



# **The Best Land Under Heaven: The Donner Party in the Age of Manifest Destiny**

*Michael Wallis*

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Cutting through 160 years of mythmaking, best-selling historian Michael Wallis presents the ultimate cautionary tale of America's westward expansion.

*"WESTWARD HO! FOR OREGON AND CALIFORNIA!"*

In the eerily warm spring of 1846, George Donner placed this advertisement in a local newspaper as he and a restless caravan prepared for what they hoped would be the most rewarding journey of a lifetime. But in eagerly pursuing what would a century later become known as the "American dream," this optimistic-yet-motley crew of emigrants was met with a chilling nightmare; in the following months, their jingoistic excitement would be replaced by desperate cries for help that would fall silent in the deadly snow-covered mountains of the Sierra Nevada.

We know these early pioneers as the Donner Party, a name that has elicited horror since the late 1840s. Now, celebrated historian Michael Wallis—beloved for his myth-busting portraits of legendary American figures—continues his life's work of parsing fact from fiction to tell the true story of one of the most embroidered sagas in Western history.

Wallis begins the story in 1846, a momentous "year of decision" for the nation, when incredible territorial strides were being made in Texas, New Mexico, and California. Against this dramatic backdrop, an unlikely band of travelers appeared, stratified in age, wealth, education and ethnicity. At the forefront were the Donners: brothers George and Jacob, true sons of the soil determined to tame the wild land of California; and the Reeds, headed by adventurous, business-savvy patriarch James. In total, the Donner-Reed group would reach eighty-seven men, women, and children, and though personal motives varied—bachelors thirsting for adventure, parents wanting greater futures for their children—everyone was linked by the same unwavering belief that California was theirs for the taking.

Skeptical of previous accounts of how the group ended up in peril, Wallis has spent years retracing its ill-fated journey, uncovering hundreds of new documents that illuminate how a combination of greed, backbiting, and recklessness led the group to become hopelessly snowbound at the infamous Donner Pass in present-day California. Climaxing with the grim stories of how the party's paltry rations soon gave way to unimaginable hunger, Wallis not only details the cannibalism that has in perpetuity haunted their legacy but also the heroic rescue parties that managed to reach the stranded, only to discover that just forty-eight had

survived the ordeal.

An unflinching and historically invaluable account of the darkest side of Manifest Destiny, *The Best Land Under Heaven* offers a brilliant, revisionist examination of one of America's most calamitous and sensationalized catastrophes.

## **The Best Land Under Heaven: The Donner Party in the Age of Manifest Destiny Details**

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# From Reader Review *The Best Land Under Heaven: The Donner Party in the Age of Manifest Destiny* for online ebook

## Whitney says

I have discovered a new favorite hobby: eating lots of snacks while reading about cannibalism! But really...this book was fantastic - a new, clear perspective on the Donner party. Carefully researched - even the early parts of the journey - and richly populated - even the less "important" members of the various pioneer groups. It took this good of a book to finally make me feel guilty about all my family's Donner jokes when we drive through the pass.

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## Matt says

**"It's supposed to be a challenge, that's why they call it a shortcut. If it was easy, it'd just be the way."**

- Paulo Costanzo, as Rubin, in *Road Trip*

**"Unless you pass over the mountains early in the fall, you are very liable to be detained, by impassable mountains of snow, until the next spring, or, perhaps, forever."**

- Lansford W. Hastings, *The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California* (1845)

**"Remember, never take no cutoffs and hurry along as fast as you can."**

- Virginia Reed, Donner Party Survivor, in a letter to a cousin

Let's play word association.

I say "Donner Party."

You say \_\_\_\_\_.

Well, you're going to say one of two things: (1) *What are you talking about? I don't want to play word association with you;* or (2) *Cannibalism!*

If you've heard about the Donner Party, it's probably because, in 1846-47, they ended up eating each other in the Sierra Nevada mountains after their wagon train got stuck in the snow. Cannibalism just has that effect on people. It gets your attention. It is one of the world's great taboos. From the whaleship *Essex* to the Uruguayan rugby team memorialized in *Alive*, even the whiff of cannibalism tends to give an event a lingering infamy.

