

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

December, 2020 issue #148



R

eprising

the Forlorn Hope

"...the greatest endurance trek in history..."
Tim Twietmeyer

First, a little explanation. December's Heirloom, as well as next month's January edition, were all done (as well as next March and April's editions) because we work ahead at the Heirloom's editorial offices. You just never know what might happen. Then along came the adventurers who are going to do a reprise of the Forlorn Hope journey, "the greatest endurance trek in history..." That's a big deal and it took place partly on Donner Summit. It was an easy decision to change the issues (don't worry, what was to be this month's and next month's Heirlooms will "hit the stands" next December and January.)



The impetus for changing the content of the Heirlooms, amending the web indices, changing the summaries on our website, and moving links and content because of an extraordinarily compelling story that grew out of a compelling historical story – the trek of the Forlorn Hoe escaping Donner Lake to get to California and get help to save their friends and families, the Donner Party.

Over the recent months as the final details of the reprise began to take shape I came to appreciate the original 1846 trek far beyond the basic story. The challenge, the misery, the risk, the hardship, and the sacrifice for others all ends in an extraordinary accomplishment. It's the story of people against the elements, against starvation, against the Sierra. It's a story of horror and of the best of human nature. That's all coming later in this issue.

Story Locations in this Issue

Big Bend pgs 17-19

Starting point of the 2020 adventure



Soda Springs Ski Area pg 14

Norden RR station pg 15

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Unless otherwise noted, the photographs and other historical ephemera in The Heirloom's pages come from the Norm Saylor collection at the Donner Summit Historical Society

On December 16, 2020 four extreme athletes will leave Donner Lake for Johnson's Ranch, near Wheatland, in California's Central Valley. They will follow closely the original route of the 1846 Forlorn Hope and we'll follow along metaphorically. That will be next month's Heirloom. We'll cover the background, the research, the trip, preparations and how you discover a route used only once long ago.

These two Heirlooms, December, 2020 and January, 2021 will be collectors items.

The Background for the Forlorn Hope Reprise

The story of the Donner Party is one of the most famous in American history. When we think about the story we think of the wrong turn two times, bad luck, bad decisions made in ignorance, dietary issues, dissension, mendacity, evil, horror-filled, and unbelievable hardship. That's a lot but there's more. It's also about tenacity, heroism, and the very best of the human spirit. One of the stories in the larger Donner Party story is the story of the Forlorn Hope, fifteen members of the larger party who escaped Donner Lake in a bid to get help in California.

Before we get to that heroic and tragic story, we need a quick background of the Donner Party. Then we can get to the Forlorn Hope which will be the lead up to the modern-day reprise by four extreme athletes.

The Donner Party that was trapped at Donner Lake arrived at the lake on October 31. They had had many troubles since taking their fateful left-hand turn onto the Hastings Cut-Off just after Ft. Bridger on July 31st. Lansford Hastings was ahead of them on his cut-off with another wagon train and the Donners simply started to follow along, hoping to slice hundreds of miles and weeks off the trip to California.

The first problem arrived six days later when they found a note from Hastings saying the route ahead of them was impassable. Riders rode ahead to find Hastings who came part way back and pointed to another route, which he'd not taken. Here was a second fateful turn. Hastings had gotten his wagons through his route and the Donners would get through the variation, but only after much more exhausting work. There was no trail to follow. They made only two miles a day cutting their way through the wilderness. It must have been exhausting and disappointing – California was beckoning. How many were thinking, "if only we hadn't followed that SOB"? Of course, worse was to come.

Two weeks later they found another note from Hastings saying it would take only two days to cross the desert. It took five. It was 80 miles across, not 40. Water ran out. Oxen and cattle ran away. Wagons were abandoned. People were exhausted. They were miserable and worse was yet to come.

The cut-off was 125 miles longer than the route others were taking on the California Trail. The Donners spent 68 days

doing what others spent 37 days on to get to the same point. That put them even further behind than they'd been before. How they must have hated Hastings.

Then there was accident, death, banishment, and maybe murder. Food ran out. There was dissension in the group. It was getting worse. And worse was yet to come.

Then they saw the Sierra – squarely in their path. It was terrifying. The Donner Party members were so close to California but now there was another monstrous obstacle. Would the journey never end? Could it get worse?

Yes.

The Donner Party missed another turn into Coldstream Canyon outside today's Truckee. Coldstream Pass had been discovered earlier that season and the top could be reached without taking wagons apart and carrying things over various rock ledges which was what had to be done at the original pass, soon to be named Donner. There was snow on the ground so they'd missed the turn off and went the way the emigrants of '44 and '45 did, to what we call Donner Pass. Half the party ended up at Donner Lake. Imagine their frustration as they looked up at the steep granite walls. There appeared to be no route up. It was snowing. More was coming. Worse was yet to come.

It was October 31, 1846.

Most of the Donner Party had arrived at what would be called Donner Lake on October 31 (the rest of the party including the Donners, was at Alder Creek seven miles away). Some members of the party tried to get over the pass right away but failed. The snow was too much and people were dispirited and exhausted. On November 3, 13, and 22 there

WILLIAM HENRY EDDY

AGE: 28. BORN: prob. Prov., RI or MA

- Resourceful, good hunter, strongest snowshoer, COD innovation for warmth
- Tender & kind hearted; occasionally bent truth, enterprising, frank
- Carriage-maker in IL
- Tried 4 times prior to FH to cross summit
- First to reach Johnson's Ranch
- Led 3rd Relief Party [failed on 1st Relief]
- Main informant to JQ Thornton, 1847
- Married Eleanor Priscilla, (25), 1841
- 2 children: James(3), Margaret(2) children and wife perished at the lake
- Remarried Flavilla Ingersol 1848, 3 children, divorced
- 3rd marriage, school teacher, moved to Petaluma, CA
- d. 1859 at age 42; buried in San Jose
-
- **SURVIVED**

JAY FOSDICK

AGE: 23. BORN: New York State

- Moved with family to IL in 1836
- Eldest of 4 children (2 boys and 2 girls)
- Played the violin
- Courted Sarah Graves; married just before emigration west
- Married Sarah Graves, 1846
- Fell behind with Sarah, heard Eddy rifle, exclaimed, "There! Eddy killed a deer. Now if I can only get to him, I shall live!"
- Died in Sarah's arms
- Body was used as sustenance for others
- d. beyond COD Jan 5th, 1847 (23)
-
- **PERISHED**

