



By the early 1850s there were “stations” with food and accommodations along the most traveled Sierra Nevada routes. Prior to that period, emigrants had to survive on their wits and determination. Photo, Slippery Ford House, 1860s.

Chapter 3: The Donner Party - a Tale of Survival

[The words of survivor Eliza P. Donner Houghton] In camp that night, Mr. Stanton outlined our course to the settlement, and consented to lead the train across the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Frost in the air and snow on the distant peaks warned us against delays; yet, notwithstanding the need of haste, we were obliged to rest our jaded teams. Three yoke of oxen had died from exhaustion within a week, and several of those remaining were not in condition to ascend the heavy grades before them.

Frost in the
air and snow on the
distant peaks warned us
against delays...





With sickening
anguish the first
morsels were prepared...

Not one touched flesh of kindred body... Death would have been preferable to that awful meal, had relentless fate not said: "Take, eat that ye may live. Eat, lest ye go mad and leave your work undone!"



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Heavy snows can plague travelers over the Sierras throughout the year. This snowy scene on the summit of the Sierra Nevada Mountains was taken on June 15, in the 1860s.

Up and up we toiled until we reached an altitude of six thousand feet, and were within about ten miles of our companions at the lake, when the intense cold drove us into camp on Prosser.

The following morning the ground was covered with snow two or three feet in depth, which had to be shovelled from the exposed beds before their occupants could rise.

Father's face [George Donner] was very grave. His morning caress had all its wonted tenderness, but the merry twinkle was gone from his eye, and the gladsome note from his voice. For eight consecutive days, the fatal snow fell with but few short intermissions.

Some of the poor creatures had perished under bushes where they sought shelter. A few had become bewildered and strayed; others were found under trees in snow pits, which they themselves had made by walking round and round the trunks to keep from being snowed under. These starvelings were shot to end their sufferings, and also with the hope that their hides and fleshless bones might save the lives of our snow-beleaguered

party. Every part of the animals was saved for food. The locations of the carcasses were marked so that they could be brought piece by piece into camp; and even the green hides were spread against the huts to serve in case of need.

Uncle Jacob, the first to die, was older than my father, and had been in miserable health for years. Like a tired child falling asleep, was James Smith's death.

Our camp having been thus depleted by death, Noah James helped John Baptiste to dig for the carcasses of the cattle. It was weary work, for the snow was higher than the level of the guide marks, and at times they searched day after day and found no trace of hoof or horn. The little field mice that had crept into camp were caught then and used to ease the pangs of hunger. Also pieces of beef hide were cut into strips, singed, scraped, boiled to the consistency of glue, and swallowed with an effort; for no degree of hunger could make the saltless, sticky substance palatable. Marrowless bones which had already been boiled and scraped, were now burned and eaten, even the bark and twigs of pine were chewed in the vain effort to soothe the gnawings which made one cry for bread and meat.

Snowy Christmas brought us no "glad tidings," and New Year's Day no happiness.

The natives were often found traveling on snow shoes. It didn't take long for the early settlers to use both snow shoes and skis to get around. In this early 1860s photos, trappers were out to set a bear trap, one of many ways in which the grizzly bear was driven from the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

"The bones of those who had died and been devoured by the miserable ones that still survived, were lying around their tents and cabins. Bodies of men, women and children, with half the flesh torn from them, lay on every side. A woman sat by the side of the body of her husband, who had just died, cutting out his tongue; the heart she had already taken out, broiled and eat !

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