

# DESPERATE DREAMERS



The Story of the Donner Company of 1846

*A Documentary Film Script*

Written By: William N. Lindemann

## **Script: Desperate Dreamers** – The Story of the Donner Company of 1846

**Dedication:** This film is dedicated to the 42 men, women and children of the Donner Company of 1846 who lost their desperate struggle for life and to those 49 who survived through that bitter Sierra winter.

The purpose of this script is to produce a documentary/dramatic film that is highly objective and minimally subjective, about the western American overland trail migration in the year 1846 and featuring the story of the Donner Company in that year. The intended purpose for the film is to make it available for legal contractual distribution to television networks, for distribution to the public at large and to feature regularly as an exhibit at the Donner Memorial State Park Museum. An edited short version will be made available for school distribution and museum screening.

This film is intended to be shot inclusively and embracingly using a very short lens for the live action docu-drama footage to give a broader more encompassing sense of place within which the characters portray their roles, promoting a sense of the Donner Company traveling and indeed the western expansion happening within the context of the world at large. Soft focus will give a dreamy quality and authenticity to the century-and-a-half old story. Some low camera angles will give heroic stature to some of the characters. Many still images will be animated to provide a background of authenticity. Sound will be stereo multi-track mixes of multiple sources.

The film is romantically based on the informal, emotionally charged journal entries and letters of the participants in the original historic events. Viewers vicariously experience the story and its drama unfolding as it did for the original participants over 150 years ago. The script is based almost entirely on primary sources such as journals, along with letters written or published, sometimes after the occurrences, used as they were intended, to document the incidents they relate to. Only two minor incidents are fictionalized, the meeting between Virginia Reed and Bryant and the conversation between Clyman and Hastings Both incidents are supposed to have some basis in reality since the participants traveled in each other's immediate company at great length.

The soundtrack is comprised of music and instruments selected for being germane to both the script and the time period. All the music was published and popular by 1846. The musicians consulted have deep, technical knowledge of the instruments and musical style appropriate for the time period, it is important for credibility to remain accurate to the times and the story.

Desperate Dreamers is the true story of human beings contending with desire, hope, fate, life, death and extraordinarily adverse natural conditions. This is the story of the human spirit dominating against adversity, a dramatic story of peril, defiance, and, for some, survival. There are stories of families and kindred love, a stronger bond cannot be found. There are stories of greed and avarice, anger, revenge and cowardice, bravery and devotion. There is wisdom in the words of those who chronicled the events surrounding the Donner Company of 1846, their passage from east to west and from here to eternity.

**Script: Desperate Dreamers/** Read Time 40:36 minutes

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The Cast:

Name, Description (age) (time minutes: seconds)

1. Actor 1, older, mature, deep, strong man's voice (00:42)
2. Actors [many voices]
3. Narrator, young, clear, soft woman's voice, i.e., the young Emigrant Girl Virginia Reed (01:46)
4. Patrick Breen, Irish immigrant going west to the Catholic Missions, daily kept a journal at the Donner Camp (51) (04:38)
5. John Breen, son of Patrick (14) (00:14)
6. Edwin Bryant, young - middle aged man, journaled travels in the Russell Company from which he, and the Donner Company separately, split (02:45)
7. James Clyman, mountain man, literate, to whom emigration is incomprehensible (54) (00:46)
8. Tamsen Donner, Mrs. George Donner, literate, educated school teacher, mother (44) (01:58)
9. Captain William O. "Le Gros" Fallon, large, older, middle aged military man (00:44)
10. Lansford Warren Hastings, self-interested, pompous, ambitious, lawyer, (27) (01:18)
11. Heinrich Lienhard, young Swedish man, journaled his travels in the west, left Ft. Bridger at the time the Donners did but went by Ft. Hall not the cut-off (00:36)
12. James Frazier Reed, wealthy, successful businessman, single-minded decisive, military (46) (03:04)
13. Virginia Reed, daughter of James and Margaret (13) (03:15)
14. Martha "Patty" Reed, daughter of James and Margaret (8) (00:44)
15. Reason P. Tucker, middle aged man, organized some of the relief (00:33)
16. Jesse Quinn Thornton, middle aged man, kept a journal of travels west (00:35)
17. Historian/Narrator (16:16)

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## Screen Blank

**Sound begins:** several guitars, tune "De Colores"

**Title fades in:**

## Desperate Dreamers, the Story of the Donner Company, 1846

### SCENE 1



Jumping Off Point

**Camera:** wagon canvas flapping in the breeze

**Actor 1:** (voice-over) (background sound of flapping canvas)

The Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths, that spring out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, vines, fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olives and honey, a land

wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack anything in it. (Bible, Old Testament) Deuteronomy chapter 8, verses 7-9 (42)

**Images:** fade-in animated black and white stills of Hastings and Emigrant's Guide

**L. Hastings:** (voice-over)

In a word, I will remark that in my opinion, there is no country, in the known world, possessing a soil so fertile and productive, with such varied and inexhaustible resources, and a climate of such mildness, uniformity and salubrity; nor is there a country, in my opinion, now known which is so eminently calculated, by nature herself, in all respects, to promote the unbound happiness and prosperity, of civilized and enlightened men. Lansford Hastings, The Emigrants Guide to Oregon and California, 1845 (43)

**Sound:** fade to end "de Colores"

**Sound:** guitar, 4 string banjo, tune Shenandoah

**Images:** fade-in animated newspaper headlines and broadsides promoting California emigration

**Camera:** ES MS historian at desk in old and rare book/manuscript library

**Historian:** (on-camera speaking seated at desk relaxed, confidant, articulate)

Americans in the 1840's feared economic depression and rampant unemployment. Unable to make mortgage payments on their land, many farmers left for the west. Epidemics of cholera and yellow fever, diseases like malaria, typhoid, tuberculosis and scarlet fever drove people from their homes.

For more than a century the death rate outnumbered the birth rate along the Mississippi River. Religious and social oppression pushed Irish Catholic immigrants to seek freedom in yet another new land. So, to Americans, by the summer of 1845, California, the providential land of plenty, beckons.

Magnificent, opportunistic descriptions tug at the hearts of every man, woman and child.

(1:18)

**Images:** animated still images of grand, painterly, wilderness landscapes



**Image:** still colored landscape dissolve to motion image of girl in landscape

**Sound:** fade out Shenandoah

**END SCENE 1**

## SCENE 2

**Sound:** fiddle, 4 string banjo, dulcimer, tune "Sweet Betsy From Pike,"

**Camera:** Slow steady zoom ES MS to close-up of young emigrant girl sitting on trunk or barrel alongside wagon looking wistfully toward horizon

**Young Emigrant girl:** (on-camera speaking)

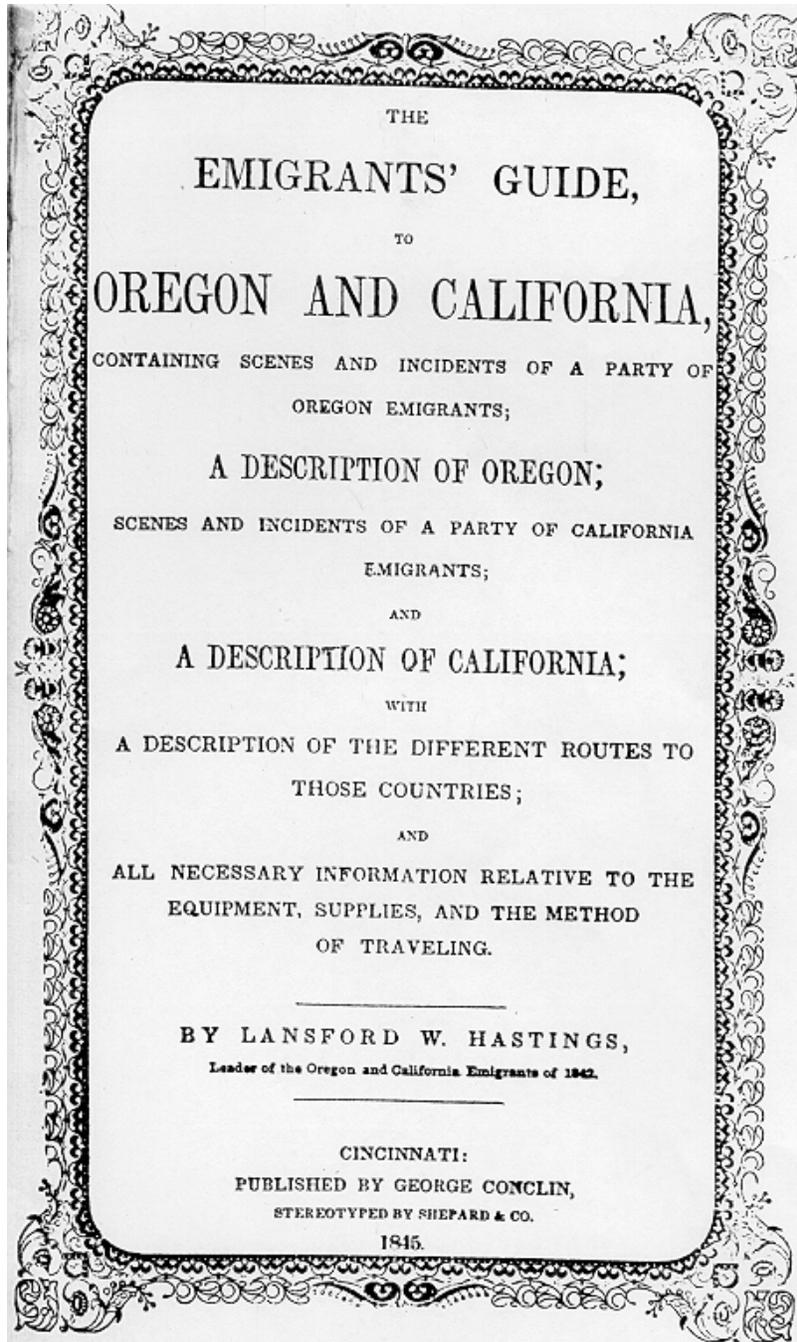
Everyday the newspapers report successful travel to the west. Routes west are written about. Wagons roads are rutted deeply in the land. Letters arrive home from families settled in the new land of milk and honey. Papa says, "it is no longer just a dream, the new west is a dream come true."

