

2009

Searching for Tamsen Donner

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Searching for Tamsen Donner

American Lives

SERIES EDITOR: Tobias Wolff

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SEARCHING FOR
**Tamsen
Donner**

Gabrielle Burton

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London

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An earlier version of chapter 47
was first published as
“Ceremony” in *Mediphors*:
*A Literary Journal of the Health
Professions* 8 (Fall–Winter 1996).



Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Burton, Gabrielle.
Searching for Tamsen Donner /
Gabrielle Burton.
p. cm.—(American lives)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-0-8032-2285-4 (cloth: alk. paper)
1. Donner, Tamsen, 1801–1847.
2. Donner, Tamsen, 1801–1847—
Correspondence. 3. Donner party.
4. Women pioneers—West (U.S.)—
Biography. 5. Women pioneers—
West (U.S.)—Correspondence.
6. Frontier and pioneer life—Sierra
Nevada (Calif. and Nev.) 7. Overland
journeys to the Pacific. 8. Burton,
Gabrielle—Travel—West (U.S.)
9. Burton, Gabrielle—Family.
10. West (U.S.)—Description and travel.
I. Title.
F868.N5B87 2009 978'.02092—dc22
[B] 2008041074

Set in Quadraat by Bob Reitz.
Designed by Ashley Muehlbauer.

This book is dedicated to
my husband, Roger,

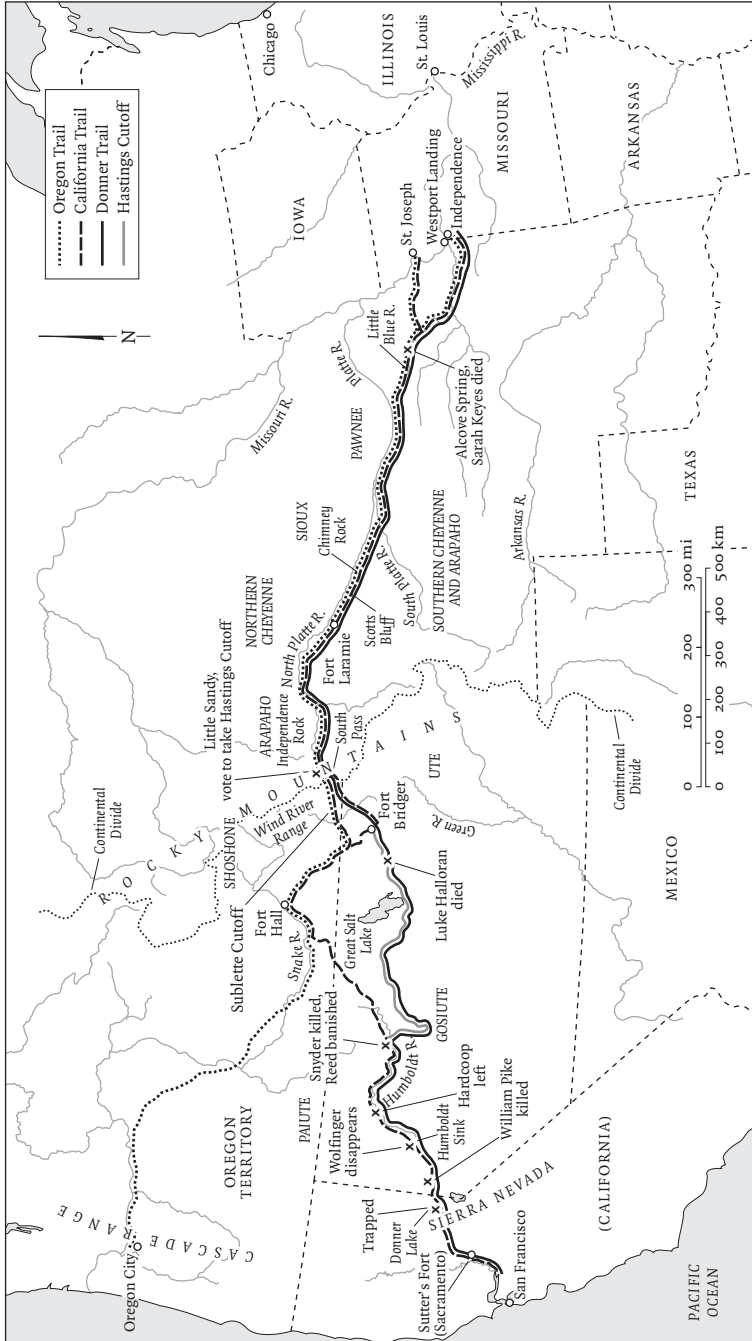
and

our daughters, Maria, Jennifer,
Ursula, Gabrielle, and Charity,

hardy joyous traveling companions
on the road and in life.