SARAH GRAVES FOSDICK

AGE: 21. BORN: Dearborn Co., IN

- Eldest daughter of Franklin and Elizabeth Graves
- Married Jay Fosdick 1846
- Teacher in Napa Valley
- Married William Dill Richie 1848
- 2 sons
- Married Samuel Spires
- 4 more children (total 6)
- d. suddenly by heart disease 1871 (46) in Corralitos, /Santa Cruz Co., CA
-
- **SURVIVED**

These sidebars here and on the next pages are "tribute cards" put together by Bob Crowley, one of the 2020 extreme athletes reprising the Forlorn Hope trek. The group will carry these cards, most with pictures of the people, as a tribute to honor their feat. The sources for the tribute cards are listed on page 12.

were more escape attempts but they all failed.

What was going through the minds of the members of the people trapped at the lake? Were there recriminations? If only we'd gone faster. If only (name the person) had not been so slow. If only we had not taken the short cut. What'll we do to Lansford Hastings when we get hold of him? If only the snow would melt - we'd get over the Sierra quickly - we won't dawdle, we promise. Will it ever stop snowing? Will there be enough food? Will we have to stay here all winter? Can we survive? Was there anger at the family that appropriated the little cabin Moses Schallenberger and his friends had built two years before, leaving everyone else to scramble to build something? For the Reed Family, having lost their wagons, cattle, and father they must have wondered additionally, where was Papa? (James Reed had been banished from the party weeks earlier). Could they survive on the kindness of others? For Charles Stanton and the two Indians Sutter had sent back with him to bring food and hope to the party, they must have thought, why'd we come back? Maybe too, they thought, "These people are worthless." We'll never get out of here.

If you put your mind to it you can come up with any number of thoughts or conversations. They must have been depressed at their prospects. They must have been frightened. They must have been uncomfortable crammed together without privacy into shelters hurriedly thrown together. Those shelters must have offered little protection against the storms, the cold, and the accumulating snow. As the winds howled before the snow fell and almost buried the shelters, the sides must have shaken. All the people inside could do was bury themselves in filthy blankets and pray. The actual Donners, at Alder Creek, were only in tents. There'd been no time to build anything less insubstantial. Little could any of them know that in a few weeks they'd be trying to eat the cow hides they'd thrown over their shelters.

There were several escape attempts. November 3, many of the Donner Party tried for the summit. They abandoned their wagons and loaded things on oxen. Adults carried children. They struggled through drifts of snow feet deep. Charles Stanton and one of the Indians Sutter sent with Stanton to bring food to the party, struggled to the top of the pass. Snow was chest deep. It was too hard to go on. They returned to the rest of the group which was camped below

**HARRIET FRANCIS MURPHY
PIKE**

AGE: 18. BORN: Union Co., SC

- 2nd daughter Levinah Jackson Murphy
- Younger sister of Sarah Murphy Foster
- Known to be “quiet one” of two sisters
- Married William Pike at age 14, 1842
- Made home in Tennessee with Levinah
- Lost husband to shooting accident w/ Wm. Foster along Truckee Riv., 1846
- Daughters: Naomi (2) escaped in 1st Relief, Catherine (2) perished at camp
- Married Michael C. Nye, 1847
- Settled in Marysville, livery stable
- Moved to Oregon in 1860s
- d. young at 46, buried in Marysville
-
- **SURVIVED**

MARY ANN GRAVES

AGE: 19. BORN: Dearborn Co., IN

- 2nd daughter of Franklin and Elizabeth Graves
- Called the “belle of the Donner Party”
- Courageous, resolute, strong-minded, outspoken
- To be engaged to John Snyder (she denied); rumored romance w/ Stanton
- Married Edwin Pyle, 1847; murdered
- Cooked meals for murderer to ensure he lived to hang
- Married J.T. Clarke, 1851
- Ranching in San Benito Co.
- Moved to Tulare Co.
- d. 1891 at age 65
-
- **SURVIVED**

CHARLES TYLER STANTON

AGE: 35. BORN: Pompey, NY

- At 5’5” was strong and determined
- Bachelor
- Passion for botany and geology
- Regarded as a selfless hero with high moral standards
- Entrepreneur in Chicago
- Helped drive Donner wagons
- Went ahead to Sutter’s fort for supplies
- Returned with Luis & Salvador and mules
- Led Forlorn Hope over Donner Pass
- Became snow blind exhausted, fell behind, last seen on December 20th
- d. abt 21 Dec, 1846 near Cascade Lake (35)
-
- **SURVIVED**

in the snow. They wouldn’t move. They had no energy. They would try to cross in the morning. Darkness arrived at their camp a few miles west of the lake and a few miles short of the top of the pass. More snow began to fall.

Panic and despair set in. They’d suffered so much and now this. Could anything more go wrong? Virginia Reed described things, “When it was seen that the wagons could not go through the snow, the goods and provisions were packed on oxen and another start was made... men and women walking in the snow up to their waists, carrying their children in their arms and trying to drive their cattle... We camped within three miles of the summit [the bottom of the pass]. That night came the dreaded snow. We children slept soundly on our cold bed of snow... every few moments my mother would have to shake the shawl – our only covering – to keep us from being buried alive. In the morning the snow lay deep on the mountains and valley. With heavy hearts we turned back.” Their dreams of California, even though they were so close, were shattered. Despair.

Snow continued for three days. On November 13 another storm ended and 15 people headed for Donner Summit: three fathers, two young women, Charles Stanton and the two Indians Sutter had sent back with Stanton. They waded

through snow that was ten feet deep. They failed and returned to the lake exhausted. They could not get through the snow and get over the pass; they could not go through the snow and go back to the Truckee Meadows (today’s Reno) either.

On November 22 twenty-two people with seven mules that Sutter had sent carrying food headed for the top of Donner Pass. There was an argument. The mules could go no further and Stanton would not leave the mules. He’d given his word to Sutter to bring them back. Wm. Graves said, “We could see nothing but snow and the tops of pine trees.” No one could go on without Stanton or the Indians to act as guides. At midnight they arrived back at Donner Lake.

