

## Donner Historical Tour:

Bill Bowness - 2019

edited - 2021

### Intro at Flag Pole

- Be at meeting area 5 minutes prior to scheduled start time. As Park Visitors arrive, make them feel welcomed. Engage in 'ice breaker' questions (i.e., where are you from, what other plans do you have for you visit here, what do you know about the Donner story, etc)
- Introduce yourself. Keep it brief....
- If group size allows... Ask where everyone is from
- "How many planned to come here; who discovered us after arriving in the area?"
- Outline for tour (approx. 60 minutes, you're **not captive** if you need to leave, this is your vacation... what would you like to hear about?
- Lands Acknowledgement – for example: "Let us take a moment to acknowledge that we are standing on lands that for thousands of years were used and managed by the Washoe People. We recognize these original stewards and respect their continued presence in these magnificent lands." **Be sincere and speak from the heart.**
- Before we go, look **at these squares** of pavers. How many do you think represent the size of a wagon (show picture of wagon train). Storage space, maybe the size of a minivan, suburban? Think about packing your life into a minivan.

### Move to mortar rock.

- First Peoples walked across Beringia (currently Bering Strait) **15-20,000 BCE** (end of last ice age).
- Indigenous people in this area were here approximately **7000 years ago**.
- When Europeans entered the California region in the **16th century**, they encountered a population of more than 300,000 Native Americans in more than 200 tribes. Their centuries-old way of life was ended relatively quickly....
- Not surprisingly to the Donners, there were no permanent residents in the high country of the Sierra Nevada until the late 1850's. There is just too **inhospitable of a climate**. Anyone that has tried to drive here in a blizzard understands. In the winter, there is no large game (the big mammals are smart enough to move to lower elevations or hibernate), only smaller mammals like rabbits, squirrels, foxes, coyotes, marmots, etc. But these animals are extremely difficult to hunt as many are nocturnal and all are elusive. This point will really come into play when we talk about the Donners vs. Moses' survival attempts.
- **The most common Native Nevadans** to this area are the Washoe. The people of the Martis Phase (Martis Cultural Complex) used 'house pits' for winter shelter and atlatl (throwing stick) for hunting. The Washoe of the Kings Beach Cultural Complex used bow&arrows and lived in "galis darjal" (conical, bark slab, winter houses). The Washoe came to the high country every summer, would fish in the high lakes and in the fall collect pinyon pine nuts.
- The **First Peoples of California**. Miwok (Salvador and Luis), Nisenan, and Maidu are nations of the western Sierra foothills that may have hunted these mountains in the summer
- Using a pestle on a rock mortar similar to this they would mash acorns producing mush, gruels, or cakes that they could use throughout the winter. In the Fall the Washoe would collect pinyon pine nuts that they roasted and later would use for stews or drink as a gruel.

### Move to base of monument

- Dispel **myth about the snow** reaching the base of the monument (22.5'). Snowpack was closer to 10'-14'. Climatologists, using weather modeling, estimate that there may have been 22' of snowfall in the winter of 1846-47 but as the snow settles/melts between each storm, 10'-14' on the ground is more likely. Evidenced by tree trunks that were cut at that level for firewood.
- Between **1840** and **1870** an estimated **300,000** people migrated west.
- It is romantic to think that these people were migrating simply for a better life. There is some truth to that. When in fact they were **leaving an undesirable life** due to disease, (Cholera, malaria, and typhoid), religious persecution (Catholic and LDS), and economic downturns. Some were looking for adventure and curiosity of what lay on the other side. In the mid-1840's the idea of Manifest Destiny evolved and some pioneers were migrating west out of patriotic duty. Manifest Destiny is the idea that it was America's destiny or right to expand its borders from Atlantic to Pacific. AND, in doing so, forcing the indigenous populations (Natives or Mexicans) to leave or assimilate.
- The **Reeds were leaving economic depression** (some rumor that Reed was deep in debt and simply walked away from it when he migrated. Abe Lincoln did Reed's bankruptcy. Later, Reed asked Lincoln to come on the migration.)
- **The Breen's were looking for religious freedom.** They were Catholic and Alta California (a Territory of Mexico), founded on the coat-tails of the Catholic religion, was a place where they would be free to live in a fully Catholic culture.
- Some were inspired by the idea of **manifest destiny**, the belief that the land between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans belonged to America and that they should settle it.
- The Sierra Nevada Mountains are challenging to cross. As the Sierra Nevada's were formed, the western plate slid under the eastern plate and as both plates began to lift the western side was more gradual sloped and the eastern was steeper.
- The first successful crossings of the Sierra Nevada by European Americans were done by individuals or small groups of mountain men like **Jedediah Smith**. Settlers on horseback or mule such as Bartleson-Bidwell Party and **Peter Lassen** made the Sierra crossing.
- It wasn't until 1844 that the **Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party** successfully brought wagons over the Sierras

