The Donner Summit Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society and the most historically significant square mile in California.

July 2025 issue #203

Heroes and Survivors 2025 Introduction

Rediscovering history lost in the shadows of time – The Stephens Murphy Townsend Party of 1844

This month's Heirloom is different since it focuses on one large topic, the Stephens Murphy Townsend Party and coming reprise of one part of that by History Expedition. In 1844 the Stephens Party was the first party to arrive in California with wagons following the overland journey. The reason for not having other subjects and pictures is that the extreme athletes who did the reprise journeys of the Forlorn Hope, the Donner Rescue, and Snowshoe Thompson expeditions are at it again. On September 29 they will do a reprise of the horseback group of the Stephens Party going from near the State Park at Donner Lake to Lake Tahoe and over the Sierra Crest to Sutter's Fort. Our editorial staff is sure you'll want to follow the story. The trek will last about five days. What follows is the wider story of the Stephens Party, its various sub-stories, and the coming reprise.

The Stephens Party

We'd have a better chance of remembering the 1844 Stephens Murphy Townsend Party (SMT), the first group to arrive overland in California with wagons, if they had not been superseded by the Donner Party tragedy of two years later. Unfortunately for the Stephens Party though, their trials and heroism were overshadowed with few even remembering them. There is one video, "Forgotten Journey." There's a fictionalized account, Truckee's Trail, and one very short serious book, The Opening of the California Trail (which includes a lot of a shorter book, Moses Schallenberger at Truckey's Lake [sic]). The story of the 1844 Stephens Party is a heck of a story though. It's an extraordinary story.

In celebration of the Donner Party's "unsuccess" the lake and the pass were named for them. Lots of books, articles, and videos focus on them. Their experience was sensationalized immediately and that sensationalism continued for decades to fill the 19th Century history's version of supermarket tabloids. The stories of horror overshadow everything else.

Two years before the Donner Party fifty people traveled across the continent as part of the Stephens Party and not a single person was lost. Fifty-two people actually arrived in California because two women gave birth during the trip. That alone

tells us something about the character of the participants. That successful crossing to California is enhanced by several smaller stories.

Smaller story number one: the women and children wintering in the Sierra and saved just in time by the men returning from Sutter's Fort where they had been dragooned into helping with a little revolution.

Smaller story number two: seventeen year-old Moses Schallenberger wintering alone at Truckey's Lake (today's Donner Lake).

Smaller story number three: the horseback party of six which included two women. That group split off from the main group at Truckee's Lake and headed south to today's Lake Tahoe and then over the Sierra Crest to California. They were hoping to get to Sutter's Fort for help. Snow had been falling and winter was upon them.

Elisha Stephens

The details of story number three are fascinating but maybe even more fascinating with its own substory. One of the six was Moses' sister. In leaving the main party she was leaving her husband, the "Townsend" of the Stephens Murphy Townsend Party. What must she have been like – willing to go off from the main group with no idea of a route and cross the Sierra in winter?

History Expeditions

We can address the "ins and outs" of those stories but first we need to address the connection to today and History Expeditions (historyexp.org).

History Expeditions (historyexp.org) is made up of five extreme athletes, people who think a brief one hundred mile run before breakfast is just the thing to start the day. Two of the team, Tim Twietmeyer and Bob Crowley, came across a book, Indifferent Stars Above (reviewed in the February '11 Heirloom) which is about the Donner Party. They were enamored with the story and began to think about reprising the Forlorn Hope expedition, one piece of the Donner Party saga, and celebrating the group's heroism.

It took seven years of research in order to decide on the route of the Forlorn Hope and do necessary preparation. The research embodies the philosophy of the group, "Researching clues left from primary sources and heading into the field to piece together the puzzle." In researching and then reprising, History Expeditions is "Honoring the heroes who pioneered the trails by reprising their routes as modern-day expeditions." You can read about their one hundred mile long trek reprising the Forlorn Hope from Donner Lake to Sutter's Fort near Wheatland CA in the December '20 and January '21 Heirlooms. There you can see how the route was developed, how they practiced, prepared their equipment, aged their old-fashioned clothing (for the arrival to the crowd at the Donner Memorial State Park), who the Forlorn Hope group was, and some philosophy.

The Forlorn Hope reprise was so successful and satisfying that the next year the extreme athletes, Bob, Tim, Jen, and Elke, decided to do a reprise of the Donner Party rescue expeditions that came to ultimately save about half the Donner Party. You can read about that in the February and March '22 Heirlooms.