On December 16, 1846, Seventeen members of what would be called the Forlorn Hope left the camp in an escape attempt to get help from California. That’s the next story.

WILLIAM McFADDEN FOSTER

AGE: 30. BORN: Meadville, Crawford Co, PA

- Husband of Sarah Murphy Foster, son-in-law Levinah Jackson Murphy
- Common sense, intelligent
- Shipmate w/ Wm. Pike; met/married Sarah & Harriet Murphy respectively, 1842
- Pike died after gun accident w/ Foster
- 7 children; Jeremiah George (2) died at lake; Keseberg accused of killing, cannibal
- Accused of killing Luis & Salvador for meat
- Carpenter in MO & CA, then rancher in Maryville w/ M. Nye, Ch. Covillaud
- Prospector in Yuba; Foster Bar named
- Moved to MN mid-1850s, back CA 1860
- d. of cancer 1874 at age 58
- Catholic convert, interred Mission Dolores
-
- **SURVIVED**

SARAH ANN CHARLOTTE MURPHY FOSTER

AGE: 19. BORN: Union County, SC

- 1st child of Levinah Murphy Jackson
- Eldest sister of Harriet(18), John Landrum(15), Meriam/Mary(14), Lemuel(12), William(11) and Simon(3)
- Lost Levinah & John (lake), Lemuel (FH)
- Baptists convert to Mormon
- Married Wm. Foster, 1842
- 7 children; Jeremiah George (2) died at lake; Keseberg accused of killing, cannibal
- Educated, fine narrator
- After husband death, lived with brother William in Marysville
- Moved to Mendocino Co., midwife
- d. 1906 at age 80; buried Ft. Bragg
-
- **SURVIVED**

FRANKLIN WARD GRAVES

AGE: 57. BORN: Wells, Rutland Co., VT

- Backwoodsman and pioneer, farmer
- Good natured, kind and hospitable
- Farmed in IL for 15yrs
- Married Elizabeth Cooper, 1820
- 10 children; all amazingly survived
- Wife -Elizabeth, d. at Starved Camp, 1847
- Teamster John Snyder killed by James Reed in scuffle on trail
- Built double cabin at Lake; share w/Reeds
- W/ Stanton built snowshoes for FH
- Oldest member of FH
- d. COD, 24th December 1846 (57)
- Knowing he'd perish, told Sarah and Mary to use his body for sustenance.

PERISHED

The Story of the Forlorn Hope

Life was clearly untenable at Donner Lake for the Donner Party in the winter of 1846-47. They were trapped in the snow. They were dispirited. They were exhausted. They were afraid. There was hardly any food and they'd be reduced to boiling and eating ox hides. They were not working together. Mistake compounded mistake. Three attempts by small groups to escape and get help in California had failed. It snowed and snowed. It was cold. They lived in filth, miserable. In that context seventeen people decided again to head for California, this time on snowshoes.

The Forlorn Hope set out on December 16. They left what would be called Donner Lake taking a huge risk. To get to California they would have to slog through the snow on Donner Summit and risk new storms without shelter. They would have to go without food and bear hardships unimaginable to us sitting comfortably reading this. What is it like to sleep in the snow in soggy and sodden clothing fearing what might come overnight, fearing what the weather might bring? What is it like to hike through the snow, sinking into it with each step, and to do it to exhaustion with no food or warmth at the end of the exertion? What is it like to starve slowly and be forced to eat leather shoelaces? What is it like to have a choice between death and eating human flesh? What is it like to know you have to keep going, you have to survive, not just for yourself but for the children or family members you've left behind at the lake and who are counting on you to get help? How can you possibly give up – as long as you live?

PATRICK DOLAN

AGE: 31. BORN: Dublin, Ireland

- Single
- Had farm near Keokuk, IA
- Friend of the Breen family
- Lived in Breen cabin at Lake
- Cheerful, fun loving, good natured
- Drew lots to determine who must die; he lost
- 2 days later he perished from hypothermia at COD
- d. COD 25 th December, 1846
- His remains were used as sustenance

PERISHED

WILLIAM GREEN MURPHY

AGE: 10. BORN: Weakley County, TN

- 3rd son of Levinah Murphy Jackson
- Younger brother of Lemuel, Mary (Covillaud), Harriet (Nye)
- Rode wild horses, spoke Spanish and Native Indian (was interpreter)
- Started with FH but turned back after a day; had no snowshoes – too hard
- 1st Relief rescued; frostbitten feet
- Attended U of MO, graduated 1861
- Settled in Maryville, admitted to bar Supreme Court, NV; Successful law practice, DA for Yuba Co.
- 6’1” tall, loved children, noted orator
- Staunch prohibitionist, Christian
- d. 1904 in Marysville, CA (68)
-
- **SURVIVED**

LEMUEL B. MURPHY

AGE: 12. BORN: Weakley County, TN

- 2nd son of Levinah Murphy Jackson
- Dearly loved by sisters, courageous
- Patience and resignation of the martyr type
- When reduced to half a biscuit each, he insisted that Sarah should eat his portion
- Sister Sarah (Foster) held and comforted him in his delirium as he perished
- Sarah could never “behold a bright moonlight without recurring with a shudder to this night on the Sierra.”
- d. COD Dec. 26th 1846 (12)

PERISHED

two who turned back? They were tired, obviously, but now they had to retrace their steps through the snow, back to the unbearable conditions at Donner Lake.

What about the ones who continued on? What were they thinking? Three were fathers and three were mothers. They’d left their families behind. Franklin Graves had left behind his wife and seven other children. Which was a better choice? Fight snow and weather to head for California to get help and maybe never see your children again, or stay at Donner Lake to protect the children? Could the people to whom the children were entrusted be trusted?

How far was it to Sutter’s Fort? They’d been living in the snow for one and a half months and had little shelter and little protection. Now they’d be out in the open with only a few blankets. Walking the snow had been hard at the camp at Donner Lake. Now they would have to fight the snow for miles each day for days with little rest and little food. What about their families and friends left back at camp? Would they live? Would they be cared for? Could the Forlorn Hope bring back help – in time?

How does a parent make that choice to leave children behind? How can one bear to leave children to face starvation? How could one bear not to try to escape and get help in California? Was there a way to survive?