### Move to shade on Murphy Trail

- 1844 - **Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party**. First successful crossing of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Mountain Man **Elisha Stephens (show pic)** was elected captain of the wagon train because he had spent several years as a mountain man and beaver hunter in the Pacific Northwest. He also had skills as a blacksmith. He had worked at the Council Bluffs Indian Sub-agency before resigning to go to California. He was a man that could survive in the wilderness and understood a bit about Native Americans.
- **Dr. John Townsend**, Wife Elizabeth, and her 18y.o. brother Moses Schellenberger. Dr. Townsend would be the first licensed physician to live in California. Moses would end up spending the winter of 1844-45 at Truckee (Donner) Lake
- The largest family group in the party was headed by Martin **Murphy, Sr.** His family had **23 members**. As Irish Catholics, the Murphy family were seeking religious, economic, and political freedoms in the West.
- The **50-member Stephens group** left near present-day Council Bluffs, Iowa on May 22, 1844 (later than the Donner's would depart in 1846)
- The party was guided by mountain men **Caleb Ol' Greenwood (81 years old)** and **Isaac Hitchcock** both had been "trapping and trading" in California in 1830's. After descending South Pass, Hitchcock and Greenwood led the party west from the Big Sandy River to the Green River bypassing Fort Bridger and saving seven days. (Not surprising, Jim Bridger was not happy about his outpost being bypassed.) After

leaving Fort Hall the company headed south-east following the Mary/Humboldt River into the Great Basin of the Utah Territory (later to become part of Nevada).

- As they crossed the **Great Basin**, and as water disappeared in the **Humboldt Sink**, they came across a Plains Paiute party who told them about water ahead. As they communicated with hand signals and drawing in the dirt, one Native kept saying “trokay, trokay” which the settlers took to be his name. In the Native dialect “trokay” is roughly interpreted as “yes” or “all is well”. They called him Trokay which later “telegraphed” into “Truckee”. He was chief of the Plains Paiute and would later become Captain Truckee as a scout for Fremont.
- STM arrived in this area late November 1844 (the Donner’s would arrive here October 31, two years later).
- STM was able to move a few wagons over the pass (**show pic**) and continue about 20 miles before making a winter camp.
- Eighteen-year-old **Moses Schallenger** (**Show pic**) volunteered to spend the winter in a cabin watching over six wagons. Moses survived by **trapping** fox, coyote, and other small animals. (Note: it is believed that the Donner Company did not have traps.) Additionally, two other men were going to winter but they decided that supplies were too thin and caught up to the main body of the company. Also, Moses had many books to read which he attributes to keeping him sane.
- Ended with two souls (two babies) more than they started with (**52**).
- The crossing was a year before Fremont, two years before the Donner Party and five years before the 1848–49 Gold Rush.
- In the spring members of the company returned for Moses and to retrieve the remaining wagons

### Move farther along Murphy Trail

- Donner-Reed Party. In the spring of 1846, almost 500 wagons/1,500 people headed west from Independence, MO. At the rear of the train, a group of nine wagons containing 32 members of the Reed (cabinet/furniture maker) and Donner (farmers) families and their employees left on **May 12**.
- **Just 16 days later, the first of their party died.** Sarah Keyes, Margaret Reed’s 70yo mother died of “consumption” (Tuberculosis) and was buried along the trail.
- In late spring/early summer of 1846, **Lansford Hastings** headed east across the Great Basin and around the southern end of The Great Salt Lake, into the Wasatch Mountains, and finally to Fort Bridger. Hastings was scouting a potential short cut from Fort Bridger to the California Trail.
- To promote his new route (the “Hastings Cutoff”), Hastings sent riders to deliver letters to traveling migrants. On July 12, the Reeds and Donners were informed about the ‘short cut’. Hastings promised that he would meet any interested pioneers at Fort Bridger and escort them through the shortcut.
- At Fort Laramie, Reed met an old friend named **James Clyman** who was coming from California. Clyman, a mountain man, warned Reed not to take the Hastings Cutoff, telling him that wagons would not be able to make it and that Hastings’ information was inaccurate.
- At Fort Bridger the company was informed that they had missed Hastings by a week and he was escorting another company through the Wasatch. After **Jim Bridger** confirmed the Cut Off was a “good trail”, the decision was made to take the Hastings cutoff winding through the Wasatch Mountains into the Salt Lake basin. They rested a few days before setting off.
- As the Donner Party made its way through the Wasatch Mountains, the Graves family, who had set off to find them, reached them. Their arrival brought the Donner Party to **87 members in 60–80 wagons**. The Graves family had been part of the last group to leave Missouri, confirming the Donner Party was at the back of the year’s western exodus
- The settlers had to cut trees and brush and move boulders to make a trail. Severely slowing them down, at times going only **1 mile a day** (they had averaged 10 miles a day across the plains). They lost

another six weeks. (A year later the Mormons used the trail cut by the Donner to cross the Wasatch to settle in Salt Lake and said it was a good road!)

