



Searching for Tamsen Donner

Gabrielle Burton

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Tamsen Donner. For most the name conjures the ill-fated Donner party trapped in the snows of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in 1846–47. Others might know Tamsen as the stoic pioneer woman who saw her children to safety but stayed with her dying husband at the cost of her own life. For Gabrielle Burton, Tamsen’s story, fascinating in its own right, had long seemed something more: the story of a woman’s life writ large, one whose impossible balancing of self, motherhood, and marriage spoke to Burton’s own experience.

This book tells of Burton’s search to solve the mystery of Tamsen Donner for herself. A graceful mingling of history and memoir, *Searching for Tamsen Donner* follows Burton and her husband, with their five daughters, on her journey along Tamsen’s path. From Tamsen’s birthplace in Massachusetts to North Carolina, where she lost her first family in the space of three months; to Illinois, where she married George Donner; and finally to the fateful Oregon Trail, Burton recovers one woman’s compelling history through a modern-day family’s adventure into realms of ultimately timeless experiences. Here Burton has for the first time collected and published together all seventeen of Tamsen’s known letters.

Searching for Tamsen Donner Details

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From Reader Review Searching for Tamsen Donner for online ebook

Elaine says

This was a very interesting account of one woman's obsession with a historical figure she felt a connection with. I wish there were less reverence for the emigrants and more feeling for their invasion of native lands, but I loved the descriptions of their family trip in the 70s to trace the Donner Party trail.

Gwen says

Ostensibly the tragic tale of Tamsen Donner, this is really a book about America in the 1970's, feminism, and especially a mother's relationship with her daughters. If you've ever gone on a road trip in the family station wagon, you will be dying of envy as you read about Burton's quest to follow the Donner Party's wagon ruts during a summer vacation with her husband and five daughters.

The long, drawn-out period between chasing the story and writing the book spans a sea change in how historical research is done, so the book is of interest not only for its subject, but also for the way it documents the evolution of historical research.

Ken says

I became hooked on the Donner story after reading this book and Gabrielle Burton's "Impatient with Desire; The Lost Journal of Tamsen Donner." This spring I decided to follow the Donner track from Springfield Ill to Truckee, CA as the Burton family did in 1977. These two books were excellent companions for the trip and provided interesting insights to places and historical events along the track. There are some stark differences between the Burton's 1977 trip and replicating it now: the internet, Google Maps, GPS, etc provide a wealth of information and make the trip much easier. The greater respect and understanding our country now has for this time in our history was evident all along the trail. For example, Alcove Spring is now a beautiful park preserved by the Alcove Spring Historic Trust and the National Park Service. If you are interested, you can read about my solo motorcycle trip at link: snarzand.tumblr.com

Lori says

This book makes an interesting but not outstanding "companion" to Daniel Brown's [The Indifferent Stars Above](#), another book about one of the Donner Party's women which I found far superior in both research and subtlety. The memoir approach Burton uses here, and her ruminations on writing and motherhood, felt self-absorbed and trivial to me. But despite my restlessness through some of the segments concerning her feminist awakening and attempts to integrate homelife and artistic aspirations, the segments in which Burton recounts her family's road trip along the Donner trail three decades ago shine with both imagination and authenticity. She examines her longtime fascination with Tamsen Donner in a matter-of-fact way that rings

true, channeling her admiration into a subtle portrait of a strong, independent-minded woman who pursued her interests while also fulfilling society's expectations; who was both accomplished academic and dedicated family woman; who endured heartbreak and rebuilt her life after the deaths of her first husband and children, only to see a happy life with her second family turn into a nightmare beyond comprehension.

Burton's research coup is assembling all of Tamsen Donner's extant letters in one place, and the woman they portray is formidable: opinionated, inquisitive, firm in her expectations of others, and disinclined to self-indulgence or brooding. With such enduring strength standing behind them, it's not surprising that all the children of her second family survived their winter of entrapment and privation. It is simply a shame that this capable and long-suffering woman never made it to balmy, fertile California, but was likely murdered just days from rescue by a traveling companion with far less strength of character.

Julia says

Gabrielle Burton has a bit of an obsession with Tamsen Donner, who was the wife of George Donner and a prominent member of the eponymous and tragic Donner Party of 1846. In 1977, as part of her research for a novel she plans to write, Gabrielle packs her husband and five daughters into their station wagon and sets off from Illinois to retrace the steps of Tamsen Donner on her fateful journey West, passing the same landmarks, sleeping where Tamsen slept, and attempting to view the landscape, over 100 years later, through the eyes of those early pioneers.

