

HISTORY OF THE DONNER PARTY

C.F. MCGLASHAN*

A Tragedy of the Sierra

By C. F. McGlashan

Truckee, Cal.

To Mrs. Elizabeth A. Keiser,

One of the Pioneer Mothers of California,

This Book is Respectfully Dedicated by the Author.

Preface.

The delirium preceding death by starvation, is full of strange phantasies. Visions of plenty, of comfort, of elegance, flit ever before the fast-dimming eyes. The final twilight of death is a brief semi-consciousness in which the dying one frequently repeats his weird dreams. Half rising from his snowy couch, pointing upward, one of the death-stricken at Donner Lake may have said, with tremulous voice: "Look! there, just above us, is a beautiful house. It is of costliest walnut, inlaid with laurel and ebony, and is resplendent with burnished silver. Magnificent in all its apartments, it is furnished like a palace. It is rich with costly cushions, elegant tapestries, dazzling mirrors; its floor is covered with Oriental carpets, its ceiling with artistic frescoings; downy cushions invite the weary to repose. It is filled with people who are chatting, laughing, and singing, joyous and care-free. There is an abundance of warmth, and rare viands, and sparkling wines. Suspended among the storm-clouds, it is flying along the face of the precipice at a marvelous speed. Flying? no! it has wheels and is gliding along on a smooth, steel pathway. It is sheltered from the wind and snow by large beams and huge posts, which are bolted to the cliffs with heavy, iron rods. The avalanches, with their burden of earth and rocks and crushed pines, sweep harmlessly above this beautiful house and its happy inmates. It is drawn by neither oxen nor horses, but by a fiery, hot-breathed monster, with iron limbs and thews of steel. The mountain trembles beneath his tread, and the rocks for miles re-echo his roar."

If such a vision was related, it but indicates, prophetically, the

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progress of a few years. California's history is replete with tragic, startling events. These events are the landmarks by which its advancement is traced. One of the most mournful of these is recorded in this work - a work intended as a contribution, not to the literature, but to the history of the State. More thrilling than romance, more terrible than fiction, the sufferings of the Donner Party form a bold contrast to the joys of pleasure-seekers who to-day look down upon the lake from the windows of silver palace cars.

The scenes of horror and despair which transpired in the snowy Sierra in the winter of 1846-7, need no exaggeration, no embellishment. From all the works heretofore published, from over one thousand letters received from the survivors, from ample manuscript, and from personal interviews with the most important actors in the tragedy, the facts have been carefully compiled. Neither time, pains, nor expense have been spared in ferreting out the truth. New and fragmentary versions of the sad story have appeared almost every year since the unfortunate occurrence. To forever supplant these distorted and fabulous reports - which have usually been sensational new articles - the survivors have deemed it wise to contribute the truth. The truth is sufficiently terrible.

Where conflicting accounts of particular scenes or occurrences have been contributed, every effort has been made to render them harmonious and reconcilable. With justice, with impartiality, and with strict adherence to what appeared truthful and reliable, the book has been written. It is an honest effort - toward the truth, and as such is given to the world.

C. F. McGlashan.

Truckee, Cal., June 30, 1879.

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Three miles from Truckee, Nevada County, California, lies one of the fairest and most picturesque lakes in all the Sierra. Above, and on either side, are lofty mountains, with castellated granite crests, while below, at the mouth of the lake, a grassy, meadowy valley widens out and extends almost to Truckee. The body of water is three miles long, one and a half miles wide, and four hundred and eighty-three feet in depth. Tourists and picnic parties annually flock to its shores, and Bierstadt has made it the subject of one of his finest, grandest paintings. In summer, its willowy thickets, its groves of tamarack and forests of pine, are the favorite haunts and nesting places of the quail and grouse. Beautiful, speckled mountain trout plentifully abound in its crystalline waters. A rippling breeze usually wimples and dimples its laughing surface, but in calmer moods it reflects, as in a polished mirror, the lofty, overhanging mountains, with every stately pine, bounding rivulet; blossoming shrub, waving fern, and - high above all, on the right - the clinging, thread-like line of the snow-sheds of the Central Pacific. When the railroad was being constructed, three thousand people dwelt on its shores; the surrounding forests resounded with the music of axes and saws, and the terrific blasts exploded in the lofty, o'ershadowing cliffs, filled the canyons with reverberating thunders, and hurled huge bowlders high in the air over the lake's quivering bosom.