Climbing Donner Pass must have been excruciating. Walking in snow is hard. It’s exhausting, step by step. Snowshoes make sinking less of a problem but those were amateurly made snowshoes. They probably didn’t fit well. As one walks in snowshoes the snowshoes pick up snow making them heavier as the wearer picks up snow with each step. In addition, particularly at the start, the Forlorn Hope was going uphill, sometimes very steeply. That kind of snowshoe walking is even harder. The Forlorn Hope had to climb 1,000 feet to the pass. They were cold and tired but tired doesn’t describe things. Exhaustion is an easy term but does not describe things adequately. Each step must have been excruciating. They must have aimed each step to fit into the previous person’s steps so they would not waste energy compacting the snow with each step. It’s just a bit easier but everyone’s stride is different and if you step in the previous person’s footprint you compress the snow a bit more, sinking just a bit more. Each step requires just a bit more lifting, a bit more energy.

The Forlorn Hope were full of hope though, and it must have driven them. How far can it be to California? Mustn’t it be downhill? They would save their families.

And they were worried.

AMANDA HENDERSON McCUTCHEN

AGE: 23. BORN: Unknown
abt
1822

- “Hardy young woman”
- Married Wm. McCutchen abt 1842, MO
- Lived in Graves cabin
- 5 children; Harriet (2) perished at Lake
- Left Harriet with Graves; she endured terrible death, tormented by lice; arms restrained
- Seamstress near Sonoma
- Edward (son) spent childhood with attending physician and his wife, adopting the name “Johnson” as middle name in gratitude
- d. giving birth to son Edward, 1857 (35) in Santa Clara County

• **SURVIVED**

Even considering all that, Mary Ann Graves remarked afterwards, remembering the climb up to Donner Pass 1000 feet above the lake as she stopped to look back, “The scenery was too grand for me to pass without notice.” Donner Pass is grand. Tourists admire it daily but how extraordinary it must have been to remark on that and not her tired, cold, wet, hungry, and miserable person? Mary Ann also noted that someone else had said, “We were as near to heaven as we could get.” That’s touching but also full of dramatic irony because we know some of the horror to come. Many were much nearer heaven. They couldn’t conceive of what was coming.

On the 17th the Forlorn Hope got to the top of Donner Pass and they camped just west building a log fire. The snow was twelve feet deep. Coffee and few strips of bacon were all they had

after their exhausting day.

They went only six miles the next day after traveling all day. They had gotten through Summit Valley along “Juba creek” William Eddy said in his journal. That shows how hard travel in the snow can be. They were only able to go six miles despite their urgency. There were snow flurries and high winds but at least it wasn’t snowing – yet. Still, the travel must have been miserable, with no hope of respite at the end of the day.

About 11 on the night of the 19th it began snowing. The wind was blowing cold and furiously. Three days out from the lake the storm continued and “feet commenced freezing,” said Wm. Eddy. It snowed all day. The Forlorn Hope was without shelter except for blankets. Blankets must have become soaked as did clothing. They made about five miles that day perhaps to about today’s Kingvale.

On December 20 they were still in the vicinity. They struggled on through the snow. There was only one day of food rations left. Charles Stanton went snow blind. They could only go four miles. At this rate the original ten day estimate was hopelessly wrong. Conditions were horrible but they didn’t even have enough food to go back and if they did go back, then who would rescue the Donner Party? Who would rescue their families?

Here a little digression is in order for a little heroism. Charles Stanton had no family in the Donner Party. When the party was low on food somewhere in today’s Utah some weeks earlier, he’d volunteered to go ahead to Sutter’s Fort for help with another member of the party who did have family. The other fellow, William McCutchen, fellow became sick and remained behind in California. Stanton, along with two Miwok Native Americans, Luis and Salvador Sutter sent, and some mules, returned to the Donner Party somewhere near today’s Reno. His sense of responsibility must have been great as was his sense of decency and heroism. He’d given his word. He and the two Miwoks were part of the Forlorn Hope. They had just covered the route so their leading would make getting to California less difficult.

The landmarks don’t look the same in the opposite direction, especially after snowfall, though. A wrong turn got them into the wrong river valley. Nothing looked familiar and all the party could do was head west. They had no maps and no compass to show a workable way.

“How heart-rending must have been their situation at this time, as they gazed upon each other, shivering and shrinking from the pitiless storm !” [sic]

John Sinclair,
Alcalde of Northern California,
who interviewed the Forlorn
Hope survivors

[The Forlorn Hope] made snow-shoes, and fifteen started, ten men and five women, but only seven lived to reach California eight men perished. They were over a month on the way, and the horrors endured by that Forlorn Hope no pen can describe nor imagination conceive.”

Virginia Reed Murphy
Across the Plains with the Donner Party, 1891

On the fifth day out from Donner Lake the Forlorn Hope again awoke in the snow wrapped in blankets. What is that like to sleep in the snow covered only by a blanket? Can you even sleep or does exhaustion inure you to the cold? As the group got ready to move on, Charles Stanton sat back against a tree and lit his pipe. It was December 21. He was so worn out. He said he'd be along shortly. He didn't want to hold them up. Charles Stanton died somewhere below Cascade Lakes near Donner Summit. There is a marker today but it's probably in the wrong place. Wm. Eddy's journal said the food was gone.

On December 22 another storm hit the Forlorn Hope. It "snowd [sic] all last night Continued to Snow all day with Some few intermissions..." (Wm. Eddy). They stayed in camp all day. What do you do all day in camp with no food, huddled under a wet blanket?

On the 21st they realized they'd made a wrong turn somewhere having turned into the American River drainage away from a better route in the Yuba/Bear River drainage. The Indians were "bewildered."

If the journey of the Forlorn Hope does not sound miserable so far, just wait. On the 24th the "storm recommenced with greater fury; extinguished fires," said Wm. Eddy. The storm had increased so much they could not travel. As the storm raged around them they sat in a circle covered by blankets. John Sinclair, Alcalde of Northern California, who interviewed members of the Forlorn Hope (and whose report is included in Edwin Bryant's *What I Saw in California*) said Wm. Eddy suggested they all sit in a circle on a blanket. Their feet pointed in to the center of the circle and blankets were spread over their heads. Snow and wood held the blankets down on the outside of the circle. Snow fell and closed off openings. Body heat made the cold less unbearable. The group sat that way for 36 hours while the storm raged. Once the storm had abated one member of the party found some cotton stuffing in her cape that was still miraculously dry. It served as tinder to start a fire. How does one bear that kind of thing?

