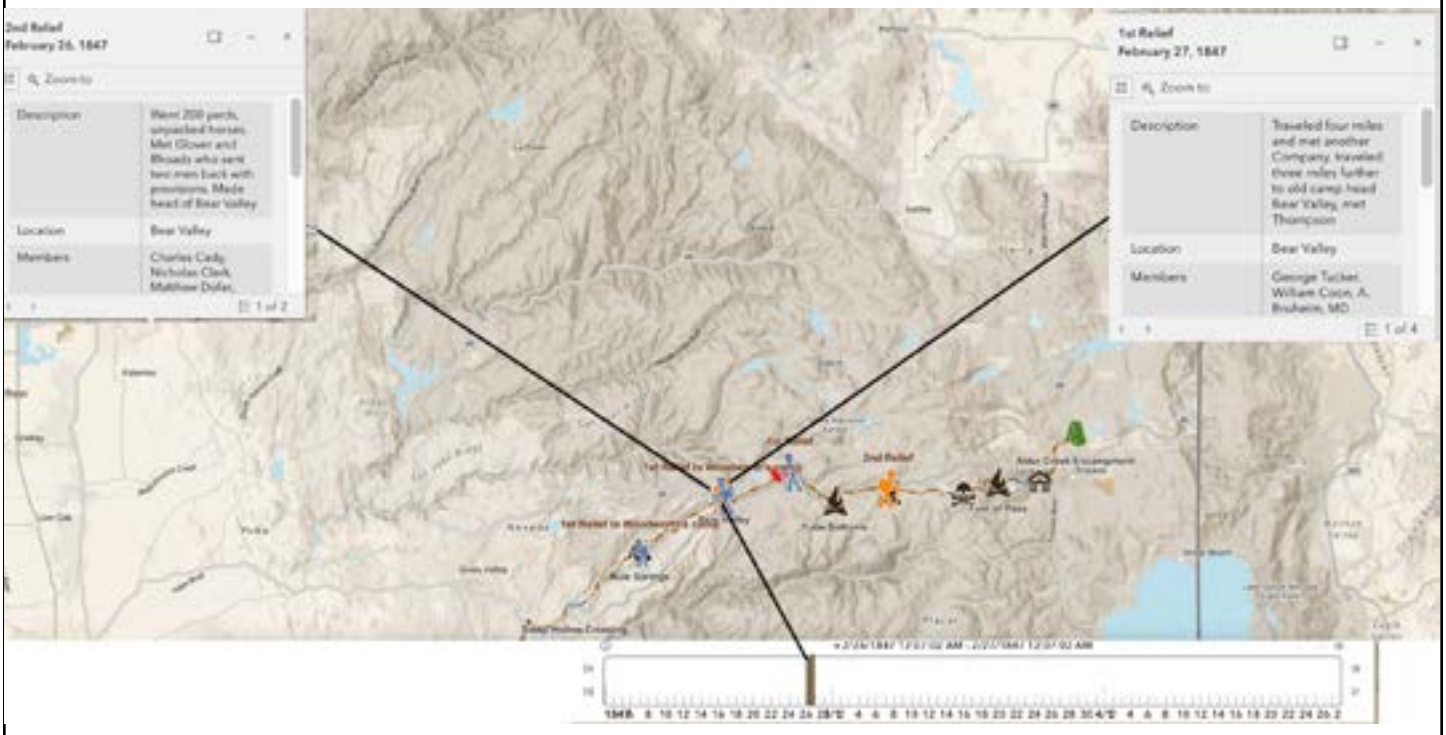
Donner Relief Parties: Mapping The Heroes

Donner Rescue Expeditions Interactive map

The Donner Party was more than just two wrong turns and a bad guidebook. Delve into the story and we find tragedy, bad luck, bad decisions, ignorance, dissension, mendacity, evil, horror, and unbelievable hardship. That's the bad. The Donner Party was also about tenacity, heroism, and the very best of the human spirit. All of that is worthy of remembering and celebrating, which is why four extreme athletes did a reprise of the Donner Party rescue expeditions in 2022. They hiked and snowshoed from Johnson Ranch, near Wheatland CA. to Donner Lake celebrating the extraordinary feat of the men who went into the mountains to rescue the Donner Party. In order to do their trek they had to have a map of the route and that has grown into an extraordinary interactive map that tells the story of the original rescuers as well as serves as a guide..

The Donner party arrived at what would be called Donner Lake on October 31, 1846, two years before the Gold Rush. After a couple of attempts to get over the pass it was clear they were going no further and after their animals were lost in the snows it was clear, too, that food would run out. Help was needed or it might be that no one would survive the Sierra winter. Fifteen members of the party, called the Forlorn Hope, set out on December 16, heading for California. They were taking a huge risk traveling over the snow with little food and no maps; but there was risk in staying at the lake too and they had families to save. To get to California they to slogged through the snow on Donner Summit and endured storms with no shelter. They went without food and bore unimaginable hardships. 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 each leather shoelaces? 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? How can you possibly give up – as long as you live? What is it like to be forced to eat human flesh?