I especially enjoyed the Burton family's own travelogue chapters, reminiscent of some other travel adventure memoirs I've read, but I think I wished that it the rest had been fleshed out more, and for that reason I struggled with whether to rate it three or four stars. Regardless, it sounds like Gabrielle Burton has an amazing family dynamic and five strong, confident, incredible, kick-ass daughters.

Elevate Difference says

Searching for Tamsen Donner

By Gabrielle Burton
University of Nebraska Press

Westward expansion meets the women's movement in Gabrielle Burton's *Searching for Tamsen Donner*, a memoir about a mother's journey West in the path of the doomed Donner Party pioneers of 1846-7. Most people associate the Donner Party legacy with cannibalism. The pioneers spent a horrific winter stranded in the Sierra Nevadas with no supplies; forty-two died and many of the remaining members survived on the remains of their friends and family.

Tamsen Donner, wife of the party's captain, stayed behind with her dying husband as the last relief party left with her children. Her name has gone down in history as a paragon of traditional womanly virtue, a loyal wife who sacrificed her own life to be with her husband in his last moments. In *Searching for Tamsen Donner*, Burton seeks to show a different side of Tamsen, one that showcases her many roles as wife, mother, schoolteacher, botanist, letter writer, and traveler against the background of the Donner Party legend. As William Lederer tells Burton at a Bread Loaf writer's conference in 1972, "Most people survive by eating

each other. You're going to write a book that shows a better way."

Five years later, Burton sets off en route to California from New York with her family, weaving together the history of Tamsen Donner through pioneer gravesites and memorials, museums, maps, scholarly research, and surviving letters and diaries from the Donner party. Burton's memoir charts her own participation in the feminist movements of the sixties and seventies, and her decision to become a writer while caring for a husband and five daughters. Burton's struggle to balance career with family is a central tension of her journey. "I was afraid the summer would go and we'd find we had piddled the trip away in side trips to snake farms and Stucky shops," she writes, these family diversions suggesting that, "I was not a writer at all but always and exclusively a mother."

Burton's family is supportive, however, and their cooperation and support efface the home/career divide that underscores popular images of successful women. With Tamsen in the foreground, Burton reminds us that history is filled with strong women—women who juggled domestic duties and personal aspirations long before movements for political equality had met with any success.

Searching for Tamsen Donner is also a road story, and much of the pleasure of reading Burton's memoir lies in the plucky characters she meets throughout her journey. These characters straddle history and modernity, blending tales of local life with their own struggles as farmers, small business owners, and casino employees. They also tell the story of the careless destruction of American landscapes—of highways built over historical markers, vandalized memorials, and toxic government testing sites. These acts of destruction present a very different picture from the serene visual landscapes described by Tamsen in her extant letters, all of which appear in Burton's memoir.

Burton's emphasis on pioneer history occasionally seems to leave unquestioned the frontier mythology of discovery, the manifest destiny that masks nineteenth-century imperialist narratives of westward expansion. Burton's self-identified focus on Tamsen shows that a more complete depiction of pioneer history and its displacements and dispossessions are beyond the scope of her memoir, but sometimes one wishes for a less peripheral depiction of Native and Mexicans populations in her retelling of Tamsen's journey West. Burton's quibbles with the Mormon Church and culture, too, may seem a bit strident to third wavers. But Burton's account of her journey and Tamsen's are (second wave) at its best, and her story is an inspiration to all women seeking to balance personal ambitions, adventure, and family.

Arriving just in time for summer road trip planning, *Searching for Tamsen Donner* is a moving exploration of a legendary American woman through the eyes of a modern heroine.

Review by Barbara Smith

Kelly Ferguson says

A few people have recommended *Searching for Tamsen Donner* to me. Given that my book was this close to being called *In Search of Laura Ingalls Wilder*, that seems appropriate. Author Gabrielle Burton and I are certainly kindred spirits in many ways: Irish Catholic, quirky/obsessive, in awe of our heroine, with a penchant for travel on remote western highways. We try to connect with a person from the past to understand who we are in the present. We both have a maps that show our journeys. (The heroines compared to ours). Our books are more memoir than scholarship, the focus being our personal journey.