In winter it is almost as popular a pleasure resort as during the

summer. The jingling of sleighbells, and the shouts and laughter of skating parties, can be heard almost constantly. The lake forms the grandest skating park on the Pacific Coast.

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Yet this same Donner Lake was the scene of one of the most thrilling, heart-rending tragedies ever recorded in California history. Interwoven with the very name of the lake are memories of a tale of destitution, loneliness, and despair, which borders on the incredible. It is a tale that has been repeated in many a miner's cabin, by many a hunter's campfire, and in many a frontiersman's home, and everywhere it has been listened to with bated breath.

The pioneers of a new country are deserving of a niche in the country's history. The pioneers who became martyrs to the cause of the development of an almost unknown land, deserve to have a place in the hearts of its inhabitants. The far-famed Donner Party were, in a peculiar sense, pioneer martyrs of California. Before the discovery of gold, before the highway across the continent was fairly marked out, while untold dangers lurked by the wayside, and unnumbered foes awaited the emigrants, the Donner Party started for California. None but the brave and venturesome, none but the energetic and courageous, could undertake such a journey.

In 1846, comparatively few had dared attempt to cross the almost unexplored plains which lay between the Mississippi and the fair young land called California. Hence it is that a certain grandeur, a certain heroism seems to cling about the men and women composing this party, even from the day they began their perilous journey across the plains. California, with her golden harvests, her beautiful homes, her dazzling wealth, and her marvelous commercial facilities, may well enshrine the memory of these noble-hearted pioneers, pathfinders, martyrs.

The States along the Mississippi were but sparsely settled in 1846, yet the fame of the fruitfulness, the healthfulness, and the almost tropical beauty of the land bordering the Pacific, tempted the members of the Donner Party to leave their homes. These homes were situated in Illinois, Iowa, Tennessee, Missouri, and Ohio. Families from each of these States joined the train and participated in its terrible fate; yet the party proper was organized in Sangamon County, Illinois, by George and Jacob Donner and James F. Reed. Early in April, 1846, the party set out from Springfield, Illinois, and by the first week in May reached Independence, Missouri. Here the party was increased by additional members, and the train comprised about one hundred persons. Independence was on the frontier in those days, and every care was taken to have ample provisions laid in and all necessary preparations made for the long journey. Ay, it was a long journey for many in the party! Great as was the enthusiasm and eagerness with which these noble-hearted pioneers caught up the cry of the times, "Ho! for California!" it is doubtful if presentiments of the fate to be encountered were not occasionally entertained. The road was difficult, and in places almost unbroken; warlike Indians guarded the way, and death, in a thousand forms, hovered about their march through the great wilderness.

In the party were aged fathers with their trusting families about them, mothers whose very lives were wrapped up in their children, men in the

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prime and vigor of manhood, maidens in all the sweetness and freshness of budding womanhood, children full of glee and mirthfulness, and babes nestling on maternal breasts. Lovers there were, to whom the journey was tinged with rainbow hues of joy and happiness, and strong, manly hearts whose constant support and encouragement was the memory of dear ones

left behind in home-land. The cloud of gloom which finally settled down in a death-pall over their heads was not yet perceptible, though, as we shall soon see, its mists began to collect almost at the outset, in the delays which marked the journey.

The wonderment which all experience in viewing the scenery along the line of the old emigrant road was peculiarly vivid to these people. Few descriptions had been given of the route, and all was novel and unexpected. In later years the road was broadly and deeply marked, and good camping grounds were distinctly indicated. The bleaching bones of cattle that had perished, or the broken fragments of wagons or cast-away articles, were thickly strewn on either side of the highway. But in 1846 the way was through almost trackless valleys waving with grass, along rivers where few paths were visible, save those made by the feet of buffaloes and antelope, and over mountains and plains where little more than the westward course of the sun guided the travelers. Trading-posts were stationed at only a few widely distant points, and rarely did the party meet with any human beings, save wandering bands of Indians. Yet these first days are spoken of by all of the survivors as being crowned with peaceful enjoyment and pleasant anticipations. There were beautiful flowers by the roadside, an abundance of game in the meadows and mountains, and at night there were singing, dancing, and innocent plays. Several musical instruments, and many excellent voices, were in the party, and the kindest feeling and good-fellowship prevailed among the members.

