

The Story of the Story - Westward on the trail of the Donner Party

Like so many before us, emigrants both modern and historical, the west of America is something that pulls at you even if you don't realise it. For me an American from the Midwest of the United States the West is no less foreign than for Cathy, whose Kentish homeland closely resembles my childhood Ohio. Movies, books or florid historical accounts cannot prepare one for the sheer magnitude of what the West is. And while the grand landscape provides the suitable setting for the dramas of the West, it also progenerates drama, things mundane elsewhere are here transformed. This fact might explain how one can be unprepared for the experience even through saturated with accounts of its uniqueness.

In 1839 a New York newspaperman named John O'Sullivan published an article in which he championed American settlement of lands west of the then boundaries of the country and claimed that America was chosen by god to do so for the good of humanity. It was in this article that he coined the phrase Manifest Destiny to explain the concept. Manifest Destiny fit so well into the popular concept of personal freedom and righteousness that it became a doctrine of American policy. This environment also fostered a man named Lansford Hastings to write a guide for emigrants, claiming California to be veritable cornucopia, ripe for the taking. It is no wonder that many struck out for the promised land and no great leap to see it coming to a messy end.

We had travelled in the West before and experienced it's grandeur, but for us, the illuminating spark that brought these things together was the story of the Donner Party. This party of emigrants heading to California in a wagon train in 1846 and whose 83 members became stranded in winter snows is well known to many. The subtext of this journey is less known. Disparate family bands that travelled together only out of need but otherwise in competition with each other. They competed for firewood, water and grazing on the trail but the real struggle was to be the first and therefore claim the best in California. The gold rush had not yet happened, but the land rush was on.

The Donner Party was one of the last parties that year to reach the final outpost before crossing over the Sierra Nevada mountain range into California. This tardiness prompted them to take the shortcut or "cut off" touted by Lansford Hastings that went through untried territory south of the Great Salt Lake in Utah. They were further slowed by the necessity to clear thick wooded mountains by mere feet per day to allow their wagons of precious possessions to pass. When this was finally accomplished, they reached the end of skull valley and stared out across the Great Salt Desert, which is as its name suggests, is a hellish expanse of searing white salt. A note left by Hastings claimed two days and nights of hard driving to cross the desert and promised water at the end. In fact, it took six days leaving the oxen crazed with thirst, some were lost and wagons and possessions were buried in hope of returning for them. The beginning of the end had arrived and the party still had many hundred miles to cross before reaching the Sierra Nevada. This final leg of the journey left some people with virtually only the clothes on their backs and bartering with i.o.u.'s which promised many times the value of a scrap of food to be repaid in California. There was little or no charity among them. By the time they reached the Sierra, the first snows had arrived. They immediately made an attempt to cross the mountains, which failed as did many other attempts. Resigned to their fate they returned to a valley to set up camp for the winter. Oxen were slaughtered, cabins hastily built and covered with the hides. The Donner family and their hired hands having suffered a broken wagon axle were forced to camp 6 miles from the main camp and had only time to erect crude shelters of brush leaning against trees and covered with the canvas from their wagons.

The winter of 1846-7 was one of the worst ever recorded for that area, the two camps were deluged. The cabins and shelters were buried under between 12 and 24 feet of snow. In this setting, ox meat that was left in the snow for preservation was lost, hunting was unsuccessful but time moved on. Hunger became a pressing concern as the camps were reduced to eating anything remotely like food. Pet dogs, ox hides boiled to glue, bark and twigs were all consumed, then these began to run short. Months of this desperate situation ensued, driving some to set out to get over the mountains. This group is known as the forlorn hope, a last ditch attempt to get to safety. This group found themselves pinned down by a storm near the summit of the pass. They stopped and built a fire to keep from freezing and as the fire burned it melted the snow. The blizzard continued and fire descended as until it reached the earth, leaving the freezing emigrants in deep pit. Here they were forced to stay. Both in the mountains and in the camps, people were dying. The circumstance became too great, flesh lay there with no strength to bury it. Hunger finally broke the taboo and the dead were consumed, thus the winter passed. Rescuers finally arrived and the 42 survivors were taken to the promised land of California.

This is a harrowing story but it stands up in annals of American history and it is a story that is as much brought on by the West as by the participants. The Donner Party members were innocent of the power of the frontier to toy with them like a petulant god and guilty of self-serving short sightedness. We were no less innocent of the ways of the West and guilty too of believing that we could entertain this story without consequence. The work we have made for Destiny Manifest – Eden's End is not an attempt to recreate this story even though we have travelled the Donner Party route. The work instead tries to capture the effect that the experience had on us and illuminate the intertwining fates of the Donner Party and those of us who live with the consequences of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny that still informs contemporary politics.

-Eric Wright, 2005