

THE GREAT TREK
By William K. Harlan
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In the spring of 1960 I was an undergraduate at the University of California, Berkeley. I made money doing odd jobs, often for faculty members. And so it was that I was hoeing weeds one sunny day in the garden of a professor in the German Department. When I took a break, he expressed interest in my name and asked me about my family history. I replied that all I knew was that my great-grandfather, Elisha, had come across the plains in a wagon when he was a child and that he had ignored his father's injunction not to lean out of the wagon, had fallen and been run over and narrowly survived. (It was a story my father often told when my brothers and I were sticking our heads out of the back windows of the old Hudson!) The professor proceeded to tell me a remarkable story of Elisha's father George, my great-great grandfather, who had led a wagon train to California in 1846.

The professor happened to be translating a journal written in German by Heinrich Lienhard, who had traveled with the Harlans at times during their trek. It turned out that the Harlans helped blaze a new trail through the mountains and deserts of Utah and Nevada, a supposed short-cut to the promised land of California. This "short-cut" was one of the factors in the tragedy which befell the Donner Party that same year. I took the professor's advice and checked out the documents about the Harlans' story in the Bancroft Library of pioneer history at the university. Over the years I and other family members have continued our research into the story of this branch of the family, a story which has equal parts of courage and gullibility. It is a glimpse into one family's version of how the West was won.

The Harlans Arrive in America

The first Harlans to arrive in America, two brothers named George and Michael, were Quakers who came originally from Monkwearmouth, near Durham in Northern England. They had immigrated to County Down in Ireland and subsequently in 1687 landed in New Castle, Delaware, then part of Pennsylvania, part of the wave of settlers encouraged by William Penn. For the next one hundred years four generations of Harlans lived in the relative peace and prosperity in and around Chester County, Pennsylvania. One Harlan was denounced by the other Friends for "vanity" in erecting an elaborate tombstone on his wife's grave; another got in trouble for marrying a non-Quaker. Despite these tensions Harlans seemed content with their lives until after the Revolutionary War. One George Harlan (218) served as a "wagon boy" in the Army during that conflict. [The numbers in this essay refer to individuals identified in History and Genealogy of the Harlan Family, written by Alpheus Harlan, published originally in 1914.] Then he moved with his family to Lincoln County (now Barren County) in south central Kentucky. He and his wife Mary Wright Harlan had ten children, and it is with his fourth son, George (852), that this narrative is concerned.

West from Kentucky

Young George was born in 1802 and in 1806 his father moved the family to Montgomery County in Ohio, near what is now Dayton. When George, Sr. died in 1815, his widow Mary moved the family to Wayne County, Indiana. There George Jr. and his brothers William (850), Samuel (851), John (853) and Elijah (854) grew to manhood. In 1823 George married Elizabeth Duncan from Pennsylvania. They would have seven children: Rebecca (2990), Mary Ann (2991), Joel (2992), Samuel (2993), Nancy (2994), Elisha (2995) and Jacob (2996). Mary Ann remembered living near an Indian village in Wayne County and how one day an insistent Indian entered their locked cabin by dropping down the chimney. When Mary Ann was five, George moved his family to Berrien County in the southwest corner of Michigan near the town of Niles. Around this time his brothers relocated to Kosciusko County, Indiana, near the Tippicanoe River. Jacob Wright Harlan (2984), son of Samuel (851), was raised there.

Jacob Wright Harlan had a hard childhood. He recalled the sadistic teacher who beat the students with a hickory stick during his abbreviated three months of formal education. Jacob's mother having died when he was young, his father remarried, and his stepmother made life miserable for him. His father finally sent him off as an indentured servant to his uncle, Elijah, who worked him and his cousin, John, so mercilessly that John died and Jacob developed consumption and was given up for dead. However, his grandmother, Mary Wright Harlan, George Senior's widow, told the young man on her death bed that he would survive and thrive. Her words of encouragement gave him hope, and he had a dream of a beautiful valley filled with prosperous farms where he would settle. Soon after that, in 1845, he went to live with his uncle George and his family near Niles, Michigan.

By contrast Mary Ann Harlan had pleasant memories of her childhood. She recalled the one-room log cabin used as a schoolhouse, the lessons she learned and the fun the children had at spelling bees. Once again the family lived near many Indians and maintained cordial relations, except when the Indians got drunk. Eventually the local Indians were transported west to open up their land for more settlers. Many years later Mary Ann still remembered the powerful grief which the Indians experienced at having to give up their lands. In 1845 George Harlan and his family also moved west to California.