Here we have a slice of the Donner Party Relief expeditions map with the route laid out as researched by Tim Twietmeyer and Bob Crowley. The timeline at the the bottom scrolls until stopped and takes the reader to a date during the expeditions. In this case Febrary 26 is the stopping point where there are two icons of hikers in two different colors representing the first and second reliefs. At the top left and right are the notes that pop up at that point for that day for those two relief parties.

It took the five survivors of the Forlorn Hope thirty-three days to get to Johnson Ranch. They had barely survived. When William Eddy knocked on Harriet Ritchie's door at Johnson Ranch, she burst into tears at the emaciated and staggering man held upright by two Indians. Bloody footprints marked his trail which others followed to find his companions. The Forlorn Hope's heroism would save about half of the people trapped at the lake.
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, endured the hardship of carrying heavy packs uphill through the snow over the Sierra to Donner Lake, almost one hundred miles. They endured hunger, cold, exhaustion, and the horror of seeing the camps at Donner Lake. This is heroism but the story is not generally known or celebrated.

The rescuers were in a rush heading east to Donner Lake but unfortunately for people today who are interested, the rescue parties left no maps or pictures. There are people interested in more than the outline of the story and want the details. There are those who want to celebrate the heroism and the best of human nature.

When four extreme athletes decided to follow up their 2020 reprise of the Forlorn Hope trek with a celebratory reprise of the rescue expeditions in 2022, they had little to go on. So there followed a year of intense research into books, journals, articles, and websites. There were many on the ground reconnaissances to develop the route, piece by piece. Then, prior to the January 2022 departure, there was trip organization, logistics, and property owner permissions to obtain.

In 2023 there was another reprise, this time of the Grosh Brothers of Virginia City.* Meanwhile work started on an extraordinary tool which people would be able to use to immerse themselves in the heroism surrounding the Donner Party rescue expeditions.

The tool, which would become a day-to-day interactive map of the Donner Party rescue expeditions route from Johnson Ranch to Donner Lake, was an outgrowth of the need to catalog the research that two of the four extreme athletes had done. Tim Tweitmeyer and Bob Crowley began their route research almost immediately after they and two partners finished the reprise of the Forlorn Hope route. They were hooked by the history and the heroism.

The research came from contemporary authors J. Quinn Thornton (who interviewed the principles in 1847) and Edwin Bryant (who wrote What I Saw in California and who had been part of the larger party that included the Donners until he broke off, trading his wagon for a mule). Then there was Patrick Breen's Diary (member of the Donner Party), William Eddy's diary (which has disappeared into history but which was referenced by James Reed and Edwin Bryant), James Reed's diary (member of the Donner Party who was exiled, arrived in California long before the rest of the party, and who led one of the rescue parties), and Reason Tucker's and the Rhodes brothers diaries (members of the relief expeditions). Those sources provided eighty percent of what Twietmeyer and Crowley learned. The other twenty percent came from other participants like Virginia Reed (James' daughter and one of the rescuees).
As research continued the amount of information was almost overwhelming and needed some organizing but the names of the sources only skates across the surface. Each source was full of stories. There were four relief parties over the first part of 1847 and each of those parties splintered making more entities to follow, more day by day events to catalog. Some of the parties were simultaneous, at least in part. Bob and Tim first used Excel spreadsheets to organize information but that quickly proved unwieldly. There had to be a better way and a way to combine the repository of stories with a map that would be interactive. First Bob and Tim brought in a Donner Party expert, Dan Rosen the author of The Donner Party Diary, to vet their research and help organize things. He really accelerated the research adding to the physical map with his encyclopedic knowledge of the Donner Party and his organizational skills. Then there began a world-wide search, digitally, for mapping software that would not just designate a route but would give people access to the stories of the relief expeditions in an organized fashion. Ironically the software Bob and Tim found, Esri, which was the most sophisticated, was also California-based. Esri is GIS (geographic information system) mapping and spatial analytic software used by NGO's (non-governmental organizations) and governments around the world to organize information by location. In short, Esri is software which blend maps and databases. Coincidentally, Tim's son works for Esri. Esri is not cheap but it has attractive pricing for non-profits which was available to Bob and Tim, having hooked up with the Donner Summit Historical Society which is a 501c3.

Esri is like learning a new language, but once learned with the help of experts, it provided a way to organize all of the research Bob and Tim had done into a usable form. It's easy in a time of superlatives to describe this effort to make the interactive map as the best or most wonderful but it really is a tour de force.

Just working with the map the user gets an appreciation of the effort that went into its production. A timeline scrolls along the bottom of the screen which marks each of the days of the various expeditions. As the days change icons pop up along the route to Donner Lake. Click on the icons and up pops short descriptions of what happened on those days. Click again on "view" and you're drawn into the whole text of the research.

