



To Stay Alive

SKILA BROWN

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MARY ANN GRAVES AND THE
TRAGIC JOURNEY OF THE DONNER PARTY

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LOCAL FAMILY HEADING WEST

Local resident Franklin Graves announced he'll be making the journey west later this spring, relocating his family to the better climate and lands of California. Making the trip will be:

Franklin Graves, 57

Elizabeth Graves, 45, wife

Sarah Fosdick, 21, daughter

Jay Fosdick, 23, son-in-law

Mary Ann Graves, 19, daughter

Will Graves, 17, son

Eleanor Graves, 13, daughter

Lovina Graves, 11, daughter

Nancy Graves, 7, daughter

Jonathan Graves, 6, son

Frank Graves, 4, son

Eliza Graves, infant, daughter

John Snyder, 25, hired hand

Mr. Graves wishes to sell his home and land.
Interested parties should inquire with him soon.



KEY

-  Graves's route (including Hastings cutoff)
-  traditional route to California
-  state/territory border
-  national border

-  river
-  mountains
-  coast
-  settlement
-  landmark

1846-1847
Journey of Mary Ann Graves and Family



Spring
1846

New Dress

It's finished.

The travel dress,
thick and crisp and green,
white buttons in a line,
a bright stiff collar, perched high.

It's a dress for an adventure,
a dress ready for
whatever it will face.

Strongly stitched, unspoiled, new,
well made.

It is meant to endure.

Empty Wagons

Two weeks ago they came,
wooden ribs arching up
on edge, designed to give structure
for the cover—great big stretch
of canvas—draped over, falling down,
curving around, like a frown.

Every time the wind blows,
the canvas, stretched tight,
cracks, like the sound of tree limbs snapping.
The wind goes right through
the empty wagons, shoots out the other side,
nowhere to linger.
As if the belly of the wagon
is bare, hollow, hungry.

Father

Father

has been
burning like the sun
for weeks, warming any sadness
about leaving that anyone else had
creeping up before it could properly sprout.
It's spring but he hasn't filled his days with tired
planting. He's whistling. Cleaning his rifles, packing up
powder, his fingers itching to squeeze on the aim of some wild
meat in the west. He has already abandoned his shoes,
even though the ground is nowhere near
summer warm. But his feet are hot
with the burn to walk, to ride, to move
west. He looks like a wildfire,
burning through the field,
and we've no choice
but to circle around
him.

Sarah

She's impossible to hate, my sister, with her
always sweet pies,
always sweet words,
always kind heart. Even her humility — “Mary Ann,
you're much better at quilting than I” — is
always sincere. Never mind that it's just a quilt,
and who cares if I'm good at that anyway.

She's
always first, my sister,
always two years ahead, seven times
as smart, four steps in front, as though I can't go anywhere until
she's cleared the way.

The first one married, as of last month, even though she
always says, “Mary Ann, you're pretty enough to pick out any husband
you'd want.” Even though boys have only seemed to grow
on her side of the field. But now, things might be different,
it might just be my turn, now that she's gone and made herself
Mrs. Jay Fosdick. Not as if I wanted Jay anyway — shorter
than corn in June, plainer than a bare patch of land.

I don't know why she's in a hurry for all that.

All she has to do is turn around to see there's
always more family than a person really needs.

California

This place, California,
is drawing Father west, calling to him,
fertility of soil, infinity of spring,
causing him to sell his land, herd
his family through two thousand miles
of wind, deserts, mountains, storms,
land unclaimed, wild with danger
and game. I cannot wait to see it
for myself. Today Father comes home
from the courthouse, having sold the cabin,
the land, our home. I watch him open up
a sack of coins, coins from Mexico,
France, Spain. I run them through
my fingers while Jay and Father cut holes
in a wooden board, then we all drop
the coins in, one thunk at a time.
Father will nail it under one of the wagons
so no one will know it's there. Nancy
says, "What's so great about California
anyway?" Father tells her how
it's perfect, like a piece of heaven.
"Why don't we just go to heaven instead?"
she asks. Father only laughs,
but Mother says, "No one gets to heaven,
child, unless first they've died."