Pulling Up Stakes

Why would an apparently successful farmer leave everything he had worked to build and take off for a foreign country on the other side of the continent? In 1845 George received a copy of The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California by Lansford Hastings and became obsessed with California. Jacob believed his uncle may have known Hastings, who had lived in Michigan. In any event George determined to sell his farm and emigrate as soon as the harvest was in. It must have been a momentous decision. At that time California was ruled by Mexico, lying 2,000 miles to the west over the most challenging of terrains. Hastings' book certainly made it sound simple enough, assuring the emigrant of the ease of the trail and the abundance of good water and feed for the animals and praising the Pacific region's excellent land for the adventurous farmer. The primary

reason for George's decision, however, must have been the urge to travel, to step into the unknown, exemplified in the Harlans' moves from Kentucky to Ohio to Indiana to Michigan, always pushing the frontier back.

We know that George received about \$3,000, a large sum in those days, for the sale of his land just before the family left Michigan. We can surmise that he was able to finance most of the eleven wagons the extended family took, ten prairie schooners with teams of oxen and one wagon drawn by horses. (The Van Gordon brothers probably had their own wagon.) As a farmer, George wanted to take his cattle with him, and so he drove about 80 head, including dairy cows, all the way to California. (The roundabout route that the Harlans took would end up being more than 2,500 miles long.) In his party there were 15 family members: himself; his wife; six of his children (young Samuel having died before they left); his daughter Rebecca's husband, Ira Van Gordon and his brother, John; George's nephew Jacob Wright Harlan and his nieces Sarah (2983) and Malinda (2985); another nephew, son of William, George W. (2979). And most incredibly, he took his wife's mother, Mrs. Duncan, who was about 90 years old and blind! In addition to these identified members of the party, there were undoubtedly young men and women who were hired to help. With 11 wagons to drive and teams to manage and that herd of cattle to move, George must have needed more hands. We know from other accounts of wagon parties at this time that hiring help was a common practice; Heinrich Lienhard's diary mentions a young man named Alfred who was traveling with the Harlans. Steve Harrison, Harlan genealogist, has found an account of Richard Swift, the 15-year-old son of one of George's neighbors, who got his mother's permission to accompany the Harlans to California. Mary Ann's account estimates that there were about 25 people who set out from Niles on October 14, 1845, Jacob Wright Harlan's seventeenth birthday. There may be no way of knowing who all of these other unnamed emigrants were.

As they traveled west through Illinois toward the Mississippi River they encountered incredulity. In Joliet a curious man asked where the wagons were headed. When he was told they were bound for California, he grew irate at being made fun of: California must have seemed as remote as "Timbuktoo" to people at that time. When they reached the Mississippi they followed it south. In Hancock County my great-grandfather Elisha, then seven years old, leaned too far out of the wagon, fell beneath the wheels and was nearly killed. Then he was treated by a nearby doctor who, in bleeding him, severed an artery and nearly killed him again. After a week he was sufficiently recovered for the party to proceed. They crossed the Mississippi by ferry at Hannibal, Missouri. In both Missouri and Illinois they encountered hostility when people mistook them for Mormons, who were also on the move and with whom the locals had clashed violently. In Missouri they picked up another emigrant, a man named William S. Clark, who had lost his crops in a flood. Clark would eventually settle in San Francisco and give his name to Clark Point at the foot of Broadway where he built the first wharf on the West Coast. (Nancy Pratt Melton, *Golden Nugget Library – San Francisco*, <http://www.sfgenealogy.com/sf/gnl/lonearmy.htm>)

Spending the Winter

The party wintered in Lexington on the Missouri River. According to Mary Ann, her father, George, rented a hotel for the entire group. He allowed local slaves to hold dances in its ballroom. The young members of the party also entertained themselves with dances, the music furnished by Bill Richardson and his fiddle. It was during this layover that Sarah wed her cousin, George W. Harlan, and Mary Ann married John Van Gordon, the brother of her sister Rebecca's husband. The Harlans were hired by the U.S. government that winter to transport members of the Sac and Fox tribes to the Kansas Territory. (Mary Ann says of this event, "The same Indians the government had moved west while we lived in Michigan had to be moved still farther west. Lo, the poor Indian, civilization was on his track.") While hauling the Indians John Van Gordon accidentally shot George W. Harlan in the hip. This confused and upset the Indians, but one of the sons of the famous chief Blackhawk was among the passengers and spoke enough English to calm the situation and get a medicine man to examine the wound and assure everyone George W. would recover. He was taken back to Lexington and was well in a couple of weeks. That winter Jacob worked for a local farmer harvesting hemp alongside the man's slaves. He was befriended by one who was buying his freedom and showed Jacob the ropes. Jacob made enough money to pay for his outfitting and buy a grey mule, but he was disgusted by what he saw of the slavery system. (Some of the Harlans exhibit racial tolerance in an age of harsh intolerance; later Jacob Wright financed his mercantile venture in the gold fields with the help of an Afro-American, William Leidesdorff, a prominent businessman in San Francisco and Joel adopted an abandoned Indian baby and raised him as a son on his ranch in Sam Ramon.)

