for it?”



“Why *wouldn't* we take his word for it? It’s in his book, and he obviously knows what he’s talking about. Who says the other trail is any safer? Only a couple hundred families have gone that route, so it’s likely there are many routes out there better than that one. One thing I do know for sure is the main route is hundreds of miles longer.

If we move at 10-15 miles per day like we hope, do you know how much time this would save us?”

“Besides, we need to get out there quick. Listen to this part of the book: *‘It is a surprising fact, that upon this entire route, from the States, either to Oregon or California, there is not a stream that emigrants cross, but that is fordable, at the season of the year, at which they pass through those regions.’* If we don’t get out there quick, *others* will beat us there, and we won’t get any of the free land from the Government of California.”

I listened to the discussion, puzzled, and silently left the room.

Hastings had written a book about the travels across the Midwest. Why should he *not* be believed? *Why would he lie?* I would wrestle with this single question for months.

It’s one thing to question taking another route if tens of *thousands* of people have taken one route, as I had thought, and *nobody* had taken another. But these men had just said only a few *hundred* had gone west! That changed my perception. *Was this accurate?*

What was the meaning of their “land” comment? Did we really need to “get there fast” before the land was taken up?

I knew I had plenty of time to think about these issues as I prepared for the trek across The California Trail!

Chapter 2

We left at day-break. April 15, 1846. Three families:

James and Virginia Reed, their four kids, and Virginia's Mom;

George and Tamzene Donner, and their five kids;

Jacob and Elizabeth Donner, and their seven kids.

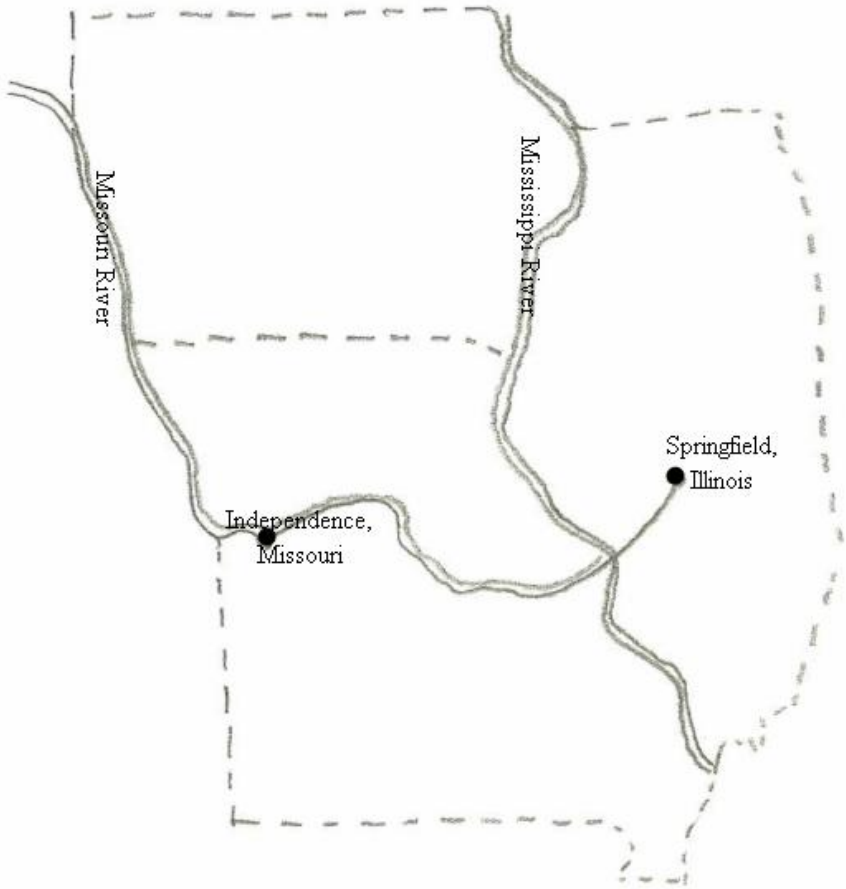
The teamsters (as we were called) brought our Springfield, Illinois group to a total of 32 people heading west.

Each family also had three wagons. The first was to live in, the second for supplies along the way, and the third to carry things to California once we were there.

The oxen, of course, were essential. 2,500 miles across the continent. To know something about ox-teams is to know these animals don't respond to beating. They respond to gentle words like a human. Most important – to me – was the fact they needed to be guided, which meant I would be walking alongside them the entire way.

2,500 miles on foot, walking 10-15 miles every day!

Our first major stop would be Independence, Missouri, situated along the Missouri River. Traveling along such a landmark as a major river served us well. It was a sign we were headed in the right direction – that's always important! It also provided us ample water, for us and our always-thirsty oxen.



At nights, as we rested long the meandering “Big Muddy” River, I sat by the fire and listened to others talk of the trip. I, of course, was still trying to get my bearings, having been thrust into the 19th century like I had been. I asked many questions, but mostly to other teamsters when we had moments to ourselves, away from the families.

“Why are these people heading west? What’s the allure? They had comfortable lives back in Springfield, didn’t they?”

“Most folks think it’s because the Reeds and the Donners are not content, and non-content people are always on the move, looking for something better. Maybe that’s the case. People have to be on the move.”

“I don’t think that’s the case. These people *are* content. They’re successful. And they’ve fought for what they have. Reed fought in the Black Hawk War with Abe Lincoln. Donner, too, has traveled a mighty, so they both have been around.”

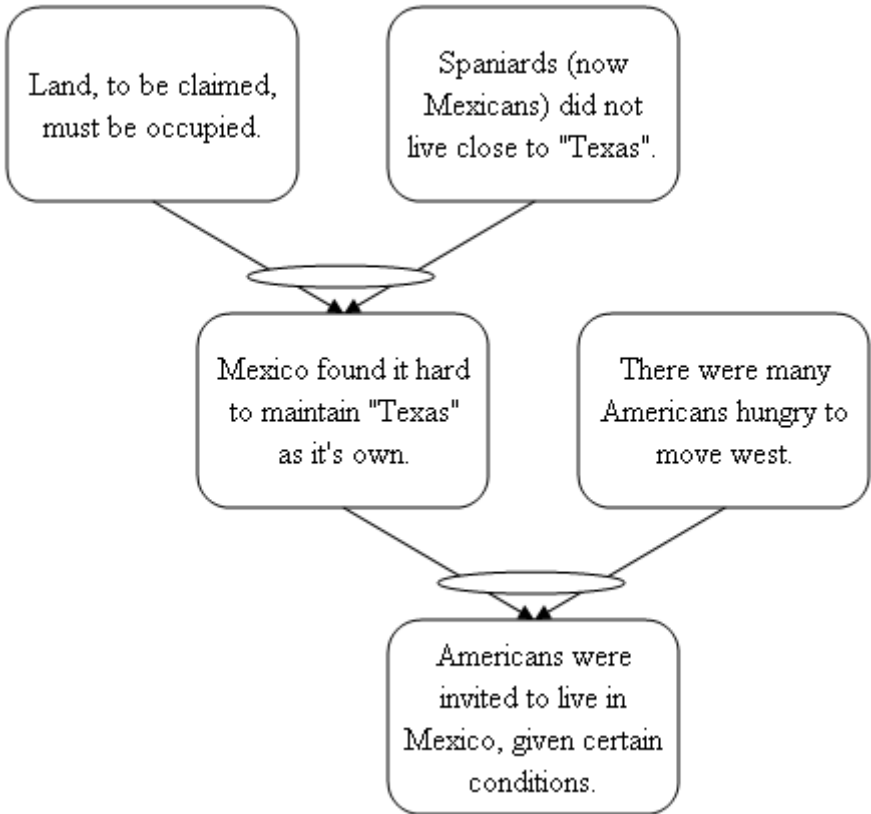
“But the idea of land – free land – that’s as strong a reason as gold to get a man moving. *Land!* A parcel of earth you can call your own, farming it with your own hands, your own sweat, growing crops for yourself and pasture for your stock. Land.”

“But how is it free, this land in California?”

“Son – I thought you were a teacher. What are you teaching if you don’t know these things?”

