

## 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.

# 1

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.

## 2

The year before I bought the motorcycle, summer 1972, I went to Bread Loaf Writer's Conference in Middlebury, Vermont, nervously bearing a thin sheaf of poems. At age 33, I was away from home alone for the first time since I had married ten years before. My children were 9, 7, 5, 2, and 10 months. I weaned the baby from breastfeeding in order to go.

Many strange things happened on that mountaintop, and this was one of them: One morning, toward the end of the two-week conference, William Lederer, a famous writer and teacher on the Bread Loaf staff, stopped me on the stair and said, "Last night, I dreamed you were going to write a book about people surviving without eating each other."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Most people survive by eating each other," he said. "You're going to write a book that shows a better way."

"How do I do that?" I asked.

"How would I know?" he said. "It's your book, not mine."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but he was a mysterious old man—I see now he couldn't have been more than 60—who had

mesmerized me with his tales of travel and adventure. He had witnessed the Long March, a massive military retreat of Chinese communists in 1934, and I can still almost stand there with him as day turned to night, watching the never-ending silhouettes of those thousands upon thousands who traversed eight thousand miles of impossible terrain for a year, only one-tenth surviving. He also trafficked in the occult, which, in that rarified atmosphere, gave him an air of spooky prescience. I didn't tell anyone about his dream.

I had gone to Bread Loaf as a contributor in poetry, then came home and signed up to audit two poetry courses at the University of Maryland. I also started writing a short story that began with a mental image of a woman in an unfamiliar room. When I asked myself what she was doing there, I answered that she had just completed a grueling cross-country motorcycle trip with her lover. Motorcycle trip? In one of my poetry classes, I found a cyclist and endlessly pumped him for details.

Many drafts later, I realized I had brought my characters three thousand miles across the country in a physical void, not one blade of grass. I studied state maps and children's geography books.

"Tell me again about coming cross-country," I said one Saturday night to my husband, who had made the trip by car several times. He went slowly, reliving his memories. It grew late; I was tired, bored. "Then we went to this great diner . . .," Roger said.

I stared at the fluorescent light in the kitchen, his voice droning. "You'd have to go over Donner Pass."

"Mmm?"

"Donner Pass. You know, where they ate each other to survive."

I snapped awake. "What did you say?"

But I had heard what he said.

I got out books on the Donner Party, my first introduction to them. As I read the books, one name kept leaping off the page. **Tamsen Donner**. A remarkable woman born in Massachusetts in 1801, she taught school, wrote poetry, spoke French, botanized, painted watercolors, raised five daughters, and endured personal tragedy and tragedy on a grand scale.

Two of her five daughters were stepdaughters, but still . . . Her five daughters, my five daughters: I don't believe in reincarnation or people calling out from the grave, but was that not something, an amazing coincidence, a link, a bond? It certainly would carry me for many years.

It's known from other pioneer journals that Tamsen Donner kept a journal but, like her body, it was never found. My short story evolved into a novel about two women separated by 130 years, both living in times of social upheaval, both making exterior and interior journeys.

My 1970s modern heroine was a 27-year-old midwestern, Irish Catholic high school history teacher, kicking over the traces, trying to experience the remnants of the "'60s" in Berkeley, California, before the revolution passed her by. She had found Tamsen Donner's lost journal in a rummage shop and was reading it on a spur-of-the-moment cross-country motorcycle trip from Berkeley to Buffalo—nearly a reverse of Tamsen Donner's trip.

The novel, *Nearly Time*, consumed me, turned my sensibility from poetry to fiction, and for better and for worse, took over our family for the next six years. Although the Donner sections were only a tenth of the novel, searching for Tamsen Donner became an integral part of our family life.

We seven traveled to Newburyport, Massachusetts, where she was born and grew up.

We went to Elizabeth City, North Carolina, where she taught school, married, became a mother, and in one terrible three-month period lost her first family: her husband, a son, a daughter.

We spent an entire summer retracing the Donner Party's overland route from Illinois to Donner Pass, California.

We camped, our first time ever in a tent, on Tamsen and George Donner's farm in Springfield, Illinois.

I spent the longest night of my life by myself at the base of the tree where it was believed Tamsen had spent nearly five months in the mountains.

Our kids all became experts on the Oregon and California Trail, dashing off countless school compositions on the subject.

Our dog was named Tamsen.

And all the time, I struggled with how I could be a mother and a writer. The women's movement was challenging the notion that being a mother was enough fulfillment for any woman, and I was a card-carrying member, but guilt, depression, and fear were my secret companions. It took years to realize that one reason I was obsessed with Tamsen Donner was that she literally gave up her life to stay with her husband, and I feared that would happen to a deep, authentic part of me and my writing aspirations.

On the strength of that apprentice novel, I got a succession of agents, an invitation to an artists' colony, and encouraging words from editors—but no takers. In 1979 I finally decided the years of raised and dashed hopes were exacting too high a price from my family and me, and it was time to move on. I always said I'd go back to it, but even thinking about it was aversive.

Years passed. I wrote another novel, *Heartbreak Hotel*, that after twenty-eight rejections was finally published and won the Maxwell Perkins Prize and the Great Lakes Colleges Association prize. I wrote numerous articles and essays for newspapers and magazines, often about women trying to balance family and career, finally finding the solution: my children grew up.

In 1996, because I was then living in California attending the American Film Institute, and my husband and adult children badgered me, I went to the Donner Party Sesquicentennial at Donner Pass. *Don't want to be here. Don't want to think about any of this. Rejections. Failure.* By the second day, all the years of research I would have sworn had fled my memory forever were right there. I knew more than the rangers. I seemed to be the only person who had retraced the Donner's route from Springfield to the Sierras. Camped on their Illinois farm. Spent the night at their mountain campsite. Went to Newburyport, to North Carolina, had a dog named . . . I realized with some surprise that I was an expert on

the Donner Party. I decided to write a screenplay on Tamsen Donner for my second-year MFA project. I kept this to myself for several days before telling my delighted family, still not sure I wanted to pick that scab again.