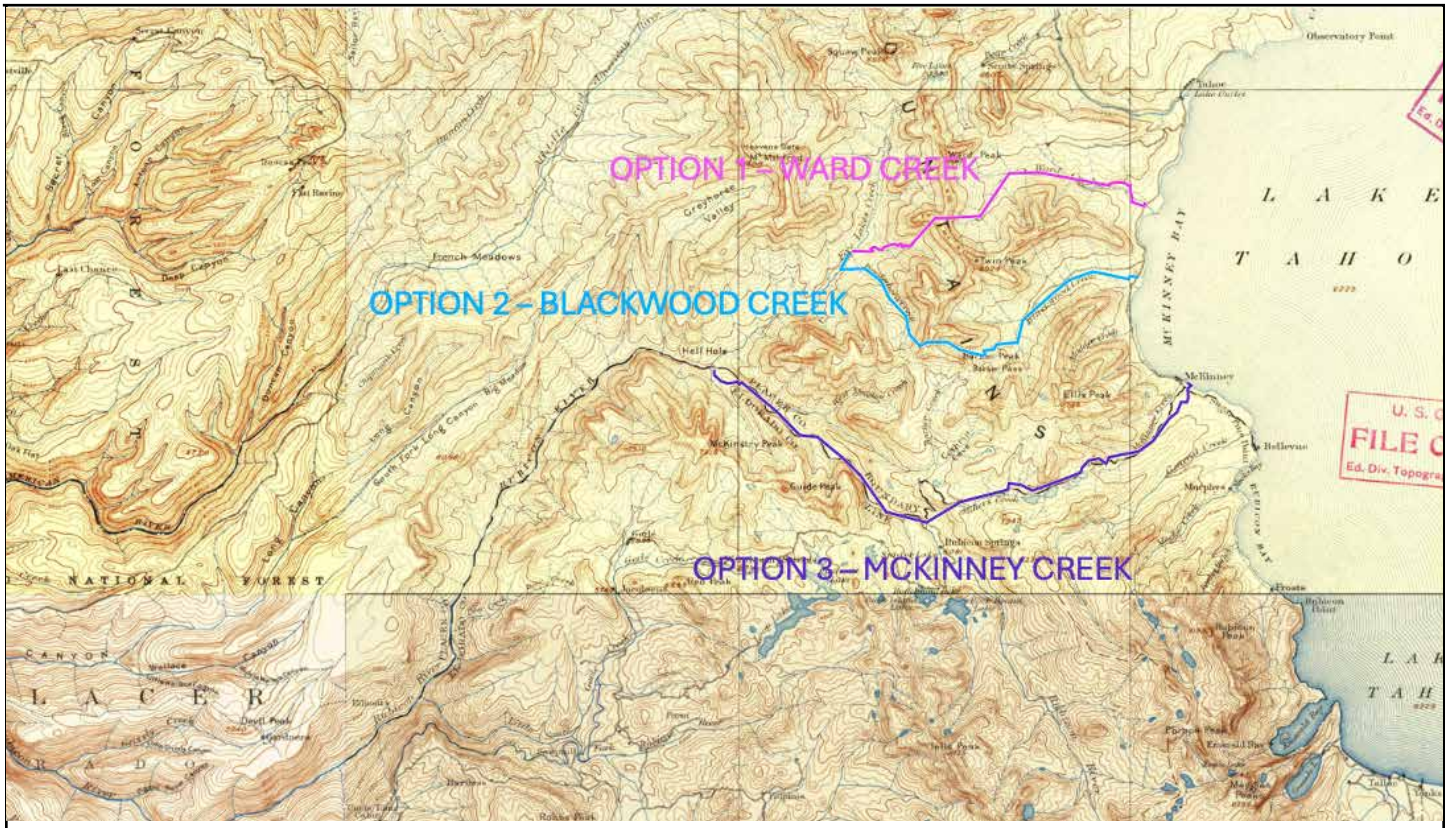
In 2023 the group did a reprise of the Grosh Brothers from Virginia City NV and over the Sierra to Last Chance CA. That was way off Donner Summit and so not a subject for the Heirloom.

In 2024 History Expeditions latched on to the story of Snowshoe Thompson who crossed and recrossed the Sierra in winter over decades as he delivered the mail. That you can read about in the March and April '24 Heirlooms.

The History Expeditions people at Last Chance during a previous expedition
from left to right: Hall Hall, Tim Twietmeyer, Elke Reimer, Jen Hemmen and Bob Crowley

The title of an article in the April '24 Heirloom introduces the History Expedition people as well as the story, "Unearthing the West: History Expeditions Retraces Footsteps and Recites Forgotten Tales." See page 13.

Wanting to unearth more history and honor more pioneers, History Expeditions has planned a 2025 adventure which will be a reprise of the Stephens' horseback party from near Truckey's



Lake to Lake Tahoe and then over the Sierra down to California and Auburn. They plan to leave from the vicinity of the Donner Memorial State Park on September 29.

Bob, Tim, Jen, Elke, and now joined by a fifth member of History Expeditions, Hal, are well versed in preparation and various aspects of preparation can be read about as noted above. This 2025 expedition has one major change from the previous treks. Just as the horseback group's six members traveled on horses so will our five. This trip will also be longer, about 150 miles. Whereas the original horseback group took 28 days to get to Sutter's Fort, today's group will take about five days, ending in Auburn.

Deciding on the route has required a lot of research as the group looked for clues from diaries, letters, and interviews. Apparently, the original party was more interested in getting to California and help for the main group than in memorializing their route. There are various possibilities as one heads south from Truckey's Lake to what would later be called Lake Tahoe. Once at the lake the group had to decide which of a couple of streams was the one to take to the crest. From wherever they arrived at the crest they ended up at the source of the American River and from there it was downhill to California's Central Valley and Sutter's Fort. The map above shows the three possible routes.

Going off into the unmapped wilderness is a dicey proposition and History Expeditions and their cadre of supporting historians all think that the group must have had some idea of the route. It may be that they had some more advice from Native Americans who had helped them with the route leading up to the Sierra Crest. Native Americans had been traversing the Sierra Crest for thousands of years and so had experience to pass on. We can imagine members of the Stephens Party sitting with Native Americans who sketched out on dirt or animal skins a route different from what the main group would take over Donner Summit. The drawing would have shown Lake Tahoe, then the four streams coming down to the lake and which one to take to the crest. Apparently the group took the right route and arrived at Sutter's Fort intact and ahead of the men from the main group – see below. The map above shows three routes because Moses Schallenberger said that the horseback group, which included his sister did get to the shore of Lake Tahoe and that would have been some miles after one of the possible routes. It's doubtful they would have backtracked. We should note here too, that the Stephens Party had already received help from at least one Native American, Chief Truckee, who described for them the route to and over Donner Pass. So it's not much of a stretch, given the lack of evidence, that Native Americans, and or Chief Truckee, could have described more geography than the route over Donner Pass.

The Stephens Party Stories

The Main Group and the women and children wintering at Big Bend

Imagine leaving home, leaving all that is familiar, leaving friends and family – no doubt forever. Imagine travel-

ing six months at 10-12 miles a day alongside your oxen and wagon. There are a thousand miles to cover. Consider the hardship day after day, vulnerable, exposed to every change in the weather. Consider the constant worry. You have to get to California before winter. Will there be enough food to get there? Will your family's health last? What will the Indians do? What is the route since no wagon trains have gotten to California with wagons so far. Then too, Caleb Greenwood, the guy guiding the group has never been to California AND he's 80 years old. Modern people would say, "What could go wrong?"

What could possibly induce someone to do that – before the Gold Rush? How would that trip affect your life? How would it change you?