On Christmas Day only eleven of the 15 were still alive.

"My shoes were ox-bows, split in two, and rawhide strings woven in, something in form of the old-fashioned, split-bottom chairs. Our clothes were of the bloomer costume, and generally were made of flannel."

Mary Ann Graves

Mary Ann Graves said, "Father died on Christmas night at 11 o'clock in the commencement of the snowstorm."

December 26 Wm. Reed reported afterwards, "Could not proceed; almost frozen; no fire." They'd been six days without food and only a little food before that. Lemuel Murphy, aged 12, died.

December 27 the Forlorn Hope cut flesh from a dead companion's body, "roasted it by the fire and ate it, averting their faces from each other and weeping" (Donner Party Chronicles pg 238). The two Native Americans refused to eat.

Alcalde Sinclair captured some of the pathos, "How heart-rending must have been their situation at this time, as they gazed upon each other, shivering and shrinking from the pitiless storm ! Oh ! how they must have thought of those happy, happy homes which but a few short months before they had left with buoyant hopes and fond anticipations ! Where, oh where were the green and lowery plains which they had heard of, dreamt, and anticipated beholding, in the month of January, in California ? Alas ! many of that little party were destined never to behold them. Already was death in the midst of them." [sic]

January 1, 1847 the Forlorn Hope crossed the North Fork of the American River for the first time. There were only ten members. They carried dried human flesh. Their feet were bloody and frostbitten.

January 17 Wm. Eddy arrived at Bear Valley. The seven surviving members of the Forlorn Hope, five women and two men, had been found a few days earlier by Nisenan Indians, a sect of the Maidu Tribe. Two Native Americans helped Eddy to the nearest settler's house where young seventeen year old Harriet Ritchie broke into tears when she saw him, a ghoulisn ghostly figure of a man. He was staggering and emaciated. A rescue party was mustered immediately from nearby Johnson's Ranch who retraced Eddy's bloody footprints to find the other six survivors lying in the mud. It had taken 33 days for the Forlorn Hope to travel from Donner Lake over Donner Summit and down to Bear Valley.

"... they resumed their journey, their feet being so swollen that they had burst open, and although they were wrapped in rags and pieces of blankets, yet it was with great pain and difficulty that they made progress... Every foot of that day's struggle was marked with the blood from their feet."

J. Quinn Thornton, 1849
The Donner Party Mountain Camp 1846-47

News spread about the fate of the Donner Party trapped in the mountains. Rescue parties were formed. People who could have easily stayed comfortably in California, with plenty of food, would endure the hardship of carrying heavy packs uphill through the snow. They would endure hunger, cold, exhaustion, and the horror of seeing the camps at Donner Lake.

“I told them I would go... for to go back and hear the cries of hunger from my little brothers and sisters was more than I could stand. I would go as far as I could, let the consequences be what they might.”

--Mary Graves

The History of the Donner party Charles F. McGlashan

For More:

Ordeal By Hunger	George R. Stewart
Desperate Passage	Ethan Rarick
Donner Party Chronicles	Frank Mullen
Saving the Donner Party	Richard Kaufman
Deceived	Peter Limburg
Best Land Under Heaven	Michael Wallis
Across the Plains in the Donner Party	Virginia Reed Murphy (1891)
History of the Donner Party	Charles McGlashan
Winter of Entrapment	Joseph King
Indifferent Stars Above	Daniel James Brown
The Donner Party Mountain Camp 1846-47	J. Quinn Thornton (1848)
(contemporarily published under the name of Camp of Death)	
Unfortunate Emigrants: Narratives of the Donner Party	Kristin Johnson
What I Saw in California (1846)	Edwin Bryant
Trail of the First Wagons over the Sierra Nevada	Charles Graydon
Donner Party Diary	Daniel Rosen

For More on this year's trek

<http://forlornhope.org/>

Next Month:

The 2020 trip
 A trip to the Camp of Death
 How the trails were discovered
 The people
 Maps

“Then they wrapped their blankets about them and slept upon the snow till the morning light recalled them to their weary travel. On that morning of their fifth day out, poor Stanton sat late by the camp-fire. The party had set off, all but Miss G., and as she turned to follow her father and sister, she asked him if he would soon come. He replied that he should, and she left him smoking. He never left the desolate fireside. His remains were found there by the next party who passed.”

Eliza Farnham, California Indoors and Out, 1856
 quoted in The Donner Party Chronicles
 pg. 235

“And Mr. Stanton, who sacrificed his life to assist his companions – for he had no family or relations in the company – should be held in honored remembrance by everyone who can appreciate a noble act. [As we ascended the Sierra] the clouds on the mountains looked very threatening, but he naturally looked at the bright side of things, and assured us there was no danger, little thinking that the next summer’s sun would bleach his unburied bones, not far from that spot.”

John Breen
 quoted in The Donner Party Chronicles
 pg. 235

“The noble Stanton was one of the party, and perished the sixth day out, thus sacrificing his life for strangers. I can find no words in which to express a fitting tribute to the memory of Stanton.”

Virginia Reed Murphy, 1891
Across the Plains in the Donner Party

Tribute Card Sources

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From the DSHS Archives



Postcard of the Soda Springs "J" bar in 1941. Below, back of the card.