The formation of the company known as the Donner Party was purely accidental. The union of so many emigrants into one train was not occasioned by any preconcerted arrangement. Many composing the Donner Party were not aware, at the outset, that such a

tide of emigration was

sweeping to California. In many instances small parties would hear of the mammoth train just ahead of them or just behind them, and by hastening their pace, or halting for a few days, joined themselves to the party. Many were with the train during a portion of the journey, but from some cause or other became parted from the Donner company before reaching Donner Lake. Soon after the train left Independence it contained between two and three hundred wagons, and when in motion was two miles in length.

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With much bitterness and severity it is alleged by some of the survivors of the dreadful tragedy that certain impostors and falsifiers claim to have been members of the Donner Party, and as such have written untruthful and exaggerated accounts of the sufferings of the party.

While this is unquestionably true, it is barely possible that some who assert membership found their claim upon the fact that during a portion of the journey they were really in the Donner Party. Bearing this in mind, there is less difficulty in reconciling the conflicting statements of different narrators.

The members of the party proper numbered ninety, and were as follows: George Donner, Tamsen Donner (his wife), Elitha C. Donner, Leanna C. Donner, Frances E. Donner, Georgia A. Donner and Eliza P. Donner. The last three were children of George and Tamsen Donner; Elitha and Leanna were children of George Donner by a former wife.

Jacob Donner, Elizabeth Donner (his wife), Solomon Hook, William Hook, George Donner, Jr., Mary M. Donner, Isaac Donner, Lewis Donner and Samuel Donner. Jacob Donner was a brother of George; Solomon and William

Hook were sons of Elizabeth Donner by a former husband.

James Frazier Reed, Margaret W. Reed (his wife), Virginia E. Reed, Martha F. (Patty) Reed, James F. Reed, Jr., Thomas K. Reed, and Mrs. Sarah Keyes, the mother of Mrs. Reed.

The two Donner families and the Reeds were from Springfield, Illinois.

From the same place were Baylis Williams and his half-sister Eliza Williams, John Denton, Milton Elliott, James Smith, Walter Herron and Noah James.

From Marshall County, Illinois, came Franklin Ward Graves, Elizabeth Graves (his wife), Mary A. Graves, William C. Graves, Eleanor Graves, Lovina Graves, Nancy Graves, Jonathan B. Graves, F. W. Graves, Jr., Elizabeth Graves, Jr., Jay Fosdick and Mrs. Sarah Fosdick (ne Graves). With this family came John Snyder.

From Keokuk, Lee County, Iowa, came Patrick Breen, Mrs. Margaret Breen, John Breen, Edward J. Breen, Patrick Breen, Jr., Simon P. Breen, James F. Breen, Peter Breen, and Isabella M. Breen. Patrick Dolan also came from Keokuk.

William H. Eddy, Mrs. Eleanor Eddy, James P. Eddy, and Margaret Eddy came from Belleville, Illinois.

From Tennessee came Mrs. Lavina Murphy, a widow, and her family, John Landrum Murphy, Mary M. Murphy, Lemuel B. Murphy, William G. Murphy, Simon P. Murphy, William M. Pike, Mrs. Harriet F. Pike (ne Murphy), Naomi L. Pike, and Catherine Pike. Another son-in-law of Mrs. Murphy,

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William M. Foster, with his wife, Mrs. Sarah A. C. Foster, and infant boy George Foster, came from St. Louis, Missouri.

William McCutchen, Mrs. W. McCutchen, and Harriet McCutchen were from

Jackson County, Missouri.

Lewis Keseberg, Mrs. Phillipine Keseberg, Ada Keseberg, and L. Keseberg, Jr., Mr. and Mrs. Wolfinger, Joseph Rhinehart, Augustus Spitzer, and Charles Burger, came from Germany.