**Camera:** Different camera angles ES, LS, MS, with 19 men on horseback from Sutter's Fort in California, crossing the Sierra Nevada, Lansford W. Hastings in front heads back east in April of 1846. Among his party is mountain man James Clyman.

**Camera:** MS low front quarter his side on James Clyman riding horseback alongside Hastings

**J. Clyman:** (on-camera speaking)

I reckon that there book of yours, Mr. Hastings, will stir up a significant amount of excitement amongst folks readyin' to start out across the Missouri River come spring.



**Camera:** MS low front quarter his side on Lansford Hastings riding horseback alongside Clyman

**L. Hastings:** (on-camera speaking)

Yes, Mr. Clyman, I took great pains to complete this work.

(pulls book from coat or bag and begins to read)

The California Route, from Fort Hall to the Sacramento River, lies through alternate plains, prairies and valleys, and over hills amid lofty mountains; thence down the great valley of the Sacramento... Wagons can as readily be taken from Fort Hall to the bay of San Francisco, as they can from the States to Fort Hall, and in fact the latter part of the route is found much more eligible for a wagon than the former. (35)

**Sound:** fade out Sweet Betsy Form Pike

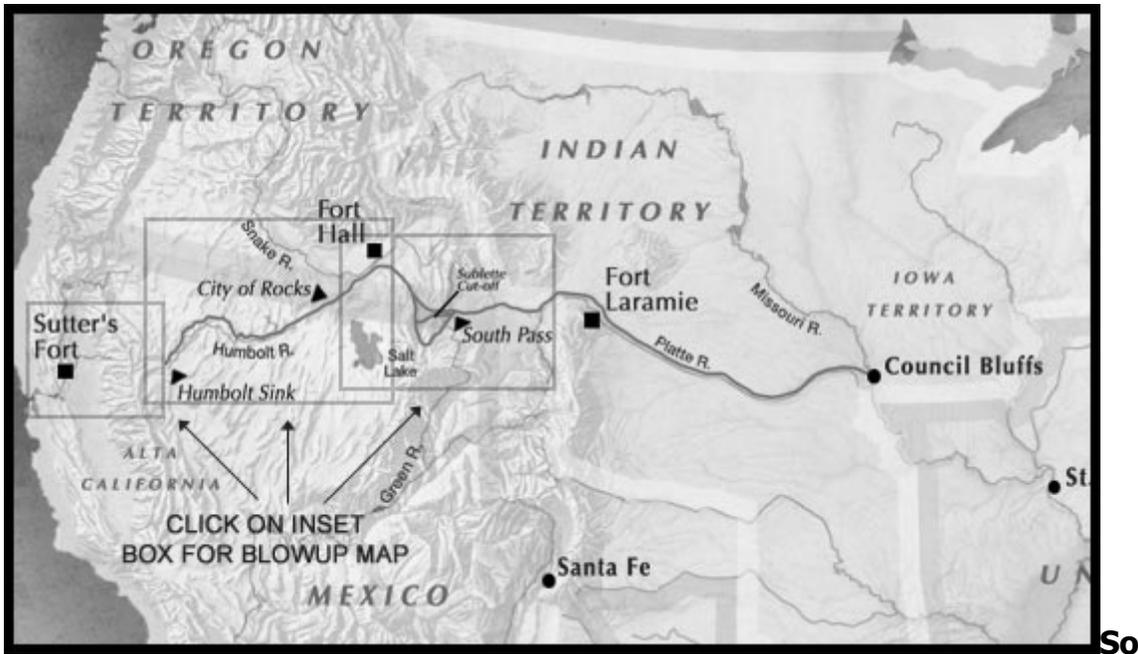
## **END SCENE 2**

## **SCENE 3**

**Sound:** guitars, dulcimer, fiddle various reels

### **MAP INSERT**

**Image:** progressive animated pictorial map (repeats to update throughout film) showing progress along route used throughout and updated. Camera pans and zooms to details as necessary



**und :** waltz music continues with a quick change and various instrument changes and solos

**Image:** animated Black and White still of James Reed

**J. Reed:** (voice-over)

I left Springfield, Illinois with my family about the middle of April, 1846, George and Jacob Donner with their families accompanied me. We arrived at Independence, Missouri, where I loaded two of my wagons with provisions, a third one being reserved for my family. James Reed (24)

**Camera:** pull back to reveal young emigrant girl walking alongside Donner's wagon, Tamsen Donner sitting in background, George preparing the wagon

**Young Emigrant Girl:** (on-camera speaking)

Mrs. Tamsen Donner, George's wife must be writing a letter or keeping her diary. Among all the provisions Mr. George Donner brought, he has informed us, is a copy of Mr. Lansford Hastings guidebook. (8)

**Camera:** Slow steady zoom ES MS CS woman sitting on chair beside wagon with lap desk writing a letter and speaking aloud as she writes

**T. Donner:** (on-camera speaking)

It is supposed there will be 7,000 wagons start from this place this season. We go to California, to the bay of San Francisco. It is a four months trip. We have wagons furnished with food and clothing and drawn by three yoke of oxen each. (pause)...I am willing to go and have no doubt it will be an advantage to our children and to us. I came here last evening and start tomorrow morning on the long journey. Farewell. Tamsen Donner, May 11, 1846. (42)

### **END SCENE 3**

### **SCENE 4**

**Sound:** waltz music continues with other various quick changes and instrument changes and solos



**Camera:** Different camera angles low angle LS MS Tamsen Donner and Young Emigrant Girl talking

**T. Donner:** (with the Young Emigrant Girl, on-camera speaking)

We are commanded by Captain Russell - an amiable man. George Donner is himself yet. He crows in the morning, and shouts out, "Chain up, boys! chain up!" with as much authority as though he was "something in particular." (20)

**Enter:** Edwin Bryant, Bryant walking carrying paper

**Young Emigrant Girl** (on-camera speaking)

Good morning sir, Mr. Edwin Bryant isn't it, can you tell me what day this is... and could you tell me... has the committee completed their task?

**Camera:** pull back to show wagons in background fade after Bryant  
**E. Bryant:** (on-camera speaking)

May 12 ... the wagons and teams were this morning inspected... It appears from their report that the number of wagons belonging to the company was 63; of men 119; of women 59; of children male and female 110. (29)

**Images:** dissolve into animated black and white still images of wagon trains, wagons crossing rivers

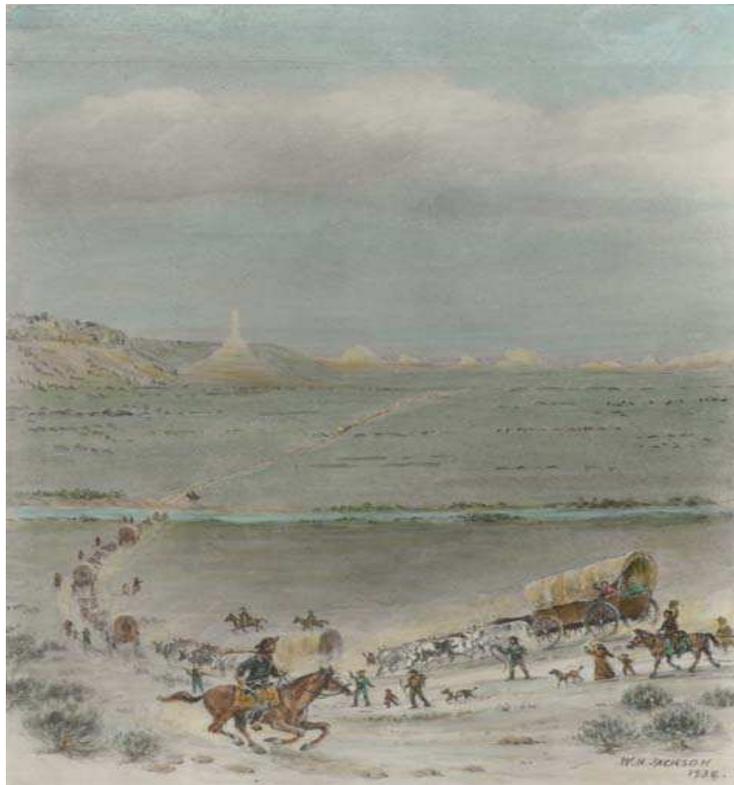
**Narrator:** (voice-over)

The wagons began moving by nine o'clock and by ten the old camp is deserted.

