

## Chapter Eleven

# Hastings' Cut-off

*"never take no cutofs and hury along as fast as you can"\**

*\*James Reed's daughter Virginia in a letter to her cousin, May 16, 1947<sup>1</sup>*

Chronicler John R. McBride had included the following curious report in recording his recollections of the 1846 migration many years later. He wrote that it was around July 9 upon crossing the Green River on their way from South Pass to Ft. Bridger, that the Simpson company in which he was traveling had met several mountaineers who warned them that the new Hastings Cut-off was "an impracticable route for teams, and if they attempted it, would lead to disaster." McBride commented later that these predictions proved to be "erroneous; for Hastings, having induced some 60 wagons to follow his leadership, piloted them safely through his proposed route to California."

The first sixty some wagons of the Harlan-Young company, which Hastings himself had guided over his new "short-cut" in 1846, did in fact reach the settlements in California safely. But what is most curious about McBride's selective memory is that he did not even mention an additional twenty-three wagons that had lagged behind the eventual Hastings' procession, and fared very badly indeed. McBride, who wrote his recollections of the journey much later in his life, surely must have heard about the plight of the Donner party, which had emigrated in the same year he did. By the time McBride wrote his remembrances the fate of the Donner party had become a world-famous tragedy. But curiously, McBride completely ignored this tragedy in making his statement about the efficacy of Hastings' new route.

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Three different mountaineers who were familiar with the new Hastings route had warned against using it -- Joe Walker, Solomon Sublette, and James Clyman. They believed the Hastings Cut-off to be yet an unproven, high-risk route that involved crossing through narrow mountain canyons and over seventy-five miles of arid desert without water. It was at best probably not much shorter than the existing route through Ft. Hall -- if at all. And Donner party leader James Reed had even been an old army buddy of Clyman, whose opinion might have been expected to hold some sway.

Chronicler Edwin Bryant -- who had recently shared some of Reed's special wines and liquors to celebrate the Fourth of July -- said he had even left a note at Ft. Bridger advising his former Donner traveling companions against

following the fast-moving Russell pack party in which Bryant himself was traveling, over the new Hastings' Cut-off. "Our situation was different than theirs," argued Bryant. "We were mounted on mules, had no families, and could afford to hazard experiments, and make explorations. They could not."

Bryant told of the newly-former Russell pack-party on July 17 camping near Hastings and Hudspeth at Ft. Bridger; and being introduced to Fremont guide Capt. Joe Walker who attempted to dissuade them from the Hastings' Cut-off. But they decided to take the lead under the guidance of Hudspeth; and then write letters of warning to their former traveling-companions. This Russell pack party left on horseback July 20, eventually crossed the 75-mile Great Salt Lake Desert in only seventeen straight hours, traveling at an average speedy clip of 4.5 miles-per-hour, and then reached the Humboldt River and the regular California Trail on August 8.

Apparently their warnings were not delivered to the Donner party by the proprietors of Ft. Bridger, Jim Bridger and Louis Vasquez. They had been losing business due to emigrants taking the shorter Greenwood Cut-off that on the way to Ft. Hall bypassed their little stopping place. Therefore these proprietors had a vested interest in "promoting" Hastings' new route through Bridger.<sup>3</sup>

It was not until September 30 that the Donner party finally arrived at the place where the new Hastings route met up with the regular California Trail past Ft. Hall, near present-day Carlin, Nevada. The Donner's former 1846 Oregon-bound traveling companions – chronicler J. Quinn Thornton, ex-Governor Lilburn Boggs, the entire Rice Dunbar company – in fact all of those who had traveled down this same California Trail on the first leg of the Southern Route – had passed by there nearly a whole month earlier, and had already entered into the present-day state of Oregon from the south, or had opted instead to proceed on into California.<sup>2</sup>

The first week of October was only hours away, and our James Smith ancestors on the South Road – who had traveled alongside the Donners until they turned off -- would finally cross over the Cascade Mountains during this same week. Yet here was the Donner party -- now at the very tail end of the entire 1846 migration -- still having before them nearly the entire present-day state of Nevada to cross before they would even *reach* the Sierra-Nevada Mountains (the southern extension of the Cascades) -- much less cross over them.

Prior to their embarking on his new route, the Donner party had never even met Lansford W. Hastings, about whose character George Donner's wife Tamsen had expressed such grave concern. Hastings had met only some of the 1846 advance companies as they approached South Pass, to "induce" them to take his new cut-off into California. Sometime after leaving there, Hastings later sent forward an eastern-bound messenger named Wales Bonney with a letter to those in the rear companies, informing them that Hastings would meet them at Ft. Bridger and give them a more complete description of the advantages of his new

route to the south of the Great Salt Lake. In this letter, Hastings assured them that his new route was much shorter and better than the regular route through Ft. Hall; that “there was an abundant supply of wood, water, and grass ... except one dry drive of thirty-five miles, or forty at the most; that they would have no difficult canyons to pass, and that the road was generally smooth, level, and hard.”<sup>4</sup>

Upon reaching Ft. Bridger on July 25, where Hastings' earlier letter had said he would be waiting to escort them, the Donner travelers were surprised to find none of the would-be guides there to meet them. Hudspeth (who had just come from California with Hastings) had already left on July 20 with the Russell pack party at the forefront of the procession. Then Hastings had followed him out with the enlarged Harlan-Young wagon party soon afterwards. Despite this depressing news – which should perhaps have warned them of impending danger -- the twenty-three Donner wagons chose to continue onto the new route. In so doing they forfeited their last opportunity to follow instead the regular route to California through Ft. Hall, and on down the California Trail. And so, they turned off at the end of July and started on this new route, following the tracks of the sixty some wagons that had preceded them -- thus sealing their fate.