Samuel Shoemaker came from Springfield, Ohio, Charles T. Stanton from Chicago, Illinois, Luke Halloran from St. Joseph, Missouri, Mr. Hardcoop from Antwerp, in Belgium, Antoine from New Mexico. John Baptiste was a Spaniard, who joined the train near the Santa F trail, and Lewis and Salvador were two Indians, who were sent out from California by Captain Sutter.

The Breens joined the company at Independence, Missouri, and the Graves family overtook the train one hundred miles west of Fort Bridger. Each family, prior to its consolidation with the train, had its individual incidents. William Trimble, who was traveling with the Graves family, was slain by the Pawnee Indians about fifty miles east of Scott's Bluff. Trimble left a wife and two or three children. The wife and some of her relatives were so disheartened by this sad bereavement, and by the fact that many of their cattle were stolen by the Indians, that they gave up the journey to California, and turned back to the homes whence they had started.

An amusing incident is related in the Healdsburg (Cal.) Flag, by Mr. W. C. Graves, of Calistoga, which occurred soon after his party left St. Joseph, Missouri. It was on the fourth night out, and Mr. Graves and four or five others were detailed to stand guard. The constant terror of the emigrants in those days was Indians. Both the Pawnees, the Sioux, and the Snakes were warlike and powerful, and were jealous, revengeful, and merciless toward the whites. That night a fire somehow started in the prairie grass about half a mile from camp. The west wind, blowing

fierce and strong, carried the flames in great surging gusts through the tall prairie grass. A resin weed grows in bunches in this part of the country, generally attaining the height of four or five feet. The night being very dark, these weeds could be seen standing between the fire and the guards. As the flames swayed past the weeds, the impression was very naturally produced upon the mind of a timid beholder that the weeds were moving in the opposite direction. This optical illusion caused some of the guards to believe that the Indians had set fire to the grass, and were moving in immense numbers between them and the fire with intent to surround them, stampede the cattle, and massacre the entire party. The watcher next to Mr. Graves discovered the enemy, and rushed breathlessly to his comrade to impart the intelligence. Scarcely had Mr. Graves quieted him before it was evident that a general alarm had been spread

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in the camp. Two other guards had seen the Indians, and the aroused camp, armed to the teeth, marched out to give battle to the imaginary foe. It was a rich joke, and it was some time before those who were scared heard the last of the resin Indians.

Only once, before reaching Salt Lake, did death invade the joyous Donner company. It was near the present site of Manhattan, Kansas, and Mrs. Sarah Keyes was the victim. This estimable lady was the mother of Mrs. J. F. Reed, and had reached her four score and ten years. Her aged frame and feeble health were not equal to the fatigues and exposure of the trip, and on the thirtieth of May they laid her tenderly to rest. She was buried in a coffin carefully fashioned from the trunk of a cottonwood tree, and on the brow of a beautiful knoll overlooking the valley. A grand old oak, still standing, guards the lonely grave of the dear old mother who was spared the sight of the misery in store for her loved ones. Could those who performed the last sad rites have caught a vision of the horrors awaiting the party, they would have known how good was the God who in mercy took her to Himself.

Chapter II.

Mrs. Donner's Letters

Life on the Plains

An Interesting Sketch

The Outfit Required

The Platte River

Botanizing

Five Hundred and Eighteen Wagons for California

Burning "Buffalo Chips"

The Fourth of July at Fort Laramie

Indian Discipline

Sioux Attempt to Purchase Mary Graves

George Donner Elected Captain

Letter of Stanton

Dissension

One Company Split up into Five

The Fatal Hastings Cut-off

Lowering Wagons over the Precipice

The First View of Great Salt Lake.

Presenting, as they do, an interesting glimpse of the first portion of the journey, the following letters are here introduced. They were written by Mrs. Tamsen Donner, and were published in the Springfield (Illinois) Journal. Thanks for copies of these letters are due to Mrs. Eliza P. Houghton of San Jose, Mrs. Donner's youngest daughter.

Allusions are made in these letters to botanical researches. Mrs.