(8)**Sound:** waltz music fades

**Sound:** (off-camera) whips cracking, animals snorting and stamping about, creak of many wagons, many shouts of men, women and children. (10)

**Images:** long wagon trains



**END SCENE 4**

## SCENE 5

**Sound:** fiddle, dulcimer, tune "The Donside Emigrant's Farewell"**Camera:**

steady slow pan following MS Tamsen Donner walking alongside moving wagon

**T. Donner:** (on-camera speaking)

There are 420 wagons, as far as we have heard, on the road between here and Oregon and California. (11)

**Camera:** action continues**Historian** (on-camera speaking from tailgate of wagon)

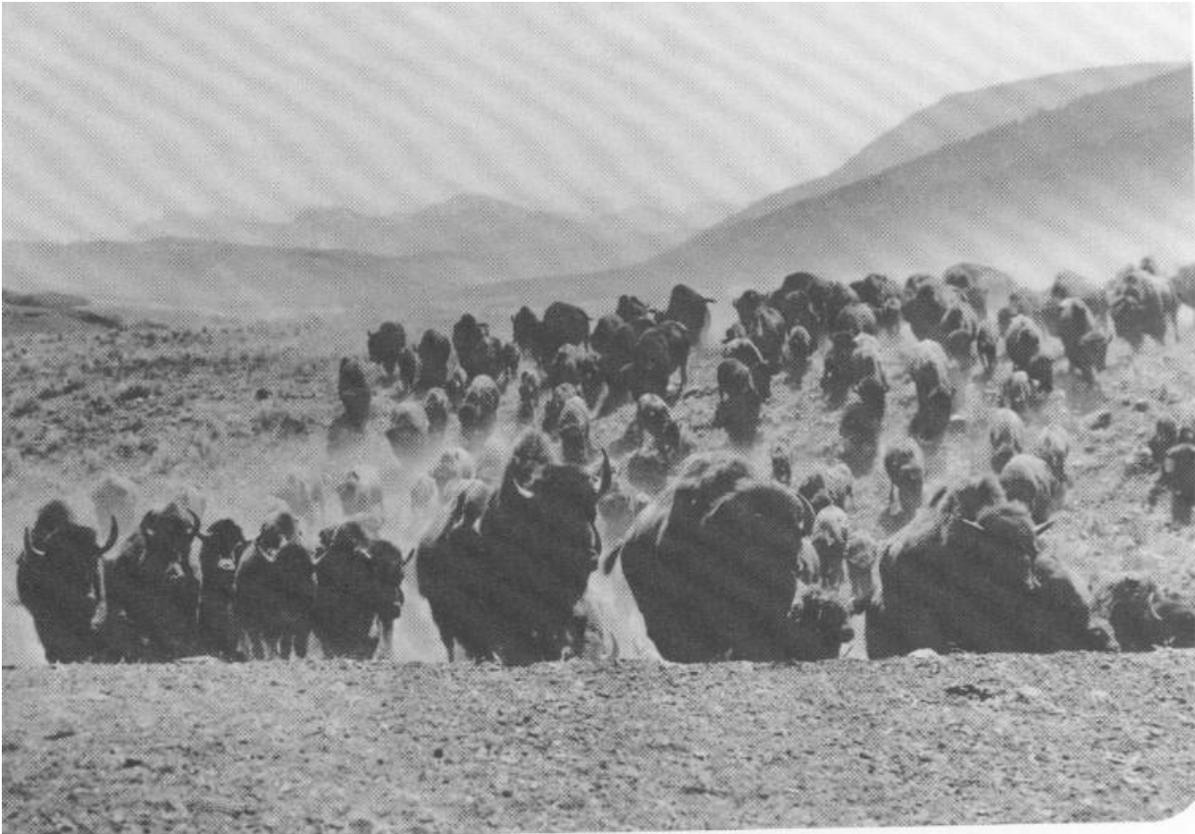
**Camera:** Different camera angles MS CU

The fateful road west poses many hardships in the first weeks: rain, river crossings and fords, swollen creeks and mud, followed by scorching heat, then a hard, fast road through the monotonous prairie that requires quick, delirious walking. (21)



**T. Donner:** (on-camera speaking)

We are now on the Platte, 200 miles from Fort Laramie...June 16th, 1846... our journey so far, has been pleasant. The water for a part of the way has been indifferent - but at no time have our cattle suffered for it. Wood is now very scarce, but "Buffalo chips" are excellent - they kindle quick and retain heat surprisingly. (emphatically though lightheartedly foreshadowing) **Indeed if I do not experience something far worse than I yet have done, I shall say the trouble is all in getting started.** (45)



**Camera:** location motion footage of route vistas in color, cut to Edwin Bryant walking alongside moving wagon

**E. Bryant:** (on-camera speaking)

Our progress is very slow. But notwithstanding this, many of the wagons are late in reaching camp, and the train is frequently strung out several miles. I am beginning to feel alarmed at the tardiness of our movements and fearful that winter will find us in the snowy mountains of California, or that we shall suffer from the exhaustion of our supply of provisions. (34)



**Historian:** (on-camera speaking from rocky Sierran summit in autumn)

**Camera:** MS

Anxiety is mounting over slow progress. On June 20th, Edwin Bryant, accompanied by eight others, rides ahead to Fort Laramie, about 150 miles away, to obtain mules and horses. They will abandon their wagons and excess belongings to travel lighter and faster. (26)

**Images:** cut to animated black and white stills of Fort Laramie, mule trains, Independence Rock, Edwin Bryant, James Clyman  
**Sound:** fade out Donside Emigrant's Farewell

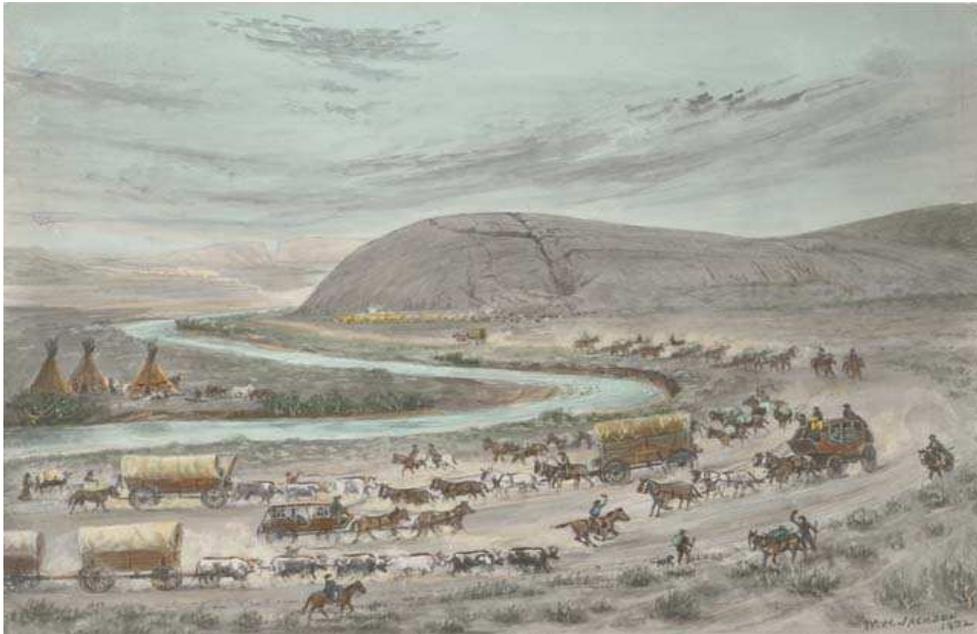
## END SCENE 5

## SCENE 6

**Sound:** pennywhistle, bodrun, guitar, dulcimer and fiddle music various Irish ballads with a good beat like cantering horses' hooves

**Historian:** (on-camera speaking before Independence Rock)

Riding east Clyman, parts with Hastings at Independence Rock. Traveling on, Clyman meets the first westward wagons on June 23 and counted 503. On June 27th Clyman meets Bryant. (19)



**Camera:** Slow steady zoom MS CU Bryant **E. Bryant:** (on-camera speaking)

A party returning from California encamped a small distance below on the Platte. One of these came up to the fort to purchase provisions. He gave a most discouraging description of California, representing it as scarcely habitable. (23)

**Camera:** Slow steady zoom MS CU Clyman **J. Clyman:** (on-camera speaking)

It is strange that so many of all kinds and classes of People should sell out comfortable homes in Missouri and elsewhere, pack up and start across such an immense Barren waste to settle in some new place of which they have so uncertain information. (26)

**Camera:** pull back slowly to reveal Clyman in a building Reed entering

**Historian:** (voice-over)

James Reed encounters Clyman as well. They served together in the Black Hawk military campaign. On June 27th they sit down to some of Reed's libations. They talk at length, Clyman arguing for the Fort Hall route and Reed holding out for a shorter way. (22)