The first overland 19th Century emigrants to California went for better lives, new opportunities, more freedom, adventure, land, and pay (some were servants). They gave up what they knew for what they thought could be. The journey would be hard of course but they had no idea how hard. Hard as the journey would be dealing with day-to-day travails, harder would be what came at the end. At the end there were deserts to cross and then, what would petrify later emigrants, the Sierra. The Sierra was the hardest part of the transcontinental crossing. The great barrier had to be crossed for dreams to come true.

Making it even harder, imagine heading off into the unknown and only knowing generally the destination. There were no usable maps. There were no routes. People were taking such a big chance. Still harder yet, after traveling all the way across the continent, heading exactly where or how you don't know, there's winter to deal with. A Sierra winter is nothing like a winter back east where snow falls and melts. In the Sierra snow falls and doesn't melt - until spring. Crossing the Sierra in winter you've got to slog through the snow, each step a chore, climb uphill, all the time hoping you're going the right way.

It's too late to turn back. There's nowhere else to go except forward into the unknown but that's unknown. Energy is low. Animals are weak and dying. Food is running out. It's snowing harder.

Before 1844 almost all the emigrant wagon trains leaving the United States headed for Oregon. In 1844 the first wagon train to reach California, with wagons, left Missouri - some years before the Gold Rush. There were three families, fifty people (26 men, 8 women, and 16 or 17 children) – save that statistic for later (it will be important), and eleven wagons.

In May of 1844 they crossed the Missouri River. People did not travel in wagons. They walked. Their wagons were pulled by oxen and not horses. They covered 10-12 miles a day. They brought along apples to ward off scurvy. They walked; they walked the whole way.

The party ran into all kinds of problems. There was the Sublette Cutoff that ended up saving many miles but also left the party for two days without water. The cattle ran off. The oxen stampeded endangering the wagons as they rushed for water. Then there was the 40 mile desert which left them for three days without water or forage as they crossed today's Nevada.

Chief Truckee

The Sierra loomed above them and if they were like later emigrants at that point it must have struck terror in their hearts. It was getting colder and winter was coming. It was November. How would they get over? Their guide, 80 year old Caleb Greenwood had never been to California (there are some discrepancies about his age depending on the sources). At that point the party met a Paiute chief they called "Truckee" (which really meant everything was ok in the Paiute language) who told them about the river they could follow to the Sierra – it would be called the Truckee. As they approached, traveling in the river channel, they crossed the river six times in one day and then ten times in a mile on another day. Oxen hooves became so soft the oxen refused to move. Movement was a torture. The men walked alongside to encourage them. Sometimes the oxen had to be triple teamed in order to get the wagons going. Then snows came just to remind them winter was coming. The grass was covered so the oxens' misery was greater. There was nothing for them to eat. They would stand and bawl each night. It was heart-wrenching. Late in life Moses Schallenberger said, "…the emigrants would forget their own misery in their pity for their cattle. But there was nothing to offer them except a few pine leaves…"

That was the oxen. Consider the people. They too were crossing and recrossing the river. Their shoes were not waterproofed. Shoes must have filled with water - cold water. Clothing must have gotten wet from the snow on the outside but also from the sweat on the inside. When would this trip ever be over? Isn't California just ahead? Whose idea was this? How will we get over those mountains?

They could not rest; they could not risk it.

The party split. It was November 14. Four men and two women headed on horseback up the Truckee River from what is now Truckee and saw Lake Tahoe. We'll get to those six later. The other group headed for Donner Lake and the Summit. Again the party split. Six wagons and three people were left at Donner Lake and five wagons and everyone else headed up. We'll get to the three in a little bit. There were forty people in the party.

Back to the main party

It continued to snow. The snows were so heavy the trees bent with the weight.

Winter had come. The snow got deeper. The Sierra Summit still loomed. How far did they still have to go? What was on the other side? How would they get over? For several days they searched for the way over the pass. Was this really the way to go? Should we have gone with the six who split off at the river? Was the Indian telling the truth?

painting by Harold Von Schmidt of emigrants on the Carson Pass but it's like what the Stephens Party did.

On November 20 the party headed out along the lake struggling through the snow that was two feet deep. Somewhere past the end of the lake when it got too hard for the oxen to go uphill the wagons were unloaded and the food and household goods were carried up the mountain. The snow was up to the oxen's chests. The oxen were double teamed to pull the wagons through the snow up the mountain. Higher they went and the snow became deeper. It was freezing cold. Half-way up the mountain their way was blocked by granite. They were stopped at a rock ledge ten feet high. They could go no further. It was impassable. They must have despaired – trapped on the side of the mountain, standing in snow, with more snow falling. They'd have to go back – to what? To where? Their dreams had been dashed but more than that, their lives were at stake. Their children could die. There were more than a dozen children to deal with including a newborn baby and a very pregnant mother to be. Then, Elisha Stephens later remembered, a miracle.

You can still see one or more candidates for the rock ledge if you follow the old Lincoln Highway route up Summit Canyon to Donner Summit and Donner Pass. They look a bit like Harold Von Schmidt's painting and today's hiker, looking for history, wonders at getting wagons and oxen around and over. Just when all seemed lost, a cleft in the rock was found. Oxen were led through one at a time. Wagons were hoisted up the face, oxen pulling on chains and men lifting from below. You'd bet there was no elation. That would come later if they got to the top and if they could get warm, finally, sitting around a fire. There was only one way up and they'd found it. Some later would follow the Stephens Party route, including those in the Donner Party who managed to escape, but by 1846 another two routes had been found. When travelers would even later use Donner Pass they would benefit from black powder which blasted a road through the rock.