RIDING THE J-BAR TO TOP OF BEACON HILL, SODA SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA

POST CARD

CORRESPONDENCE

Sweet Lady
Snowing
Skiing good
not hungry now
Don't miss you
(Ditt, you know)
no dishes gifts
Butter scotch Jack



Lady Ardis
2524 Wakefield Ave
Oakland, California

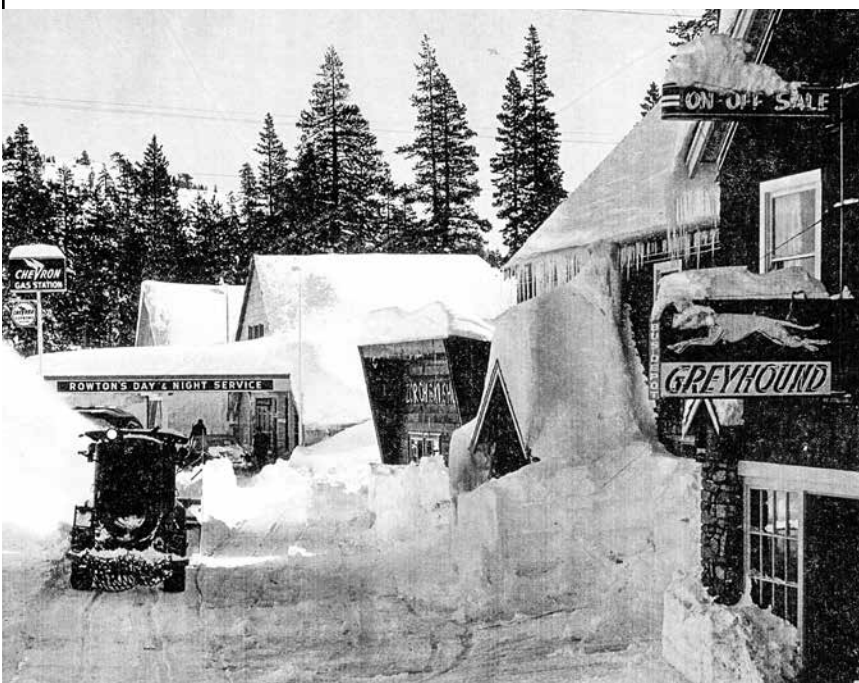


Inside the Norden train station which was inside the snowsheds in the days when people could take the train to Donner Summit.

From the DSHS Archives



Soda Springs Ski Area. Note that skiing was on the east, left side of the hill which is now where Soda Springs Rd. is plowed in winter.



Soda Springs Hotel with "Tasty Food" and "on off sale" as well as the Greyhound depot. Rowton's "Day & Night Service" Garage is in the background. Just before you get to the service station there is Zorich's Ski Shop on the right. The space is now occupied by the Donner Summit Historical Society - a worthy endeavor you may have heard of.

Book Review

The Donner-Reed Tragedy **Ted Davidson 515 pages 2002**

There are many books about the Donner Party as well as many shorter pieces, all non-fiction, all telling the compelling story of the emigrants trapped for the winter at what would be called Donner Lake. Here we have a book of fiction, noted in large letters on the cover, as “An Historical Novel.” That gives the writer a lot of latitude.

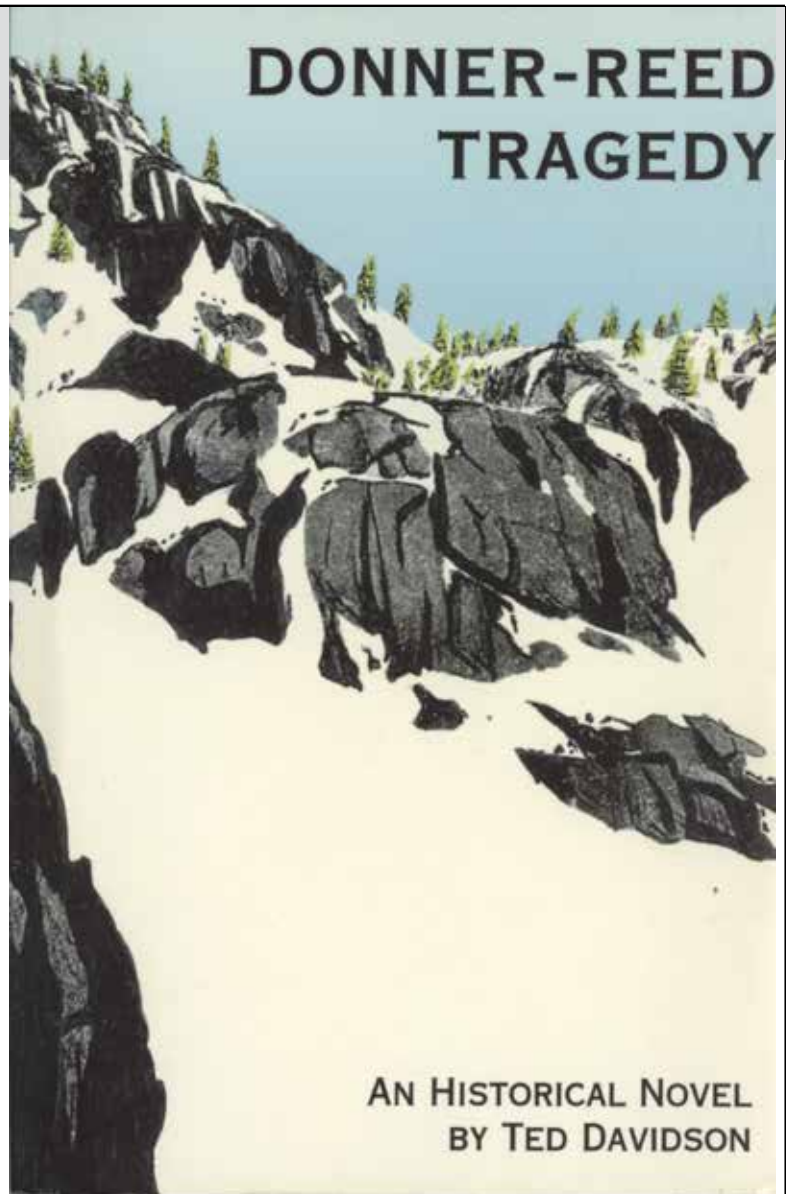
Non-fiction writers about the Donner Party started telling the story almost immediately after the events (See the April, '15 [Heirloom](#)). The initial accounts mostly reported sensational details of madness and gore. There followed more reasoned interpretations (see the first book, McGlashan's [History of the Donner Party](#) in the April, '15 [Heirloom](#)) recounting the events and leaving out cannibalism in deference, one supposes, to the contemporary sensibilities. In the late 20th Century authors brought different interpretations or emphases about the events: day by day accounts, the weather, modern science about the effects of starvation, etc. In [The Donner-Reed Tragedy](#) we have one of the only fiction entries into the Donner Party pantheon of books and articles. It tells the story some the previous non-fiction books have told and adds to the story with what the author imagines might have happened during different incidents divided by dates.