However, as Michael Wallis demonstrates in *The Best Land Under Heaven*, there is a lot more to the saga of the Donner Party than the gastronomical extremes forced upon them. Theirs is a tale of arrogance, hubris, and greed; of small bad choices becoming large bad choices; of courage and cowardice; of hardship, pain, and endurance; and of perseverance. Oh, and there's also a couple homicides, just in case this wagon trip from Springfield, Illinois, to Sutter's Fort, California, wasn't interesting enough. *The Best Land Under Heaven* provides an authoritative account of the doomed Donner Party, and is there just about every step of the way.

Things start out a little slowly. The opening chapters (the book is divided into four large parts, and further subdivided into shorter chapters) serve to introduce the context and characters. There are a lot of people to keep track of (the wagon train eventually had 87 members), and the biographical information Wallis provides tends towards factual minutiae rather than insightful detail.

Things (though not necessarily the Donner-Reed Party) speed up on the trail. Wallis provides a lot of fascinating information about the process of taking an emigrant train west in days of yore. He traces the routes, describes the campsites, and lays out the variety of tasks each member had to accomplish. The trains, it turns out, were rolling examples of democratic dysfunction. Precious time on the trail was lost when the party stopped to form standing committees and hold reelections for wagon boss. (George Reed, who lent his name to the tragedy, was the third leader of the train).

The drama clicks into high gear at the Hastings Cutoff. This was a shortcut that split away from the traditional route of the California Trail. The shortcut was mentioned by Lansford Hastings, a western promoter and author who wrote *The Emigrants Guide to Oregon and California*. The description of the cutoff is not very detailed; however, Hastings was actually on the trail at the time the Donner Party approached, and promised that he would lead them personally. In the end, he did not fulfill this obligation. (It is amazing to consider the hardships of 19th century travel. People made life or death decisions based on sketchy information gleaned from a book. I will try to remember that the next time I get frustrated that Google Maps is taking more than .1 seconds to load).

Life has probably taught you something about shortcuts. I won't get into that philosophical question. Suffice to say, cutting corners generally comes with a certain amount of risk. For the Donner-Reed Party, this meant crossing a virtual desert, without fresh food or water. Instead of saving time, it wasted time, and that put them behind schedule to get over the mountain passes before heavy snowfall rendered them impassable.

The life-and-death struggle of the Donner-Reed Party is the book's core. Wallis does an exceptional job describing the terrible ordeal, of men, women, and children reduced to eating shoe leather and bark and, ultimately, corpses. He also thoroughly recounts the various relief expeditions sent to save them. His writing gives you a visceral sense of the cold, hunger, and exhaustion faced by the living and the dead. It seemed I was right there with them, even as I read this out on a deck in the middle of summer, with wine and snacks within reach.

Wallis uses a wide variety of sources, and does a good job of comparing accounts. He notifies you if a certain source lacks veracity or corroboration. His endnotes contain a lot of interesting annotations, including directions on where to go to the bathroom while a member of an emigrant wagon train. Two different appendices help you keep track of each member and their fate.

There is a trend among popular history books to divine a broader meaning from whatever subject the book is covering. I expected that to be the case here. The subtitle, after all, is *The Donner Party in the Age of Manifest Destiny*. Wallis, however, never really gets around to interpreting the Donner Party through any prism besides that of an exceptional story of survival and loss in an unforgiving environment. Frankly, I appreciated that. A great story doesn't need justification. A great story is its own justification.

And this is a great story, if a grisly one. It is remembered not because it has world-historical importance, but because it is an intimate portrait of human fortitude tested at the extreme edges of survivability.

There's also a lesson, if you care to learn it: *Never take no cutoffs and hurry along as fast as you can.*

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## **Melinda says**

Absolutely riveting and impeccably researched. I have read a lot about the Donner party. You might say I have a Donner Party Thing. This is by far the most illuminating and multi-faceted look at their story, as well as the book that best placed the Donner Party's trek in its historical context. Another reviewer called it humanizing, and that's exactly what it does -- strips away the hype and mythology and tells a really exciting and heartbreaking story.

(And I'm not going to lie...the short chapters helped a LOT. There's nothing more discouraging than neverending chapters in an already long book.)

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## **Becky Loader says**

Wallis is definitely a good historian and has done a lot of research into a rather chilling episode of the American West. I have read other accounts of the Donner Party, and this is the first time I learned about the bad decisions made about their journey. Somehow, that made it even more anguishing to read about their experiences. Not for the squeamish.

