

## ***Soundtrack to The Donner Party***

This is a set of pieces to be used for a movie that some day might be made, or perhaps sketches for an opera or ballet, based on the Donner Party of 1846-47. So far I've completed the first five, and have started on the next five.

### **1. Westering Journey**

[April 14, 1846](#): Journey begins at Springfield, Illinois. The travelers are George Donner, his brother Jacob, and James Frazier Reed, with their families. Each man has three covered wagons and has hired men (teamsters) to drive the oxen that pull them; Reed also has two servants. The destination of the first leg is Independence, Missouri, where the Oregon and California trails begin; the distance from Springfield to Independence is about 250 miles (400 kilometers). The trip is timed to begin when the spring rains have subsided and grass for the draft animals is available, and to end before snow makes the Sierra Nevada impassable.

### **2. Wagon Train Hoedown**

[May 19, 1846](#): At Indian Creek, about 100 miles (160 kilometers) west of Independence, the Donners and Reeds join a larger wagon train, which is led by Colonel William Henry Russell. And they are on their way.

The piece is scored for violins, violas, cellos, double bass, and flutes. The intonation is the overtones to the 11 limit, in C, Ab, F, D+, which are the utonality keys to the 7 limit.

### **3. Hasting's Cutoff**

Scored for flute, oboe, balloon drums, finger piano, and harp. This is when the Donner Party makes the fateful decision to follow the Hastings Cutoff. The piece falls by a 53rd root of 2 (77:76) every few measures. By the time it finishes, we've gone down by 7:8. Slipping away...

[July 31, 1846](#): James Reed writes "Hastings Cutoff is said to be a saving of 350 or 400 miles and a better route. The rest of the Californians went the long



route, feeling afraid of Hastings's cutoff. But Mr. Bridger informs me that it is a fine, level road with plenty of water and grass. It is estimated that 700 miles will take us to Captain Sutter's fort, which we hope to make in seven weeks from this day." At the fort the emigrants take on some new members. Now numbering 74 people, the Donner Party leaves Fort Bridger and starts out on Hastings Cutoff.



### 4. Echo Canyon

August 6, 1846: The Donner Party stops at the mouth of Echo Canyon; Hastings has left a note for them, warning them that the road ahead is impassable and instructing them to send someone ahead to get instructions. James Reed and two others set out following the wagons tracks of Hastings' group.

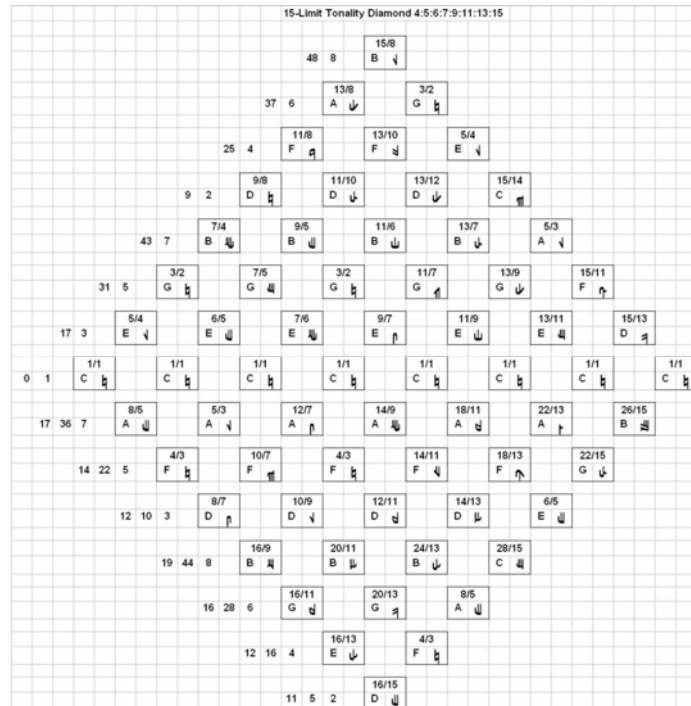
This song is in support of the scene when the Donner's are

told that they basically have to hack their own path through the Wasatch Mountains. The Hastings Cutoff is bogus, and they are told to send someone ahead for further instructions.

The music is more like space lounge music, with little resemblance to the scene of the movie. Oh well. It's based on the utonality to the 15 limit, modulating to new keys by steps of the otonality. In the chart at the right (click it to enlarge), the utonality goes up and to the left, the otonality up and to the right.

We start in the bottom row C Ab F D+ B- Gb E- D-, then move up to E, then G, then Bb.

The piece is scored for Alto Flute, Vibraphone, Finger Piano, Tuba, French Horns, Trombones, dry spring percussion, and some other percussion samples. Enjoy the utonalicious triademonium.



## 5. Into the Desert



The next piece is to be used as the backdrop for crossing the Great Salt Lake Desert. From the [Wiki](#), we can read:

\* August 30, 1846: The Donner Party reaches Redlum Spring, the last source of water before the dry drive begins, then sets out to cross the Great Salt Lake Desert.

\* September 1, 1846 (?): On the third day in the

desert, the water runs out. That night, the Reeds' thirsty oxen run off, never to be found; the Reeds take a few things and set out on foot.

\* September 3, 1846 (?): The emigrants finish the five-day journey across the eighty-mile desert, which Hastings had said was half as wide. They have lost 36 head of cattle, half of them Reed's, and four wagons have to be abandoned. They spend the next week at the foot of Pilot Peak recuperating from their ordeal, hunting for cattle, and caching their possessions.