The purpose of the fiction book, even though it reprises non-fiction treatments, is to fill in many of the holes in the story that the original diaries and reports left out. Since none of those “holes” have any facts supporting their filling, that’s all made up. We know, for example that the Donner Party took a wrong turn and ended up weeks late, among many errors of judgment and disfunction. In a non-fiction book you are left with what can be demonstrably proven. There is no need in a fiction book. You can just make up the dialogue that led to decisions and fill in the details as you want. You can make up the arguments that there must have been. The Donner-Reed Tragedy fills in a lot of those holes with made up dialogue, throws in some geographic errors and even renames one of the heroes of the story, John Stark. To deal with the last one right away, there is only one book I’ve come across that called John Stark, John Starks. [Deceived The Story of the Donner Party](#) came along four years before this one and had many problems (See the July, '19 [Heirloom](#)). I wonder if [The Donner-Reed Tragedy](#) just redid [Deceived](#)... with dialogue?

The fiction treatment also allows the author to add his own interpretation to events and use his dialogue as proof. In [The Donner-Reed Tragedy](#) there are a couple of clear villains, Lansford Hastings, who sent the Donner Party the wrong way, and Lewis Keseberg, the last of the rescues. Davidson works them over to make them seem the most unsavory characters.

That’s the introduction.

In the translation of the events to an historical novel Davidson makes up conversations, among other things. For example, he gives Bill McCutcheon a foul mouth. He makes up a whole sometimes angry discussion between Jim Bridger and Louis Vasquez about whether to give a letter from Edwin Bryant to James Reed arguing against taking the Hastings Cut-off. Bridg-



er and Vasquez also mention Reed being the real leader of the Donner Party, hence the book's title. In various ways Reed is also made to be a hero of the expedition. Tamsen Donner does some "angry reflecting" and some glaring. When some members of the Donner Party go ahead to meet up with Lansford Hastings Davidson makes up a giant to protect Hastings from an angry James Reed. Keseberg as the villain is painted by Davidson long before he was stewing and chewing pieces of human flesh (see the sidebar here). Keseberg had many bad qualities apparently, according to Davidson, including being a "lazy German bastard" and a coward. William Eddy even threatened to make Keseberg's wife a widow at one point because Keseberg didn't work fast enough or at all.

Of course conflict is what novels are about and on the way to Donner Lake there had to be various conflicts to keep the story going. In *The Donner-Reed Tragedy* there is the main conflict of the Donner Party against the environment but there are a lot of other conflicts too, at every turn. Walter Herron, traveling with James Reed goes nuts. When various members have to consolidate wagons Davidson assumes arguments and anger. There were a lot of interpersonal conflicts in the Donner Party as members fought and argued with each other. Human nature, selfishness and self preservation are also conflicts in the story.

The novelistic approach allows imagining what might have been going on as wagons got left behind and animals were killed or rendered incapable of travel by Indians or dying of exhaustion. That all provides more conflict. There must have been disagreements, perhaps continual disagreements, born of hardship and personalities forced into close contact with each other over long stressful periods but it all leads one to wonder what was true.

The fiction enables Davidson to fill holes in the story. There was not enough food and different families had different amounts. How did they deal with that or not? In Davidson's telling there is a lot of self-preservation and selfishness. Why didn't Bridger and Vasquez give James Reed the Edwin Bryant letter? Bridger just seems mean and rationalizes his decision, but why is not mentioned. Other examples are supposed arguments between George Donner and his teamsters, resentment over who got the Schallenberger cabin and imagining

eating the family dog.

The novelization approach does add to the story when the rescuers arrive at Donner Lake. In all the non-fiction accounts that's glossed over. Davidson tries to give the reader some sense of the horror. Imagining how the rescuers reacted to the living conditions at Donner Lake, "It's so far down there... Sickening smell of urine and excrement! And those putrid hides!"... "been rotting for months! Now those people are actually eating 'em! A miracle they haven't all died!"... "filth beyond comprehension! I can't even begin to stomach it!"

There are a few geographical errors and the October 31 attempt at the summit is not mentioned. The book has some good maps laying out the journey.

If you don't know anything about the Donner Party then *The Donner-Reed Tragedy* is a good introduction. If you want to really get into the story then *Desperate Passage* is still the best overall treatment (May, '14 *Heirloom*) and the *Donner Party Chronicles* (February, '17 *Heirloom*) is a good day-by-day account. Then you can imagine the details. Here we'll give one really good example of nothing beating a really good non-fiction rendition with real dialogue.

The story itself is compelling as told by evidence gleaned from diaries, letters, and contemporary reports as told by other authors. The addition of dialogue is supposed to tell the story better and inject the human element. Certainly the speculation fills in the holes and answers questions readers might have. But it

cannot compare to actual diary entries such as James Reed's writing about the storm at Starved Camp to which the misspellings add to verisimilitude.

"...after a great fatiguing day arrived at the prairie now Starved Camp at the head of Juba it was made by the other Compy. who had passed in but a few days previous. Here the men began to fail being for several days on half allowance, or 1 ½ pints of gruel or sizing per day. The sky look like snow and everything indicates a storm god forbid wood being got for the night & Bows for the beds of all, and night closing fast, the clouds still thicking terror dare not communicate my mind to any, death

to all if our provisions do not come, in a day or two and a storm should fall on us, very cold, a great lamentation about the cold... My dreaded Storm is now on us commed a perfect hurricane in the night. A great crying with the children and parents praying crying and lamentation on acct of the cold and the dread of death from the Howling storm... hunger is the cry with the children and nothing to give them freeing was the cry of the mothers with [unclear]... to their little starving freezing children night closing fast and with it the Hurricane increases..." [sic]

March 4 James Reed Diary (various sources)

We can compare that to same part of the story in The Donner-Reed Tragedy,

"Later in the night at the Summit Valley camp [not the evocative 'Starved Camp'], sleep had overcome all the refugees and rescuers; they were unaware that the storm was gaining against the fire which burned low.