And, um, we're both a tad obsessive.

The stories of Tamsen Donner versus Laura Ingalls Wilder, of course, are completely different. Tamsen Donner was the wife of the George Donner of the fated Donner Party. While on their pioneer journey to California, the wagon train became trapped in the Sierra Nevadas. Many starved while some resorted to cannibalism to survive. (Tamsen Donner died.) Burton's focus, though, is not on the tragedy, but on the story this brave, intelligent, resourceful woman who inspired her.

There are other differences in Burton's story and mine. Burton traveled in a station wagon with her husband and five daughters (Tamsen Donner also had five daughters, who survived). I drove alone. Burton published in 2009 about a trip she took in the seventies, meaning there's two histories here. I admit, I admired Burton's determined hauling of a reel to reel tape recorder to take interviews. I scribbled notes and took random video on my digital camera.

What I realized soon into my reading, was that if I were a character in this book, I'm a daughter in the back seat. My parents were huge campers. I was hauled all over the Smokey Mountains and State Parks and beyond. We put up those giant, canvas tents with poles suitable for jousting. Each day my mother carefully recorded our expenses in a tiny lined notepad. Burton describes 1979 as thrifty times. They were! I remember collecting S & H Green Stamps and saving up for toaster. Her daughters likewise reveled in the spirit of Scrooging. It's hard to explain, but it was fun as a kid to search for dimes in phone booths. Score!

Searching for Tamsen Donner is set within the times of second wave feminism. Burton began to remind me of my mother, who was also determined to carve out a meaningful intellectual life. In the seventies, this kind of ambition was not the norm for women. Burton writes a great deal about how she struggled with guilt (I mentioned the Catholic background, right?), wondering if she was selfish for dragging her family all over the country on her quests. I remember my mother working on her dissertation, typing fiendishly in the days when White-Out was the fine link to sanity. I wanted my mother's complete attention all the time, the way children do. But she also taught me, by how she was, to believe in my ability to accomplish.

There's more I could write (our search for relics, Nevada) but here I'll stop. I'll end by saying anyone who enjoys a good pioneer story (as I suspect a reader of my blog might), I suggest Searching for Tamsen Donner.

Kathrina says

I'm very confused as to what Burton was trying to accomplish here. I understand her fascination with Tamsen, and if I didn't, I probably wouldn't have been drawn to this book. If you're not already predisposed, the gist of this book isn't enough to draw you in. Burton has written a thin biography of Tamsen, layered with lots of personal reflections and parallels, and the recollection of a family adventure retracing the pioneer trail of the Donner party that took place 30-some years ago. Was Burton just too unwilling to let go of an experience that changed her but never got published way back when? I never understood what brought her back to it so many years later, other than I now see she's finally published her fictionalized account of Tamsen. I'm fascinated by the visits to important landmarks and how they were viewed, displayed, memorialized or forgotten back in 1977, but I also really want to know how they are treated today. Did Burton just not have time to check in on them? This book touches on a theme I've encountered a couple times in the last few years of my reading -- how historical landmarks become memorials that become again a new form of historical landmark as a memorial. This phenomenon has been investigated brilliantly in Sarah's

Mount Vernon, Washington's estate. I wish Burton had investigated a little more deeply into the current research and memorialization of the Donner Party, and perhaps addressed the lack of attention or accuracy towards pioneer history in today's world, as opposed to 1977.

Karen says

I actually really liked this, even though I felt it didn't quite work as a book. The story of a modern family going on a trip along the Oregon Trail helps bring the history to life. I liked hearing Burton's thoughts about Tamsen Donner and her reactions to the historical monuments or objects that she and her family saw. She threw in a lot of anecdotes that seemed to be more about her own reminiscences about the trip than serving any purpose in the book, and some of the events that felt personally meaningful to her (like quitting smoking) seemed trivial when set alongside the story of the snowed-in and starving Donner family. The author's thoughts about balancing her family and her independent identity worked pretty well alongside the story of Tamsen Donner, given the latter's own sacrifices for her husband and children and the fact that in this case Burton's personal concerns connected to larger issues.