On November 25, 1844 the Stephens Party reached Donner Summit. It had taken five days. It snowed more – more snow than they'd ever seen. Back east it would snow, but would not snow as much, and the snow would melt off. The

Traveling the Truckee River:
"the day has been warm but a fine breeze has fanned us. the journey has been over a rough & very rocky road. we crossed the river 6 times. the crossings are difficult, made so by the loose rock that lay thick on the bed of the river. the valley narrows as we ascent & the road follows the narrow bottoms n the side of the stream. whilst the pass is almost a continual canyon. the county is very uninviting. high mountain chains arise on both sides of the river, and are covered with brown sterility & dark volcanic burnt rock. occasionally a white lime or chalky spot is seen on their sides as if they had been ventilation of subterraneous fire or lava." 1849 [sic] Then, "The river was so crooked that one day they crossed it ten times in traveling a mile. This almost constant traveling in the water softened the hoofs of the oxen, while the rough stones in the bed of the river wore them down until the cattle's feet were so sore that it became a torture for them to travel.. The whole party were greatly fatigued by the incessant labor. But they dared not rest. It was near the middle of October, and a few light snows had already fallen, warning them of imminent danger of being buried in the snow in the mountains."

Moses Schallenberger, 1844 in Overland in 1844

The snow on the mountains was now about two feet deep. Keeping up their course on the north side of the lake until they reached its head, they started up the mountain. All the wagons were unloaded and the contents carried up the hill. Then the teams were doubled and the empty wagons were hauled up. When about half way up the mountain they came to a vertical rock about ten feet high. It seemed now that everything would have to be abandoned except what the men could carry on their backs. After a tedious search they found a rift in the rock, just about wide enough to allow one ox to pass at a time. Removing the yokes from the cattle, they managed to get them one by one through this chasm to the top of the rock. There the yokes were replaced, chains were fastened to the tongues of the wagons, and carried to the top of the rock, where the cattle were hitched to them. Then the men lifted the wagons, while the cattle pulled at the chains, and by this ingenious device the vehicles were all, one by one, got across the barrier.

From George Stewart's, Opening of the California Trail page 102, Overland in 1844,
Moses Schallenberger's reminiscences set down for George Bancroft in 1885 and edited by George Stewart.

Pacific Ocean storms hit California laden with moisture. As they ride higher and higher over the Sierra more moisture condenses and falls. By the time storms get to the summit they are dropping sometimes huge amounts of snow. In the Sierra the snow does not melt until summer. On Donner Summit, according to the Central Sierra Snow Lab, an average of 30' of snow falls each winter - an average of 34' in those days. The Stephens Party did not know that though. They had no idea how bad it could get – would get. Sometime ignorance is good.

The Stephens Party slogged through the snow for two days until they got to today's Big Bend; it was November 28.

Here a little digression is in order. We are familiar with walking. We place a foot down, roll heel to toe, and push off. Walking in snow is hard. We have to lift our feet out of the snow with each step. That extra lifting is tiring. As we put a foot down we have to push through the snow. On reaching firmer snow or ground we push off for the next step but there is a loss of traction. The foot can drag in the snow on the way to the next step. All of those adjustments to normal walking are tiring and then, after hours, exhausting. Then too, the Stephens Party was fighting the snow at high altitude. You lose your breath. You perspire. The sweat is cold. Sometimes it freezes - on you. You don't want to move any more than you have to so that your skin does not contact the freezing moisture. If it's snowing it's even harder. You sink further into the snow with each step. The clothes get wet and soggy. Walking, or stumbling through the snow, is a misery. How did they get 17 kids through the snow? How do you keep a newborn baby warm?

At Big Bend the exhausted party stopped. There was less snow; it's more than a thousand feet below the pass. The animals could not go on. The children could not go on. The men had an idea. Except for two (well one man and a boy), they would all head for California and help. They'd be back. First a week was spent building shelter, slaughtering oxen and preparing. Seventeen men left for California on December 6 leaving behind two men, six women, and seventeen children. What were the conversations as families separated? Did dire straits preclude second guessing? The oxen were slaughtered. That ought to be enough food. Little "cabins" were built. No doubt they were like the cabin at what would be at Donner Lake (be patient; that part of the story is still to come):12 x 14 feet, a roof of branches and ox hides, no door, no windows, no chinking between the logs. 25 people would occupy whatever they built until the men returned. Children don't take up a lot of room.

Not long after the men left there were 26 people at Big Bend. Elizabeth Yuba Murphy was born – the first white baby born in California. She was named after the Yuba River which, had there not been ice on it, flowed right at their doorway.

Imagine the plight of the women, children, and two men at Big Bend. It was winter. They were surrounded by snow. They had only beef to eat. It was a continual chore to get enough wood. Everyone must have sat by the fires but while their fronts were warm, their backs must have been cold. How did they take care of hygiene? What is it like to wear the same clothes for week after week? How thick do they get with sweat and dirt and smoke, and body oils? How do you have a baby in those conditions? How do you keep the baby clean? How do you deal with seventeen unhappy, cold children while you are unhappy and cold and worried? Will the men make it to Sutter's Fort – and back? We can only imagine their thoughts: Why did I ever let him talk me into this? No one kept a diary.

Seventeen men headed for Sutter's Fort where, in mid-December they found the six who had split back at the Truckee River. The men had arrived just in time for a revolt against Mexico and inexplicably joined Sutter in heading south for Santa Barbara rather than going back to rescue their families.

The revolt sputtered and by mid-January the men were back heading for the stranded families who were down to eating boiled hides. What must that be like? What's it like boiling ox hides and scraping off he gruel for sustenance? What despair there must have been when the last meat was gone. The cold was unrelenting. The days must have been boring. What do you talk about after you've talked about every-

thing? How often can you wonder about the men and where they might be and how soon they'll be back? Did they give in to despair? How did they keep the children's spirits up? No one wrote about any of that - once they got to California there were other things to think about and who cares anyway, we have new lives to lead - so we can only imagine.

In a measure of the despair some at least must have been feeling, James Miller and his son headed for California for help. There was nothing else to do to save the women and children; the men were not coming back. Miller and his son had not gone far before they saw a figure coming through the snow. It was Dennis Martin and the front of the rescue party. The men had made it and were returning. The food the rescue party brought revived the families. It was February 24. Dennis Martin continued on to Donner Lake. He'd made a promise to Elizabeth Townsend. That story is still to come.

The families were rescued and Moses Schallenberger said, "They were all safe, although some of them had suffered much from hunger." Some, he said, had eaten nothing for fourteen days but rawhides. It was February, two months since the men had left for California and help.