**J. Clyman:** (on-camera speaking)

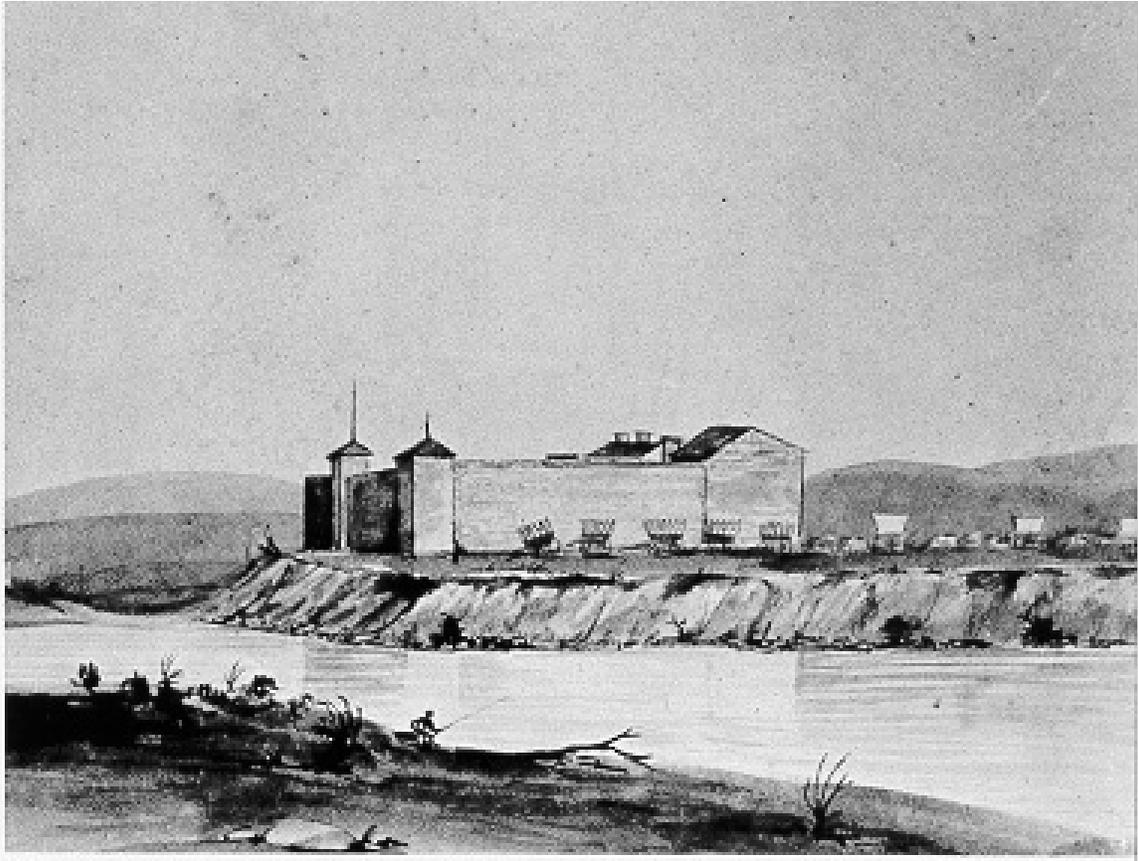
Several of us continued in conversation until a late hour. ...Take the regular wagon track and never leave it, it is barely possible to get you through if you follow it, and it may be impossible if you don't. (20)

**J. Reed:** (on-camera speaking)

There is a nigher route, and it is no use to take so much of a roundabout course.

(9)

**Image:** stock motion footage from silent film "Wagon Train" showing wagons splitting up



**Narrator:** (voice-over)

We left Fort Laramie, the point of no return on the journey west, and disregarding Mr. Clyman's advice, the wagons moved on to Fort Bridger. Traveling with the remainder of the emigrant party, originally under Colonel Russell, we caught up with Edwin Bryant's group on July 4th. We celebrated together and Mr. Bryant's pack train resumed travel in the afternoon.

**Sound:** Irish ballad fades

**END SCENE 6**

**SCENE 7**

## **MAP INSERT**

**Image:** progressive animated pictorial map showing progress along route used throughout and updated. Camera pans and zooms to details as necessary

**Sound:** guitars, dulcimer, fiddle various waltzes with many changes

**Historian:** (on camera)

They reach Independence Rock four days behind the next advance group.

Hastings is not there. Six days later along the Sweetwater River they cross paths with Wales B. Bonney traveling alone. (16)

**Camera:** LS MS Bryant riding on mule back

**E. Bryant:** (on-camera speaking)

Mr. Bonney brought with him an open letter from L.W. Hastings, Esq., of California, dated on the headwaters of the Sweetwater, and addressed to the California emigrants on the road. ...It...invited to those bound for California to concentrate their numbers and strength, and to take a new route which had been explored by Mr. H., from Fort Bridger via the south end of the Salt Lake, by which the distance would be materially shortened. Edwin Bryant, July 10 (36)

**Historian:** (on-camera speaking)

**Camera:** MS

On July 14th Bryant's group arrived at the Big Sandy River and turned south toward Fort Bridger, along the old trail, they did not continue on Greenwood's cutoff to Fort Hall. They reached Jim Bridger's Trading Post and found Hastings,

he was strongly promoting the route that, he said, shortened the distance by 150 to 200 miles. (31)

**Camera:** MS CU Bryant in camp, mules staked out

**E. Bryant:** (on-camera speaking)

We arrived at the Big Sandy and turned south toward Jim Bridger's trading post. We elected not to take Greenwood's cut-off to Fort Hall. Finally at Bridger's I met up with Mr. Hastings who is strongly promoting his new route that he says shortens the distance by 200 miles. I was introduced today, July the 17th, to Captain Walker... He spoke discouragingly of the new route via the south end of the Great Salt Lake. (12)



**Historian:** (on-

camera speaking before Little Sandy River, spring flood stage)

Meanwhile back on the Little Sandy a separation takes place, the majority of the wagons originally with Russell continuing on to Oregon and California by way of Fort Hall. (14)

**Camera:** cut to animated stills

**Sound:** waltzes continue with some changes

## **END SCENE 7**

## **SCENE 8**

**Sound:** waltzes continue with some changes

**Images:** animated black and white stills of South Pass, Plume Rock, The Parting of the Ways, Walker, river, Fort Hall, Fort Bridger

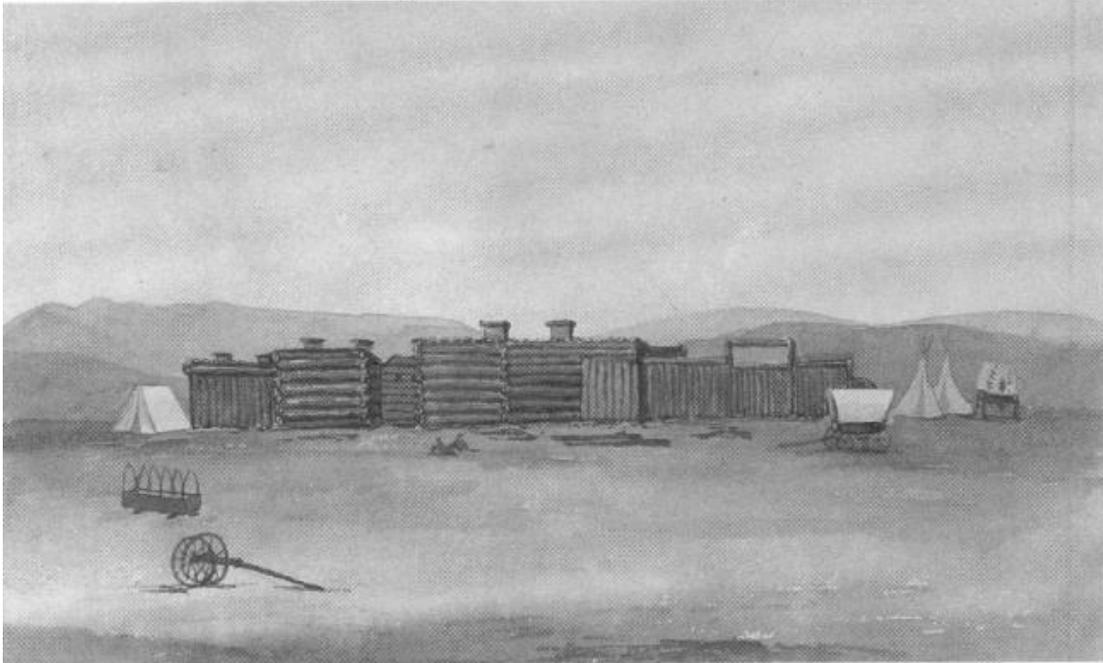
**Camera:** location motion footage of route vistas in color cut to MS CU of Reed

**J. Reed:** (on-camera speaking) (*plot direction anchored*)

...a few wagons, mine with them, are going the Fort Bridger, Salt Lake Route to California. The day after our separation from the Russell company we elected George Donner captain. From this time the company shall be known as the

**Donner Company.** (title validation) (22)

**Sound:** fiddle, 4 string banjo, guitar, tune "Down in the Valley"



**Camera:** MS Bryant mounted on mule back riding by camera pans to hold him in frame  
**E. Bryant:** (on-camera speaking)

We determined this morning, July the 18th, to take the new route via the south end of the Great Salt Lake... I wrote several letters to my friends among the emigrant parties in the rear advising them not to take this route, but to keep on the old trail via Fort Hall. We were mounted on mules, had no families, and could afford to hazard experiments, and make explorations. They could not. (31)



**Narrator:** (voice-over)

Many men living and conducting business along the trail and at trail's end, have a strong interest in the success of this route. Some devise schemes of wealth to be had at the expense of the poor emigrants. (18)

**J. Reed:** (on-camera speaking)

Several friends of mine who had passed here with pack animals for California had left letters with Mr. Vasquez - Mr. Bridger's partner - directing me to take the route by way of Fort Hall and by no means to go to the Hastings cutoff. Vasquez being interested in having the new route traveled, kept these letters (from me).