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## **Kusaimamekirai says**

In 1846, The Reed and Donner families along with many others set off from Illinois to embark on a new life in California. What happened after that is one of the more infamous and famous stories of the American frontier.

Reading this very well researched and engaging book, I was struck by the fact that things by no means had to happen like they did. The Donner party as they came to be known had to be the victims of the worst convergence of circumstances and bad luck anyone has ever had. Of the dozens of bad decisions and circumstances they encountered, just one or two of them going a different way might have resulted in a completely different story. However between winter coming a month early in the Sierra Nevadas, the worst series of snowstorms that region had ever seen (20 foot high snowbanks!), and trusting the horrible, horrible advice of a self promoting, snake oil salesman like huckster who sent them on the world's worst shortcut, they were doomed.

This is not to say that they didn't bring a lot of this on themselves with their own hubris because they certainly did.

They ignored multiple warnings about taking this "shortcut" instead dog sticking to the tried and true trail. They burdened themselves with ridiculous items like double decker wagons complete with furniture sets, and chimneys(!). Most importantly, they were incredibly cavalier and reckless with their time considering how often they stopped to sing, get drunk, or collect wildflowers and flora. Seriously. All leading to them being late to arrive and eventually stranded in the snow covered mountains of California.

All that being said, once tragedy began to strike, there were some incredible instances of heroism and selflessness. I was quite moved for example by Tamezen Donner's refusal on three separate occasions to escape to safety with rescue parties because it would have meant abandoning her sick husband.

Sadly, for every Tamezen Donner there were cases of unspeakable callousness and cowardice. Murder, betrayal, the abandoning of small children and stealing their merger possessions in the process, all seemed to be common occurrences that seemed unfathomable to me.

Yet perhaps I should reserve judgement even for these heinous acts.

Simply because there is no precedent for what these people went through. Visualize it as I might, I know I'll never be able to fully understand what went through their minds and what influenced their choices. Were I to be put in their shoes I'd like to think I would choose the road of a Tamezen Donner but as this book makes abundantly clear, when faced with extraordinary circumstances human beings react in unpredictable ways, for good and bad.

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## **Diane S ? says**

Westward Ho! Manifest destiny, the American dream, new land, and many in the mid 1800's followed it's siren call. For the Donner Brothers who had already successfully farmed in a few different states, it was the chance for adventure, new land in a new place, a new start. Many were traveling over the Sierra Nevadas heading to Oregon or California and the Donner families wanted to be part of this large exodus.

Remember studying this in school, know I read another book about this expedition that went so horrifically wrong, though I don't remember the title. This book starts with the beginning of the journey, the background of the family, and the gathering of supplies, the others that eventually joined this ill fated party and the high hopes and optimism of which they started out. What made this book so poignant was the human element. The author, though he does touch on other events happening at the time, very much concentrates on the people. Those stuck in the mountains, the ones who tried walk out to get help and supplies, and the eventual rescuers. Made it personal as we get to know the people involved. The mistakes they made, the bad advice they followed and the good advice they ignored. Heartbreaking.

Cannibalism of course it what is most mentioned when people talk about this event, but reading this gives a more detailed view and I just can't imagine, nor hopefully never have to, be in a situation like these people. Mothers, children starving, people dying, the horrific cold, and reading this I could feel the desperation, feel the cold, the intensive snow fall. The back of the book has pictures of some and brings the reader up to date on what happened to the survivors afterward. How they fared and what their lives were like. An intense reading experience.

ARC from publisher.

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## **Robert Melnyk says**

Interesting account of a group of people who set out from the mid-west in 1846 to journey to California in search of a new life in a new land. The book details the lives of 87 people who became known as the Donner Party as they made their trek across the wilderness. It describes their many bouts with bad luck, poor decisions, and lack of leadership which led to their mostly disastrous fate. Out of the 87 people, 41 died in their attempt to reach California, most of them in the heart of the brutal winter of 1846-1847 in the Sierra Nevadas. Out of the 41 who dies, 19 were cannibalized by others in order to survive. As horrible as that sounds, if not for that, mostly likely they would have all perished.

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## Neocortex says

This history of the Donner saga claims to do two things others don't: to separate myth from fact and to place the emigrants within the context of Manifest Destiny. I picked it up in a bookstore in Truckee in part because it was the staff pick—if you're looking for a book on the Donner Party, the locals in an indie bookstore ought to know the contenders—and because of those two, self-proclaimed selling points.