Before he left Lexington, George located his former brother-in-law, Peter Wimmer. Wimmer had been married to George's sister, known as "Aunt Polly," Mary Harlan (856), who died in Missouri in 1844. George convinced Wimmer, with his new wife and children, to join the Harlan group. The Wimmer family would play a pivotal role in the discovery of gold at Coloma in 1848. George appears to have been not just an eager emigrant but also an apostle, encouraging others to make the dangerous journey to an unknown land following the directions of Lansford Hastings, a trail guide of questionable ability.

On the Oregon Trail

In the spring the emigrants gathered at Indian Creek near Westport, in what is now Kansas City, to prepare for the overland trek. There were about 500 wagons, most of them headed for Oregon. According to Gregory Franzwa in The Oregon Trail Revisited, the emigrants had to wait until the new grass was sufficiently high to provide feed for the stock, and so the wagons got under way on April 6, 1846, with appropriate fanfare including a stirring sermon by Reverend Dunleavy. The emigrants had elected former Governor Boggs of Missouri as their captain, and for the first three days they traveled together across the Kansas prairie headed northwest along the Little Blue River. By then it became apparent that the group was too large to travel as a single unit; the wagons could go no faster than the slowest rig. The emigrants broke into smaller groups, the Harlans traveling with one headed by Judge Moran, formerly of Missouri. The organization of the wagon trains remained fluid throughout the trip.

Rough Humor on the Trail

Jacob Wright Harlan recounted a practical joke which illuminates the tension over command and control issues for the emigrants' wagons. A man named Inman complained bitterly about what he saw as the lack of discipline in running the train. He said he was a preacher, but Jacob recognized him as a horse thief from Kosciusko County in Indiana who had escaped from the local jail. Jacob and some of the other young men decided to play a joke and one night held a meeting and voted to replace Judge Moran with Inman as wagon master. The next day Inman issued stringent new rules and spent the day riding himself and his mount to exhaustion making sure everyone obeyed. His actions led to one family, the Pyles, being left behind in possible danger of attack by the Sioux. When Pyle rejoined the train after dark, he accused Inman of endangering his family. The same young men who had voted Inman into office now unanimously voted to replace him with Moran. In his rage at what was clearly a preplanned prank, Inman took a shot at Jacob who returned fire. Neither man was injured, but Inman's wagon was voted out of the train, an action that could be very dangerous hundreds of miles from civilization. This potential for chaos in organizing the trains would become a particular problem when those following Hastings' Cutoff entered the mountains of Utah.

Later the emigrants played a cruel practical joke on a serving girl named Lucinda. She had come along with the Hoppe family, eager to find a husband. At one point she was "married" to a young man named Alfred working for George Harlan and traveled with him for a short time until they quarreled violently. The young men then convinced Lucinda that a man named Mike, who had ridden on ahead, had left a letter for her with a proposal of marriage. Lucinda yearned for his return and told everyone they would be married, much to the amusement of the others. Apparently Lucinda frequently overstayed her welcome and was dismissed from a wagon by having the bundle containing all her belongings being thrown overboard. Lienhard tells us that George took pity on her at least three times and took her in and saw to it she got to California.

The wagons had crossed into what is now Nebraska and were following the Platte River. Mary Ann described what it was like to live on the trail:

Our wagons were filled with cupboard-like compartments lying flat across the bottom of the wagons; they had two doors that were kept closed. In these, we carried our provisions. We had a number of cows, so we had milk most of the way. At night when we camped, our wagons were driven so as to form a circle all around the camp. Our fires were made with flint rock, using buffalo chips and trash for fuel. Beds were made in the wagon or upon the ground. We cooked over the open fires, baking bread in Dutch ovens, often aided with tin reflectors. Our daily fare consisted of bread, fresh meat, most of the time, parched cornmeal eaten with milk, bacon, coffee, tea, etc.

Both Mary Ann and Jacob recall with fondness the young people holding dances in the evening on the prairie around the campfires. Musicians included fiddle players, such as Ann Eliza Fowler, whom Jacob would marry once they got to California.