### **THE HASTINGS CUT-OFF**

The first part of the road was more difficult than the Donner party expected, but not impassible, and they managed to cover at least ten miles per day. But on August 6 when they came into the Weber River Valley, George Donner found a note from Hastings telling them the Weber Canyon was very bad, and he was not sure if the Donners could get through. At Hastings' request, Reed went forward with two others to receive further instructions. The remaining Donner party spent five anxious days waiting for Reed's return, precious time which they could ill afford to waste. On the wagon roads west, time was everything.

Reed learned that the route taken by the Harlan-Young party had been an ordeal that the younger men of that train had barely survived. It was certainly no route for the older Donner party leaders (James Reed was forty-five, Jacob Donner, fifty-six; and George Donner, in his early sixties). Hastings suggested an alternative route that the Donners embarked on August 12 -- one that they would soon discover had to be literally carved out before them as they pushed slowly along.

It was not until the end of August that the Donner party finally emerged from the Wasatch Mountains, having traveled only thirty-six miles in over three weeks time -- averaging much less than a meager two miles-per-day! Coincidentally, their emergence occurred at the same time Edwin Bryant reported that the fast-moving Russell pack party, traveling well ahead of the Donners, had surmounted the Sierra-Nevada Mountains, and had already descending into California. Yet the Donners still had before them a vast Utah

desert plus the entire state of present-day Nevada to cross. These emigrants were not yet aware that already their party was in very serious trouble.

This ordeal down the canyon had left the Donner party shaken and exhausted, both physically and in their enthusiasm for this new route. Before them lay an even more grueling challenge: the long, dry trip across the arid Great Salt Lake Desert. Hastings had told them it was thirty-five miles across, forty at most -- two days and two nights of hard traveling in the middle of summer. This was by no means impossible, as they could take water with them and ration it out. However, the mileage across the desert turned out to be twice what Hastings had told them, and ended up taking them four times longer!

It was eight days before the Donner party got everyone across this torturous desert, and their oxen -- what was left of them anyway -- were so badly jaded they could scarcely work. The emigrants then took one full week to rest and replenish themselves and their oxen, so that they could carry on. Again, this was more precious time lost that they could not have known would have proved invaluable near the end of their journey across the Sierras.

It took yet another two weeks for the Donners to reach the Humboldt River, and return to the original California Trail -- which they did not reach until the end of September. This was nearly two full months after the Russell pack party had arrived there in early August. From this point (east of present-day Carlin, Nevada) they still had a long way to go. Not only had Hastings' "more direct shortcut" proved to be far more demanding than the regular route through Ft. Hall, it turned out to be around 125 miles longer as well!

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Although the Donner party could not fully comprehend it as yet, time had become very short. T. H. Jefferson's map showing the Hastings Cutoff had a note on it that said: "[e]migrants who reach this pass by the first of October are safe"<sup>5</sup> -- referring to the pass in the Sierras later named for the Donner's. The Donner party was already starting into October, and they had yet to cross most all of Nevada before they reached these Sierra Mountains.

As the Donner party began trudging slowly down the California Trail following the Humboldt River, tempers started to fray. On October 5, a nasty incident flared up between James Reed and one of the wagoners, when Reed intervened to settle a conflict between two travelers. It led to Reed knifing him to death after the wagoner had caught Reed with his whip and drawn blood. For this offense Reed was banished from the train, and was forced to leave his family and proceed on ahead to Sutter's Fort in California. Thus the one person who had been most responsible for steering his colleagues onto what had become a very difficult course was now being separated from those who had to bear the brunt of his decision, his own family included. What else could possibly go wrong for this ill-fated Donner party?

The fall weather was drawing colder, and Indian harassment along the route was increasing. The Donner party had already lost over 100 head of cattle, including many work-oxen. By mid-October they finally reached the Truckee River, the gateway to the Sierras, but by then storm clouds were hanging over the mountains. Some in the party wanted to stop and rest their tired cattle. Others wanted to push ahead quickly, to avert the impending storm.

Then after a few days rest, their fortunes appeared to change for the better. Charles Stanton, a young bachelor they had sent ahead for provisions back when they had first reached the Humboldt River, finally returned from Sutter's Fort in California with two Indian guides and seven mules loaded with food. He also brought the good news that the pass would not be blocked with snow for another month yet – not until mid-November at the earliest. The emigrants breathed a huge sigh of relief. Things were looking up – finally. Thank God – the end of their long and difficult journey was now in sight.

It was here that the ill-fated Donner party made their final tragic mistake. They stopped again to rest what was left of their badly jaded oxen – this time for five more days -- readying them for the final push over the summit. After first reaching the California Trail it had now taken the Donner party nearly the entire month of October to cross Nevada and arrive at this place from which they would make their last final effort at crossing over the high Sierra mountains and on into California.

Resuming their journey near the end of October, the Donner party had reached a small mountain lake that now bears their name. That night it began to snow. Some of the party tried going over the pass, but already there was five feet of snow on the ground. The further up they climbed, the deeper the snow became. Young Stanton and one of the Indians did make it almost to the summit, but were forced to turn back.

On the other side of the Sierras, James Reed, upon arriving at Sutter's Fort had gotten horses and tried to bring supplies to his family. But he too was turned back by snow, some twelve miles from reaching the summit from the California side.

The next morning when the travelers awoke they found themselves in the midst of a full-blown snowstorm. The Donner party had no choice but to settle in however best they could, and prepare themselves for the winter. The rest of the story, as they say, is history.

The early storm that began on October 28 and eventually trapped the Donners in the swirling snows of the high-Sierras, would hold great significance for their former Oregon-bound traveling companions who had embarked on the Southern Route into Oregon. This the members of the James Smith party would soon learn as they approached the dreaded Umpqua Canyon.