*I do not regret nor shall I the fatigue
expense nor embarrassment to which I
have subjected myself. My heart is big
with hope & impatient with desire.*

—TAMSEN DONNER, 23, in a letter to
her sister, dated November 1824, written
halfway through her journey from
Massachusetts to North Carolina at a
time when women did not travel alone



Preface

The story of the Donner Party of 1846 has been told by novelists, poets, filmmakers, and scholars, and it continues to fascinate because it's the American dream turned nightmare. En route to California, Tamsen and her husband, George Donner (the leader of the Donner Party), their five daughters, and eighty other pioneers were trapped by early snows for more than four months in the Sierra Nevadas. Nearly half the party perished, some resorting to cannibalism to survive.

Tamsen Donner sent her daughters out of the mountains with the first two rescue parties and stayed with her dying husband. The final rescue party found George's body wrapped for burial, but Tamsen's body was never found.

In 1972 Tamsen Donner came unexpectedly to our family and took up permanent residence. Over the years I have read widely and deeply on the Donner Party, including the original Patrick Breen diary and many out-of-print books found through rare-book dealers; corresponded with numerous historians, librarians, and genealogists; traveled to cities where Tamsen Donner lived; and retraced the Donners' overland

route from Springfield, Illinois, to Donner Pass, California. Through the courtesy of the Huntington Library and the historian Mark McLaughlin, I'm privileged to present in one place for the first time the seventeen extant letters written by Tamsen Donner, seen in their entirety by few outside her immediate descendants.

In the decades since first discovering Tamsen Donner, I've written about numerous other subjects in nonfiction, fiction, and screenplay form. Yet, after every major project, I kept returning to Tamsen.

The story of the Donner Party may be the best known, least substantiated tale of nineteenth-century American overland emigration. There are few primary sources and countless contradictory secondary sources that began appearing soon after the event and continue to the present. The recollections of survivors years later have the strength of personal experience and the weakness of retrospective memory, sometimes confirming another survivor's statement, and just as often disagreeing. Even today, more than 160 years later, scholars and Web wonks argue passionately about the exact place the Donner Party was on a certain date, or the ages of different members. Every detail authenticated, no matter how minor, seems a victory over puzzle and mystery, and it is, advancing knowledge and keeping the past alive and as accurate as we can ascertain. But what we really want to know is *what really happened* in the four months the Party was trapped in the mountains. And that is never going to be known. I wrote an Oregon Trail of words about the Donner Party before realizing that, although I respect historical scholars greatly, I didn't want to write a history of the Donner Party. What I wanted to do was capture Tamsen Donner's spirit.

Stories, like lives, take their own form. For histories and scholarly analyses, please see the Further Reading section at the end of this book. Where possible, I tried to reconcile details believed to be true in 1977 with more recent discoveries, but overall this is a personal narrative, my recollection and interpretation of my young family and myself who found ourselves traveling Tamsen Donner's path more than a century after she had.

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Roger came home from work one day in 1973 and there, sitting in our driveway, was a cherry red Honda 350 motorcycle. “I just felt I had to know what riding feels like,” I said.

Roger apparently shared the feeling. He promptly got on the bike, rode up the hill of our driveway, realized he didn’t know how to stop, braked by crashing into a parked car, and shattered his wrist. “Men and their toys,” one nurse sniffed. I didn’t mention it was my bike.

I was planning to ride it cross-country for the novel I was writing about two women, a real historical heroine and a fictional modern one. Going west, I’d follow the route that Tamsen and George Donner had taken in 1846—Illinois, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, Donner Pass in the mountains near Sacramento, California—and riding back east I’d take my modern characters’ route, which began in Berkeley, California, paralleled the Donners’ route, and ended in Buffalo, New York. The Donner route out was now mostly minor bypassed roads, and I figured that by the time I started home on the modern route, mostly interstates, I’d be a highly proficient rider.

