

PBS: The American Experience  
The Donner Party -- 1846-1847

In this documentary, you will examine the Donner Party and how their story in many ways, struck down the myth of frontier idealism. You will also examine the natural forces and flawed decisions which contributed to the Donner Party tragedy.

Setting the Scene: Imagine that you have become stranded in a sudden blizzard while hiking up a mountain. Rescue is uncertain or not expected for a long time. Think about a possible survival plan. Remember, life-and-death situations often bring out the best and worst in people in ways that are often surprising to them. The program you will be watching ("The Donner Party") recounts the tragic story of pioneers who were stranded in a mountain winter just short of their destination. The program traces their journey, reveals why the tragedy occurred, and what measures the group took to survive.

Questions to Answer -- Take notes as you view (25 points total)

Questions 1-5 are worth 3 points each and question 6 is worth 10 points.

1. What reasons led James Reed and George Donner to take Hastings Cutoff? Why was their decision unwise?
2. What other factors contributed to the failure of the venture?
3. Was Lansford Hastings to blame for what happened to the Donner Party? Why?
4. What traits did members of the Donner and Reed families possess? Support your answer with examples from the film.
5. How did people in the 1840s view the American West? How did the story of the Donner Party help strike down the myth of frontier idealism?
6. Imagine you have been stranded along with the Donner Party. Choose a member of either the Donner or Reed family, and write a one page journal entry from that person's point of view

Extra Credit (up to +10 points)

Today's hikers and campers often find themselves in life-threatening situations caused by the forces of nature, bad decision making, or because of accidents. Research what a human being must do to survive in the wilderness. Include the essential equipment that a hiker or camper must take along and use. Present in a one to two page report.