- After finding a tattered note left by Hastings, the track across the water-less desert was thought to be 40 miles and take two days but turned out to be closer to **80 miles and six days**. Stock ran away or died from lack of water. Reed lost most of his draft animals and had to abandon wagons in the desert.
- They recovered at the springs at the base of Pilot Peak on the other side of the desert. They spent several days trying to recover cattle, retrieve the wagons left in the desert, and consolidating their food and supplies to other wagons.
- It was suggested that two men should go to Sutter's Fort in California; they had heard that John Sutter was exceedingly generous to wayward pioneers and could assist them with extra provisions. **Charles Stanton and William McCutchen** volunteered to undertake the dangerous trip and left the company on September 12.
- Along the Humboldt, the group met Paiute Native Americans, who joined them for a couple of days but **stole or shot several oxen and horses**.
- On October 5, **Reed was banished** for killing John Snyder in a road-rage fight after their teams became tangled.
- More encounters with Native Americans who killed oxen and horses. Native Americans chased away all of Graves' horses, and another wagon was left behind. With grass in short supply, the cattle spread out more, which allowed the Paiutes to steal 18 more during one evening; several mornings later, they shot another 21. So far, **the company had lost nearly 100 oxen and cattle**, and their rations were almost completely depleted.

### Move to Murphy Cabin

- Finally, the Donner Party reached the **Truckee Meadows October 15**, 1846 (present day Reno). They held there for five days to recoup and prepare for the final push into California. Charles Stanton, along with two Miwok vaqueros (Luis and Salvador) returned with mules and food.
- It was October 20 and they had been told the **pass would not be snowed in until the middle of November**. At Alder Creek George Donner severely cut his hand while trying to fashion an axle for a broken wagon. The Donners decided to camp there (about 7 miles NE of Donner Lake).
- The main group Reached Truckee Lake (now Donner Lake) **October 31**.
- Several attempts were made to cross the summit.
- **Sixty members** and associates of the Breen, Graves, Reed, Murphy, Keseberg, and Eddy families set up for the winter at Truckee Lake. Three widely separated cabins of pine logs served as their homes, with dirt floors and poorly constructed flat roofs that leaked when it rained.
  - The Breens occupied the abandoned Schellenberger cabin (located at the base of the Pioneer Monument) with Patrick Dolan, Keseberg built a lean-to for his family against the side of the Breen cabin.
  - William Eddy built a three walled cabin against this rock (refer to the boulder) for the Murphys and his family,
  - Charles Stanton built a duplex cabin and housed the Reeds and the Graves.
- **16 Stayed in the Murphy Cabin**; the Murphy's and Eddy's
- **Rescue parties were difficult to form**. Men were scarce. The Mexican-American war was on and in June there had been the Bear Flag Republic revolt.
- 17 of the Donner Party with 14 pair snowshoes made by Graves and Stanton set off to get help on December 16. 2 returned to camp the next day. 33 days later a starving, frostbitten, and bleeding William Eddy crawled into a Miwok village. They fed him and took him to Johnson Rancheria where the alarm was sounded for help.

- Three rescue parties were sent to Truckee Lake (Donner Lake) with the first reaching the settlers in mid-February (almost four months since becoming stranded) and the last not until April.
- Of the 87 people who entered the Wasatch Mountains (81 that reached the Sierra mountains including the returned Stanton with two Miwok men, Luis and Salvador), 45 survived. Only the Reed and Breen families remained intact. The children of Jacob Donner, George Donner, and Franklin Graves were orphaned. William Eddy was alone; most of the Murphy family had died. Only three mules reached California; the remaining animals perished. Most of the Donner Party members' possessions were discarded.
- In 1846, an estimated 1,500 people migrated to California. In 1847, the number dropped to 450 and then to 400 in 1848. The California Gold Rush spurred a sharp increase and 25,000 people went west in 1849.<sup>1</sup> Most of the overland migration followed the Carson River, but a few forty-niners used the same route as the Donner Party and recorded descriptions about the site.
- Late Spring/Early Summer General Kearny, escorting Fremont east for court martial, camped at Truckee Lake. He remarked that it was such a gruesome sight and ordered the Mormon Battalion to collect everything they could find (bones, clothing, furniture, wagons, etc.). The men placed everything in and around the Breen cabin and “struck it to fire”. In that fire went a significant cache of artifacts!
- Another reason that artifacts and bones have not been found in any significant amounts is our soil. The soil content is highly granitic (from granite rock) and highly acidic. The soil here will break down bones to dust in just a few years!
- In the 1880s, Charles McGlashan began promoting the idea of a monument to mark the site of the Donner Party episode. He helped to acquire the land for a monument and, in June 1918, the statue of a pioneer family, dedicated to the Donner Party, was placed on the spot where the Breen-Keseberg cabin was thought to have stood.