“Well – I taught math and I’m just in from Boston,” I said, a bit ashamedly. This, however, was only part of the truth. My ignorance lay in the fact I was thinking about the America I was familiar with:

did they do? They invited Americans to come live in Texas. Americans had a fever to move west, and Mexicans needed some semblance of civilization in their newly acquired land. You follow?"

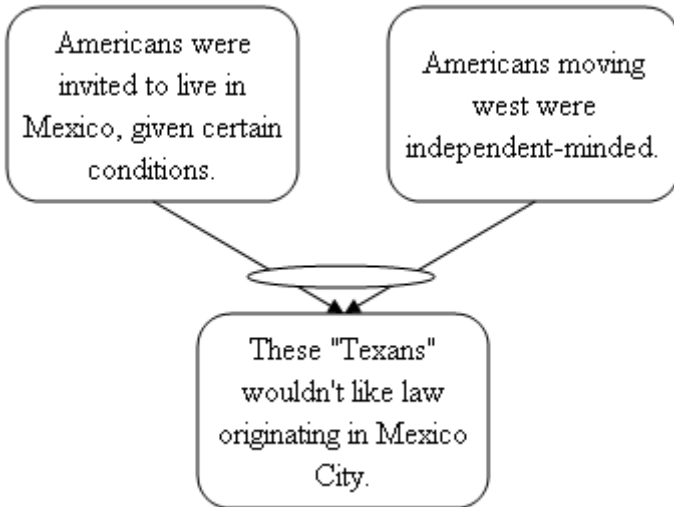


"Not quite. *Why* did they need people there?"

"You've lived in the city your whole life, so I can see why you don't follow. Look around you. You see a lot of openness, right? Well, if there's too much openness, what stops another person – or country – from saying, 'This is here for the taking – *and I'm taking it!*'"

"OK – but what has this to do with California?"

“In a minute. So Texans moved in – and *continued* to move in. Imagine the type of people moving in. Rugged. Individuals. Probably not much for following rules made up by a government hundreds of miles away. The clamor for independence was inevitable.”



“And in 1836, the Republic of Texas *did* declare their independence from Mexico!”

“How can a group of people do that?”

“What’s wrong with it? Spain ruled Mexico, and the Mexicans didn’t like the rule, and revolted. Texans merely did the same thing. This surprises you, doesn’t it? Is the founding of our country any different story? We disliked England’s method of governing, and eventually reached a breaking point – the ‘straw that broke the camel’s back’.”

He was right, of course. I'd never given that much thought.

“But what about California?”

“I'm almost done. Be patient. Texas declared itself a Republic. Not a state, but a *Republic*, and started formal relations with foreign countries. Eventually, Texas was admitted as a slave state to the Union in 1845. *How do you think Mexico felt?* Mexico still claimed Texas had no right to declare itself a Republic, and now the area was a State in the United States!”

“Not so good,” I added, obviously.

“This was 1845. A few Americans thought the same way about California. *Why not populate it, and declare itself a Republic?*”

“But to do that, you need people on the land, right?” I responded.

“Exactly. Come to California and we'll give you land. Why not? There were so few people on the land!”

This was the “America” he was describing:

Our trip wasn't across Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, and Nevada to California. It was across Unorganized Territory, past "Texas", and onward to Mexico!

"I'll have more time to think about this," I thought to myself. "What I have to focus on is the fact many of these people I'm with right now will be dead within a year because of what's going on right now. What can I do to stop it?"

"First, focus on the 'cutoff' – the shortcut Hastings boasted about. Concentrate on this! Get these people to realize the 'cutoff' *isn't* a cutoff.

But how?

Chapter 3

We reached Independence, Missouri on May 11, 1846. Twenty-five days of traveling, averaging 12 miles a day.

Independence was bustling with activity. Not only were there wagon trains heading *west* to California, there were the huge wagons heading *southwest* to Santa Fe.

And the relationship between Mexico and the “Republic of Texas”, and the United States, had broken down. War was declared.

What *else* would go wrong?

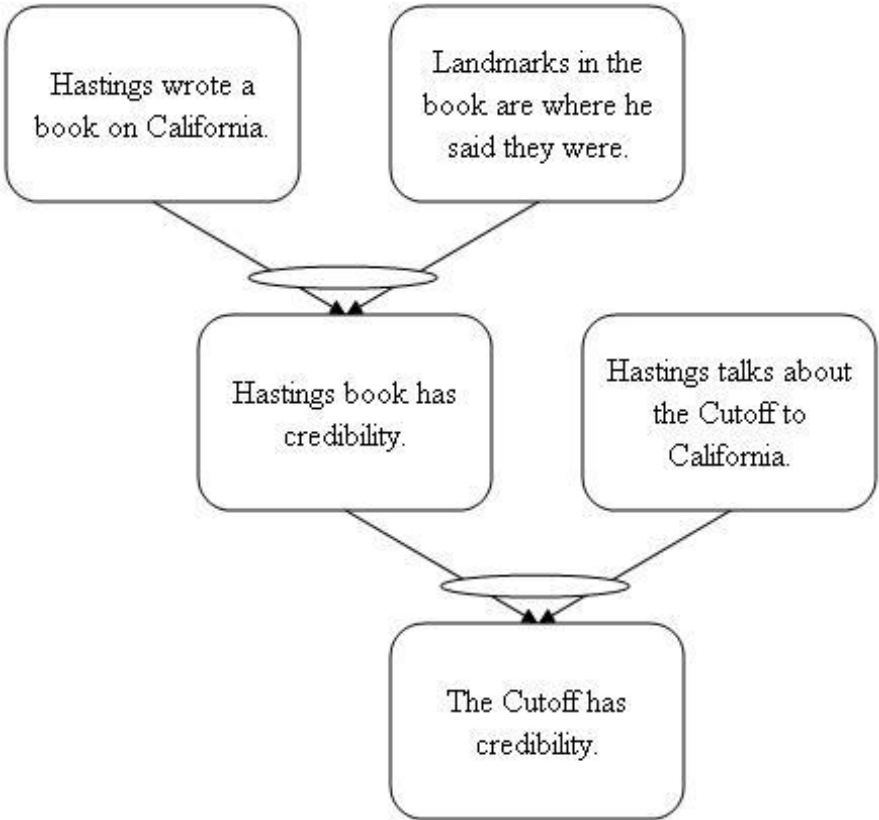
Our next stop was “Lone Elm”, as we moved into Kansas. “Stop that!” I told myself. This isn’t even Kansas *Territory* yet! That wouldn’t happen until the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, and Kansas wouldn’t gain statehood until 1861. This was still “Unorganized Territory”.

We said good-bye to those heading to Santa Fe with their remarkable Conastoga Wagons. They to the southwest, us due west.

Our group grew. We teamed with other wagons heading west, and we were now a formidable crew, 32 men, women, and children, and 20 wagons, heading west. Past Courthouse Rock, Chimney Rock, Scotts Bluff. These were all landmarks in Hastings’ Book.

Not only was Hastings’ someone who had written a book about California, but he’s been right about all the landmarks! It would be

hard to persuade George Donner and James Reed to believe me and not Lansford Hastings, given the evidence mounting up. That is:



We moved along the Platte River westwards. Like the Missouri River, the Platte proved a good route for us, providing both a good traveling landmark, plus a secure source of water.

But the trails were not as deeply marked as I had expected. With thousands of wagons heading west, I would have expected these ruts to be deep and compact, making going easy. These were neither nor compact. And this was the main trail! *Why not?* The actual numbers of emigrants moving westward, I found, were as follows:

EMIGRANTS ON THE WESTWARD TRAILS				
Year	Oregon	California	Mormon	Total
1839	20			20
1840	13			13
1841	24	34		58
1842	125			125
1843	875	38		913
1844	1,475	53		1,528
1845	2,500	260		2,760
1846	1,200	1,500		2,700
1847	4,000	450	2,200	6,650
1848	1,300	400	2,400	4,100
1849	450	25,000	1,500	26,950
1850	6,000	44,000	2,500	52,500
1851	3,600	1,100	1,500	6,200
1852	10,000	50,000	10,000	70,000
1853	7,500	20,000	8,000	35,500
1854	6,000	12,000	3,200	21,200
1855	500	1,500	4,700	6,700
1856	1,000	8,000	2,400	11,400
1857	1,500	4,000	1,300	6,800
1858	1,500	6,000	150	7,650
1859	2,000	17,000	1,400	20,400
1860	1,500	9,000	1,600	12,100

Looking at these figures – particularly focusing on the California Trail – a number of things stood out:

1. the number of emigrants heading to California *prior* to 1846 was unbelievably small. I was under the impression *thousands* of people had gone to California and taken a certain route, and now Hastings was proposing a cutoff from the normal trail. *There really was no “normal” trail.* This would be another strike for me in trying to get Donner and Reed not to leave the normal trail!

