



The moon hangs low in the early morning sky as members of Expedition Mirage make last minute preparations for the long trek across Utah's Great Salt Lake.

A missing chapter in the story of the ill-fated Donner-Reed wagon train was "written" last summer in the crust of the Great Salt Desert of Utah.

The "authors" were members of Expedition Mirage, a 30-man scientific team from the University of Utah. Cruising over the salt encrusted wastes in Thiokol's rugged TRACKMASTER and SPRYTE vehicles, the expedition retraced the route taken by the luckless pioneers in 1846.

Jacob Donner and James Reed, leaders of the wagon train, thought the route a shortcut across the desert. But the narrow-wheeled wagons kept breaking through the salt crust and sinking into the brackish ooze. The shortcut proved a four-day nightmare. Many oxen, wagons and personal belongings had to be abandoned; but the most valuable thing the party lost was time.

The party was woefully behind schedule when they reached the Sierra Nevada — the last natural obstacle before the warm fertile valleys of California. Donner and Reed gambled on trying to cross the mountain range before winter snows sealed the passes. They lost. An early November blizzard trapped the wagon train until spring. Forty-two of the 87 men, women and children perished.

Expedition Mirage covered the desert route in 10 hours, skimming over the treacherous salt crusted mud on Thiokol's all-weather, all-terrain tracked vehicles. Beneath the sands they discovered old wagon wheels, ox bones, cooking utensils and trinkets — mute evidence of the desert hardship, which was a prelude to tragedy.

The vehicle pictured is a Model 105 TRACKMASTER, capable of transporting 2400 pounds of cargo over desert, jungle, swamp, snow or rugged mountains.

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