(27)

**Images:** of oxen, wagons in mountains



**Historian:** (voice-over)

Hastings' partner will guide Bryant's mule train to the south end of Salt Lake.

Bryant's group departs with another small group of emigrants early on July 20th.

Hastings is unwilling to wait any longer for the remaining parties in the rear. He leaves later that same day with 40 wagons of the George Harlan and Samuel C.

Young Company. (30)

**Camera:** MS CU J. Reed Little Sandy River

**J. Reed:** (on-camera speaking)

We have arrived here safe at Bridger's this 27th day of July, with the loss of two yoke of my best oxen. They were poisoned by drinking water in a little creek called Dry Sandy...Jacob Donner also lost two yoke and George Donner a yoke and a half... I have replenished my stock by purchasing from Messrs. Vasquez and Bridger... The new road, or Hasting's cutoff, leaves the Fort Hall road here, and is said to be a savings of 350 or 400 miles in going to California, and a better route. There is, however, or thought to be, one stretch of 40 miles without water; but Hastings and his party, are out ahead examining for water, or for another route to avoid this stretch... Mr. Bridger informs me that the route we design to take, is a fine level road, with plenty of water and grass, with the exception before stated. (1:08)

**Sound:** waltzes fade out

## **END SCENE 8**

## **SCENE 9**

**Sound:** 4 string banjo, guitar, fiddle tune "Blue Tail Fly" (or "Jimmy, Crack Corn").**Images:** Fort Bridger Historical Park**Historian:** (on-camera speaking)  
Camera MS

So it is, with haste and optimism, the Donner Company leaves Fort Bridger for Salt Lake via Hastings cut-off on July 31, 1846. Along with the Reeds and

Donners are the Keesebergs from Germany with two wagons, the Breens from Illinois with four wagons; the Murphy family from Tennessee with two wagons and many other small families and single men. The company in all numbers 22 wagons with 27 men, 15 women and 41 children. (40)

**Camera:** location motion footage Echo Canyon, Weber Canyon, Yellow Creek, motion footage of route vistas in color



**J. Reed:** (voice-over)

We started this morning on the Cut off route by the South of the Salt Lake. 4 1/2 miles from the fort there is a beautiful spring called the Blue Spring as cold as ice. Passed several springs and encamped at the foot of the first steep hill going west, making this day 12 miles. (28)**Camera:** location motion footage Wasatch Mountains fly-over, Emigration Canyon

**Historian:** (on-camera speaking from Emigration Canyon or similar view)

**Camera:** MS CU

A few days into the cut-off they discover it is not as easy as they believed.

Hastings, from his advanced position, left a note stuck on a sagebrush, warning them Weber Canyon was impassable with wagons. "Find another route over the mountains," he advised. If they will send a messenger he promises he will return and pilot them through a better route. (32)**V. Reed:** Young Emigrant Girl (on-camera speaking as three ride off into distance, much dust)

These directions were so vague that C.T. Stanton, William Pike, and my father rode on in advance and overtook Hastings and tried to induce him to return and guide our party. He refused, but came back over a portion of the road, and from a high mountain endeavored to point out the general course. Virginia Reed (28)**J. Reed:** (voice-over)

Thursday, August 6, we left our encampment about ten o'clock and encamped above the canyon. Here we *turn to the left hand* (stated emphatically and optimistically) and cross the Mountain instead of the canyon which is impassable. (18)

**Sound:** Blue Tail Fly continues with changes

## **END SCENE 9**

## **SCENE 10**

### **MAP INSERT**

**Image:** progressive animated pictorial map showing progress along route used throughout and updated. Camera pans and zooms to details as necessary

**Sound:** Blue Tail Fly continues with changes

**Young Emigrant Girl:** (voice-over)The company waits four days, camping at the mouth of the canyon. On August 11th we take the new route scouted by my father, James Reed. It takes us 18 precious days to go a mere 39 miles.

(21)**Images:** animated black and white stills Emigration Canyon

**Camera:** Slow Motion lap dissolve MS CU Young Emigrant Girl lap dissolve to location motion footage fly-over Emigration Canyon lap dissolve to MS V. Reed

**V. Reed:** (on-camera speaking standing above cook fire)

While cutting our way step by step through the "Hastings cut-off," we were overtaken and joined by the Graves family... finally we reached the end of the canyon where it looked as though our wagons would have to be abandoned. It seemed impossible for the oxen to pull them up the steep hill and the bluffs beyond, but we doubled the teams and the work was, at last, accomplished... Worn with travel and greatly discouraged we reached the shore of the Great Salt Lake.

**Camera:** location motion footage color scenic vistas Great Salt Lake and Great Salt Desert

**Virginia Reed:** (voice-over) continues...

We prepared for the long drive across the desert and laid in, as we supposed, an ample supply of water and grass. This desert had been represented to us as only forty miles wide but we found it nearer eighty. It was a dreary, desolate,

alkali waste; not a living thing could be seen; it seemed as though the hand of death had been laid upon the country. (1:12)

**Images:** animated still images Pilot Peak, the Great Salt Desert, wagons, animals and remains in desert, wagon tracks



**Historian:** (on-camera speaking from Great Salt Lake in background)

**Camera:** different camera angles ES LS MS

They spend four days and nights crossing eighty miles of the Great Salt Desert, driving day and night with little rest. The first two days and nights they drive 60 miles according to James Reed. Reed loses all of his uncontrollable, thirst crazed cattle the third night out. They waste a week, trying in vain to recover the animals. (32)

**Images:** animated stills of route vistas in color dissolve to animated black and white still of Jesse Quinn Thornton **J. Quinn Thornton:** (voice-over)

36 head of cattle were lost on this drive, thought to be stolen by the Indians.

The remaining oxen were injured and depleted. Four wagons were left.

Provisions were redistributed and found to be very short. On Thursday, September 10th, Charles T. Stanton and William McCutchen were dispatched, post haste, to Sutter's Fort to bring relief and provisions to the company. J.

Quinn Thornton (35)

**Images:** animated still images of Jasper Pass, Ruby Valley, Ruby Mountains, Overland Trail Pass, abandoned wagons, images of oxen wandering in desert

**Sound:** Blue Tail Fly fades out

## END SCENE 10

## SCENE 11

**Sound:** guitar, dulcimer, fiddle various English ballads

**Images:** animated stills of the Humboldt River and the sink

**Historian:** (on-camera speaking)

Early in September Heinrich Lienhard is in the last of the advanced wagons at the Humboldt River. They had left Fort Bridger on July 26th, five days ahead of the Donner Company. (18)

**Image:** animated black and white still of Heinrich Lienhard

**H. Lienhard:** (voice-over)

...here the road from Fort Hall joined that of the Hasting's Cutoff, which might be better called *the Hastings Longtripp*. How much we had profited by this cutoff

we soon enough learned through a small company which had taken the Fort Hall road. They had left Fort Bridger 12 or 13 days after we did, and were now just as far advanced as we. Heinrich Lienhard, September 8th (36)



James and Margaret Reed

**Images:** animated still color images of trail near Gravelly Ford, Snyder

**HillHistorian:** (on-camera speaking from Gravelly Ford)

**Camera:** Different camera angles ES LS MS

The Donner Company is 17 days behind Lienhard's group. On October 5th the company passes Gravelly Ford, on the Humboldt River. Graves loses two more oxen and a horse to Indian theft. They double-hitch teams for the steep pull over Emigrant Pass. John Snyder, driving for Graves, refuses to hitch up his team with another. (26)

**Camera:** Different camera angles LS MS CU following action

**Action sequence**

Snyder: beats his cattle forward with the stock of his whip.

**Snyder:** (on-camera shouting)

Hee-yeah, hee-yeah

**Historian:** (voice-over)

James Reed and one of his drivers, Milt Elliot, offered assistance (10)

**Action continues**

**J. Reed:** (on-camera shouting)

Milt, let's give him a hand

**Historian:** (voice-over) but they were met with abusive words.

**Action continues**

**Sound:** sounds of men fighting

Then Snyder strikes Reed a blow on the head with the butt end of his heavy whip-stock. This blow was followed in rapid succession by a second, and a third. As the third stroke falls, [Reed's wife, Margaret] runs between her husband and the furious man, hoping to prevent the blow. Reed sees the uplifted whip but has only time to cry. (28)

**Reed:**

John, John

**Action continues:**

Down comes the stroke on his wife. Reed is stunned for a moment and blinded by the blood streaming from the gashes in his own head. Quick as a thought his

hunting knife is out and Snyder falls. Reed immediately regrets the act... in a few moments Snyder expires.

Some, Including Lewis Keeseberg, intend to lynch Reed for the offence. (24)

**Camera:** MS Lewis Keeseberg Props up the tongue of a wagon in the middle ground, wagons and emigrants in background Reed and Snyder in foreground

**Keeseberg:** (on-camera shouting)

I say we hang him right here and now.