2. the emigrants heading to California in 1847 *fell* dramatically. *Why?* Because of the horror story of the Donner Party I'm traveling with right now!

3. the emigrants heading to California in 1849 and after are huge. *Why? Gold!*

4. what happened in 1851 to cause the trail emigration to fall off so much, particularly along the California Trail?

But there were many things that would go wrong on this trip. I've got to focus! I tell myself half of these people – now my friends – will die within a year!

And I'm really only looking to make up *one* day! They got caught on the wrong side of the Sierra Nevadas, at what we now call Donner Lake. Had they made it over the peak – *what if?*

Knowing the actual fate of the Donner Party, I reflected on what I knew was to come:

Reed's "Pioneer Palace Car", of course, was slowing everyone down, but what was I to do? Tell him to leave it by the wayside?

When they got to Fort Bridger, Mountain Man Jim Bridger says the Cutoff is fine. He's lying – he's never *been* on the cutoff. Maybe I can impeach his credibility. Not likely. He's a legendary mountain man of the west, for goodness sakes. Why would anyone dispute his word – and take mine?

James Reed will eventually lose all his oxen crossing the Great Salt Lake Desert, and then spend precious time to find them – and recover items from his abandoned wagon. If only the Teamsters had kept track of the oxen! There’s definitely ground to be made up here.

George Donner’s axle breaks, and in fixing it, he gashes his arm. This slows him down, and eventually it slows *everyone* down. It seems there’s something here to work with, but I’m not sure what – at the moment. Accident’s happen, after all. And we march on.

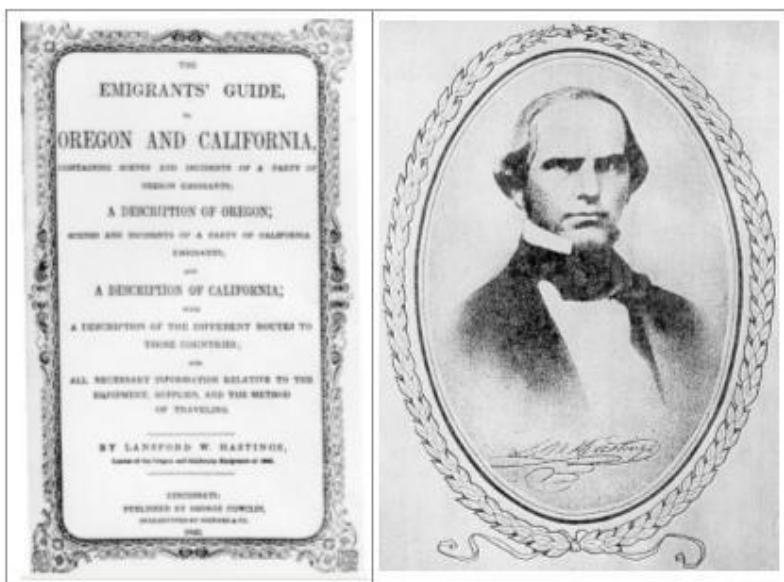
As of yet, I’ve suggested nothing. I’ve tended the oxen, drove the team, and done a lot of thinking, but I’ve not made any significant contribution to the trip. And I’ve said little. *What has there been to say?*

But an idea was formulating. We stopped at Independence Rock in Wyoming. The name itself has origins dating back to this time period. Emigrants heading west left Missouri in the spring, and if they were to make it to Oregon and California before they got trapped in the mountains, they needed to make it here – to this mountain – by Independence Day. July 4th.



Here we were, just a week late, but now making good time, and now camped for the night. I approached James Reed and asked if I could take a look at Hastings’ book.

Chapter 4



The book was remarkable in its detail. Looking back, it's no wonder Hastings was believable regarding the cutoff, as I turned page after page of descriptions of California, Oregon, and the different routes to get there.

But where was the cutoff? I read chapter after chapter, but could find no mention of it. I knew it was there, however, because I had heard Donner and Reed reading from the book about the cutoff during our first meeting back in Springfield!

We marched on across now-Wyoming, heading mostly due-west towards the first short-cut. We approached what would become the first of two “left-or-right” decisions: *the Greenwood cutoff*.

Another day, another 10-12 miles walking, another night.

I lit another candle and started again, this time only re-reading Chapter 14: A DESCRIPTION OF THE DIFFERENT ROUTES. And there it was!

“The most direct route, for the California emigrants, would be to leave the Oregon route, about two hundred miles east from Fort Hall; thence bearing west southwest, to the Salt lake; and thence continuing down to the bay of St. Francisco, by the route just described.”

This was it! I don't even know how Reed and Donner came upon these few words. Chapter 14 consists of 5,062 words, and here were 46 mere words that would change the course of history.

But they were important words, and as I said, Hastings had proven to be right thus far! His credibility was way up!

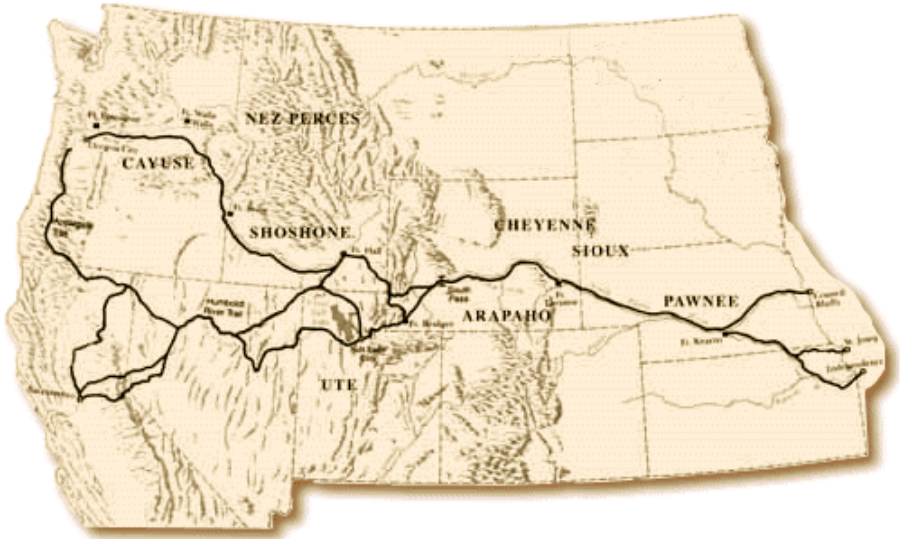
However ...

I knew he had not been south of the Great Salt Lake, which he references in the book. Maybe this is why the details are lacking.

Maybe this was an avenue I could take to convince the Donner Party to stay on the “regular” path.

But let's suppose I failed to convince the Donner Party of what I was saying. Suppose I found Hastings to be eloquent and convincing, and he was able to persuade the others of the viability of the cutoff.

We reached South Pass and the Continental Divide in the Rocky Mountains, only realizing it because of the flow of the water.



The Continental Divide, of course, serves as a hydrological divide of the Americas, separating the watersheds that drain into the Pacific and those that drain into the Atlantic. If it's true all water flows downhill, then the Rockies serve as the “most uphill” (generally) in the Americas.

Without South Pass, travel to the west coast would have been difficult, if not impossible. Once it was found, however, the overland trip suddenly became viable.

And it was remarkable seeing the change in the flow of the water.

As we camped along the Little Sandy River, Teamster Charles Stanton read us his diary entry:

“Yesterday at noon we arrived at the “culminating point,” or dividing ridge between the Atlantic and Pacific. This evening we are encamped on the Little Sandy, one of the forks of the Green river, which is a tributary of the great Colorado, which flows into the gulf of California. Thus the great day-dreams of my youth and of my riper years is accomplished. I have seen the Rocky mountains--have crossed the Rubicon, an am now on the waters that flow to the Pacific! It seems as if I had left the old world behind, and that a new one is dawning upon me. In every step thus far there has been something new, something to attract.--Should the remainder of my journey be as interesting, I shall be abundantly repaid for the toils and hardships of this arduous trip.”