"Many yards beyond the fire, Reed slowly groped

his way out of the darkness. In frozen clothes, carrying an axe and only a single piece of fire-wood, he was half-blind from blowing snow. He stopped and looked toward the fire.

"All he saw was a faint glow of light.

"Fear overpowered his numbed senses; he forced himself forward but stumbled and fell into the snow. He struggled to his hands and knees, rested for a moment, and then slowly began crawling toward the fire."

Which is better?

Then there is Davidson's imagined dialogue of Lewis Keseberg when he was found by the rescuers (See the sidebar on the previous page).

That comes right out of the most sensational of first reports of the Donner Party tragedy in newspapers. They were mostly exaggerated as is this. Does it add?

Note:

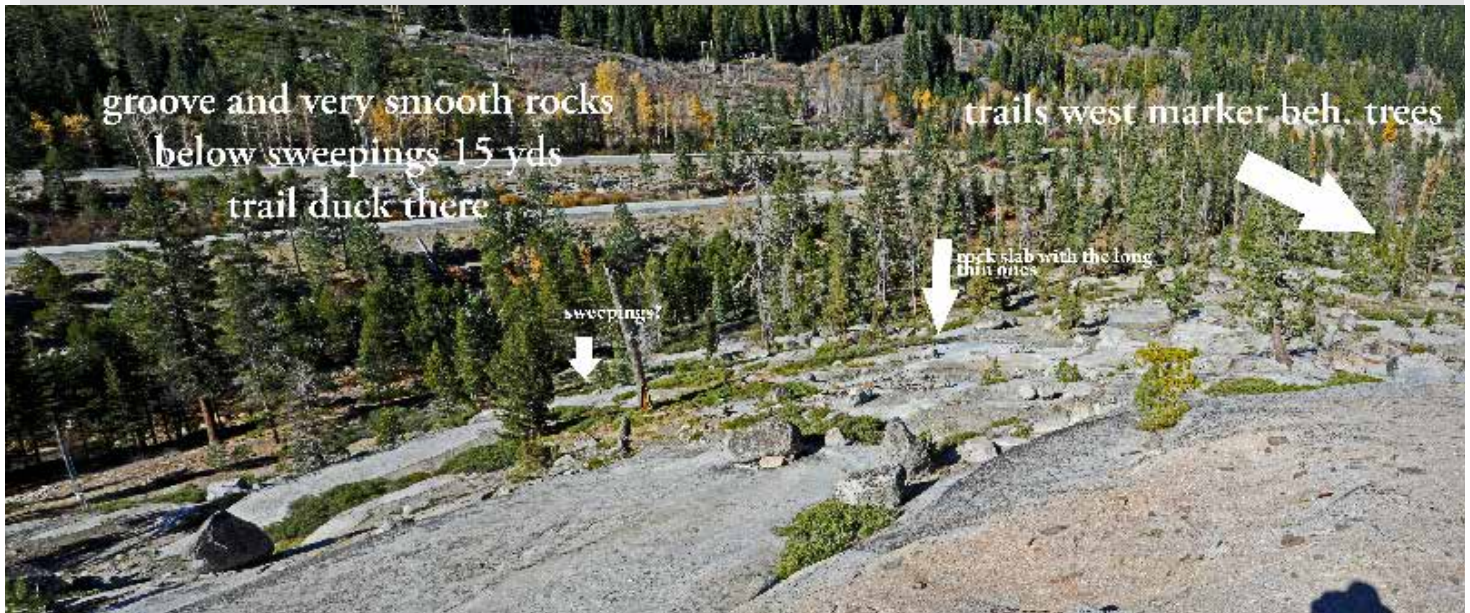
You have noticed our monthly book reviews. You might want to do some reading of your own.

Stop in at the DSHS. Norm Sayler has a large collection of books for perusing, buying, or checking out.

You might even want to do a review for us.



Odds & Ends on Donner Summit



Rust Marks at Big Bend

Since the Forlorn Hope is the main feature in this [Heirloom](#) the rust marks at Big Bend are appropriate too.

Here's a fun activity after snow melts. Head down to Big Bend on Old Highway 40, Donner Pass Rd. Park at the Loch Leven trailhead at the pit toilets. Then head north and go a bit east to find the Trails West marker (previous page) marking the route through there of thousands of emigrant wagons. Go back west to the steeper parts and imagine trying to get your wagon down the steep slippery slope. Emigrants used to winch down their wagons using a tree which is no longer standing. Spend some time on the granite slabs looking for the thin rust marks. Spend more time looking for a groove worn into the rocks.

The photo above is from the granite dome that is the high spot. The arrows give you some help. It has been suggested by some trail experts that the "sweepings" of small rocks were actually swept by the emigrants so the footing would not be so treacherous. The groove and rust marks on the rock below are noted in the photograph above.





Left is a spot on the side of a rock worn smooth by thousands of iron wheels rubbing against it.

Below left and right are two examples of rust marks on the large granite slabs.



This is part of a series of miscellaneous history, "Odds & Ends" of Donner Summit. There are a lot of big stories on Donner Summit making it the most important historical square mile in California. All of those episodes* left behind obvious traces. As one explores Donner Summit, though, one comes across a lot of other things related to the rich history. All of those things have stories too and we've been collecting them. Now they're making appearances in the [Heirloom](#).

If you find any "Odds & Ends" you'd like to share pass them on to the editor - see page 2

*Native Americans; first wagon trains to California; the first transcontinental railroad, highway, air route, and telephone line, etc.

Old Time Sunday Drive

**Next Time
Take Scenic
Old Hwy 40
instead of I-80**



Historic Towns
Interesting Scenery
Fascinating History
Picnic Spots
A Slower Pace



Take a look at our guide to Old Highway 40! turn by turn instructions from Rocklin to Truckee, broken into four legs and including pictures and history. Available on line on the brochure page of donnersummithistoricalsociety.org, at the DSSS (at the blinking light in "downtown" Soda Springs, or the visitors' centers in Truckee and Auburn.



And while you are at it, check out the 20 Mile Museum - interpretive signs from Nyack to below Donner Summit on Old 40. Information at www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Donner Summit Historical Society.org

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Donner Summit Historical Society
and share in the Summit's rich
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Take the Scenic Route: Donner Summit's Old Highway 40



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50 interpretive signs along Old 40
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