The Fowlers' Connection

The Fowlers played a prominent part in the story of the Harlans' life in California. The patriarch, Henry, began as an architect or master builder in Albany, New York, and then moved his family to Illinois. He went to California with his two sons in 1843. Once there, they started building for General Vallejo in Sonoma, the famed leader of California under Mexican rule. When Henry was given a land grant near the present site of Calistoga, he sent his son William back to Illinois to bring the rest of the family: his wife, two unmarried daughters (Ann Eliza and Minerva), his married daughter (Catherine Hargrave), her husband John Hargrave and their children. One of the Hargrave children, Mary Jane, would marry Richard Swift, the young neighbor of George Harlan from Berrien County, who joined the Harlan wagon train. The couple would eventually settle in Healdsburg, California. When the Fowlers joined the Harlans on the trail, William Fowler was one of the few emigrants who had seen their final destination.

Crossing the Rockies

The emigrants followed the Platte and then the North Fork steadily to the west, passing the prominent landmarks along the trail: Courthouse Rock, Chimney Rock, Independence Rock, where they often carved their names. Then the trail, in what is now Wyoming, followed the Sweetwater River up to South Pass, the major crossing point over the continental divide. Once over the pass, the emigrants faced several decisions: they could continue to the southwest over the old Oregon Trail route to Fort Bridger on the Bear River or they could go directly west over a new trail, the Sublette Cutoff, which took them over the Green River and into what is now Idaho. The cutoff, which had opened just the previous year, was a 50 mile stretch without water or grass, but it would save at least three days, a major consideration for emigrants now running short of supplies. Most emigrants, whether headed for Oregon or California, opted to stay on the old trail with reliable water and feed.

The other decision they faced was how to get to California: riders from the west brought word to the emigrants that Lansford Hastings, the famous author of the guidebook, would meet wagon trains at Fort Bridger and lead those headed for California on a new shortcut he had discovered that would save three hundred miles over the old route. Most emigrants heading for California opted to stay on the proven route which took them north from Fort Bridger to Fort Hall on the Snake River and then southwest into what is now Nevada and the Humboldt River. The river offered the only practical route through the desert basins and ranges down to Truckee River and the crossing over the formidable Sierra Nevada. Those who chose the Fort Hall route made a wise decision.

Hastings: Villain or Visionary?

Lansford Hastings was born in Ohio in 1819 and was trained as an attorney. He first traveled overland to Oregon in 1842 and then to California. He apparently decided that he could lead a coup against the Mexican officials and establish an independent republic of California with himself as the head. (Such entrepreneurial nation-building was not unusual in the nineteenth century: Texas had such an origin, and the famous "filibuster" William Walker had tried to establish his own republic in Central America until he ended

up in front of a firing squad.) When Hastings returned to the United States in 1844, he wrote his guidebook with the aim of encouraging emigrants to flock to California, providing the critical mass of “Americans” to make his plan possible. In his book (The Emigrants’ Guide to Oregon and California, Applewood Books), published in 1845, he mentions the possibility of a short-cut around the south end of the Great Salt Lake, but he offered no details. It was not until the winter of 1845 when he had returned to California that he sought confirmation of such a short-cut from John C. Fremont, the noted western explorer. Fremont apparently encouraged Hastings’ vision of a quick, safe route west from Fort Bridger to the Humboldt River. And so in the spring of 1846 Hastings set off from Sutter’s Fort with a small group to explore parts of the route he proposed to lead wagon trains along later that same year. There is no documented evidence that Hastings had ever traveled all of the route of what was called “The Hastings Cut-Off.”

Commentators have held Hastings responsible for the disaster that befell the Donner Party. They point out that he did not adequately investigate the terrain; he certainly did not take into account the difficulties that heavily-loaded wagons would encounter on a trail which they would have to build as they traveled west. Characteristic of the assessment of Hastings’ culpability is Gregory Franzwa’s comment in The Oregon Trail Revisited. He called Hastings “a particularly odious PR man . . . who wanted to be King of California so badly that he put out a guide book advocating a route he had never seen [page 23].” The irony is that while people like Hastings and Fremont purported to be experts on the West, there were genuine guides who knew what they were talking about – the fur traders and mountain men who had explored the West in person over many years. Unfortunately for the emigrants of 1846, these men, largely illiterate, were not the ones sought out by book publishers! Every one of them who was asked about the feasibility of Hastings’ “short-cut” advised against taking it. However, people like George Harlan, the Donners and the Reeds accepted Hastings at face value. We can see in Harlan’s advocacy of the Hastings Cut-Off to his friends and family the mark of a true believer. He would soon be terribly disillusioned in the mountains and on the salt flats of Utah and Nevada.