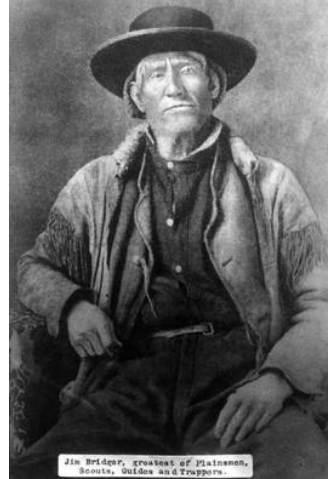
We camped that night, me still thinking of how I was going to get Hastings to admit he had never been south of the Great Salt Lake.

What then? I needed a back-up plan. Fortunately, I had one.

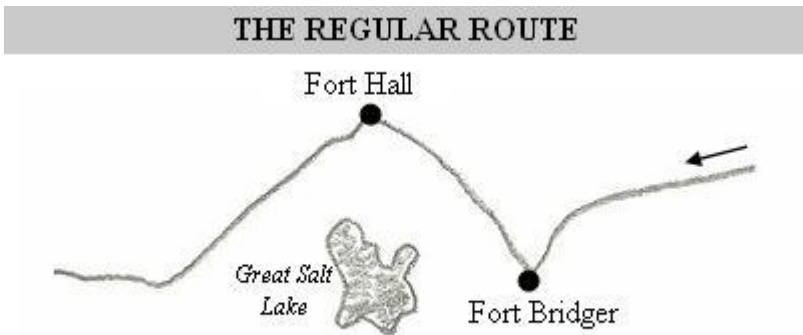
I knew something only one other man knew at this time: *someone else was lying.*

Jim Bridger.

He had a vested interest in emigrants taking the Hastings' Cutoff.

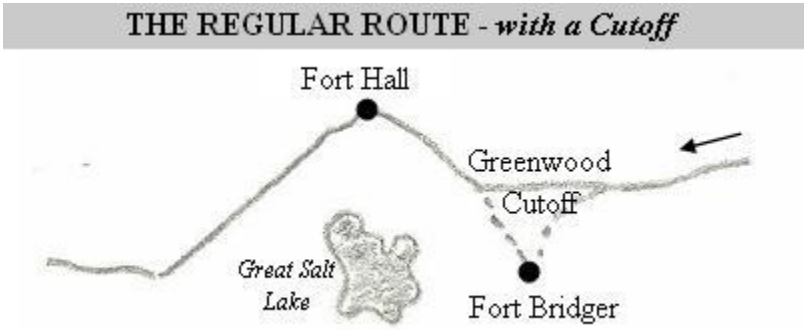


The “regular route” previously veered southwest to Fort Bridger, and then northwest up to Fort Hall, and then around The Great Salt Lake:

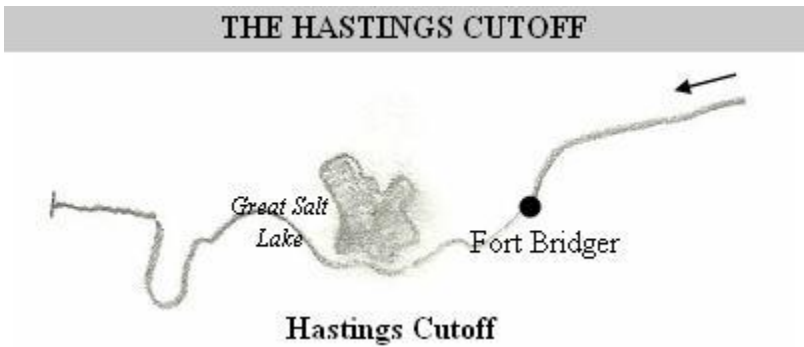


Fort Bridger, as you see, is quite a ways off the beaten path.

It was inevitable a shortcut was found to Fort Hall, and it was: The Greenwood Cutoff.



Fort Bridger was left “out of the loop”, unless ... Hastings’ Cutoff proved successful.



By now, the Greenwood Cutoff was crowding out the traffic headed through Fort Bridger. Unless the Hastings Cutoff was viable, Bridger would be out of business.

Why didn't Bridger just move his Fort north of the Great Salt Lake? Bridger's short-sightedness is remarkable, but that's another story: lie / tell-truth.

He lied to ensure short-term traffic.

We saw earlier, incidentally, what *did* happen to overland traffic after the horrific story of the Donner Party was printed. Traffic plummeted, as expected.

But *that's* another story as well. It's a sad – but all-to-common – story of evading the facts of reality.

I had to convince the others that Bridger was lying.

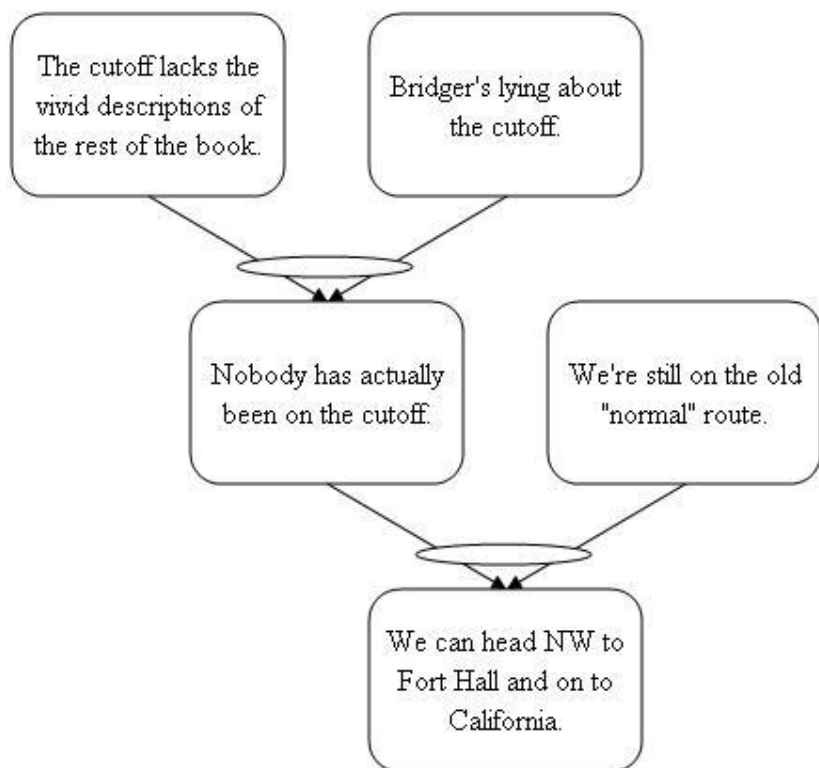
This will be hard, of course. Fortunately, I had *two* plans of attack.

You see, James Reed had let on that Hastings would be at Fort Bridger to lead us over the cutoff!

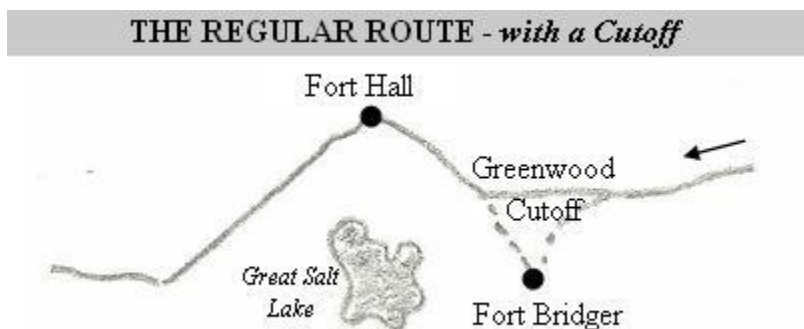
My plan, then: show, by lack of description, it was likely Hastings had been north of the Great Salt Lake, but equally unlikely he had been south. I had to get him to admit this.

The second: get Bridger to admit it was a poor route as well.

In my mind, the logical route to get us headed northwest to Fort Hall was as follows:



We came upon the Greenwood Cutoff / Fort Bridger intersection. It was the first of two “left-or-right” decisions.