Michelle says

Gabrielle Burton, mother of 5 daughters and aspiring writer, discovers the historical Tamsen Donner during the heyday of the women's movement in the 70's. Upon hearing about the Donner party of 1845-46, she immediately connects with Tamsen, the mother, also of 5 daughters, and wife of adventurer George Donner, who leave the safety and security of their Illinois home behind them to travel to California. With a series of ill-fated decisions and circumstances, the party is trapped in the Sierra Nevadas and must spend the winter camped there in the most difficult of circumstances. While the 5 girls are eventually rescued and taken to safety, both Tamsen and George, as well as many other members of the party, die in the mountains.

Burton, determined to write a novel about Tamsen, takes a summer to retrace the steps of the Donner party. With her come her husband and 5 girls, ages 5 to 14. They pack camping gear in their station wagon and set off for an adventure that will shape the rest of their lives. IN this memoir, Burton interweaves her family's trip with historical accounts from Tamsen's life and the Donner party. Additionally, Burton writes about her attempt to find a balance between writer and mother.

Robert says

The author, Gabrielle Burton, came to the monthly meeting of our Genealogical Society here in Santa Barbara. Her talk was superb - and intriguing. On a whim, I bought her book and thought I would read it some day. When I got home, I picked it up and was amazed that I could hardly put it down. I finished it off on the 2nd day. Of course, being a Californian, I am always interested in the story of the Donner Party coming over the Sierras. The whole story (including cannibalism) has captured the minds of boys in California for generations. THIS story tells that (from Tamsen Donner's viewpoint, as a woman), but also tells the story of the author's OWN family as they set out to travel in Tamsen Donner's path across the country. DELIGHTFUL. HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.

Claudia says

This book is both history and memoir woven together so skillfully that one never loses one story in search of another. Gabrielle Burton takes her husband and five daughters on an adventure to follow the 1846 trail of the Donner Party over the Sierras to California. We have all heard the story, seen it in documentaries and perhaps read a story or two about the now infamous cannibals. But the story is much larger than that one small incident which happened late in the trip. This is a story of a woman who against all odds manages to deliver two of her daughters to California, losing her life in the process. It is about breaking barriers and boundaries and making our own rules when there are none in place. The parallel story is Gabrielle's yearning to understand who Tamsen Donner was and how she survived as long as she did. Burton is no athletic outdoors person and the trip wears on her physically and emotionally but it also gives her strength and a wealth of knowledge. The people she meets along the way add a bit of spice to the stew. This is a wonderful story that simply must be read by every woman who has wondered if she had "the right stuff."

Lotte says

Part biography of Tamsen Donner, part story of the Donner party's westward trek, part memoir of a family's summer trip 30 years earlier, and part reflections of the author's struggles to find balance in her life, some readers may feel disheartened at a lack of purpose and focus. I was predisposed to enjoy this book because of its positive review on NPR and my own interest in women's history, western history, the family's summer journey with 5 young daughters, and the weaving together of several themes.

I found myself occasionally irritated at the author's personal reflections. Burton finds many similarities between her life and that of Donner, and sometimes these sections felt fabricated. By looking long and hard enough, similarities in life are not difficult to name, but they may be largely in our minds. For me, her thoughts on finding personal balance eventually approached whining. I was also perplexed why, in a book only recently published, Burton mostly shares only her findings from the 1970s, providing few current updates on historical sites or interpretations of the Donner story.

Those weaknesses aside, when I finished this book, I felt satisfied and appreciative of Burton's efforts in producing one of the more interesting books I have read in quite awhile. I look forward to reading her book *Impatient with Desire*, a fictionalized view of Tamsen Donner of her life and the Donner party.

Linda says

After reading Burton's "Impatient With Desire" last month (a selection of my book group), I looked for her earlier book, "Searching for Tamsen Donner", a memoir telling the reader about her (Burton's) obsession with Tamsen Donner and the Donner Party. It was a fascinating read for me, especially having just read "Impatient With Desire", historical fiction, based on Burton's years of research. I am glad I read the fiction first, even though it was published second. Burton filled in the voids of what is known of the Donner Party's journey west in 1845/46, and describes their fate, some of which is known, and some of which Burton "made up" based on her research. Once again, a book group selection caused me to stretch my reading parameters. Most folks I talked with about these books has heard of the Donner Party, even my 14 year old

granddaughter. I had not heard of this historical event, or if I learned about it in school, I had totally forgotten it. This is an awesome story of determination, both to seek a new and better life, and then to survive in the face of horrendous obstacles. Yes, cannibalism is part of the story, but the context makes it less abhorrent, at least to me.

Sam says

Loved this memoir.