West from Fort Bridger: A Ragged Beginning

The Hastings Cut-Off ran west from Fort Bridger, through the Wasatch Mountains in what is now Utah to the Great Salt Lake, then south and west across the salt flats and finally in a great loop around the Ruby Mountains to join the established California Trail at what is now Elko, Nevada, on the Humboldt River. To understand the confusion, miscommunication and wrong-headed decisions of the emigrants of 1846 who blazed this trail, we must keep in mind that there were at least four different groups all trying to find their way across a hostile terrain. Members of each group saw and remembered different things about the trip. In his important historical study West From Fort Bridger: The Pioneering of Immigrant Trails Across Utah, 1846—1850, Dale Morgan and his co-authors have examined the written accounts of those who followed Hastings’ short-cut and have reconstructed the different routes they took.

The Harlan Party was the first to strike out west from Bridger in the company of another wagon train headed by Samuel Young. There was no apparent connection between the

Harlan and the Young families; they were just the first ones to arrive at the fort. The train, with their extended families and associates, consisted of 57 wagons and left the fort with Hastings on July 20. The only accounts we have of this party are the memoirs of Jacob Wright Harlan and Mary Ann Harlan Smith, both written about forty years later. The same day a pack train led by Edwin Bryant and guided by Hastings' partner, James Hudspeth, left Bridger, following a different route through the canyons. Hudspeth was apparently seeking an alternative route down to the Great Salt Lake, and his wandering track would crisscross the Harlans' through the mountains. Bryant kept a detailed journal of the trip which he published just two years later (What I Saw in California, New York, 1848). He tells us he urged the emigrants at the fort not to take the new trail: "Our situation was different from theirs. We were mounted on mules, had no families, and could afford to hazard experiments. They could not." The experienced mountain man Joseph Walker visiting at the fort concurred that the "short-cut" would prove an illusion. Bryant even wrote a letter to James Reed of the Donner Party warning him to stay on the Fort Hall Trail and left it with Bridger's partner, Louis Vasquez, to be delivered when the Donners arrived. Reed did not receive the letter and later attributed this failure to Vasquez's desire to promote the Hastings' Cut-Off in order to bring in more business.

After the first two parties left, more wagons straggled into the fort. The fluid organization of the emigrant trains across the plains contributed to this chaotic situation. Apparently these latecomers pressed on, following the tracks of the Harlans' wagons. Then on July 26 a third organized train of six wagons, called the Hoppe Party, left Bridger. In this group was a remarkable young Swiss man named Heinrich Lienhard. He would keep a detailed journal in German with many interesting details. Because the Hoppe Party was right behind the Harlans, we are able to get a first-hand description of some of the obstacles our ancestors faced. Lienhard's account was published in Europe but was not translated into English until years later. Also traveling with the Hoppe group was a man named T. H. Jefferson, who drew a detailed map of the new route. Nothing more is known of this cartographer, but he did document the route the Harlan wagons took.

On July 31 the fourth and final wagon train, the Donner-Reed Party, left Fort Bridger, following the tracks of the earlier emigrants. Of the 87 members of this ill-fated group, only 47 would survive to reach the California settlements the following year, and they would undergo the most horrible of ordeals. Because the Donner Party came so close to making it across the final mountain barrier before they were snowed in, historians have examined in detail the delays and missteps they encountered along the Hastings Cut-Off. One first-hand account of their travails kept during the trip was written by James Reed, a central figure in the tragedy and eventual rescue. The mountain man James Clyman, who had ridden east with Hastings along part of his proposed trail, says he warned Reed to stay on the Fort Hall trail: "It is barely possible to get through if you follow it – and it may be impossible if you don't." But Reed was determined to take what he called "the nigher [shorter] route."

Weber Canyon: Things Fall Apart

The Harlan-Young wagons proceeded through the foothills of Wyoming and into the mountains of the Wasatch Range in Utah. As they progressed they had to construct a rough trail to accommodate their wagons, scouting the route, cutting brush and trees where necessary, occasionally leveling out rough spots. Jacob Wright Harlan remembered that it was particularly disagreeable having to cut through greasewood and sage brush. They passed down Echo Canyon with its spectacular red rock cliffs and came to the Weber River on July 27. This major waterway runs northwest down through the mountains into the Great Salt Lake, and it posed a dilemma for the emigrants – should they follow it down to their immediate destination? At that critical juncture, Hastings’ “command and control” had broken down; he was back with the Hoppe Party, 40 miles to the east. However, Hudspeth, leading the Bryant Party, emerged from a nearby canyon at this moment and advised the trail blazers that he thought the Weber River was a viable route. According to Bryant’s journal, Hudspeth said the passage was practical, “by making a road in the bed of the stream for short distances and cutting out the timber and brush in other places.” And so the emigrants turned to the right and made a fateful decision. Meanwhile Hudspeth led his pack train off in a different direction.