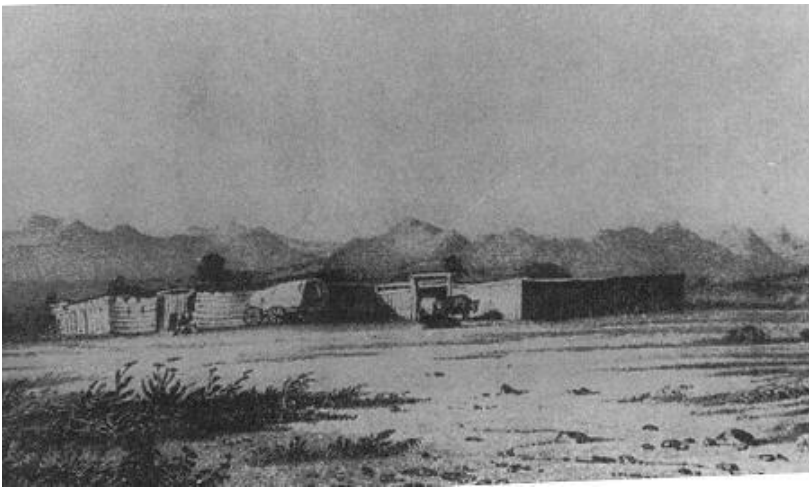


I knew there was no sense even suggesting “go to the right” to the “regular route”. They were set on getting to Fort Bridger and all I had was circumstantial evidence.

I eagerly anticipated my encounter with both Hastings and Bridger, formulating my plan as we plodded along.

Fort Bridger was our last hope. After that, there was no turning back. Once we made a decision to go south around the Great Salt Lake, we were committed.

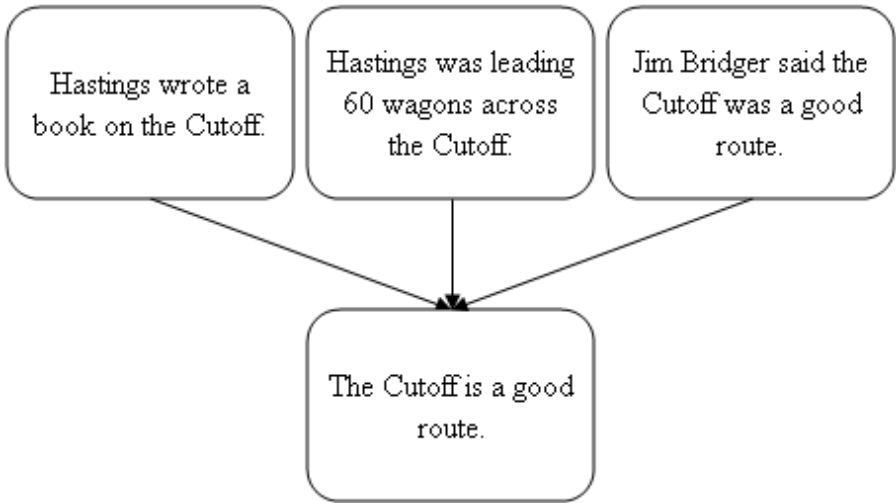
We arrived at Fort Bridger.



And Hastings wasn't there!

Where was he? He was leading 60 other wagons across the cutoff!

My argument crumbled immediately. Not only had Hastings written a creditable book, now he was leading another wagon team across the cutoff! *Either* of these facts by themselves was convincing enough, but couple these two facts with the testimony of legendary mountain-man Jim Bridger the Cutoff was a good route, what did I – just a teamster from the east – have? Nothing.



What a fool I was. This whole trip, I had been focusing on the Cutoff. “If only they hadn’t taken the Cutoff”, I repeatedly told myself. It was now clear the Cutoff was a *reasonable* choice!

However, focusing on this one point had obscured the more important issue: had the Donner Party sped up only *one* day on this whole trip, they would have made it up and across the pass through the Sierra Nevadas, and they would have been on their way to Fort Sutter in California.

One day!

Forget the Cutoff! *Time* was the constraint, and I wasn't managing it.

And now it *was* a race against time.

Fortunately, I knew where a great deal of time would be wasted in the coming two months.

There was still time! *But I had to start thinking!*

Chapter 5

We left Fort Bridger on July 27th. Optimism was high. Reed wrote in his diary:

“Hastings Cutoff is said to be a saving of 350 or 400 miles and a better route. The rest of the Californians went the long route, feeling afraid of Hastings’s cutoff. But Mr. Bridger informs me that it is a fine, level road with plenty of water and grass. It is estimated that 700 miles will take us to Captain Sutter’s fort, which we hope to make in seven weeks from this day.”

Though the going was easy at first, it wasn’t long afterwards the rest of the Donner Party knew what I already knew. The Hastings’ “Cutoff” was a sham.

But there we were.

The worrying intensified. As they moved west, they knew they were already moving slow. Now they had embarked on an unproven path, making the going even slower.

“Would they make it?”, they wondered.

I also knew what they didn’t: sham or not, they *almost* do. A single day – maybe two – extra – and they’re headed through the pass and across the Sierra Nevadas.

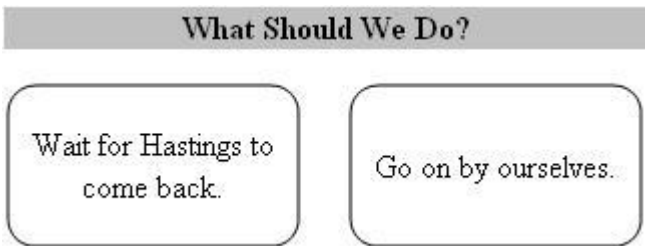
That was the key: to get through there before snow hit.

And time was the constraint: Manage it and we would be OK.

On August 6th, we found a note left on a stick. It was from Hastings, telling us the “trail” ahead was very bad. We should wait for him to come back and show a better route.

Did he know a better route? Was there a better route?

The group debated: Wait for Hastings / Go on by Ourselves ...



I hadn't spoke much the entire trail ride, but interjected: “Why are these the *only* options: to wait or to go on?”

George Donner spoke up: “What else is there?”

“Go back to Fort Bridger.”



There was a collective “gasp” from the group. It was clear what they were thinking. Anybody who’s already done a job once hates to go back and do it again. Trail-walkers were no different.

“Here me out ...”

“Wait for Hastings / Go on by ourselves”. “That’s the dilemma you say we’re facing? Let’s remember Hastings has already lied about this trail. What makes you think there *is* a trail? *He doesn’t know this land at all!*”

Donner started to speak up: “But the book ...”

I cut him off: “I know – I know. The book. Have you ever wondered why Hastings went into such detail about the trails *north* of the Great Salt Lake, but so little about the Cutoff *south*?”

I thrust the page into the open.

You read his words, but you didn’t read *behind* his words. Look at the vivid descriptions of California, Oregon, and the routes. The landmarks. Yes, it’s all there.”

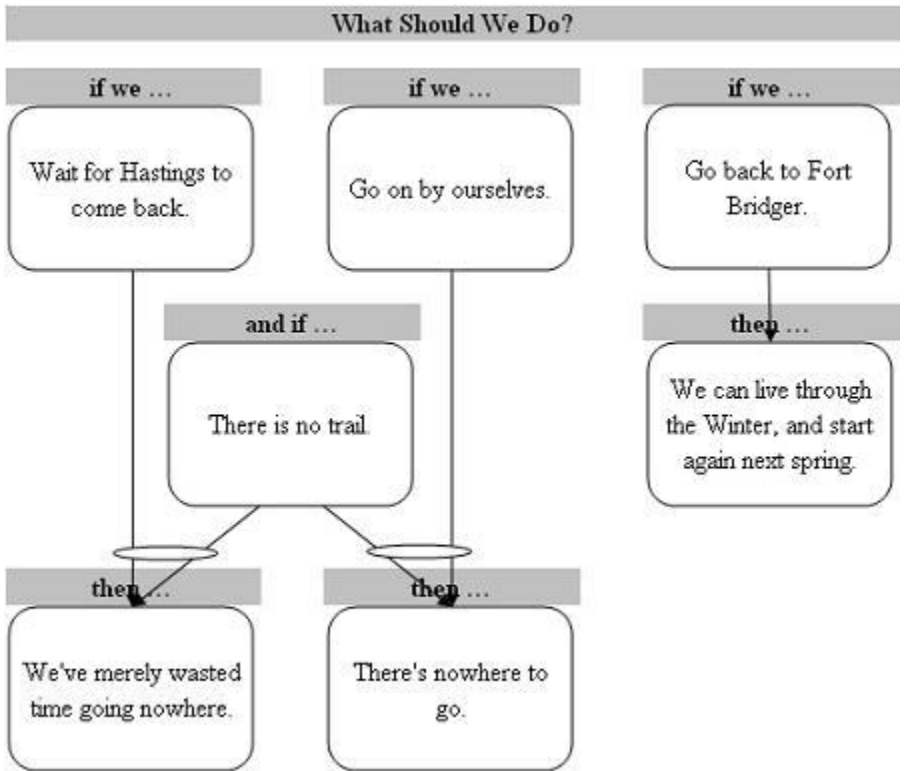
“Now look at his one little paragraph about taking this ‘cutoff’.”

