

CELEBRITY MIGRAINE

MARGARET REED

Stress, Migraine and Cannibalism in the Sierra Nevada

No matter the individual's race, gender, ethnicity or culture, stress is the most common trigger for acute headache reported by migraineurs. Paradoxically, a sudden release from stress also may produce an acute attack of migraine (eg, the dreaded "vacation migraine"), whereas a chronic reduction in stress may result in a dramatic decline in one's migraine burden.

In the Winter 2016-17 issue of *Migraineur* we presented the case of Ulysses S. Grant, military hero, 18th U.S. President and "celebrity migraineur". In April 1865, despite having cornered Robert E. Lee's dwindling Confederate army at Appomattox, Grant feared Lee would once again conjure up the trickery required to elude his grasp. Racked by anxiety, Grant developed an acute migraine headache that by April 8 was peaking in intensity. In his memoirs he wrote, "I was suffering very severely with a sick headache...I spent the night in bathing my feet in hot water and mustard, and putting mustard plasters on my wrists and the back part of my neck." Despite these efforts, his "sick headache" was still present on the morning of the 9th.

Then arrived a note from Lee indicating his willingness to surrender. Decades later Grant recalled that "the instant I saw the contents of the note, I was cured."

Other "celebrity migraineurs" less well known to history than Grant have experienced this same stress/release migraine phenomenon. One particularly vivid example of the effect of stress on migraine



comes from Margaret Reed, a survivor of the infamous "Donner party".

In 1846, desiring a better life for his family and specifically concerned by the frequent, debilitating migraines suffered by his wife, James Reed used what remained to him after declaring bankruptcy to obtain the wagon, oxen and supplies required for the long emigration to California. On April 14, accompanied by eight wagons belonging to a number of other families (the large Donner clan amongst them), James, Margaret and their four children began the exodus from Illinois. Passing through Springfield on the 15th, James was unable to persuade his old and trusted friend, Abraham Lincoln, to join them.

Margaret's migraine flared near the northeastern border of present-day Utah, as the company's wagons lumbered down a section of trail lined by 300 Sioux warriors on horseback.

Margaret, 32, was "migraine-prone", and her mother, Sarah, consequently joined the Reed household to help Margaret care

for the children. Age 70, Sarah would be the first of the party to die on the emigrant trail...but far from the last.

Margaret's migraine flared near the northeastern border of present-day Utah, as the company's wagons lumbered down a section of trail lined by 300 Sioux warriors on horseback. Attracted by the Reed's 13-year-old daughter, Virginia, the Sioux offered buffalo robes, "pretty beaded moccasins" and ropes made of grass in exchange for the young girl and her pony. Only after her husband tactfully managed to convey that Virginia was not available did Margaret's "crippling migraine" subside.

Delayed by a variety of circumstances, near what is now Wyoming the large band that had traveled so far together divided into two separate groups. Fearing that they might otherwise fail to clear the Sierra Nevada range before winter's onset, one group opted to take "Hasting's Cutoff", a little-used new detour that led south of Salt Lake and across the great salt desert before rejoining the standard California Trail. The other group opted for the longer but proven route that arced northward far above the Lake and then southwest into Nevada.

James Reed spoke strongly in favor of the detour and the time it would save. Ironically, those who traveled with him

on this shorter route—those known to history as the “Donner Party”— would become trapped in the mountain snow. Many would perish.

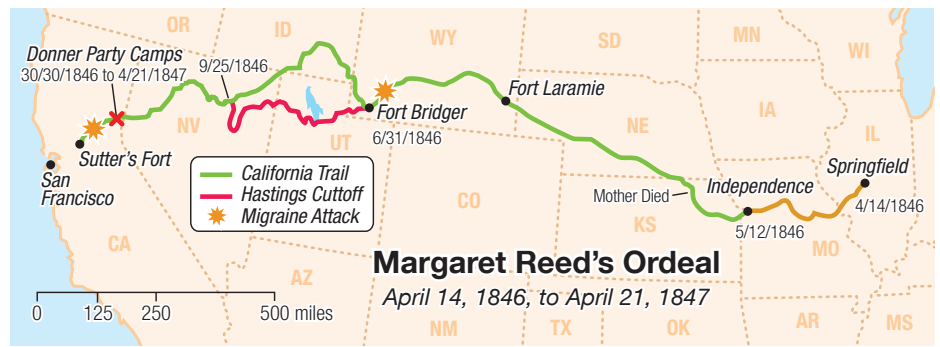
The detour proved to be a bust. Time was passing, autumn was approaching and the Donner Party grew ever more aware of their slow progress. Nerves frayed, tempers erupted and Margaret’s migraine blossomed. In a bizarre incident along the alkaline waters of the Humboldt River, James was banished from the Party after killing a young teamster. Knowing how inadequate was the emigrants’ remaining store of provisions, he set out for Sutter’s Fort on the far side of the Sierras to seek much-needed supplies.

With James Reed now exiled, the Party continued on, and after 68 excruciating days on the Cutoff they finally rejoined the established California Trail. They rested (too long) in a large meadow near present-day Reno before moving into the mountains. On October 30 they made camp in a “pretty little valley” in the High Sierras just five miles from Truckee (now Donner) Lake. That night it snowed 8 inches.

With her mother buried by the trail back in Kansas and her husband absent and quite possibly dead, Margaret Reed fought alone to keep her children alive.

It was only the beginning. By the following afternoon the snow was axle-deep and the wagons useless. For eight consecutive days the snow continued to fall, and by the time the weather briefly cleared it was obvious to all that the pass was closed. They would be waiting out the winter by the frozen lake. Without rescue, starvation seemed a certainty.

The weeks passed. With her mother buried by the trail back in Kansas and her husband absent and quite possibly dead, Margaret Reed fought alone to keep her children alive. Despite her growing weakness and incessant migraine, she purchased four oxen from the other emigrants



and slaughtered them in the snow. When that meat was gone, she deftly slit the throat of the family’s beloved pet dog and wept as she cut up his body. Determined that her children not starve, on January 4 she set out to cross the mountains, organize a relief party and bring back food. After 5 days and 4 nights in the snow and freezing cold she was forced to turn back. Even in her desperation, however, Margaret Reed did not resort to cannibalization. While written accounts of the emigrants’ camp at the lake describe “hair, bones, skulls and the fragments of half-consumed limbs”, children with blood-stained faces devouring human liver and heart, and human flesh boiling in a large iron kettle, the Reeds are considered to be the only family of the Donner Party not to have consumed other humans.

And yet all the Reeds survived. Margaret and James were reunited on February 28, as a rescue party heading westward with the wife in tow met an eastward-bound rescue party led by the husband. On March 1 Margaret suffered an especially severe migraine attack, and the relief party bearing her consequently stopped for a day of rest. After so much stress for so long, the sudden release must have been overwhelming.

Of the 87 members of the Donner Party, 41 perished. Of the 35 who died in the camp by the lake or attempting to cross the mountains, 18 were cannibalized. As for the Reeds, James Reed subsequently made his fortune and eventually became one of California’s leading citizens. His wife, Margaret, is said to have led a peaceful life. Peaceful...and migraine-free.