Just west of the present town of Henefer, Utah, the Weber River enters a steep, narrow gorge. The most prominent landmark of this upper gorge is Devil’s Slide, a sheer limestone wall that runs down the mountainside, one of several such formations that would necessitate “making a road in the bed of the stream.” But taking 57 wagons through the swift-flowing Weber or along its bushy banks was a major undertaking. Mary Ann remembered, “There were many willow trees, and in going down the canyon the willows were bent one way; it would have been almost impossible to have gone back. The wagons had to be almost lifted over many places; it took five men to each wagon.” W.W. Allen and R.B. Avery in The California Gold Book described what the Harlan-Young Party faced:

The canyon was scarcely wide enough to accommodate the narrow river which traverses it, and there was no room for roads between the waters and the abrupt banks. In many places great boulders had been rolled by the mountain torrents and lodged together, forming an impassable way..... Three such obstacles were encountered, and only about a mile a day was averaged for more than a week.... Three times spurs of the mountain had to be crossed by rigging the windlass on top, and lifting the wagons almost bodily.

Once past the upper gorge and its Devil’s Slide feature, the Weber enters a broader valley around Morgan, Utah, before it plunges into the lower gorge. Here things really got interesting. At one point the river makes a sharp S-curve, and the emigrants’ way was blocked by a sheer rock wall they called “Devil’s Gate.” There was no way around this formidable obstacle, and so the Harlan-Young wagons had to go over the 75 foot height, one wagon at a time. Allen and Avery explained what happened one day:

While hoisting a yoke of oxen and a wagon up [the wall] the rope broke near the windlass. As many men as could surround the wagon were

helping all they could by lifting at the wheels and sides. The footing was untenable and before the ropes could be tied to anything, the men found they must abandon the wagon and oxen to destruction, or be dragged to death themselves. The faithful beasts seemed to comprehend their danger, and held their ground for a few seconds, and then were hurled over a precipice at least 75 feet high, and crushed in a tangled mass with the wagon on the rocks at the bottom of the canyon.

Subsequent road building through Weber Canyon, including the transcontinental railroad and Interstate 84, has reduced Devil's Gate to a fraction of its former height, but you can still see it just a few miles east of Ogden, Utah.

When Hastings returned to the Harlan-Young emigrants in the canyon, he was upset. He did not plan on taking the wagons this way but rather up Main Canyon, running southwest from Hefner and over the high plateau to the mountains overlooking what is now Salt Lake City. It was too late to extract the trail blazers, but he rode back up the canyon to where the Hoppe Party was waiting for the Harlans to clear the lower gorge. He advised them to seek a way back out of the canyon, and Lienhard reports that they backtracked but could find no easy way out of the trap they were in. So they decided to try their luck in what he called "the bad places" on the Weber. Meanwhile, Hasting rode back to the Henefer crossing and left a letter on a bush advising the Donners to wait there and send riders ahead to consult with him about an alternative route.

Four members of the Donner Party rode down to the lower gorge in time to see the problems getting past Devils Gate. Jacob Wright Harlan says the Harlans urged the Donners to follow their route and help them get all the wagons over the final obstacle, but the Donner representatives demurred. (Reed may have been especially concerned about getting his specially-built wagon, reputed to have had a second story, through the tight spots.) The Donner representatives had to find Hastings, who was now *35 miles ahead* of the emigrants, at Adobe Rock near the present Salt Lake City. Once again there was a failure of command and control, and more precious time was lost.

Reed prevailed upon Hastings to ride back with him, due east, up Emigrant Canyon and to a mountaintop from which Hastings pointed out a possible route over the high country from the point where the rest of the Donners were waiting. Reed was not able to get back to the rest of his party until August 10, and on the 11th they set out on the new route. Hastings' alternative passage proved more time-consuming than the Weber Canyon route, as the fewer than 30 able-bodied men in the party hacked their way through the tough terrain. It was not until August 22 that the exhausted emigrants reached the valley of the Salt Lake, now far behind the other parties. Ironically, the Donners' apparently wasted effort in trail-building served as the basis for the Mormon Trail the next year, 1847, when the Latter Day Saints arrived and followed the Donners' tracks down to the valley where they settled.