**Camera:** LS MS

**Action continues:**

**Historian:** (on-camera speaking from wagon train in background)

**Camera:** MS CU

After deliberation amongst the men of the company Reed is banished from the train without food, weapon or ammunition. Milt Elliot and Reed's daughter, Virginia, follow him and bring him supplies, bidding him a heart rending farewell, they return to the wagons.

Reed feels he acted in self defense. The Donner wagons are two days ahead.

Reed catches up with the Donners. Walter Herron, one of Reed's drivers, who is with the Donners at the time, joins Reed and the two men push ahead for Sutter's Fort. (35)

**Sound:** ballads fade out

**END SCENE 11**

## SCENE 12

**Sound:** banjo, guitar, dulcimer, fiddle tune "Old Blue"

**Camera:** CU tracking wagon wheels turning in the dust low angle late afternoon sunlight coming through spokes

**Historian:** (voice-over) On October ninth an old man named Hardcoop is forced out of Keeseberg's wagon. No one else will take him in. He is left to die. On October 14th Mr. Wolfinger a wealthy German gentleman disappears, alone, from behind the last wagon, he is thought murdered for his money. (20)

**Images:** Truckee River at Painted Rock Truckee Meadows, Charles Stanton, motion footage of route vistas in color

**V. Reed:** (on-camera speaking from wagon stopped alongside Truckee River lower Canyon, she is visibly wrought though lighthearted, an edge to her voice) On the 19th of October, while traveling along the Truckee, our hearts were gladdened by the return of Stanton, with seven mules loaded with provisions. Captain Sutter sent two of his Indian vaqueros, Louis and Salvador with Stanton. Hungry as we were, Stanton brought us something better than food, news that my father was alive. (27)

**Camera:** various views of the Truckee Meadows, Truckee River Canyon, Alder Creek, oxen/cattle grazing



**Historian:** (on-camera speaking on location from Alder Creek site)

**Camera:** Slow steady zoom ES LS MS

Without Stanton's return the entire party would certainly have perished. (pause)  
Next, a truly fatal decision is made. The exhausted group stops to rest the oxen and cattle in the Truckee meadows. Three or four more days are lost. William Pike, father of two small children, is accidentally shot to death. Snow is settling on the Sierra Nevada Mountains. On October 23<sup>rd</sup> the exhausted, demoralized, disorganized company finally struggles up into the mountains.

The Donner families stop to repair a broken axle. They are one day behind the main company, now mostly at Truckey's Lake. Jacob Donner, wielding a chisel to finish the axle repair, accidentally, seriously gashes the back of his brother George's right hand. They manage to travel another 16 or so miles to Alder Creek and that is as far as they will go. The other weary emigrants arrive over a

two day stretch at Truckey's Lake. Some attempt crossing the summit through Coldstream valley others by the North shore of the lake. All are turned back by the snow. Patrick Breen begins to record a daily journal including weather observations. (50)**Camera:** MS Patrick Breen pensive in a cabin writing in his diary, holding his head, elbow on knee, thinking aloud

**P. Breen:** (on-camera speaking)

Came to this place on the 31st of October. We went on to the pass. The snow so deep we were unable to find the road, when, within three miles of the summit [we] turned back to this shanty on the Lake. (20)

Tues. 9th } Mrs Murphy here this  
 morning pikes child all but dead,  
 mitt at Murphys not able to get out  
 of bed Keyburg never gets up says  
 he is not able John went down to  
 day to bury Mrs Elliot & child hear  
 nothing from Graves for 2 or 3 days  
 Mrs Murphy just now going to  
 Graves fine morning wind S.E. for  
 hard last night begins to thaw in  
 the Sun } beautiful morning  
 Wedn. 10th } Wind. W. froze hard last  
 night, to day thawing in  
 the Sun Mitt Elliot died last night  
 at Murphys Shanty about 9 o'clock  
 P.M. Mrs Reid went there this morning  
 to see after his effects, of Denton trying  
 to borrow meat for Graves had none  
 to give they have nothing but hides  
 all are entirely out of meat but a  
 little we have out <sup>hides</sup> are nearly all  
 eat up but with Gods help spring  
 will soon smile upon us.  
 Thers 11th } fine morning wind W.  
 froze hard last night some  
 clouds lying in the E. looks like there  
 John Denton here last night very  
 delicate John & Mrs Reid went to Graves  
 this morn.

Patrick Breen's Journal

**Images:** Wagon in snow, Donner (Truckee's) Lake in foreground summit in snow

**Historian:** (voice-over)

Stanton comes back from the summit to urge the emigrants forward in a courageous effort to cross the storm ridden mountain range. (11)

**Images:** animated black and white stills of Patrick Breen, Donner and Lake Cabins

**P. Breen:** (voice-over)

We again took our teams and wagons and made another unsuccessful attempt to cross. In company with Stanton we returned to the shanty it continuing to snow all the time we were here. (19)

**Images:** animated black and white stills of the cabins

**Historian:** (on camera speaking from Murphy Cabin site boulder, plaque not visible)

**Camera:** Slow steady tracking around historian in a semi-circle MS

The Breen family inhabits the shack built by 17 year old Moses Schallenberger of the Stephens Party, who wintered there alone, two years before in 1844.

Keseberg builds a lean-to on one side. The Murphy's, Eddy's, Foster's and Pikes build a crude cabin alongside a huge boulder. The Graves', Mrs. Reed and her children build a makeshift, hide covered shack. Back on Alder Creek the Donners are in tents.

The stranded company watches fish swim in the lake but are unable to catch them. When the lake freezes, they stop trying. On November 4th William Eddy kills a grizzly bear with William Foster's gun. Several ducks are also taken.

Provisions however, are getting frightfully low. (1:04)**Sound:** banjo, guitar, dulcimer, fiddle tune "Old Blue"

## END SCENE 12

## SCENE 13

**Sound:** guitars, dulcimer, fiddle various English ballads with many changes

**Camera:** LS MS camera pans to follow group from side angle, emigrants walking in mountains through knee deep snow

**P. Breen:** (voice-over)

Fine morning, 22 of our company are starting across the mountain this morning including Stanton and his Indians. Saturday, November, 21st.

**Camera:** cut to MS Patrick Breen writing in his journal, thinking aloud

**P. Breen:** (on-camera speaking)

The expedition across the mountains returned. Monday, the 23rd.

**Camera:** cut to different angle

**P. Breen:** (on-camera speaking)

Our mountaineers intend trying to cross the mountains tomorrow if fair.

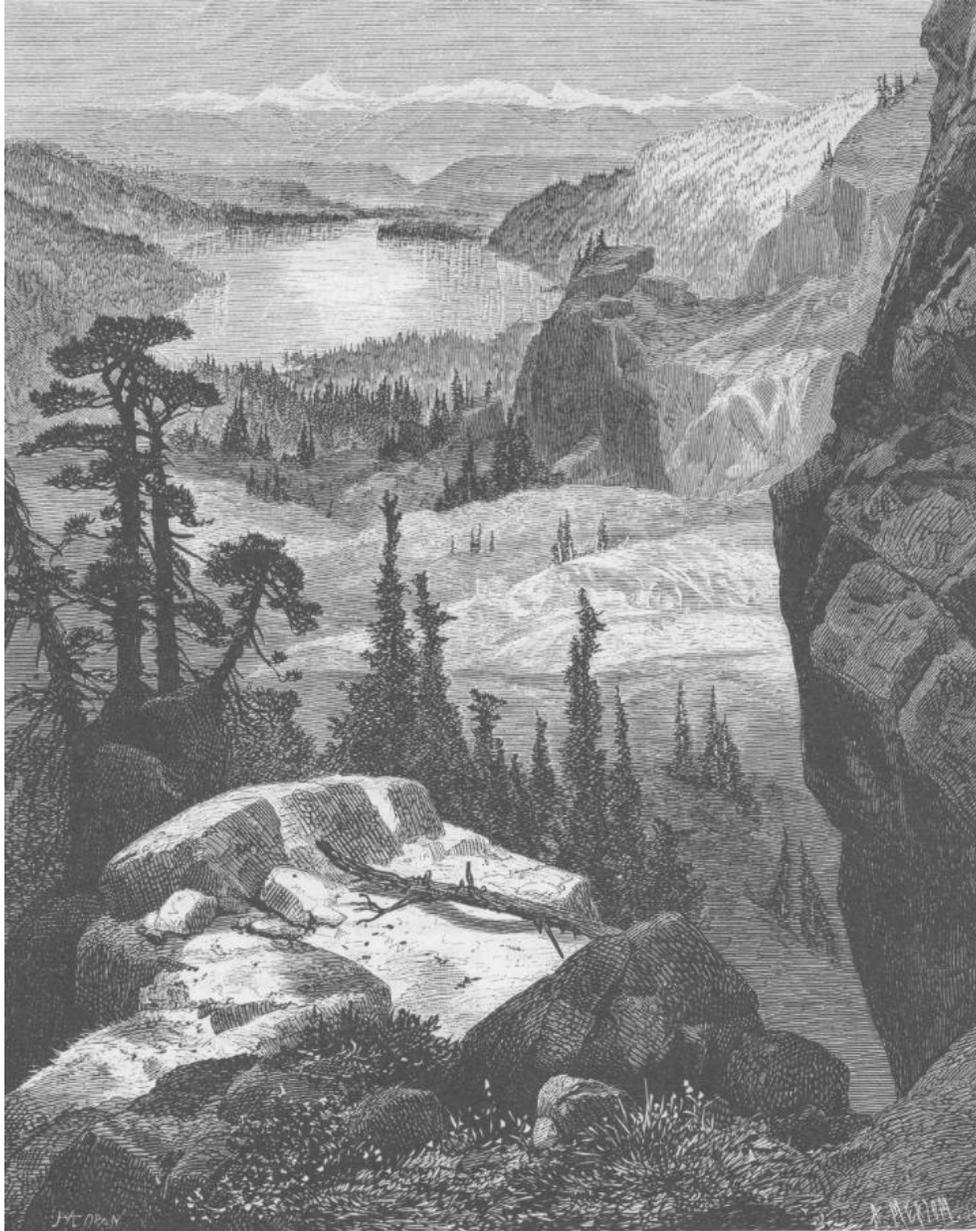
Wednesday, the 25th. Patrick Breen (29)