We Wait

Even though he's itching to go,
Father says we wait.

Wait deeper into spring,
until the roots

in the ground along the way are closer
to moving, pushing

up, growing tall, sweet,
into food for our cattle,

wait as long as we dare, hoping
winter won't come and cool everything

before we have a chance to arrive,
before our five-month journey has ended.

There's only a little gap between rain and snow,
an open window of sunshine to go,

it all must be timed just right
or it will go all wrong,

like a cup of tea that slips
from too hot to too cold

without leaving enough time
in between to drink it.

Full Wagons

Father's traded for livestock,
animals that will walk the

1,900 miles,

3 horses to ride for scouting, hunting;

20 head of cattle to be milked, and then
slaughtered, eaten, along the way.

18 oxen to pull

3 wagons.

2 are filled completely—no room

for people—sacks and sacks

of flour, coffee, sugar, salt, dishes, forks,

spoons, candles, soap, guns, bolts of

fabric, tools for the new farm, spare parts for
the wagon.

1 is our home,

filled with chairs, 3 mattresses, a

lantern on a hook, everything

stacked like we've taken up residence

in a rickety, rolling root cellar.

We're traveling with all that we have, leaving
nothing behind, nothing tying us down, nothing
holding us back.

We have everything we need.

Good-bye

We go through town
when we depart. Lovina
cries, waves to the Nelson girls,
whom she won't see anymore
at school. Jay hugs his family,
who are all torn up.
Sarah cries, waves
to everybody. Will sits up high and tall on his horse, like a hero
returning from war.

I take one last look
at this dreary town and then bring up my hand to my mouth,
blow the loudest smack
of a good-bye kiss.

Eleanor looks over at me in shock,
but I just turn around, look away,
away to where we're going, where Father
has his eyes fixed, a big smile
stretched upon his face.

I toss Frank up on my shoulders, help his arm wave good-bye.
And I wave too.

Good-bye, Lacon.

Good-bye, winters.

Good-bye, childhood.

That First Night

Nothing could be grander
than a big crackling fire
under a starry sky,
insects humming in the dark all around,
the sound of Jay moving the bow across his fiddle,
the smell of onions and potatoes
in the air—turned cool enough
to draw you closer to the flames,
close enough to see them dance
in the dark eyes of a new boy
who can't stop looking your way.

John Snyder

He heard that we were going, asked
to come along. Offering up
his help with the animals
in exchange for a place
along the way.

Eleanor says
he's handsome. Sarah says
he's capable. Will says
he's too firm with the oxen. Lovina says
he looks stronger than even Father. Jonathan says
he has curly hair like a girl. Nancy says
he walks like he's swinging. Frank says
he smells like vinegar.

He doesn't talk much,
even when Eleanor and Lovina trail after him,
pepper him with silly questions.

He walks up front with the oxen,
their tails swishing around,
his long whip dragging the ground.

He wears a face that is blank, serious, full of
mysterious thought,
and seems completely unashamed that his eyes
follow me wherever I go.

Days

Every day is easier than at home.

No same old chores,
seeds to plant,
floor to sweep.
No clothes to make,
weeds to pull,
feathers to pluck.

There's water to be hauled—but not far,
we stay beside the path of the river.

There's food to be cooked—but only twice,
we eat dried fruit, cold meat, and biscuits at noon to save time.

There's dishes to be cleaned—but quickly,
scrubbed with gritty sand, rinsed in water, wrapped in cloth
to keep the dust away.

Father tells us to be on the lookout for snakes, thieves,
storms, but my eyes stay straight ahead,
pointed toward California, where a better life awaits,
better than what we've left behind.

Nights

Extra canvas over wooden stakes makes
a tent beside the wagon, two places to sleep.

Inside the wagon we shift, move, rearrange.
“Careful of my doll,” Nancy says.