Out on to the Salt Flats

The Harlan-Young Party reached the shores of the Great Salt Lake in the early days of August, and the Hoppe Party a few days later, on August 7. Lienhard and his companions were amazed by the buoyancy they experienced when they entered the extra briny water, but as they rounded the south end of the lake and headed west, they found fewer springs of potable water. Somewhere around the present Grantsville, Utah, tragedy struck the Fowler family when John Hargrave, husband of the oldest Fowler girl, died, apparently of the exertions of getting through the Weber Canyon. His was the first recorded death of an emigrant in Utah, and his body was laid to rest alongside the trail. He left behind a widow, Catherine, and four small children.

Hastings had promised the travelers that the way would be easier when they reached the salt flats of western Utah. They crossed Skull Valley and the Cedar Mountains and prepared to make what Mary Ann Harlan called the "long drive" by stocking up on water and taking along cut grass for their animals. Then they set out on the arid salt flats. Once again Hastings proved incompetent as a guide. What had seemed a quick crossing when he rode the route earlier that year proved too much for the emigrants and their laden wagons and thirsty animals. In places the heavily loaded vehicles broke through the crust of the salt; Bryant described his mules sinking to their knees in places, "creating a dust that rose above and hung over us like a dense fog." Other emigrants described the blinding glare off the white surface. Lienhard told how the oxen fought to get into the small spots of shade of the wagons. Thirst-crazed animals broke free and ran off into the desert; William Fowler lost the oxen for two of his wagons this way, and the other emigrants gave him their extra stock to make it across.

After three days of this terrible travel, Hastings told the Harlan-Young Party he had misjudged the distance, and they still had twenty miles to go before they could reach the fresh water springs at Pilot Peak, right on what is now the border of Utah and Nevada. The emigrants unhitched all their wagons, left them in the care of one man, and drove the surviving animals to the water. At the spring they had to rest and restore themselves and their stock for three days before returning to get the wagons. The Donners, coming along later, may have had to abandon several of their wagons in this stretch; the relics of several wagons were encrusted with salt over the next 150 years until an archeological team uncovered them. The Hastings "Short-Cut" was proving to be a time-consuming and life-threatening venture for the emigrants.

Around the Rubies and to the Humboldt

West from Pilot Peak the emigrants entered the basin and range terrain of Nevada. The mountain ranges run north/south, and the Humboldt River cut through them leading west. The problem was getting to the river. If Hastings had had more time, he might have found a more direct route, but instead, after he led the wagons over several ranges, they confronted the formidable Ruby Mountains, and the Hastings' Cut-Off now took a detour of almost 100 miles to get around them. The toll on the human spirit matched that on the animals pulling the wagons. James Reed noted that the Donner Party called Flowery Lakes "Mad Women's Camp as all the women were mad with anger." The trail dropped south almost 50 miles along the eastern front of the Ruby Mountains, then crossed the range at Hastings Pass and looped north. The greatest challenge now was in the narrow

canyon of the South Fork of the Humboldt River down which the emigrants had to proceed. In a short stretch the wagons had to cross the swift-flowing river 14 times, and Heinrich Lienhard's wagon tipped over, dumping all his belongings in the water.

Once they reached the main Humboldt River where Elko, Nevada, is today and rejoined the regular trail to California, the Harlans discovered that they were about 75 miles behind the slowest of the emigrants who had taken the longer Fort Hall route. They faced two new challenges. Upset by the earlier emigrant parties, the natives along the river were ambushing the emigrant trains, killing unguarded animals and occasionally people. And George Harlan realized, about the time Hastings left the party to ride back to California, that his family could not make it over the Sierra with their reduced stock of oxen. Finally they faced another terrible desert crossing between the Humboldt Sink, where the river ended in another salt lake, and the Truckee River, which flows east out of the Sierra Nevada. This 40-mile desert was especially bad because the last seven miles were loose sand. The emigrants needed to send for help.

Jacob Wright to the Rescue

George ordered his nephew Jacob Wright Harlan to take another young emigrant, Tom Smith, and ride ahead to Sutter's Fort in California to secure provisions and more oxen. The two had a hair-raising brush with hostile Indians; Jacob tells us his mule was better than a watchdog for detecting intruders. They were able to catch up with Governor Boggs' Party and get him to leave his surplus supplies behind for the Harlan-Young emigrants in the care of one brave man. After climbing the steep eastern face of the Sierra just west of where Reno is today, Jacob and Tom rode down toward the Sacramento River and Sutter's Fort. When they reached the first outpost of civilization, Johnson's Rancho, about 40 miles from Sutter's Fort, Jacob saw the vista of a fertile valley spread below, and he remembered the dream he had had at the time of his dying grandmother's prediction that he would be cured of his consumption. He knew he had found his Eden.

