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The Archaeology of Hunger

By DANA GOODYEAR

DESPERATE PASSAGE

The Donner Party's Perilous Journey West.

By Ethan Rarick.

Illustrated. 288 pp. Oxford University Press. \$28.

In late November 2006, a San Francisco couple with two young children made a wrong turn and found themselves snowbound in their car in the Oregon wilderness, where they stayed for more than a week. The parents lived on berries, the babies on breast milk. (The father, James Kim, died of hypothermia while trying to get help.) A year later, Frederick Dominguez, of Paradise, Calif., and his three adolescent children went into the woods looking for a Christmas tree and lost track of their car; they slept in a culvert and made a "HELP" sign from sticks. After three days, they were rescued, more or less unharmed. These grim situations attracted relentless media attention: family plus snow plus stranded equals human-interest story nonpareil.

But it is the tale of the Donner party — 81 men, women and children struggling for their lives against the elements in the Sierra Nevada during the winter of 1846-47 — that forms the template for our reaction to all subsequent accounts like it. Recounted so many times and in so many media (contemporary newspaper accounts, memoirs, histories, children's books, novels, a Gary Larson cartoon, a Ric Burns documentary), the party's plight has become a kind of frontier foundation myth. The pioneers, some of whom resorted to cannibalism, have been both praised and maligned for the decisions they made on the way from Missouri to California.

George R. Stewart, a novelist whose 1936 Donner history "Ordeal by Hunger" has been the standard work for decades, begins by acknowledging just what it is about the situation that makes it so captivating. In a foreword, he time-travels to imagine the terrain braved by the Donner party: "It is a long road and those who follow it must meet certain risks; exhaustion and disease, alkali water and Indian arrows will take a toll. But the greatest problem is a simple one, and the chief opponent is Time. If August sees them on the Humboldt and September at the Sierra — good! Even if they are a month delayed, all may yet go well. But let it come late October, or November, and the snowstorms block the heights, when wagons are light of provisions and oxen lean, then will come a story."

Ethan Rarick, a journalist and the author of "California Rising: The Life and Times of Pat Brown," takes up the story in "Desperate Passage." I suspect that the impetus for the book was the shift toward science that has taken place in the study of the Donner party in the past quarter-century. Archaeologists in the 1980s dug for evidence at what is now called Donner Lake, near the Sierra town of Truckee, where a majority of the party camped. In the past few years, another team has extracted artifacts from the meadow, seven miles away, where the Donner family itself lived in makeshift tents. Demographic studies of death order with respect to gender — women lasted longer — and social networks — unattached teamsters fared the worst — have been performed. (In all, 45 survived.) Rarick brings these and other expert insights to bear on his narrative, and uncovers a fascinating experiment conducted at the University of Minnesota during World War II to examine the effects of starvation on mood (the subjects grew impatient, "boorish" and paranoid). His is the first significant book, written, like Stewart's, in a novelistic mode and likely to gain popular readership, to incorporate this new data.

But Rarick's account is not really about science; it is about humanity, and his major contribution is his choice to focus on the Reed family. In most tellings, the Donners, for obvious reasons, are at the emotional center of the story. Rarick, instead, finds a greater dramatic vehicle in James Reed — “a man with a full head of hair and a bit of a smirk and iron convictions, others be damned” — who traveled with his wife, Margret; her mother (she died on the trail); and four children. He emphasizes Reed's championing of the party's attempt at a new, supposedly faster route to California, a decision that caused significant delay and, in addition to exhausting the travelers and depleting their supplies, prevented them from crossing the Sierra before winter. Likewise, when Reed is banished en route for killing a teamster in a scuffle, and Margret and the children are left at the mercy of the rest of the group, Rarick sees a crucial setback for the Donner party, the loss of its “one true leader.” Reed rides ahead and eventually raises a rescue party; in moving scenes, he is reunited with his family, all of whom, miraculously, survived.

Rarick has done his homework — visiting the many archives where primary-source records are available, skillfully synthesizing that great body of material and even traveling the Donner party route himself. His approach to the many conflicting and contradictory accounts is conciliatory. In the interest of moving the plot along, he skirts subjects fiercely argued over for years by those obsessed with the Donner party. Whether or not George Donner sewed \$10,000 into a quilt is probably impossible to resolve at this point, though it's a little annoying that Rarick initially presents the information as speculation and then, three pages later, as fact. And it is surprising that he doesn't correct a long-held misconception about the “Forlorn Hope,” the name given to a small band who bravely attempted to escape the mountains in the middle of December. The “Forlorn Hope” isn't “a poetic nickname that captured the moment's utter desperation,” but a term derived from Dutch meaning the “lost troop.”

Rarick's thoroughness can't disguise what faces any chronicler of the Donner party: these historical bones have been picked clean. His generally facile prose is at times a trifle literary, and he sometimes loses control of his elaborate metaphors. Writing from the perspective of the Forlorn Hope as they ascend the mountains and look back at the camp, he says: “The lake dropped away, a cobalt mirror plummeting to the floor of a great basin circled by a jagged crown of white spires. Hands rose against the glare as eyes peered down toward the water, 500 feet below, then 800 feet, then finally a thousand, as though they had been magically whisked to the observation deck of a modern skyscraper.” But there are also moments of true felicity, as when he describes James Reed contemplating the wisdom of dividing his rescue party. “Already the saga of the Donner party and its rescuers was a fractured tale, small groups scattered about like icebergs calved from a glacier: some safe in California, others at the mountain camps, still others in between.”

Rarick concludes that the members of the Donner party were neither heroes for surviving nor scoundrels for the manner in which they did so. He writes: “They were Everyman. Often, adventure stories feature larger-than-life figures, grand Victorian explorers or indomitable generals or pith-helmeted naturalists resolutely seeking some wondrous discovery. ... Such quests have much to teach us, but so too does the drama of the mundane gone madly wrong.” To my mind, the lesson of the Donner party is not so much about what they did or did not consume as it is about our appetite for such dramas.

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