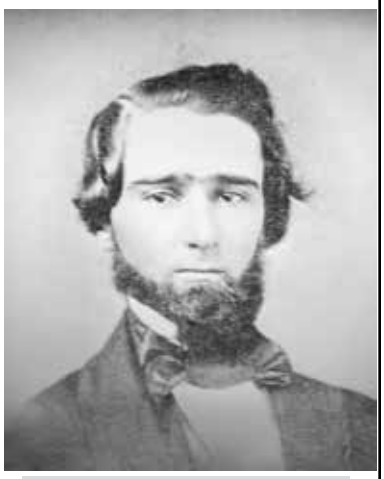
The men arrived back at Big Bend in February. On March first they all came upon a magnificent view: spring was bursting in the Sacramento Valley – it was an "earthly paradise." At that point we can suppose their thoughts were all about what was hoped to come and not about what they'd survived.

The Stephens Party did open the Emigrant Road though over which thousands of emigrants would later come. Take a walk down at Big Bend between the roadside parking and the river just up from the fire station. You'll see a trail marker for the Emigrant Trail. It's off to the right, maybe 50 yards from the road. Go west and look carefully at the granite slabs. Look around enough and you'll find many rust marks like the above, narrow stripes of brown, from thousands of wagon wheels. Maybe some of the marks are from the Stephens Party's five wagons.

Moses Schallenberger's Story

"More Miserable than I can describe"

That quote is what we in the literary profession call a "hook" which grabs readers and gets them reading.



Moses Schallenberger

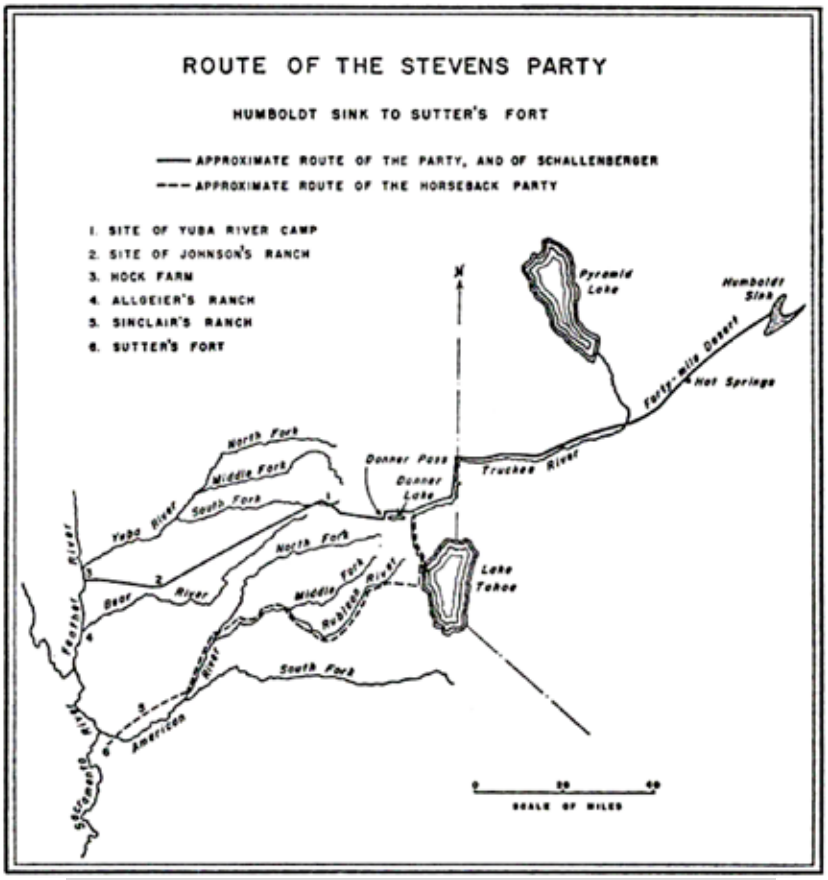
Moses Schallenberger was seventeen years old and apparently adventurous like his sister Elizabeth. His sister had gone with six others up the Truckee River leaving her husband, Dr. John Townsend, to go with the main party over Donner Summit. Her story is coming up. Moses, along with two others, had volunteered to guard the wagons that were to remain at the lake since they were full of goods to be sold in California. The emigrants had thought the snow would not be a problem. Hunting would be easy. In his reminiscences as an old man, Moses said, "I had no fears of starvation… I did not suppose the snow would at any time be more than two feet deep, nor that it would be on the ground continually." He had "no anxiety" about Indians either. The three "men" were left with two cows, "so worn out and poor that they could go no further." You can imagine his surprise as the winter wore on.

An artist's rendition of Moses' cabin at Donner Lake from Moses Schallenberger at Trukey's Lake

Parenthetically, Moses may have been the first to make that ingenuous

guess about snowfall and snow accumulation but he was not the last. Theodore Judah, who laid out the transcontinental railroad route, also thought snow would not be a problem. But that's another story for later. Let's not get sidetracked.

The Stephens Party and half of the wagons headed up Donner Pass. The wagons had to be emptied and Moses probably helped carrying wagon contents. Once the party had conquered the pass he headed back to Donner Lake with the two others who'd also volunteered to stay behind. The Stephens Party was now in three parts.



from The Opening of the California Trail

The men and Moses set about making a cabin 12 X 14 feet, "we determined to make ourselves as comfortable as possible." It had no windows and although it had a doorway it had no door. It was covered with hides and brush. There was a chimney ten feet tall. There was no chinking between the logs. Just as they finished the house it began to snow and three feet fell that night. Then it snowed more. The remaining cattle had to be killed so they would not starve. They were "nothing but skin and bones" anyway.

"Death, the fearful, agonizing death of starvation, literally stared us in the face."

It kept on snowing and the three began to fear they would "perish in the snow." Here we should remember that the main part of the Stephens Party was dealing with this same snow as were Moses' sister and the others who'd gone along the Truckee River.

The snow was so light they could not walk on it. There was no game; it had all left for lower elevations or gone into hibernation. The snow got to be ten feet deep and the three began to feel depressed. "We now began to feel very blue, for there seemed no possible hope for us." The snow was "getting deeper and deeper."