It was very dry out there. This piece is scored for bent piano wires of various dimensions and appearance, amplified by magnetic transducers and sampled; my contact microphone wooden dry percussion board; a few orchestral cymbals; and samples from Jay C. Batzner's [Mancala Samples](#). They're the ones that sound like a rattlesnake of sorts. The tuning is based on the utonality, but the samples are so enharmonic as to render the tuning moot.



## 6. Fight at Iron Point



### October 5, 1846:

While struggling up a sandy hill at Iron Point, Nevada, the Reed and Graves teams become entangled. A fight breaks out between Milt Elliott, Reed's teamster, and John Snyder, driving the Graves wagon. When Reed intervenes, Snyder grows angrier and hits Reed on the head with his whip.

With Snyder about to strike again, Reed stabs him in the chest with a hunting knife. Snyder stumbles some feet up the hill and dies. The emigrants decide to banish Reed, who at first refuses to leave but then agrees.

## 7. Bad Weather Ahead

**Early November 1846:** John Breen wrote of this time, "*We pushed on as fast as our failing cattle could haul our almost empty wagons. At last we reached the foot of the main ridge near Truckee (now Donner) Lake. It was sundown. The weather was clear, but a large circle around the moon indicated an approaching storm.*" The emigrants spend the night at the lake, 1,000 feet (305 [meters](#)) below the summit; during the night, it begins snowing on the summit.

## 8. The Voyage of Forlorn Hope

**December 16, 1846:** Patrick Breen's diary: "*Fair & pleasant. Froeze hard last night. & the company started on snow shoes to cross the mountains. Wind S.E. Looks pleasant.*" The "company" is comprised of seventeen of the strongest emigrants, with six days' [starvation rations](#) each. (Thirty years later this band of snowshoers is dubbed the "Forlorn Hope.")

**December 17, 1846:** Charles Burger and young William Murphy are unable to keep up with the snowshoers and return to the camp. Fifteen continue: five young women, nine

men, and twelve-year-old Lemuel Murphy. Around this date or the next, the snowshoers get over the summit. Patrick Breen's diary: "*Pleasant sunshine today. Wind about S.E. Bill Murp returned from the mountain party last evening. Bealis died night before last. Milt. & Noah went to Donners 8 days since; not returned yet; thinks they got lost in the snow. J Denton here to day.*"

## **9. Unworthy Sinner that I Am**

**December 21, 1846:** About this date, the snowshoers' rations run out. Charles Stanton, too weak to leave camp in the morning, sits in the snow, smoking his pipe, and tells the rest of the Hope to go on. Patrick Breen's diary: "*Milt. got back last night from Donners' camp [with] sad news. Jake Donno [Jacob Donner], Sam Shoemaker, Rinehart, & Smith are dead; the rest of them in a low situation. Snowed all night with a strong S.W. wind. To day Cloudy. Wind continues but not snowing. Thawing sun shining dimly. In hopes it will clear off.*"



**December 22, 1846:** Patrick Breen's diary: "*Snowed all last night. Continued to snow all day with some few intermissions. Had a severe fit of the gravel yesterday. I am well to day, Praise be to the God of Heaven.*"

**December 23, 1846:** Patrick Breen's diary: "*Snowed a little last night. Clear to day & thawing a little. Milt took some of his meat to day; all well at their camp. Began this day to read the Thirty days prayer. May Almighty God grant the request of an unworthy sinner that I am. Amen.*"

## **10. First Relief, Second Relief, Sutter's Fort**

**February 19, 1847:** Patrick Breen's diary: "*Froze hard last night. 7 men arrived from California yesterday with some provisions, but left the greater part on the way. To day*

*clear & warm for this region. Some of the men are gone to day to Donner's Camp. Will start back on Monday."* Daniel Rhoads, one of the rescuers, recalled, *"At sunset, we crossed Truckee Lake on the ice, and came to the spot where, we had been told, we should find the emigrants. We looked all around, but no living thing except ourselves was in sight. We raised a loud hello. And then we saw a woman emerge from a hole in the snow. As we approached her, several others made their appearance, in like manner coming out of the snow. They were gaunt with famine; and I never can forget the horrible, ghastly sight they presented. The first woman spoke in a hollow voice, very much agitated, and said, 'Are you men from California or do you come from heaven?'"*

**February 20, 1847**: Catherine Pike dies. Three of the rescuers go to Alder Creek to check on the Donners.

**February 21, 1847**: Patrick Breen's diary: *"Thawey, warm day."* The rescuers return to the lake camp from Alder Creek bringing six emigrants who are strong enough to travel.

**February 22, 1847**: First Relief: Rescuers leave the lake camp with 23 refugees. Second Relief: After spending several days drying meat at Johnson's Ranch, Reed's party sets out for the mountains. Patrick Breen's diary: *"The Californians started this morning, 24 [23] in number, some in a very weak state. Fine morning. Wind S.W. for the 3 last days. Mrs Keysburg started & left Keysburg here[; he was] unable to go... Paddy Reid & Tho[mas]s. came back."* Patty Reed, eight years old, and her little brother Tommy give out and have to be taken back to the Breen cabin. Patty tells her mother *"Well, Ma, if you never see me again, do the best that you can"*; thirty-one people remain in the camps. There have been ten deaths at the lake camp and four at Alder Creek.

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