

Donner Party Reading Comprehension

Name _____

The Donner Party was a group of American explorers who planned a long migration journey in the mid-1840s—one that didn't exactly end up going as planned. In spring of 1846, the party of 89 left Springfield Illinois, for the California Trail. Two brothers named Jacob and George were the leaders of the group, as well as for whom the party was named.

The party followed the California Trail at first, but not for long. A guidebook author named Lansford Hastings convinced the group to try a shortcut path that went through the Wasatch Mountains and the Salt Lake Desert of what is now Utah. Mountain man James Clyman warned the group not to follow Hastings' advice, as not even Hastings had tried the path with the wagons used by the Party. The group, however, agreed to take the "shortcut," and all 20 of their wagons were diverted to the path indicated by Hastings. The Donner group quickly learned that their new route was full of unforeseen hazard such as tall trees on the trail itself. Group members were forced to cut them down, which caused delays. While crossing the barren Salt Lake Desert, members of the group nearly died of thirst, others were severely weakened. All in all, Hastings' supposed shortcut added almost a month to the Donner Party's journey.

By the time Jacob and George's wagons reached the Sierra Nevada mountains in November 1846, an enormous blizzard had covered the mountains in several feet of snow and blocked off all of the mountain trails. There was no way for the wagons to pass through the mountains, and they were therefore forced to spend the winter in the frigid mountain climate. The Party traveled to the nearby Truckee Lake to spend the winter in tents, having already lost much of their supplies and livestock. Over time, the conditions deteriorated, and the settlers began to starve. Their only option was to resort to cannibalism, so the members of the party began to eat others who had frozen to death or died of malnutrition. In December 1846, 15 of the ablest party members tried to travel past the mountains in search of help. Only seven of them reached a California ranch to coordinate a rescue; their journey became known as the Forlorn Hope. In February and March of 1847, rescue parties arrived to save the remaining 45 members of the Donner Party—only half of the original travelers. According to witnesses, the survivors looked like living skeletons.

1. Which of the following was not an obstacle faced by the Donner Party?

- a. Trees blocking their shortcut path
- b. Lack of water and danger in the desert
- c. Areas of quicksand on the path
- d. Cold blizzard conditions

- 2. Which of the following was not a step on the Donner Party's journey?**
- The Salt Lake Desert
 - The Sierra Nevada Mountains
 - Truckee Lake
 - The Mississippi River
- 3. What was the problem in following Hastings' shortcut path for the Donner Party?**
- It had never been crossed before.
 - It had never been crossed before with wagons.
 - It was longer than the California Trail.
 - It had no trees for cover or shade.
- 4. Which of the following describes the Donner Party's ideal journey, and the one they actually ended up taking?**
- Illinois → California Trail → Wasatch Mountains → Salt Lake Desert → Sierra Nevada Mountains → California
 - Illinois → California Trail → California
 - Illinois → Wasatch Mountains → Sierra Nevada Mountains
 - Illinois → Sierra Nevada Mountains → Salt Lake Desert → California Trail → California
- Ideal: II Actual: I
 - Ideal: II Actual: III
 - Ideal: IV Actual: II
 - Ideal: III Actual: I
- 5. About what percentage of travelers on the Donner Party made it to their final destination?**
- 25%
 - 50%
 - 75%
 - 100%

6. The 15 settlers' journey in search of help for the Donner Party is known as the Forlorn Hope. Given the following dictionary definition for forlorn, identify the type of figurative language present in the term "forlorn hope."

Forlorn: (of an aim or endeavor) unlikely to succeed or be fulfilled; hopeless.

- a. Simile
- b. Metaphor
- c. Oxymoron
- d. Onomatopoeia

7. Which of the following best describes the Donner Party's trip?

- a. Shortcuts were taken in order to turn a long, harsh journey into a more bearable one.
- b. Total death occurred due to careless navigation and poor leadership.
- c. Extreme measures were taken due to harsh circumstances in order to survive a perilous journey.
- d. A large migration occurred with no casualties due to perseverance, determination, and strategy.