Tamsen Donner's great-granddaughter was at the Sesquicentennial—that's how close pioneer history is to us. A chance remark she made led me to seven previously unknown letters written by Tamsen. In the 1930s seven other letters written by Tamsen had been donated by Tamsen's granddaughter to the Huntington Library in Pasadena, California, but as far as the general public knew, only two of her letters existed, both written on the California and Oregon Trail. Tamsen's great-granddaughter and great-grandson had just donated the new batch of letters to the Huntington and they were not yet available to scholars or to the public. By persistence and good fortune, I obtained permission to work with the originals, one of the few outside the family to read them. Because of my previous research, I was able to understand exactly what I was reading and fill in missing parts of Tamsen's earlier life.

Some Chinese believe that when you pass your finger over the signature of a letter, you're close to the person who wrote it. I cannot tell you the thrill it was to hold and read the precious unpublished letters, one held together at the fold lines by white threads, carefully stitched by some loving descendant. And when I read copies of the letters to my husband and grown children, we were all thrilled. I wrote the screenplay, "Country of the Mind," which my daughters' film production company, Five Sisters Productions, optioned.

And so what had started twenty-six years before came full circle. I don't believe good always outs and cream always rises to the top; countless artists' unique contributions have curdled and been lost. But in this case—without getting whoo-whoop about it—I felt Tamsen Donner was speaking directly to me. The letters gave me her voice. Or perhaps it was that when her voice suddenly came across all those years, my earlier painful work had prepared me to hear it.

Before I chanced upon those letters, however, I had already become

Camden Co. June 28<sup>th</sup> 1831.

My dear sister

This busy world so fully occupies me that with difficulty I find time to write to you though its cares are not so many as to prevent my often thinking & speaking of you. Your letter received me of many anxious thoughts & mine I presume will be acceptable as it will tell you of the health of those who doubt not are dear to you. My child has been very sick for a few days we feared we should lose him but at this time he is in fine health & sitting upon the table while I write he at one time scolds me for the instant, at another knocks my knee chills with a spoon. He bears no resemblance to our former being a true copy of his father. If he lives I shall very much value he should have a northward education.

I do not intend to boast of my husband but I find him one of the best of men - affectionate, industrious & possessed of an upright heart. These are requisite to make life pass agreeably. His health is improved very much so that he is able to attend to his business. I know you have a kind husband who furnishes every thing to make you comfortable but you did not know of my letter. The in a very comfortable way our Drovers trade is tolerably profitable. My school has been less so since the birth of my child but have been compelled to discharge my board ever on that account. Our family consists of my husband, child, two little girls (boarders) a white girl & myself. We have a horse 3 cows, 2 calves & 4 hogs, sheep, turkeys & ducks. Last year we made enough.

1 & 2. Tamsen's two letters to her sister, the second written on the bottom of the first, dated June 28, 1831, and January 26, 1832. Reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

corn, pork, beans &c. to serve us this year & perhaps a little to spare. This year we have no land as we had no servants of our own. Bro. Dorrer thought it was unprofitable to have a few potato patches & if we could send them to you could give you a plenty of sweet potatoes as we shall make several hundred bushels.

I am anxious to go to Ohio but there are so many inducements for us to stay that I hardly think we shall leave. This is indeed a delightful country where every thing is produced in such abundance that is necessary for the support of man. Bro. Dorrer just told me to ask you if you could get potatoes from Boston & says he will send you 20 or 30 bushels if you have care. My husband is <sup>not</sup> Post Master you will please to direct as before & write frequently while he retains the office.

I am truly sorry for Aunt Davis's death. The girls are mired alive but she has been feeble a long time. My love to them & all other friends for 9<sup>th</sup> 1832.

My sister I send you those pieces of letters that you may know that I often wrote to you if I did not send.

I have lost that little boy I loved so well. He died the 28<sup>th</sup> Sept. I have lost my husband who made so large a share of my happiness. He died on the 24<sup>th</sup> December. I prematurely had a daughter which died on the 18<sup>th</sup> of Nov. I have broken up house keeping & intend to commence school in February. O my sister weep with me, if you have tears to spare.

Your sister

a writer, and our family, in a little echo of William Lederer's dream, had learned to live together without eating each other. Our lives are shaped by genes, environment, experience, desire, and fluke. When you're young and flailing about and hungry for guidance, a sentence in a book or a conversation can seem so critically important, so *meant* for you, you copy it down and tape it on your wall, though you know you'll never forget it. A latent part of you yearning to be born is wide open at that moment and those words enter. Long ago, a man stopped me on a stair and said that most people eat each other to survive and that I would write a book that showed a different way. Another person—or I at a different time—might have laughed or thought William Lederer's dream simply curious, but I gave his words tremendous significance and, like Robert Frost's diverging roads, that made all the difference. Without my intention or even my notice, Tamsen Donner became entwined, warp and woof, with my struggle to become a . . . A what? Not a mother who wrote; that sounds like a hobby or a sideline. Not a writer who mothered; that also sounds part-time. My husband wasn't a professor who fathered or a father who taught; he just was both. That's what I struggled for, just to be both: a writer and a mother, and vice versa, giving equal weight to both, as men do.

And so, as a writer and a mother, my professional search for Tamsen Donner's history became my family's search, creating part of our family's history, our identity. Of all the countless shards that create a family mosaic, Tamsen Donner is one of our brightest, most precious pieces. With a handful of facts and buckets of myths, we reconstructed/discovered/imagined/invented her. I wouldn't understand why for a long time.