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Donner, C. T. Stanton, and perhaps one or two others who were prominent actors in the later history, were particularly fond of botany. Mrs. Donner made valuable collections of rare flowers and plants. Her journal, and a full description of the contents of her botanical portfolios, were to have been published upon her arrival in California. Though bearing the same date, the letters here presented were written at different times. The following appeared in the Springfield Journal, July 23, 1846:

Near the Junction of the North
and South Platte, June 16, 1846.

My Old Friend: We are now on the Platte, two hundred miles from Fort Laramie. Our journey so far has been pleasant, the roads have been good, and food plentiful. The water for 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 quickly and retain heat surprisingly. We had this morning buffalo steaks broiled upon them that had the same flavor they would have had upon hickory coals. We feel no fear of Indians, our cattle graze quietly around our encampment unmolested.

Two or three men will go hunting twenty miles from camp; and last night two of our men lay out in the wilderness rather than ride their horses after a hard chase.

Indeed, if I do not experience something far worse than I have yet done, I shall say the trouble is all in getting started. Our wagons have not needed much repair, and I can not yet tell in what respects they could be improved. Certain it is, they can not be too strong. Our preparations for the journey might have been in some respects bettered.

Bread has been the principal article of food in our camp. We laid in 150 pounds of flour and 75 pounds of meat for each individual, and I fear bread will be scarce. Meat is abundant. Rice and beans are good articles on the road; cornmeal, too, is acceptable. Linsey dresses are the most suitable for children. Indeed, if I had one, it would be acceptable.

There is so cool a breeze at all times on the plains that the sun does not feel so hot as one would suppose.

We are now four hundred and fifty miles from Independence. Our route at first was rough, and through a timbered country, which appeared to be fertile. After striking the prairie, we found a first-rate road, and the only difficulty we have had, has been in crossing the creeks. In that, however, there has been no danger.

I never could have believed we could have traveled so far with so little difficulty. The prairie between the Blue and the Platte rivers is

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beautiful beyond description. Never have I seen so varied a country, so suitable for cultivation. Everything was new and pleasing; the Indians frequently come to see us, and the chiefs of a tribe breakfasted at our tent this morning. All are so friendly that I can not help feeling sympathy and friendship for them. But on one sheet what can I say? Since we have been on the Platte, we have had the river on one side and the ever varying mounds on the other, and have traveled through the bottom lands from one to two miles wide, with little or no timber. The soil is sandy, and last year, on account of the dry season, the emigrants found grass here scarce. Our cattle are in good order, and when proper care has been taken, none have been lost. Our milch cows

have been of great service, indeed. They have been of more advantage than our meat. We have plenty of butter and milk.

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." John Denton is still with us. We find him useful in the camp. Hiram Miller and Noah James are in good health and doing well. We have of the best people in our company, and some, too, that are not so good.

Buffaloes show themselves frequently.

We have found the wild tulip, the primrose, the lupine, the eardrop, the larkspur, and creeping hollyhock, and a beautiful flower resembling the bloom of the beech tree, but in bunches as large as a small sugar-loaf, and of every variety of shade, to red and green.

I botanize, and read some, but cook "heaps" more. There are four hundred and twenty wagons, as far as we have heard, on the road between here and Oregon and California.

Give our love to all inquiring friends. God bless them. Yours, truly,
Mrs. George Donner.

The following letter was published in the journal of July 30, 1846:

South Fork of the Nebraska,
Ten Miles from the Crossing,
Tuesday, June 16, 1846.

Dear Friend: To-day, at nooning, there passed, going to the States, seven men from Oregon, who went out last year. One of them was well acquainted with Messrs. Ide and Cadden Keyes, the latter of whom, he says, went to California. They met the advance Oregon caravan about 150 miles west of Fort Laramie, and counted in all, for Oregon and California (excepting ours), 478 wagons. There are in our company over
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40 wagons, making 518 in all, and there are said to be yet 20 behind. To-morrow we cross the river, and, by reckoning, will be over 200 miles from Fort Laramie, where we intend to stop and repair our wagon wheels. They are nearly all loose, and I am afraid we will have to stop sooner, if there can be found wood suitable to heat the tires. There is no wood here, and our women and children are out now gathering "buffalo chips" to burn, in order to do the cooking. These chips burn well.

