

JEFFERSON HUNT AND DEATH VALLEY

Another overland tragedy occurred within the Great Basin in 1849. Like the misfortune that plagued the Donner party, this disaster was also the result of misjudgment, inexperience, incohesiveness among the emigrants, and a willingness to take uncalculable risks by people in a hurry. The incident also gave a name to one of the Great Basin's most formidable stretches of desert, Death Valley.

The emigrants who lost their lives in Death Valley were on their way to California along a route that had opened up after the Mormons established themselves in the Great Basin in 1847 and that went southwest from Salt Lake City to California after joining the Old Spanish Trail in southern Utah. The route was appealing to gold rushers who arrived too late in the season to take the more northerly route along the Humboldt and across the snowy Sierra Nevada. So, in October 1849, the owners of one hundred emigrant wagons gathered in Provo, a new Mormon community sixty miles south of Salt Lake City, for the southwesterly journey. Their leader was a Mormon packer named Jefferson Hunt, who was paid ten dollars per wagon to take the contingent to California.

Although wagons had never been taken over the route before, Hunt organized the group in efficient Mormon fashion, and the trip was proceeding uneventfully until one of the packers, named O. K. Smith, came up with a map that showed a shortcut over Walker's Pass. Smith claimed that the route would save them five hundred miles of travel and bring them to the California gold mines in just twenty days. Hunt advised against the shortcut, but only seven wagons opted to proceed on with him as planned. They reached California just before Christmas.

Of those who headed off on the shortcut, most – over seventy wagons – soon changed their minds and turned back to the Old Spanish Trail and followed Hunt to California. The eighty-five people who were left proceeded blindly on, and seven of them died before they blundered out of the desert. They spent four months of incredible suffering to reach California on a shortcut that was supposed to take only twenty days.

(Desert Between the Mountains, p. 86)