The book succeeds admirably in its first goal. *The Best Land Under Heaven* is incredibly thorough in its research, and unlike many historical accounts, it frames its claims to characters' thoughts and feelings in a manner that makes the degree of speculation or accuracy transparent. For example, when Wallis refers to Eliza Donner's perceptions, he makes clear that the account is from a document written many years after the events, and states her age at the time they occurred, a common-sense approach that suggests that her recollections may be colored by any number of circumstantial factors without either falling into the trap of treating the content as factual nor distracting from the events the character is recollecting—neat, clear, and efficient historical writing that I wish was more common. (I'm looking at you, Stephen Greenblatt, with your magic mind-reading pills that reveal to you and only you the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of non-fictional people...and 99% of graduate and undergraduate students...and political pundits...and....) Wallis astutely realizes that just because one is telling a story about a person, that doesn't mean that person actually becomes a fictional character, and that certainly doesn't confer omniscience upon the narrator.

In a similar vein, when accounts differ, Wallis clearly contextualizes those accounts by placing them against each other, thereby providing not only a clear sense of where there is doubt, but also deepening the sense of the characters involved and the vagaries of human nature itself. As a veteran backpacker and outdoor enthusiast who has made numerous stupid decisions on my own or been a part of collective stupidity that could have had serious consequences that were instead only close calls and near misses, I found it easy to identify with the cascading horror of the group's many fatal decisions. There but for the grace of God, et&.

The book is less effective when reaching toward its second goal of placing the Donner Party within the context of Manifest Destiny. Here, Wallis relies more on mentioning the words "Manifest Destiny" periodically instead of unpacking and developing the concept itself over the course of the book. Indeed, there may not have been much more to it in the emigrants' minds than a well-developed sense of entitlement that, under extreme conditions, expressed itself in increasingly smaller circles of tribalism and, to be sure, deeply embedded racism, but there is more to the concept both philosophically and historically than the book even begins to suggest. While Wallis may provide the reader with the event and circumstances of the first mention of the phrase as such, there are deeper roots to it and the great western movement in the mid 19th century, not to mention the Mexican-American war, roots that Wallis leaves largely unaddressed. Indeed, Wallis seems very much a collector of facts, details, and fascinating trivia—a very adept and rigorous collector of interesting facts, such as the most common cause of injury and death in wagon trains or how people traveling via railway trains were commonly skewered by railroad spikes, and why—but he is not a synthesizer of either facts or ideas. He compiles more than he processes. Thus, though the book is rich with information, it is thin on insight.

In short, whereas the book more than delivers in its first goal, it rather misses the mark in its superficial approach to the second. Nonetheless, recommended as a solid book that has the good sense to keep sensationalism to a minimum; the facts of the story are horrific enough.



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## **Susan (the other Susan) says**

Review later. Snack first. ?

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## **Rae Meadows says**

This book is not for everyone. It is gruesome. But it is fascinating. What I knew of the Donner party was from school, and it was minimal. This is a super-researched book that follows the doomed wagon train as its leaders make bad decision after bad decision that lead them to the Sierras too late to cross. It is a portrait of humanity at its best and at its worst. I always thought there was some cannibalism at the end--turns out half the party of 90 perished and ALL of them were eaten. Not only that. Some were even killed to be eaten.

The Best Land Under Heaven is ultimately a portrait of the human survival instinct. When people are desperate, it doesn't bring out the best--the survivors turned on each other. Every family for itself. It is truly incredible that any of them survived at all, and the book made me wonder what lengths I would go to if my children were starving. The descriptions of life after for those who survived was a heartbreaking postscript. One of the best books I read in 2017. I became totally obsessed and everyone was sick of me talking about it. Highly recommended, but it will turn your stomach. Truly haunting.

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## **Lois says**

Exhaustively researched and grueling account of the Donner Party...ok, nowhere near what they experienced themselves but just so appalling. The fact that homicidal ethnocentrism played a role was a 'new' fact for me but shouldn't have been surprising. Never plan a trip using just one source for information, women are harder but suffer more, taboos only go so far when you are starving, greed is an essential part of the human condition, and many more lessons. Grim read but compelling.

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## **Katie says**

Well-researched and detailed account of the Donner party. But a more detailed map of the journey would have been nice.