Mrs. George Donner.

At Fort Laramie a portion of the Donner Party celebrated the Fourth of July, 1846. Arriving there on the evening of the third, they pitched camp somewhat earlier than usual, and prepared a grand dinner for the Fourth. At the Fort were a large party of Sioux who were on the war-path against the Snakes or Pawnees. The Sioux were, perhaps, the most warlike Indian nation on the great prairies, and when dressed in their war paint and mounted on their fleet ponies, presented a truly imposing appearance. The utmost friendliness prevailed, and there was a mutual interchange of gifts and genial courtesies. When the Donner Party pursued their march, and had journeyed half a day from the Fort, they were overtaken and convoyed quite a distance by about three hundred young warriors. The escort rode in pairs alongside the train in true military fashion. Finally halting, they opened ranks; and as the wagons passed, each warrior held in his mouth a green twig or leaf, which was said to be emblematic of peacefulness and good feeling.

The train was never seriously molested by the Sioux. On one occasion, about fifty warriors on horseback surrounded a portion of the train, in which was the Graves family. While generally friendly, a few of the

baser sort persisted in attempting to steal, or take by force, trivial articles which struck their fancy. The main body of Indians were encamped about half a mile away, and when the annoyances became too exasperating, W. C. Graves mounted a horse, rode to the encampment, and notified the Chief of the action of his followers. Seizing an old-fashioned single-barreled shotgun, the Chief sprang upon his horse and fairly flew over the plain toward the emigrant wagons. When within about a hundred yards of the train he attracted attention by giving an Indian whoop, which was so full of rage and imprecation that the startled warriors forthwith desisted from their petty persecutions and scattered in every direction like frightened quail. One of the would-be marauders was a little tardy in mounting his pony, and as soon as the Chief got within range, the shotgun was leveled and discharged full at the unruly subject. Three of the buckshot entered the pony's side and one grazed the warrior's leg. As if satisfied that his orders to treat the emigrants in a friendly manner would not be again disregarded, the Chief wheeled his horse about, and in the most grave and stately manner rode back to his encampment.

On another occasion, Mary Graves, who was a very beautiful young lady, was riding on horseback accompanied by her brother. They were a little

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in the rear of the train, and a band of Sioux Indians, becoming enamored with the maiden, offered to purchase her. They made very handsome offers, but the brother not being disposed to accept, one of the Indians seized the bridle of the girl's horse and attempted to carry her away captive. Perhaps the attempt was made in half jest. At all events the bridle was promptly dropped when the brother leveled his rifle at the savage.

On the twentieth of July, 1846, George Donner was elected Captain of the train at the Little Sandy River. From that time forward it was known as the Donner Party.

One incident, not at all unusual to a trip across the plains, is pointedly described in a letter written by C. T. Stanton to his brother, Sidney Stanton, now of Cazenovia, New York. The incident alluded to is the unfriendliness and want of harmony so liable to exist between different companies, and between members of the same company. From one of Mr. Stanton's letters the following extract is made:

"At noon we passed Boggs' company on the Sweetwater; a mile further up the river, Dunlavy's; a mile further, West's; and about two miles beyond that, was Dunbar's. We encamped about half way between the two latter. Thus, within five miles were encamped five companies. At Indian Creek, twenty miles from Independence, these five companies all constituted one, but owing to dissensions and quarreling they became broken into fragments. Now, by accident, we all again once more meet and grasp the cordial hand; old enmities are forgot, and nothing but good feeling prevails. The next morning we got rather a late start, owing to a difference of opinion arising in our company as to whether we should lie by or go ahead. Those wishing to lie by were principally young men who wished to have a day's hunting among the buffaloes, and there were also a few families out of meat who wished to lay in a supply before they left the buffalo country. A further reason was urged that the cattle were nearly fagged out by hard travel, and that they would not stand the journey unless we stopped and gave them rest. On the other side it was contended that if we stopped here the other companies would all get ahead, the grass would all be eaten off by their thousand head

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