Imagine what their day to day life was like. Imagine the biting cold day after day. Imagine seeing only the same faces day after day. Imagine constantly thinking about food. Imagine wearing the same clothes for weeks and then months. Imagine hygiene. Imagine the boredom.

The cabin was almost covered with snow. There was no hope. Half their meat was gone. Death by starvation "stared us in the face." The three men could not move except to get to firewood. They ate half the meat from the cows and the snow got deeper. They feared a horrible death by starvation and so decided to hike out to California.

Each step was an ordeal on the homemade snowshoes. Each step lifted pounds of snow that had caved in on top of the shoe as each forward step sank into the snow. That first three miles was along the lake but the next three miles was steeply uphill a thousand feet to the pass. After more than 15 miles Schallenberger said, [according to the editor, George R. Stewart, they'd gone about six miles in reality] "I was scarcely able to drag one foot after the other." Walking in snowshoes was "the hardest kind of work."

They got to the top of the pass and into Summit Valley and Moses was exhausted. He was just a boy. "….we reached the summit of the mountain about sunset that night, … I was scarcely able to drag one foot after the other." Then he developed cramps. He could not walk "more than fifty yards without stopping to rest." Their camp that night was a fire and pine boughs to sleep on. They cut down a tree and built a large fire on the snow. Sleep was hard. They worried about the rest of the party and they worried about their own fates. They kept the fire going and when morning came the fire had melted the snow and sunk to the ground 15 feet below. "The fire was so far down that we could not get to it" but they had nothing to cook anyway.

Moses had bad cramps and could clearly not get to California. Moses realized he had to go back to the lake, alone.

"We did not say much at parting. Our hearts were too full for that. There was simply a warm clasp of the hand accompanied by the familiar word, 'good-bye' which we all felt might be the last words we should ever speak to each other. The feeling of loneliness that came over me as the two men turned away I cannot express, though it will never be forgotten, while the 'good-by Mose,' so sadly and reluctantly spoken, rings in my ears. Today."

17 year old Moses Schallenberger went back to Donner Lake alone. He was so exhausted, upon reaching the cabin, that even though the door sill was only 9 inches high, he had to lift each leg with his hands, "I was never so tired in my life as when, just a little before dark, I came in sight of the cabin."

Moses was alone in a strange land. Winter had already turned out to be like nothing he'd imagined. What was in store now? What would happen? Would he ever get out? What about the rest of the party that had gone over the summit and what about his sister who'd split off earlier?

"Mose" felt, "something might turn up". His optimism is just one trait that makes him exceptional.

Food was a necessity and hunting had not panned out once the snow fell but Moses remembered there were some traps in the wagons that had been left behind and he set to work to use them. Using some of the beef he baited the traps and caught a coyote. The taste was horrible. So he tried various methods of cooking: using a Dutch oven, boiling, and every possible manner but "could not get him into a condition where he could be eaten without revolting my stomach."

For three days he only had coyote to eat. Then he trapped two foxes. Roasted fox was delicious. Moses also tried stewed crow but it was "difficult for me to decide which I liked best, crow or coyote."
He continued to trap catching foxes and coyotes but he never ate another coyote and when he left there were 11 coyotes hanging at the rear of the cabin. During his stay at Donner Lake he had no desire for anything but meat and had no desire for salt. He had enough coffee for one cup and that he saved for Christmas. That was his celebration.

Imagine Moses, left at Donner Lake, alone in a strange world where the snow never melted. What went through his mind day after day? What would he eat? Would the others reach California? Would someone come back for him and if someone didn't how would he know how to get to California? Would he live?

> "I had no fears of starvation… I did not suppose the snow would at any time be more than two feet deep, nor that it would be on the ground continually."

To keep himself occupied, besides trapping and keeping the fire going, there were lots of books belonging to John Townsend in one of the wagons. Even so, after a few months at the lake, it seemed like he'd been there for years. "My life was more miserable than I can describe." The daily struggle and uncertainty was wearing. "I longed for some sound to break the oppressive stillness…. I would talk aloud to myself. At night I built large fires and read by the light…as late as possible, in order that I might sleep late in the next morning, and thus cause the days to seem shorter." "What I wanted most was enough to eat, and the next thing I tried hardest to do was to kill time. I thought the snow would never leave the ground…"

Elizabeth Townsend

Moses stayed at the lake for more than two months alone.

"One evening, a little before sunset, about the last of February, as I was standing a short distance from my cabin, I thought I could distinguish the form of a man moving towards me… My feeling can be better imagined than described." The rest of the party had survived. His sister had begged Dennis Martin to go to the lake and see about Moses, which he had. Moses was saved.

Moses and Dennis Martin climbed to Donner Summit and hiked to California. Think about that next time you travel Highway 80 at high speed and in climate-controlled comfort. The ridge on the south side of Donner Lake is named for Moses.

Moses dictated his story at the age of 59 and it can be found in Moses Schallenberger at Truckey's Lake.

The Horseback Group

Now we come to a puzzle.

It is natural to stay with the group when you are in a strange place, are unsure, or are in dangerous territory. You benefit from the safety and security the group provides as well as members' skills. If you are going to go your own way, ahead of the main group it makes sense to go in the same direction. If something happens you've got back-up following.

So what went through the minds of the Stephens Party that allowed two teenagers, a woman barely out of her teens, and

three others, including a woman, to split off and go in a different direction from the main party?

What went through the mind of this horseback group of six that led them to take their chances away from the main group and in a different direction?

Presumably the horseback group members had some information, perhaps from Chief Truckee who had already helped the group. Still, what if something happened? There would be no one coming along who could help.

What went through the Murphy Family's minds as three Murphy siblings went off as part of the group?

What went through John Townsend's mind as his wife joined the horseback group? Did he want to go too but felt his responsibility as a doctor to the main group especially since one woman was ready to shortly give birth? What made Elizabeth Townsend join the horseback group and leave her husband? Her brother has already volunteered to stay at Donner Lake to guard the wagons left there.