The boys presented George's letter to John Sutter who gave them supplies and sent them on to see a rancher named Cordua for their stock. From him they secured a dozen fine oxen. However, Tom Smith refused to ride back over the mountains and desert, despite the fact that he had a sister and her family in the train; he wanted to enlist in Fremont's Army, then forming to fight the Mexicans in the war which had started since the emigrants had left home. So Cordua lent Jacob the use of two of his Indian *vaqueros*, cowboys, to help drive the animals back. Despite not being able to speak to his companions, Jacob was able to get over the crest. On his trip back he met Stanton and Pike, two men from the Donner Party who had also been sent ahead to seek help from Sutter. Jacob met his family just as they were starting up the eastern face of the Sierra with their worn-out stock. With the fresh animals they were able to get over what is now called Donner Pass. George Harlan proclaimed Jacob a hero.

Home at Last

The Harlans descended the Sierra by way of Bear River and reached Johnson's Rancho on October 25, 1846, the first day of the heavy rains that would snow the Donner Party in

on the eastern side of the mountains. They went on to Sutter's Fort to thank the men who had helped save them. George gave Cordua some of his American oxen in partial repayment. Peter Wimmer stayed in Sutter's Fort as a sawyer and later went to Coloma to help build a mill for Sutter; it was his little boy who may have discovered the gold nugget in the millrace that set off the 1849 Gold Rush. Over the next five years the Harlans would have many adventures in their new California home.

The women and children spent that first winter in the abandoned mission at Santa Clara, while the men went off to fight with Fremont's forces in Southern California. They helped elect their own captain, Lansford Hastings, who continued to command respect despite his shortcomings as a guide. There was little bloodshed on the campaign, but back at the mission, the new arrivals suffered from what they called "emigrant fever," typhoid. George lost his wife Elizabeth and Mary Ann her husband, John Van Gordon. When the men returned they went to cut redwoods in the Oakland Hills, turning them into fence posts and lumber for construction in the burgeoning village of Yerba Buena, now San Francisco. Soon the Harlans moved to Yerba Buena as well, opening a combination livery stable and dairy with the eight head of cattle that survived the trek. George owned property near what is now the entrance to Chinatown; there is an alley named for him off Grant between Bush and Sutter. Jacob and then Joel traveled to Calistoga where they courted and wed the two unmarried Fowler girls. George soon followed and married the widow Catherine Fowler Hargrave; their daughter Sarah Ann (2007) was the first "American" child born in Yerba Buena. Mary Ann married Henry Clay Smith at Mission San Jose.

When the Harlans received word from Peter Wimmer about the discovery of gold in the spring of 1848, they got a loan from their friend William Leidsdorff, bought as many supplies as they could and set off for Coloma. (They left their cattle in the care of Elam Brown in what is now Lafayette, California.) They opened a general store in the primitive mining camp. The young men went out prospecting and sold supplies. The local Indians had learned to mine for gold, and Mary Ann remembered selling dresses to the Indian women. Jacob told the story of cutting up strips of carpeting to sell as colorful *serapes* to Indians who liked the garments of the Californian *vaqueros*. The Harlans made a lot of money in Coloma, but it was a precarious and dangerous existence, especially for families with small children. When winter came, the Harlans sold their location and remaining supplies to Lansford Hastings and his partners and returned to the Bay Area. On the way back, George's mother-in-law, Mrs. Duncan in her 90s, died and was reportedly buried on the site of the future State Capitol in Sacramento. In the next year some of the Harlans made money planting potatoes that helped feed the hordes of 49ers who had arrived to seek their fortunes. But they also lost in a land court ranch property they thought they had bought. In 1850 George died and was buried in the Pioneer Cemetery in Livermore. Joel Harlan became a prosperous cattle rancher in the San Ramon Valley. Jacob Wright Harlan later ran a ferry over the San Joaquin River near Stockton. And Mary Ann Harlan Van Gordon Smith would go with her family to build a hotel in the silver mines of Virginia City.

My own great-grandfather, Elisha who was run over by a covered wagon when he was seven, would grow to manhood on his brother Joel's ranch and then become a successful cattle rancher in the San Joaquin Valley where each summer he would drive his stock on a long trek up into the mountains, just as his father had done years before on the way from Niles, Michigan, to the promised land in California.