Quilts brought out, some left in.
“There’s no room,” says Lovina.

A mattress out, some left in.
“Switch me sides,” Eleanor says.

Food put away, inside.
“I forgot to fill the buckets,” Sarah says.

Animals fed, watered, tied.
“It’s not going to work,” says Will.

Sticks stacked for the morning fire.
“He took my blanket!” Jonathan cries.

Bread in the coals to rise.
“Hand it back to him, Frank.” Mother sighs.

Water gathered.
“I’m thirsty,” says Frank.

Baby changed.
“No more talking,” Father says.

Finally it’s done.
Mother’s found a place for each of us
to lie, John by the fire outside, the family
fitted in like puzzle pieces, no room
to move around.
Sarah says good-night, moves
to sleep with Jay in the tent beside the wagon,
where they’ll have a bit of privacy
and lots more air to breathe.

Spring

At home
we work for spring,
wrench it out
of winter-hardened ground, begging
seeds to reach up, find us.
We implore it
into the cabin, opening the door, fetching
fresh air.

Here
we do not raise a hand, only travel by and watch it come to us, green
grass pushing up under yellow, birds finding their way,
flowers popping up, shy along the path,
as if west is spring and we
are riding into it.

As if here —
there never was a winter.

Father says spring will always be this easy,
at our new home in the west.

The Fire

John sits beside me every night
as we eat around the fire.
He talks more to Will or Jay, sometimes
Lovina, always in his shadow.
Tonight he turns to me.
“How is it?”

The chunk of deer, warm,
crisp in my fingers, had just reached
my lips. I pull it back.
“It’s good,” I say. “Don’t you think?”

I turn to Eleanor, beside me.
“You did well,” I say.
“Did you use grease from the morning’s bacon?”
Eleanor nods, looks at John. I open my mouth,
scrape my teeth up over the side, bite
into the sweetness. Before I can swallow,
John says,
“I killed it, you know. One shot.
Your pa was still loading his gun.”

He’s waiting for me
to say something, I can tell, but I don’t know
what to say. And my mouth
is full of food. He watches me chew
for a minute, then turns to talk to Will.

“Mary Ann!” Eleanor whispers.
“You hurt his pride.”

I swallow, shrug,
whisper back, “I didn’t know
it was such a fragile thing.”

Dinner

Next night, John's a holler's length away,
minding the cattle in a sweet spot of grass,
while the rest of us sit down to eat,
around the fire, by the trickling stream.

"Someone want to run him up a plate?" asks Jay
as he spoons out beans and ham.

I take a bite, chew,
as though I'm completely unaware
everyone watches me without looking my way.

There's a pause, one beat too long,
then Eleanor says, "I'll do it," casual but quick.
She moves her plate out of her lap,

but I'm up
and halfway to the pot of food
before she can even stand, before
I even realize I'm going,
as if my legs are somehow connected
to her brain.

A Plate

I walk to him with this plate and try
to think of what I'm going to say—something
sweet, something funny, something wise.

"I'm glad you're here," I say, once I'm standing
before him. "I'm glad Father needed some help
and you wanted to come. I'd probably be the one
up here by myself stuck minding the cattle if you
weren't here, so thanks."

John blinks, nods, seems a little confused.

I hand over the plate. "Father says you're a good worker,"
I say, because I can't stand the silence. "Says you're
earning your keep—even if you do eat a lot."
I wait for him to laugh but he

stops chewing and stares, says, "I do more
work than he does." His face is tight now,
the space between us all wrong.

"I'd get us there faster, too," he says
with a scowl. "If I were in charge."

I tilt my head, feel my mouth open
before I can stop it. "Well, you'd have to have money
and something to your name
to actually be in charge, though, wouldn't you?"

John stops chewing again and stares.

I turn as quickly as I can, fast to walk away.

Well.

That's the end of that.