Ages of the Horseback Group Members

- Elizabeth Townsend - 34
- Francis Deland, Elizabeth's servant - unknown
- Oliver Magnan (Magnent) - unknown
- Ellen (or Helen) Murphy - 22
- John Murphy - 19
- Daniel Murphy - 18

Imagine the bravery of the horseback group members willing to chance the unknown without a map in a strange country with snow falling and winter arriving?

What could go wrong?

The party split. It was November 14. Four men and two women headed on horseback up the Truckee River from what is now Truckee. Each member had a horse and there were two pack horses. They carried one change of clothing each. There was no map. Elizabeth Townsend was among the six, having left her husband and brother with the main group. Imagine the glorious moment when they came upon Lake Tahoe. They traveled along the west side of Lake Tahoe and then crossed the Sierra and headed for California. It took them twenty-one days.

This story of the six was not eventful perhaps because nothing happened worth noting except for John Murphy getting swept away down river (he was saved), or perhaps because the main characters just didn't say anything afterwards. What we are left with for this part of the big story of the Stephens Party requires a lot of speculation because little was written down. One maybe consequential event for the group was being the first white people to come to Lake Tahoe's shore. Imagine what they thought as they gazed at its blue expanse.

Then they went over the Sierra Crest to Sutter's Fort in California. The only other story associated with the group is that they ate some of Alcalde Sinclair's cattle on their way out of the Sierra and he forgave them. Compare that to the arrival of the Forlorn Hope two years later when an emaciated William Eddy, having crossed the Sierra Crest in winter as part of the Forlorn Hope, knocked on a cabin door looking for help. Harriet Ritchie answered the door and burst into tears at the sight of him. Eddy's trail of bloody footprints marked the trail others followed to find his companions.

We can assume that the Stephens Party horseback group of six, unhindered by wagons, left the main party in a quest to get to Sutter's Fort quickly. There they would have gotten help for the rest of the group. The weakness in that idea is that suppose they got supplies. Where would they have gone with them? The main party had continued to Donner Lake and then over the crest but where would their route have taken them so they could have met the horseback group? How would the horseback group know exactly what route to take, which canyons to follow? Instead of going south to Lake Tahoe, away from Sutter's Fort, why not cross the crest of the Sierra with the others and then head speedily downhill marking their trail? The route they took diverged from the route given by Chief Truckee to the wagon group. That said, did Chief Truckee also sketch out the route to Lake Tahoe and then, following one of the four rivers and streams, head up and over to the source of the American River?

What were the members of the group thinking as they split from the main group? Were their thoughts only about saving the others and getting to California quickly? How much was about adventure, heading where no whites had gone before and adventure away from the parents of the three Murphy kids? Note how young three of the members of the group were. What induced Elizabeth Townsend to leave her brother and husband? Note too that the three members of that family were split as much as they could be with Moses at the lake, John Townsend with the main group and Elizabeth one of the six in the horseback group. It's natural to assume there might have been some marital issues separating the Townsends but there's no evidence. They had worked together in John's medical practice and did

John Townsend

again in California. What was John thinking as he saw his wife heading south, away? We can imagine John staying with the main group so they could take advantage of his medical skills. He would practice medicine in California and die young from cholera as would Elizabeth. They never wrote about their experiences. We certainly should recognize the courage of the horseback group.

The horseback group ended at Sutter's Fort ahead of the men who had left the women and children at Big Bend. A successful journey like that garners no attention and so Donner Lake, Donner Pass, Donner Pk. and all the other eponymous Donner geographical locations got the attention grabbing name.

Questions for which it would be nice to have answers.

Unfortunately we are left to make guesses about important aspects of the Stephens Party since members of the party wrote very little down for us.

1. Why did Elizabeth Townsend volunteer to go with the Horseback Party of Six (HPS)? Seems odd that she'd be willing to separate from her husband, Dr. Townsend, take the clear risk. Was the motivation adventure, possibly they were having a rift in the marriage, she was an accomplished equestrian, had the best horse for the job, etc.?

2. How were Schallenberger, Foster and Montgomery selected to stay at Truckee Lake? Did they volunteer, were they picked based upon their youth, not having children or a wife, their hunting and survival skills, etc.?

3. What route did the men take from the winter encampment near Big Bend to Sutter's Fort? Who told them the route? Greenwood maybe?

4. What exactly was the HPS' assignment? To get help for those stranded in the winter Sierra? Bring back provisions? If help and provisions were to be brought, to where exactly? The HPS couldn't have known about the winter encampment as they occurred while they were making their way to Sutter's Fort. Were they told to bring help and provisions back to Truckee Lake?

5. Dennis Martin, one of the men who traveled to Sutter's Fort, fought the brief battle(s) and returned to the winter encampment in Feb 1845, was asked by Elizabeth Townsend to travel onto Truckee Lake to retrieve her younger brother, Moses Schallenberger. Presumably he was told the way by Foster or Montgomery (both who remained at the winter encampment after leaving Schallenberger behind) - or by Stephens who had managed the 5 wagons from the Lake to the winter encampment. What was his motivation to take such a risk? Was he acting alone? Is it possible he and Elizabeth Townsend had "a thing" for each other?

6. Why were the Murphy family willing to allow three siblings (Ellen (sometimes named as Helen in the sources), John and Daniel) to join the risky HPS expedition? Seems like a huge risk reward. What was the reasoning for their selection?

Here's a Question for Which We Do Have an Answer

How did the Stephens Party decide on their route over the Sierra given that there were no signs, no maps, and no one with previous experience over the route. Here is an excerpt from an article in The Bakersfield Californian on February 7, 1924 called "Former Sheriff Describes Life of Elisha Stephens." This excerpt describes how the party found its way. The former sheriff was T.A. Baker who founded Bakersfield

"The Stephens Party "encountered but little difficulty until they reached

Elisha Stephens from the Phrenological Journal 11/1883

the foothills of the Sierra Nevada's. It was often necessary to remain for several days in one camp while Captain Stephens and the scouts went on ahead to map out the way to get through the mountains. Stephens always had scouts two or three days ahead of the outfit and a scout came into camp each night to direct the next day's journey. So, by moving slowly and carefully, they managed to be very successful in their plans. Being the first emigrant train to pass through, and the whites being new to the Indians, they encountered very little trouble from them. Their main annoyance was their natural cupidity. This bothered them but little and the Indians wee of great help at times in directing the outfit over the best routes. This was done through the sign language. Sometimes the captain's patience was strained to a severe extent by the ignorance of the Indians. At times he would consume a whole day patiently mapping out on the ground, by means of mounds of dirt, small rock, sticks, etc., while getting them to understand what he wanted. Often the Indians knowledge of distance was greatly limited, but generally Stephens got along very nicely with them."