“You know why the descriptions are so scant? *He’s never been here.* That’s why. And now he’s leading a team of 60 wagons in front of us and they’re encountering poor land. That doesn’t surprise me. It’s the first time for anyone south of the Great Salt Lake in a wagon. So what does he do? He leaves us a note for us saying he’s going to

come back and help us? I say he's not coming at all, and if he did, *so what? There's no trail!*"

"To wait or to go on by ourselves? You say that's our dilemma? *Either choice dooms us!*"

"BUT – if we go back to Fort Bridger, we can wait out the winter. Sure, it'll be tough going, but tough-going is better than dead-going!"



I thought I had made my point well.

They decided to neither wait for Hastings nor to go on by ourselves, but instead to send a couple of riders out to find Hastings.

Big deal. *What kind of thinking was that?*

Wishful thinking. And “wishful thinking” is not thinking at all.

Hastings now had no credibility, and yet they rode off to ask *his* advice!

They caught up with Hastings, who pointed out a different route than the one he was currently on. *That's plenty easy to do!* And back James Reed rode, suspicious yes, but nonetheless compliant.

Six more days lost waiting in the Weber Canyon.

But we were off, now hacking our way through the Wasatch Mountains.

And I knew it would only get worse.

For the Great Salt Lake Desert lay ahead.



Hastings would play *another* cruel joke on us. As we approached the 40-mile desert, we found another note. It was from Hastings:

2 days – 2 nights – hard driving – cross – desert – reach water.

It was not two days, of course. I knew it would take us six.

I also knew something else that would save us the valuable time I'd been looking for.

But first things first: to get across the desert required a lot of water, for us and our oxen. And that posed a problem.

Imagine the trade-off our wagons faced. If you take a lot of water, the wagons become heavier, and are harder to pull. If you carry less water, the oxen's burden is reduced, but thirst becomes an issue.

And thirst would become an issue.

Particularly the oxen pulling Reed's wagon.

And a careless teamster would, for just one moment, forgot to keep them tied up. The thirsting oxen, sensing freedom, would bolt. They wouldn't be seen again.

Reed's family and possessions would need to be taken in by others.

And if this wasn't enough, once across the desert, Reed would go *back* looking for his missing oxen, and also retrieve other items from his famed "Pioneer Palace".

All this took time – valuable time.

And this was my chance!

Two days across, during our evening get-together, I raised the subject simply: "You know, these oxen are going to get thirsty, and will sense the first instance they're not tied down. Who knows our fate if they bolt."

One of the other teamsters, defensively, jumped in: "What makes you think we won't have them all corralled?"

I hadn't given it a moment's thought they'd take offense to my suggestion, but they were right. "I didn't imply that at all. I'm just thinking of the extra importance of time right now, because of the predicament Hastings has put us in."

Donner and Reed agreed – as did the teamster, happy now blame had been deflected away from him and towards Hasting – and a back-up plan was devised to ensure all oxen were tied down at all times.

It was that easy.

Missed opportunities are often that simple. Sadly, it's also the case we realize they're "simple" *after* they're missed.

It was hard going, but we got across the desert. More importantly, we got across *in one piece*, and did not have to wait while Reed retrieved his missing oxen! Instead of us camping while Reed looked for his lost oxen and salvaging his abandoned wagon, we could all rest together! And I knew something they didn't: these four days were the key! We'd be across!

We were now guaranteed safe passage across the Sierra Nevadas!

It had been so simple!

Or so I thought ...

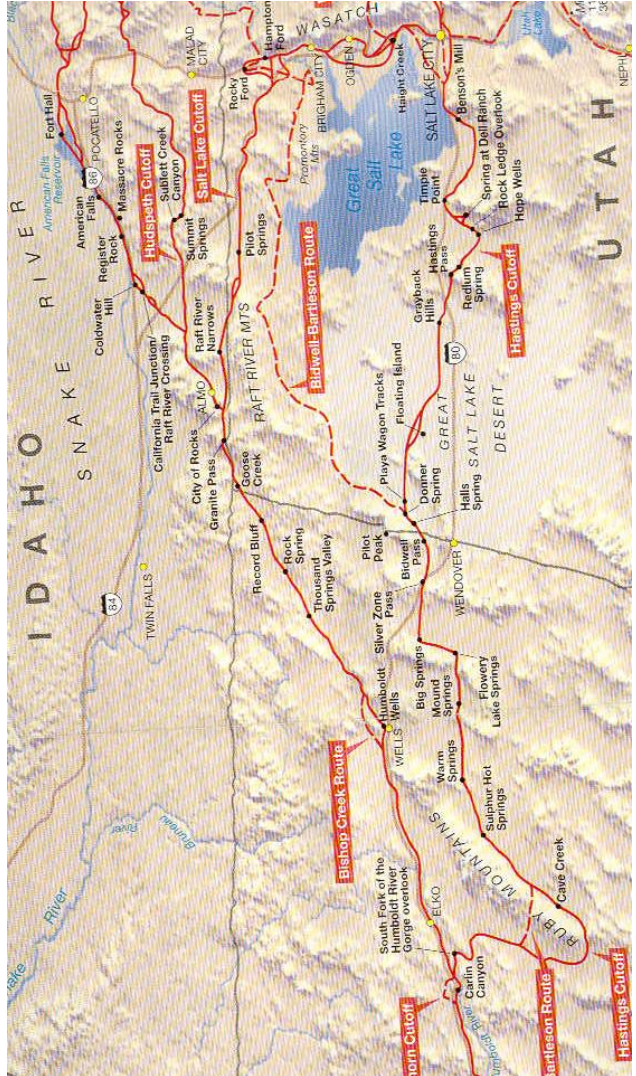
Chapter 6

I was on cloud nine by now. I had saved the group four days. FOUR DAYS! I was looking for 1-2 days. We had that, plus room to spare.

We would make it!

We followed Hastings' group around the Ruby Mountains, and ended up taking four days instead of the one it would have taken had we pushed hard to go straight over the mountains.

I was angered, but at the same time indifferent, as we made our way back onto the "regular" route. The "original" Donner Party met up with the route on September 26th. It



was now only September 22nd!

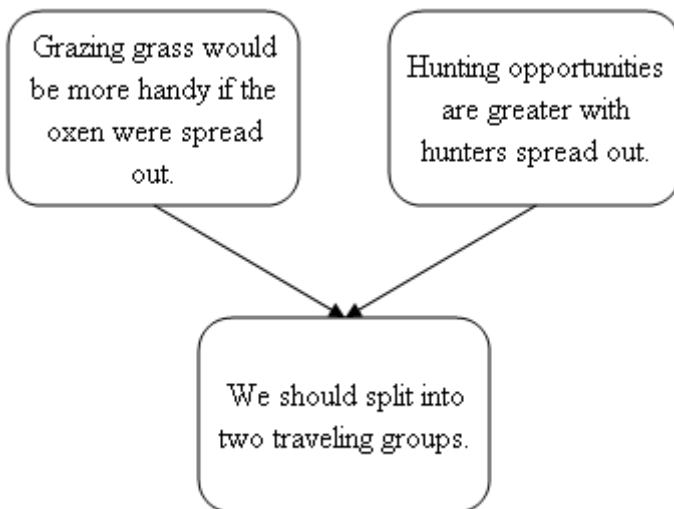
Though we were still about a month behind the ideal traveling schedule, that mattered little to me! *We would make it!*

So I thought.