**Images:** montage of dissolves between animated black and white stills of Breen's original diary pages and Breen from several angles writing

**Historian:** (voice-over) Breen notes snow on every day, for the next ten days.

Then two clear days and another five days of snow. The remaining oxen and

cattle along with a few horses and mules wander off in the storms and cannot be found. (22)



**Sound:** ballads fade out begin guitars, dulcimer, fiddle tune, person humming

"The First Noel"

**P. Breen:** (voice-over)

Stanton and Graves and some others are making preparations to cross the mountains on snow shoes. Snow is eight feet deep on the level. Sunday, December, 13th. Froze hard last night so the company started on snowshoes to cross the mountains. Wednesday the 16th.

Pleasant sunshine today. Baylis Williams died the night before last. Milt got back last night from Donners' camp sad news. Jake Donner, Sam Shoemaker, Joseph Reinhart and James Smith are dead, the rest of them are in a low situation. Monday the 21st.

**Images:** animated black and white stills Forlorn Hope, Starved Camp, Charles Stanton, Sierra Storm images including historic lithographs etc.

**Historian:** (voice-over)

The Forlorn Hope, Stanton's party of fifteen, takes provisions to last only six days. On the twenty-second they consume the last morsel of food. Not until Sunday noon, December 27th, does the storm break. They have been four days without food, and two and a half without fire. They are nearly dead. Days and perhaps weeks of starvation are yet awaiting them.

With no food and no prospects, some survivors are driven to accept the desperate act of using the bodies of the dead for sustenance. On December 22nd, poor, heroic Charles Stanton is dead in the snow. Stanton gave his life to save his companions. (52)



### Starved Camp

**Camera:** MS CU Patrick Breen writing in his journal thinking out loud, despair

**P. Breen:** (on-camera speaking)

Offered our prayers to God this Christmas morning. The prospect is appalling but hope in God, Amen. Patrick Breen (1:04)

**Camera:** CU Patty Reed by flickering firelight with small doll, tears pitiful

**P. Reed:** (on-camera speaking)

Christmas Eve came, no stocking to hang, no Santa Claus to come down our chimney in that cold, starving camp. No Papa to come to his children.

Christmas morning came and our breakfast was a pot of glue, stewed ox hide.

(28)

**Images:** animated black and white stills Patty Reed, Patty Reed's doll

**Sound:** First Noel fades out

## **END SCENE 13**

## **SCENE 14**

**Sound:** guitars, dulcimer, fiddle tune "Barbara Allen" with many changes

**Historian:** (on-camera speaking from location Donner Pass overlooking Donner Lake in winter snow/blizzard)



First Relief

**Camera:** shooting into the driving snow MS on Historian

By the New Year, 1847, four men surrender to death in the Donner camp, three more at the lake camps and eight persons die on the snowshoe expedition known as "the Forlorn Hope," including the two Vaqueros Luis and Salvador, murdered on January 10th by William Foster. On January 17th, seven survivors reach Johnson's Ranch. A relief party is formed to go the assistance of those who remain at the lake. January... more storms, more snow, more sickness, agony, despair and death. Collecting firewood is impossible. (42)

**Camera:** CU Patrick Breen writing in his diary thinking out loud  
**P. Breen:** (on-camera speaking)

Wednesday the 13th, snow higher than the shanty, must be 13 feet deep it is dreadful to look at. Landrum Murphy died last night about 1 o'clock. Sunday, January 31st. (18)  
**Camera:** MS new angle

**Historian:** (voice-over)

As February dawns the lake camp survivors are reduced to eating boiled hides, some refuse. (10)

**Camera:** MS new angle  
**P. Breen:** (on-camera speaking, mournfully)

Eddy's child died last night. Friday the 5th.

Ceased to snow last night after one of the most severe storms we experienced this winter, the snow fell about four feet deep. McCutchen's child died the 2nd of this month. Mrs. Eddy died on the night of the 7th.

**Camera:** MS new angle

Milt Elliott died last night about 9 o'clock pm. Wednesday the 10th (34)**Sound:**  
Barbara Allen fades out

## **END SCENE 14**

## **SCENE 15**

**Sound:** guitars, dulcimer, fiddle tune "Pretty Saro" with many changes

**Images:** animated black and white stills of relief party's arrival

**Historian:** (voice-over)

On Friday, the 19th of February, a relief party of seven men, including Mr.  
Reason P. Tucker, arrives with hope and few provisions from Sutter's Fort. (9)

**Camera:** MS R.P. Tucker approaching emigrants in starved condition

**R.P. Tucker:** (on-camera speaking)

At sundown we reached the cabins and found the people in great distress such  
as I have never witnessed, there having been 12 deaths, and more expected  
every hour. The sight of us appeared to put life into their emaciated frames.

(22)

**Camera:** cut to MS Patrick Breen writing in his journal thinking out loud

**P. Breen:** (on-camera speaking)

The Californians started this morning 24 in number and some in a very weak  
state. Monday the 22nd. (13)

**Camera:** dissolve to LS MS rescuers carrying two children through snow

**Historian:** (voice-over)

Martha Reed, nine, and her brother Tommy, three, are too weak to continue on. They return to the lake camps with two of the rescuers. Margaret must part with her dear little children. (17)**Camera:** CU Patty Reed

**P. Reed:** (on-camera speaking)

Good-bye Ma, If I don't see you again, do the best you can. (16)

**Sound:** Pretty Saro fades out

## **END SCENE 15**

## **SCENE 16**

**Sound:** guitars, dulcimer, fiddle tune ballad with many changes

**Camera:** MS CU Patrick Breen writing in his diary, thinking aloud

**P. Breen:** (on-camera speaking)

Friday the 26th. Hungry times in camp, plenty of hides but the folks will not eat them with a tolerable good appetite. Thanks be to Almighty God, Amen. Mrs. Murphy said that she thought she would commence on Milt and eat him. I don't think she has done so yet, it is distressing. The Donners told the California folks they would commence to eat the dead people if they did not succeed in finding their cattle under twelve feet of snow.

**Camera:** ES LS MS live action scene Native American dressed for winter, carrying a pack, walking on snowshoes, approaches the Breen cabin and offers food, fearful of drawing too close he throws three roots to the cabin inhabitants

**P. Breen:** (voice-over)

I saw an Indian coming from the mountain. He came to the house. He had a pack on his back consisting of a fur blanket and two dozen of California soap root, which could be made good to eat. He appeared very friendly and gave us two or three roots, and went on his way. He walked on snowshoes (1:08)

**Sound:** fade to wind howling

**Camera:** LS Sierra Snowstorm, winds, swirling snow

**Historian:** (voice-over)

During February, one more dies at the lake camps and three in the first relief party.

A second relief party led by James F. Reed crosses the deep snows of the Sierra. Reed encounters the first group with his wife and two of his children en route.

(18)

**Sound:** fade to penny whistle, guitars, dulcimer, fiddle ballad with many changes

**Camera:** LS James Reed encounters his wife and two children in the mountains, there is much ado though he learns two of his children remain at the lake camp.

**Historian:** (voice-over)

Reed rejoices with his wife Margaret, son James, 5, and daughter Virginia, 13.

After their brief reunion, he struggles on to the lake camp to rescue his two

other children. (16)**Camera:** MS CU Patrick Breen writing in his diary, thinking aloud

**P. Breen:**

Monday, March the 1st. There has 10 men arrived this morning from Bear Valley with provisions. We are to start in two or three days. Patrick Breen (13)

**Camera:** LS MS Reed speaking to the emigrants at the Lake Camp including P. Breen

**J. Reed:** (on-camera speaking)

All who are able, shall start March 3rd, the day after tomorrow. (11)**Camera:** MS CU Reed meets with his remaining children at the camp

**Historian:** (on-camera speaking)

**Camera:** MS CU

On March 3rd the second relief party, with eighteen survivors leaves, 14 remain behind at the lake camp. The two Reed children are reunited with their father.

The party crossing the mountains camps at Summit Valley. (18)

**Sound:** guitars, dulcimer, fiddle tune ballad with many changes

**END SCENE 16**

**SCENE 17**

**Sound:** howling wind and snow

**Camera:** LS driving windy whiteout snowstorm in the Sierra

**Images:** animated black and white stills of the rescue parties

**Camera:** Dissolve to the emigrants of the rescue party encamped huddled together in blankets. The last of their provisions gone... dreaded snow now on them... a perfect hurricane in the night. Great crying with the children... and parents... fear of the dread of death from the howling storm.