Unearthing the West: History Expeditions Retraces Footsteps and Recites Forgotten Tales.

The article here explains the philosophy behind the group. That's needed because we've got to know what would induce rational people to leave home and trek over a hundred miles, about half each time in snow, to honor California pioneers whom you discover as you read, really were heroes.

The American West, a land of rugged beauty and pioneering spirit, holds a treasure trove of stories waiting to be unearthed. Enter History Expeditions, a unique group driven by a passion to explore the tales and trails of this captivating region. But their adventures go beyond breathtaking landscapes; they delve into the forgotten heroes who shaped its history.

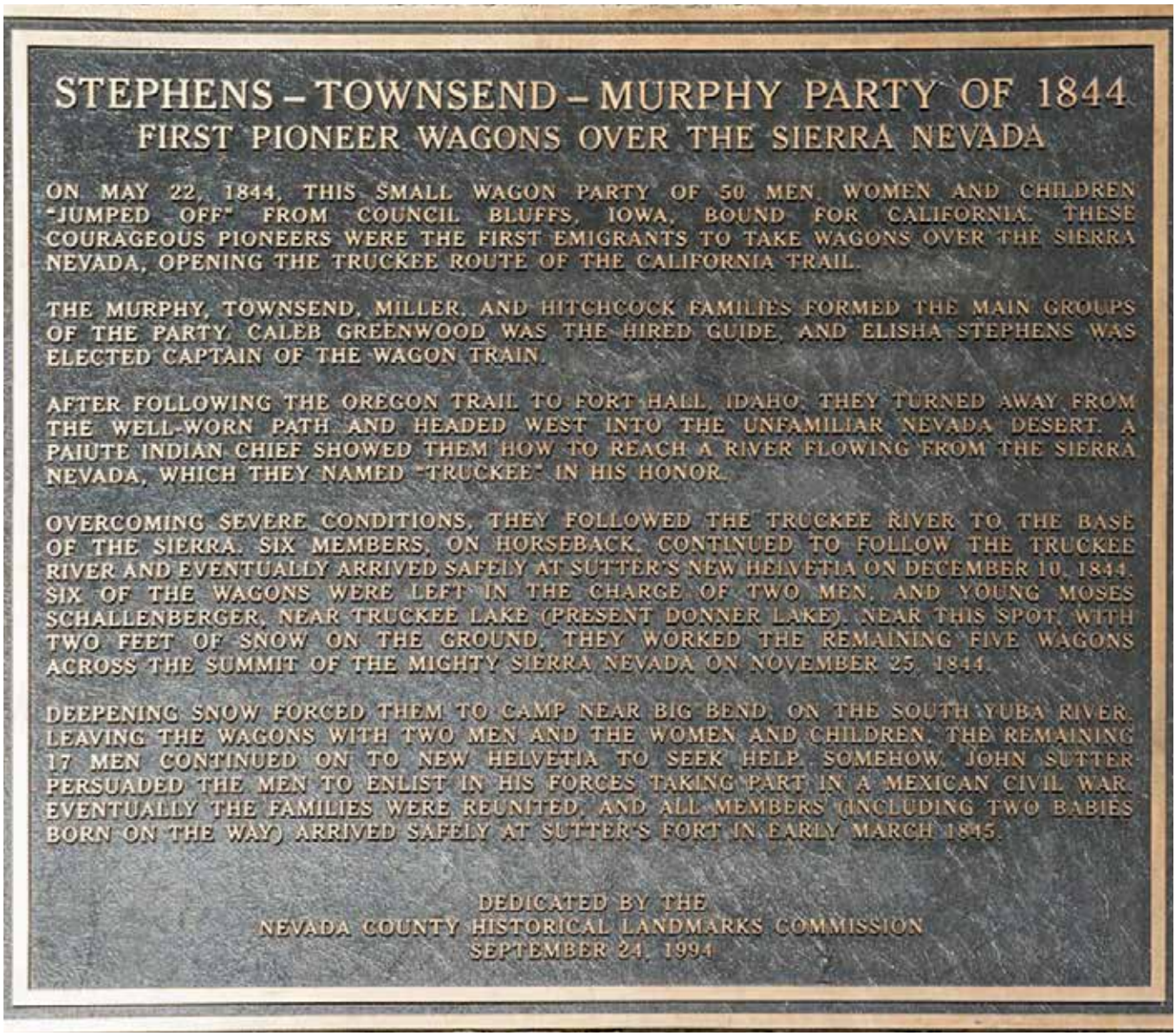
These intrepid explorers the members of History Expeditions, a blend of ultra-distance athletes and amateur historians, embark on challenging expeditions that combine historical research with physical endurance. Their mission? To breathe life into the past by retracing the footsteps of remarkable individuals who have faded from the public eye.

….

But the journey doesn't end on the trail. History Expeditions understands the importance of sharing their discoveries and the significance of these forgotten figures. They document their expeditions with film crews, capturing the physical and emotional challenges encountered. Real-time GPS tracking allows the public to virtually participate in the adventure. Through meticulous research and storytelling, they ensure these heroes are not lost to the sands of time.

Four members of History Expeditions on their way from Donner Lake to Johnson Ranch as part of the reprise of the Donner Party Forlorn Hope Expedition in 2020

History Expeditions is more than just a team of adventurers; they are historical sleuths, piecing together forgotten narratives. Their expeditions are testaments to the power of human spirit, both in the past, with figures like Thompson, and in the present, with the team's dedication to unearthing these stories. By exploring the tales and trails of the American West, they remind us that history isn't just about grand events; it's about the remarkable individuals who shaped our past.



Monument to the Stephens Party at the lookout below Rainbow Bridge