Because our team was all in one tight pack, grazing grass was more difficult than it need be for our gallant oxen.

Moving together also had another drawback: hunting. Being all in the same pack meant all the hunters were in the same pack. Therefore, our opportunities for meat were limited.

It was debated whether we should split into two groups or stay in one. The points for splitting into two separate groups were sound, and a vote taken. Two groups it was.



I listened to the debate that night with little interest. *My job was done!* I was now just along for the ride!

George Donner would lead half the wagons and take the lead, and James Reed the other half.

We were back on the regular route, making good time. Donner was now a day ahead of us. The oxen were better fed, and we found ourselves with more food than before.

Spirits started to rise!

I was in the second group, talking with Reed about the promises of California, of the United States in general, of the unbounded opportunities of ... when Murphy's Law – *what can go wrong will* – hit.

In the form of an Indian attack. Paiute Indians.



My sentence was interrupted by an arrow in my arm. Reed took two in the chest. When it was over, four men were dead, including James Reed. Six were injured. Two wagons were destroyed. Six oxen were missing.

We were in poor shape – and immobile.

Charles Stanton sped ahead to the Donner-led party, who were oblivious to our situation. After telling Donner of the attack and our condition, Donner rounded up a team of men to go back to help the trailing team.

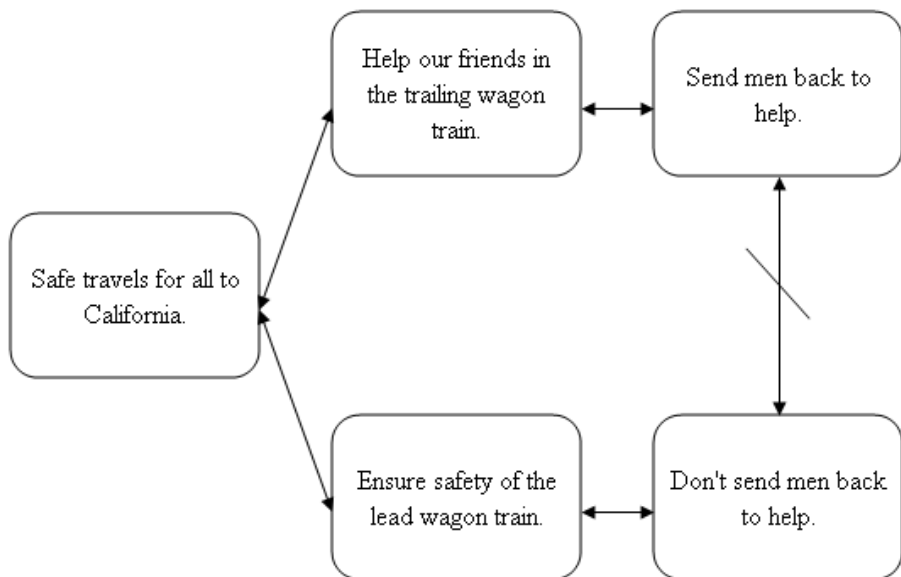
“George. If you send men back to help James’ group, won’t *we* be vulnerable to the same type of attack?”

It was his wife, Tamzene Donner.

“Are you suggesting we leave our friends back there?”

“I didn’t say that. I’m just saying we should stop and think.”

“Send the men back. A good idea? It sounds like it. Why? Because we want to help our friends. On the other hand, *if* we send them back, then *our* safety will be jeopardized, which suggests we *don’t* send the men back.”



“What can we do to *both* help our friends and ensure our safety?”

Donner thought for a moment, and knew the solution. He also knew it would not be received with happiness from some of his group.

He ordered a one-day retreat to get back to us. Everybody was going back.

Repairing the wagons, treating the injured, and burying the dead took four days. *FOUR DAYS!* We were back where we started! Yes, circumstances had changed, but the *weather* remained unchanged. The Sierra Nevada snows would come – in weeks – and our course was now re-aligned with the actual course.

How could I have been so ignorant?

Why hadn't I foreseen the problems in letting the teams split up? *Unintended* consequences for sure, but nonetheless *predictable* consequences.

We had looked for the advantages in splitting into two groups, but not the advantages – the needs – to stay in a single group.

Yes, there had been obvious advantages in allowing teams to camp apart, mainly to graze on fresh grass, but additionally to provide more hunting. But these were insignificant in the grand scheme of our travels. We had traveled for months. We had weeks to go.

And I had lost site of the goal. I had become complacent.

And I had let this complacency – *mental inertia, if you will* – become the constraint!

And now we were in trouble – deep trouble.

When we had hit the regular route, provisions were already running short. With the attack and the back-tracking of the Donner-led train, we were really in need.

What should we do? We did what the “actual” Donner Party did: we sent Charles Stanton and Mac McCutchen on ahead to Fort Sutter to retrieve provisions. We followed a similar course, and bade our friends good luck, as we marched on, slowly, but now as one unit.

It was a solemn camp that first night after our friends had departed for Fort Sutter, and I took the time to rethink the trip. We were in deep trouble, and I knew I was now to blame.

I took stock of the rest of our trip, and more importantly, the critical aspect of the route to come: the pass over the Sierra Nevadas.

What were we up against?

What *had* happened to the “actual” Donner Party at the Sierra Nevadas?

Loosely translated as “snowy mountain range”, more specific it means “snowy saw teeth”. The Sierra’s *are* saw-like in their make-up, and it is this aspect that made them a daunting foe in our movement west.

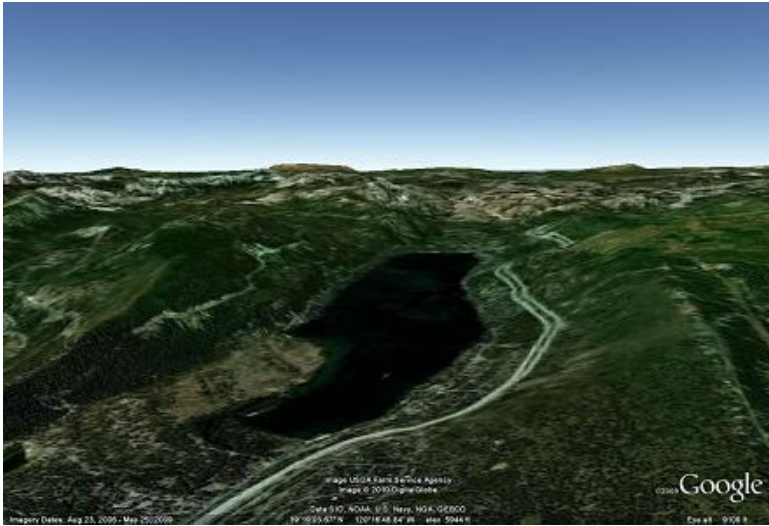


Now-a-days, the Sierra snow-bank is the major source of water for all of California. In this respect, the Sierra’s give life. But to get caught in them during *winter* could mean death.

And it did for the actual Donner Party.

THE PASS TO THE SUMMIT

Facing west



The “actual” Donner Party lead-team had made it to the Pass on October 31st, and camped that night. On November 1st, they made a try for the summit, but found the snow already on the ground had made finding the trail impossible. They retreated to the lake.

A massive rainstorm fell November 2nd. The team stayed at the lake, hoping the rain would melt the snow.

Unfortunately, the temperature had fallen during the night, and the rain had turned to snow. The pass was worse now than it was on November 1st. They made another run at the pass, but were unsuccessful. They retreated to the lake.

And hoped.

That night it snowed.

And they were trapped.



PASS IN THE SIERRA NEVADAS OF CALIFORNIA



From an old drawing made from description furnished by Wm. G. Murphy. CAMP AT DONNER LAKE, NOVEMBER, 1846

Would this trap us as well? We were now on the same chronologic collision course!

We marched on, anxious miles, hungry miles, weary of travel, leery of Indians, with the ominous thought of the mountains ahead of us, when Stanton arrived – with two Indian guides!

Provisions!

We camped that night, eating well for the first time in weeks. Knowing the future – and their fate – I was frantic, wanting us to get going. I spoke up:

“You’ve come over the Sierra’s. What were they like?”