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## **Katie Van Ness says**

Most know of the Donner Party's infamous "cannibalism," but few know of the absolute desperation these people experienced. What began as a hopeful journey to cultivate new, prosperous lives out west became a living nightmare. The book was dry at times, and there were places where I felt the author rambled a little, but overall I appreciated how thorough he was in his research. He also told the story of the Donner Party in a way that conveyed compassion, and highlighted the strength of the human spirit. Highly recommended for

anyone interested in the American West and/or those seeking understanding of the true stories behind American tales and legends.

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## **David Eppenstein says**

I suppose I should say that it was a pleasure to finally read something about our history of westward expansion that wasn't all about depredations being committed by or upon native Americans. While Indians do make very minor appearances in this tragic tale their involvement is not worth noting and for that I was grateful. While everybody is familiar with the Donner Party story I can't say that is what attracted me to this book. Reading a GR friend's review of this book gave me the idea that this was a book that might have something I have been looking for in our Western history. I have wondered for quite some time what it was like to cross at least half the breadth of this country in a covered wagon. When I was a kid there was a TV program starring Ward Bond called "Wagon Train". I always doubted the journey was anything like what TV would have had me believe and I wanted to learn the truth. This story did indeed reveal what was involved in such an undertaking. I was very much interested in the logistics of such a journey and was surprised at the expense involved and the fact that using one wagon was hardly the norm. I never did understand how a family could haul all its worldly possessions as well as the necessary food, tools, spare parts, and other necessities and do it in one wagon. So families employed several wagons and had to hire teamsters to drive their extra wagons. These pioneers also brought herds of cattle, horses, and oxen. Yes, it was oxen and not horses that pulled these wagons. This book gave me the impression that these pioneers were hardly the impoverished people hoping to go West and make a new life that American mythology would have us believe. The only such souls that fit this image in this story were the hired hands and single men traveling with party. Most of the people engaged in this enterprise had owned businesses or established farms and sold these properties to finance their Western endeavor. Maybe that changed after the discovery of gold in 1848 but I will need to read further to verify that. But this story was a very informative source for what it took to go West in the 1840's. It definitely let the reader know what was needed to make this journey and it also let the reader know what to do and not do.

Of course this story is about what pioneers should not have done and the first thing not to do is rely on advice from a source whose credibility hasn't been validated. With time running out and the necessity of getting across the Sierras before the snows started the Donner Party elected to take the Hastings Cutoff in order to save time. This cutoff was a fantasy written in popular guide to traveling West by a man named Hastings that had never really traveled the West or even traveled his touted cutoff. It was interesting to read about how the interpersonal dynamics of this wagon train evolved during the journey prior to arriving at the infamous cutoff. It started out as the Russell Party but after disagreements among the travelers it became the Bryant Party and then the train divided and finally it became the Donner Party. The wagon train took on the name of the person elected to lead the group. Donner was the last person to take the lead but it was James Reed that prevailed upon his fellow travelers to take the Hastings Cutoff which led to their place in American history. While this part of the story is rather well known and really wasn't any part of my interest in this book the tragedy is quite compelling when the details are revealed.

While about half the Donner Party survived it was interesting to learn who the survivors were and who were among the dead. I was also rather surprised by the unscrupulous behavior of some of the persons in the rescue parties. At first there seemed to be a very popular rush to aid these stranded women and children with many men volunteering and large sums being donated to purchase horses, mules, and food for the rescue effort. However, when it came to actually climbing the mountain interest seemed to wain and only the promise of high wages managed to prompt "volunteers". The rescue efforts seemed to be mounted with some

forethought but suffered from weak leadership and execution. Sadly the rescue efforts were plagued by the same difficulties facing the stranded victims. That anybody managed to be brought out of this nightmare is amazing considering the weather, the conditions, the people involved and the circumstances. A very interesting book that was worth reading.

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### **Kristin says**

Determined to reap the benefits of Manifest Destiny, the Donner Party was destined for despair and death from the very start of their westward journey. A combination of indecision, infighting amongst families and a lack of leadership contribute to their tragic downfall at Truckee Lake. In “The Best Land Under Heaven,” author Michael Wallis recreates the Donner Party’s ill-fated attempt to cross the Sierra Nevada mountain range during the violent winter season of 1846, their imminent starvation, reduced to catastrophic cannibalism to survive. The result is a cautionary tale infamously staining the chase of the American Dream forevermore.

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