A Quilt's Beginning

I climb into the rear of the wagon,
where it's stuffy, bumpy, cramped,

but where I can take out the sewing basket,
push some thread through a needle, tuck it
into my stiff left sleeve, where it will be safe
until I need it. I sort through piles of scraps,
corners of blues, greens, a triangle of yellow,
left-behinds from quilts put together before.

But mostly there is red, bits of Mother's rust-colored dress,
her Sunday best, that she wore for years, cut up

before we left. "Won't need to look fancy
for the trip," she said. "I'll make a new one once we're settled."

Faded fabric pieces, some worn thin,
some darker, thicker, all cut

into big squares. I unfold one, spread it out
onto my lap. And I can see it, this quilt, laid out on a hill,
strips of faded red sewn together like a sunset,
little bits of blues, yellows, greens in between.

I know how I will sew it.
I pick up the piece in my hand, cut a tilted line.

Rain

The rain comes,
falls on my dress,
makes dots of bright green that bleed
together till the whole thing's wet.

Every day has rain,
and there is no house
for cover, no place
to stay dry, no way
to escape it.

Mud

Frank has found a new plaything.
He brings me mud pies,
mud cakes, mud loaves of bread he's baked,
as though he's playing at being a girl.
I pat his shoulders, pretend to eat each one.
Mud lingers on my cheeks, my lips,
causes Mother to frown, Father to laugh,
Frank to smile in delight.

"Really, Mary Ann," Eleanor says,
which I ignore. It's not like
it doesn't cover us anyway, head to toe.
This mud squelches under oxen hooves,
 splatters the wagon,
 dots our dresses,
 dries on our stockings,
 makes them crisp, stiff as bones,
 hides in our hair,
 paints the wagon wood.

I smell it at all times,
hear it all day,
 taste it every time I chew.

Wheels

Sometimes a wheel gets stuck in the mud,
deep, wet and thick, will not budge.
The oxen strain, the wagon pulls,
but the wheel is firmly planted.
Today this happens while Will and Jay are away, scouting,
Father and John out of earshot in the lead.

“Let’s get it out ourselves,” I call to Sarah, but she’s already
gathering up her skirts, darting off toward the front, to get a man.

Eleanor, beside me, sucks in a breath, walks clear
of where the wheel is spinning splatters of mud out, around.

I tell Nancy and Jonathan, “Get behind the wheel. Push
as hard as you can.” Digging my heels deep into the squelch,
I pull on the slippery wood, paint my sleeves with brown as I do.

After three heaves, the wagon moves.
I step away, search for a clean corner of my apron
to wipe the mud from my eyes,
but the apron is covered in brown.

“Mary Ann!” Sarah says, out of breath. “You’ve ruined your dress!”
She’s staring at me, her mouth wide open, Father and John at her side.

I know my dress will never be
the same, but it feels good to surrender
to it, stop trying to pretend I could stay clean.

John’s face looks disgusted. But Father
laughs, says, “You got it, then?”

I nod, fling some mud from my sleeves,
smile.

Closer

Nights are cold but shorter.
Days are getting longer,
warm enough that nooning means finding shade,
that my morning shawl
is off before we even start walking,
that sweat gathers
in the band of my bonnet,
from my forehead to my ears.

There are houses now,
farms, cabins closer together,
almost to St. Joseph, the city by the river.
We've been walking for six weeks,
May's about to end. Still,
we've so much more to go.

Bitten

Frank screams a frantic cry, everyone runs
to him, but it's me who finds
the marks on his leg—snakebite.

Jay looks for the snake,
Sarah looks for water,
Will looks ahead for a house,
 in case we need some help.
 Eleanor says to me, "Weren't you
 looking after him?"

Father looks down at the bite, at the snake that Jay killed,
 says, "There, now. Not poisonous.
 It will be all right."

Frank squeezes my hand tight,
I suck in a breath so big I pop
a button on my dress
and let it lie.

Silent

I don't say much
as we get closer
to the town of St. Joseph.

I don't let go
of Frank's hand.

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