Now on the adventure rating scale, riding a motorcycle cross-country is pretty small potatoes compared to, say, hacking your way through the jungles of Borneo, but add handicap points of being a woman, and 34, and the mother of five children under ten, and your adventure rating shoots right up there. To me, that gorgeous machine was a symbol of possibility, every Schwinn I never rode, California waves unsurfed, and it remained that until I needed it no longer, although it was constantly associated with failure.

“Burton, Roger: PASS. Burton, Gabrielle: FAIL,” the police officer called out at the end of the motorcycle riding course we diligently attended three Saturdays running. It was one of those moments that you feel sums up your whole life, **Burton, Gabrielle: Fail**, but it came as a surprise and a shock. Except for the final test, which I knew I had bombed, I thought I had been doing well. Maybe I had been and the drama of the final test blotted it out.

I had ridden my bike up a narrow plank balanced over a small barrel, an absurd test, what were we training for, the circus? The plank teetered and I tottered, my motorcycle shooting off the barrel’s side, heading straight for a group of police officers. I had a vivid image of men, their hands crossed in Xs on their crotches, scattering in every direction.

“It’s not fair,” Jennifer, 8, said as I lay on my bed in a funk. “The whole thing was your idea.”

My sentiments exactly.

Humiliated and discouraged, I eventually dragged myself out of bed, tracked down one of the officers who had taught our class, and arranged for private lessons on Saturdays in an empty office parking lot. He sat amused sipping beer while I made endless figure 8s around rubber pylons until he pronounced me ready to retake the licensing test.

He was a couple of six-packs premature. Internally and externally I was still wobbly and seeing a G.B.FAIL looming in the new officer’s eyes, I ashamedly resorted to shameless flirting, only a few eye bats removed from outright solicitation.

“Well,” he said, “you never forgot to put on your turn signals and I’m very big on turn signals.”

Now licensed, I practiced figure 8s on Saturday mornings in the parking lot alone until I felt I wasn’t a death sentence to others or to myself. I discovered that the particular style of motorcycle I had bought was too high slung for me. At stops on the road, my feet unable to plant on the pavement, I struggled on tiptoe to keep 375 pounds aloft, often lost, then struggled to *get* 375 pounds aloft, tears streaming down my beet red face while men in cars sped by yelling snide remarks about liberated ladies. Several times, big hirsute Harley riders stopped to assist me without comment.

I continued to plan my trip to California, closing all escape hatches. I equipped my 350—the smallest of the big bikes or the biggest of the small bikes that could make that kind of trip—with a windshield and fairing for highway winds. I told everyone I knew that I was going and mentioned the trip in a local newspaper article. Three women who read the article, all strangers, called me at odd hours, saying, “Don’t go on this trip. You can’t with five children.” “That’s exactly why I must,” I said politely. “If I don’t have adventures, my daughters won’t have adventures,” not saying, Butt out of my life, I’m having enough trouble with my own fears without adding yours.

I began lying awake at night, calculating the number of gas stops I’d have to make, ruminating about what powerful machismo turf gas stations can be, that gas stations, tied up with machines, mastery, power, and Vroom Vroom, are where many small-town boys on the road to manhood perform rites of passage: hang out in gangs, puff first cigarettes, and commit first thefts, one or two distracting the attendant while the others grab what they can, flashlights, batteries, candy bars, the item not important, only the deed. Forget the boys; I started thinking about the men who hang around gas stations, a thin environment and time thick on their hands, and my roaring up on my cherry red Honda 350, “Hi, fellas.” From hassled at gas stations I progressed fairly quickly to spread-eagled in a remote Western town,

and how would Roger ever explain to the children, “Your mother just felt she had to make this trip.”

My fear shameful to me, I still wouldn’t lower my terms. Several men volunteered to go with me, but in the eyes of the world they’d be my protectors, maybe in my eyes too. I almost went with a woman, finally admitting to myself that I was only considering her because she was a powerful six-footer. The trip, to be done correctly, had to be done alone. It was to be my rite of passage. When you’re deprived of hanging out at gas stations, the symbols get more elaborate.

Erosion eats away by drips. I don’t know when it happened, but at some point, my fears about the trip became greater than my desire to take it. I still worked on the novel, still rode the motorcycle, dropped it, lugged it back up again, but I stopped talking about the trip. Nobody else ever mentioned it again either.