**Camera:** LS driving windy whiteout snowstorm in the Sierra

**Images:** animated black and white stills of starved camp and rescue parties

**Historian:** (on-camera speaking)

**Camera:** ES LS MS slowly circling campfire

The merciless snow drives on. Reed is snowblind. Throughout the storm William McCutchen and Hiram Miller keep the fire burning. Reed's eyesight improves and on the 7th they move out.

Weakened and unable to continue, Patrick Breen and 13 others stay behind in a pit melting into the fifteen foot deep snow. Three die in the pit known as "Starved Camp," the rest are reduced to cannibalism. Four more die at the Donner camp. Two more at the lake camp. Shortly behind the second relief party another is organized. Utter madness ensues at the camps, families are shattered by horrible and irreconcilable loss. On March 14th the third relief rescues eleven of the survivors from the second relief party at Starved Camp. On March 16th the remainder of the third relief party rescues all but three people at the lake and Alder Creek camps, leaving Lewis Keseberg, Mrs. Murphy and

Tamsen Donner. On April 17th a fourth relief arrives at the lake. Only Lewis Keeseberg is still alive. The last of the living finally reach Sutter's Fort April 29, 1847. (1:38)**Sound:** end howling wind and snow

## **END SCENE 17**

## **SCENE 18**

**Sound:** guitars, dulcimer, fiddle tune "Amazing Grace"

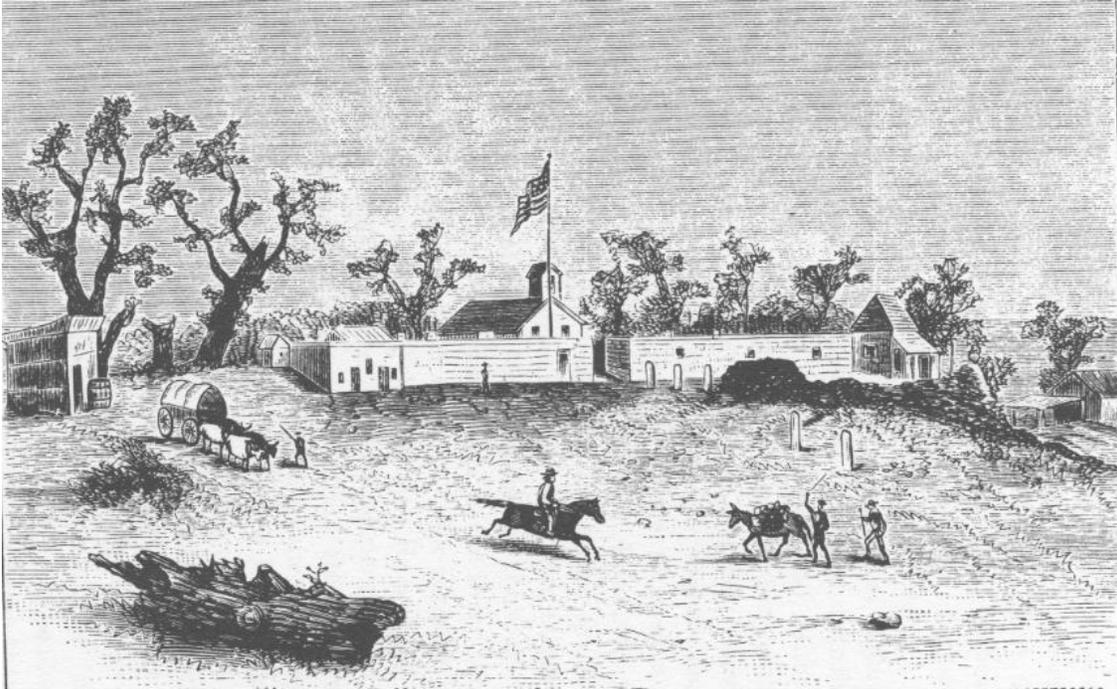
**Images:** animated black and white stills of Sutter's Fort, Fallon, Kearney, Donner Lake, Donner Pass  
**W. O. Fallon:** (voice-over Amazing Grace continues)  
When the return party of General Kearney reached the scene of these horrible tragical occurrences, on the 22nd of June, 1847, a halt was ordered, for the general purpose of collecting and interring the remains. They were interred in a pit which had been dug in the centre of one of the cabins... These melancholy duties to the dead being performed, the cabins, by order of Major Swords, were fired, and with every thing surrounding them connected with this horrid and melancholy tragedy, were consumed. Captain William O. Fallon (44)

**Camera:** Spring in the Sierra, Snowmelt runoff, Dogwood Blooming in May, green grasses, Johnson's Ranch

**Historian:** (on-camera speaking from location Pioneer Monument, Truckee)

**Camera:** ES LS MS pan to CU bronze statues

The great rivers of the Sierra swell with snowmelt and flow west to the Pacific. The magnificent valley turns green, flowers, and bears fruit. Of the 89 brave souls who began their journey in May only 49 survived to greet the new land of unbound happiness and prosperity. (27)



Sutter's Fort

**Camera:** Virginia Reed neatly dressed and writing a letter, thinking aloud cut to CU on writing

**V. Reed:** (on-camera speaking music continues)

...I have not wrote you half of the trouble we have had but I have wrote you anuf to let you know that you don't know what trouble is... We have left everything but I don't care for that, we have gotten through with our lives. Don't let this letter dishearten anybody. Never take no cutoffs and hurry along as fast as you can. Virginia Elizabeth Reed, May 16th, 1847. (38)

**Sound:** tune "Amazing Grace" continues through credits

**Camera:** fade to white over exposed images of wagon wheels turning in sunlight run behind credits

## **THE END**

### **On Screen scrolls bottom of screen to top in high contrast:**

Of those 42 brave souls

who did not survive

the passage to California...

six died enroute

seven died in the Alder Creek Donner's camp

14 died at the Lake camps

eight died on the Forlorn Hope Snowshoe escape

seven died during subsequent rescue attempts.

Inspired by their memory

we bring you their story.

### **Credits:**

Screenplay

William N. Lindemann

### **Actors:**

### **Music:**

*Contemporary instrumental arrangements of traditional songs (in the 1845 style) Fiddle, Hammer Dulcimer, 4 string banjo, Guitar, Mandolin. 1846 is too early for concertina not really developed until 1844 in England.*

Empty Pockets String Band  
Jack Shipley (760) 647-6267  
PO Box 88  
Lee Vining, CA 93541  
bodiejack@msn.com

De Colores  
Many traditional reels played on hammer dulcimer  
Many traditional English and Irish ballads played on hammer dulcimer  
Many traditional waltzes played on hammer dulcimer  
The First Noel  
Shenandoah  
Sweet Betsy from Pike  
The Donside Emigrant's Farewell  
Billy Boy  
Down in the Valley  
Blue Tail Fly  
Bold Fenian Men  
Old Blue  
Pretty Saro  
Barbara Allen  
Amazing Grace

**Images:**

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Addendum 1, Budget

**DESPERATE DREAMERS The Story of the Donner Company of 1846 - Film**

Production Budget 2007 **Running Total** **\$598,120.00**

Item	Work/Phase	Amt. Budg.	Amt. Act.	Status
<b>Script</b>				
Script	Write/Revise	21,700.00	0.00	Done
Story Board	Develop	5,485.00		
Shooting Script	Develop	7,385.00		
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>Script</b>	<b>34,570.00</b>	<b>19,700.00</b>	<b>In-kind</b>
<b>Balance</b>		<b>14,870.00</b>		
<b>Sound</b>				
Narration	Record/Studio	12,440.00		
Sound	Location/Studio	23,500.00		
Acting Talent	Location/Action	44,000.00		
Music	Record Studio	20,000.00		
Musicians	Honorarium	9,000.00		
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>Sound</b>	<b>108,940.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>	
<b>Balance</b>		<b>108,940.00</b>		
<b>Image</b>				
Still Image	Acquisition, Rights	22,000.00		

Map Images	Acquisition	8,000.00	
Motion Footage	Acquisition Stock	29,000.00	
Motion Footage	On Location Crew	52,200.00	
Motion Footage	Location Misc.Travel	28,080.00	
Motion Footage	Livestock and Rolling Stock	29,680.00	
Motion Footage	Travel Air	28,250.00	
Motion Footage	Travel Van	14,500.00	
Motion Footage	Per Diem	28,000.00	
Equipment	Rental	42,000.00	
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>Image</b>	<b>281,710.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>
<b>Balance</b>		<b>281,710.00</b>	
<b>Post Production: Audio, Still Image, Motion Image, Edit</b>			
Sound	Edit	16,000.00	
Still Image	Retouch	23,200.00	
Still Image	Animations	39,500.00	
Moving Image	Edit	62,400.00	
Final Edit	Image/Sound Final	51,500.00	
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>PP</b>	<b>192,600.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>

<b>Balance</b>	<b>192,600.00</b>	
<b>Totals</b>	<b>617,820.00</b>	<b>19,700.00</b>
<b>Running Balance</b>	<b>598,120.00</b>	
<b>Total budgeted less actual</b>		