“Do you remember the trouble we had south of the Great Salt Lake, in the Wasatch? That was nothing. These mountains are brutal. It’s going to be quite a time getting across, but we can.”

“I think we should leave first thing in the morning, and not stop until we get across the range,” I said, knowing we were under serious time-constraints.

“I’d agree, too,” said Stanton, but as we looked out over our weary group, continued. “However, I think it best we rest for two days, and then make a push to get over. Rested oxen will move four times as fast as weary and sick oxen.”

And so we camped. Two days rest. It was now October 24th.

Time was running out.

Chapter 7

Was history inevitable? It seemed like it. I knew how things would turn out, yet I seemed helpless to stop them!

We marched on towards the Pass, together as a team, but slowly ...

October 26th.

“Would the snow-covered trail to the Pass doom us, as it had the actual Donner-party? How *would* we find the trail over the Pass?” My thought was interrupted by Stanton, pulling up next to me. “Care for some water?”

“Thanks. I was just thinking about ...” I cut myself off in mid-sentence.

“How are we going to find the trail over the Pass?” I said to myself. *What a fool I was!* The man standing next to me – and the two Indian guides – had *been* over the Pass!”

An idea percolated.

We camped that night, and around the campfire, silent talk of nothing in particular dominated the conversation.

“I can’t wait to get through the Pass and over the Summit.” I spoke in a disinterested tone to no one in particular. “Sure, it’ll be some work to get across the Sierra’s, but I can already taste the good-cooking from Mrs. Sutter.”

No one seemed to be listening.

“That is, of course, *if* we can get through the Pass.”

Heads lifted. Eyebrows were raised. George Donner spoke: “What do you mean ... *if*? Stanton here says we can do it. What makes you think we can’t?”

“I’m just thinking about the time. We know we’re darn close to it snowing up there. *What if it does snow? Just a little?* What’s that going to do to the trail? Mr. Stanton?” All eyes turned.

“It was a tough route coming east for sure, and then we could see what we were doing. If the ground were snow-covered, it might be hard – it might even be *impossible* – to find the trail.”

Confidently – perhaps tipping my hat I knew more than I led on – I continued, “All right: suppose it *does* snow. What can we do to make sure we *can* find the trail?”

Stanton spoke up quickly: “Luis, Salvadore, and I know the trail. We’ve been over it! If we took off first thing tomorrow morning, we could get there by the 28th. If there’s no snow yet, we could mark the trail so it’s passable even if it does snow by the time you get there.”

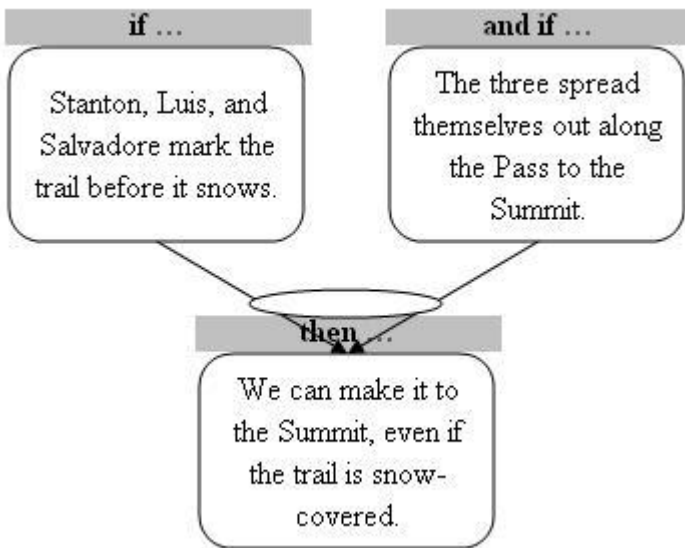
I liked *my* solution!

But *my* solution went a bit further. “And where will you three be when we get to the lake at the base of the Pass?”

“Well. I guess it makes no sense to mark the trail and then camp at the lake. There’s three of us, and the distance we’re talking about is about a mile tops. We could mark the trail, and then spread out along the trail. I’ll be about halfway up the Pass, Luis at the top of the Pass, and Salvadore about halfway mile towards the Summit.”

I had no idea if the distances were fine. *Stanton* did, however, and he had been there!

Our plan ...



We broke camp for the night.

I’ve never slept better.

We bade our friends good-bye in the morning, and continued on our way.

It was nighttime, on October 31st, when we reached the lake at the base of the Pass.

It *had* snowed (of course), and the trail *was* covered.

“*Hello, the wagon train!*” came a blast from up the mountain. It was Stanton.

He came down the mountain.

“It was lucky we took off when we did! I would not have been able to see any part of the trail if I’d ridden along with you! As it is now, we’ve got the trail marked all the way to the Summit!”

“And Luis and Salvadore?”

“You’re going to have to give Sutter a particular ‘thanks’ for sending those two along. Not only do they know these lands, they’re expert in trail-marking. They’re up there right now, finishing the job.”

“Why don’t you all rest for the night, and in the morning, get started. It’ll still be rough-going, but good-going!”

“Where are you going?”, I asked.

“You think I’m going to wait down here? You all rest, and I’m going back up to my campsite to get ready for tomorrow!”

November 1st. We started up the trail.

We met Stanton. It was hard going, but with the trail marked, it was passable.

We reached Luis, atop the Pass. We were through!

Salvadore was halfway towards the Summit. This was easier going. Stanton was right. These two really knew how to mark a trail. We went where it seemed there was no trail, yet there it was.

To the summit!

Despite our brilliant plan, it had been a brutal day of traveling. We were all exhausted, and slept well that night, the first day of November.

Two days later, moving westward across the Sierra Nevadas towards Fort Sutter, we camped. It was November 3rd.

We talked into the night. We talked of America. Of California. Of our trip. Of the thousands of others who would make the trip.

We talked of Fort Sutter and the generosity of John Sutter, who not only had sent back provisions with Charles Stanton, but also the two brave guides, Luis and Salvador, who knew the Sierras well. We said a special “thanks” to Stanton, who had ventured ahead to get provisions and returned, with the guides.

We remembered Sarah Keys, Margaret Reed’s mother, who had died just as we passed from Missouri.

It was Tamzene who broke the silence, by raising her head and looking into the dark but brilliant sky.

“Isn’t that beautiful?”, she said.



She saw the magnificent circle around the moon. It was beautiful, but it also meant something ominous in these parts. I answered her in song:

*“When there’s a ring around the moon ...
Rain or snow is coming soon.”*

I went on to explain the cause-effect logic of snowfall and the ring around the moon.

That night, it started to snow.

CONCLUSION

“What Was” versus “What Could Have Been”

The real story of the Donner Party is one of tragedy. They *don't* make it through the pass and over the Sierra Nevadas. They're trapped.

They must spend the winter. With no food, no game to hunt, no fish to catch, no foliage to pick, they slowly die, one by one. The survivors resort to cannibalism.

Of the 87 members of the party, 48 eventually reach California.

I don't like reading (and re-reading) the Tragedy of the Donner Party.

Why not?

Because it always has the same, sad ending. And the “lesson to be learned” is always the same.

How might things have been different? Would they be different if they knew what we knew?

There's advantages in being a “Monday-morning quarterback”. There's also disadvantages, the primary one being your “second-guess” is always theoretical. You weren't there.

The purpose of this series is to put you there – on site. History as it was? Valuable learning. HISTORY AS IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN?

That's the purpose of this series!

But to do so, as you've seen, requires a lot of intellectual work. Research. Fact-finding.

And the process can reveal interesting things. The "lesson to be learned" may or may not have been a good lesson – or an appropriate one.

Many more questions arise.

Americans were moving west to a land they didn't even own! How was this both possible – and legal?

I always thought the Rocky Mountains were a formidable foe, but the Sierra Nevadas proved to be much greater an obstacle. What's the origins of both ranges?

Travelers west found Indians. *Was* this their land? Does merely occupying land entitle one to ownership?

On November 3rd, the Indian scouts were imploring the Donner Party to move on. It was going to snow. How did they know this? There was a ring around the moon. What's the relationship between this and snow?

Gold. Railroads. The Oregon Trail. The Bozeman Trail. The Mormon Trail. The Santa Fe Trail. The Mexican / American War. Native Americans.

There's so much more.