The story told by the map is engrossing as it invites viewers to immerse themselves in one of the most heroic feats in American history. It's more though. Besides being a geographic

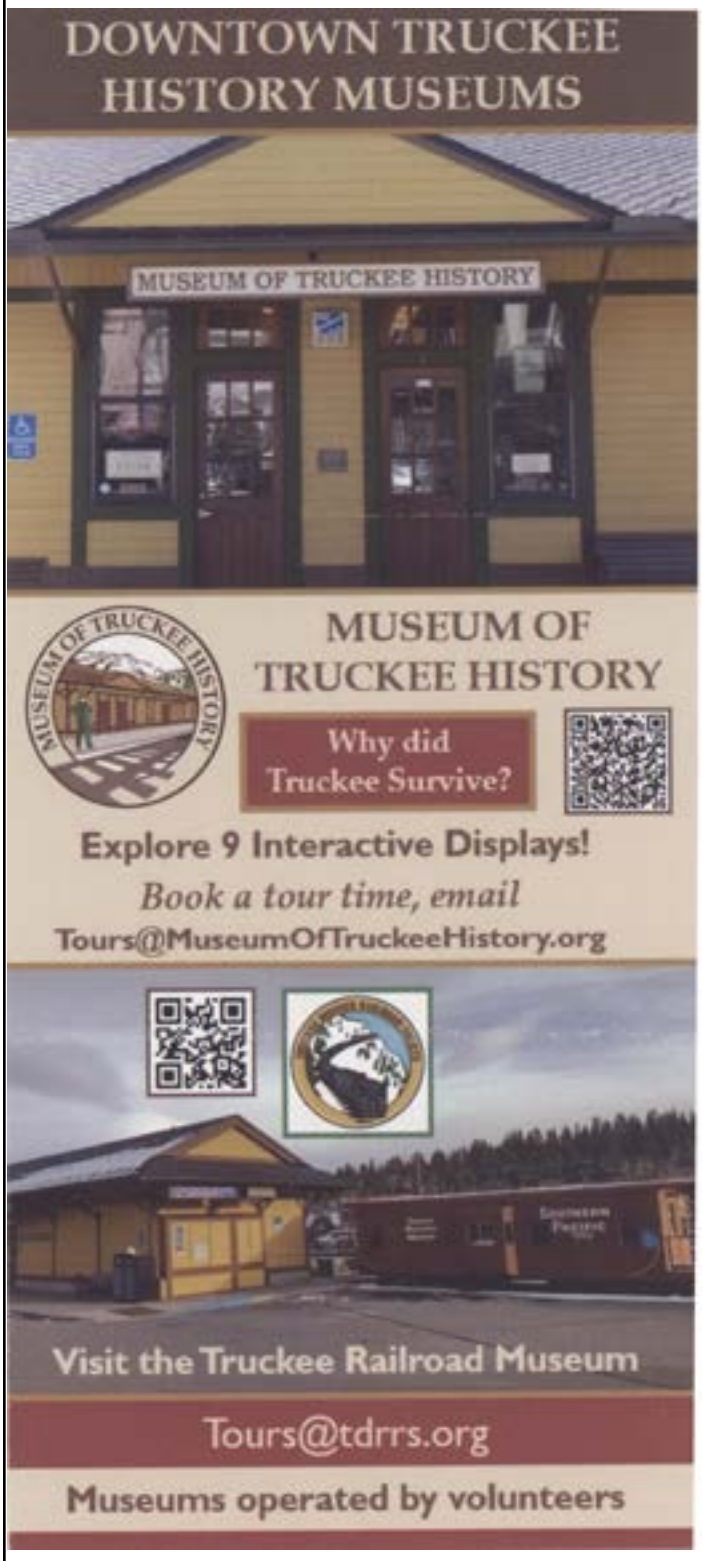
organizational system, the Esri generated map Bob and Tim made is a new kind of literature. When we read a book about a subject we do it linearly with the story unfolding through prose. The attention span of people today is diminishing though. The average American only reads two books a year. This interactive map of the Donner party rescue expeditions invites readers/viewers to approach the subject in any way they want at the moment in large pieces or small – linearly but also randomly or personally. You can stop the timeline wherever you want and then connect to the notes for the day and move around any part of the story you want. We've had hyperlinks for decades but this is richer than hyperlinks. The consumer (rather than reader) can zoom in and out exploring details or absorbing the overall view.

Here are links to the interactive map, an introcution, and a "how to."

URL for map: https://historyexp.org/donner-relief-parties-mapping-the-heroes/

Link to Mapping The Heroes map sizzle reel: https://youtu.be/XfSj-Don7T4

Link for "how to" video: https://youtu.be/uznsptlXAdk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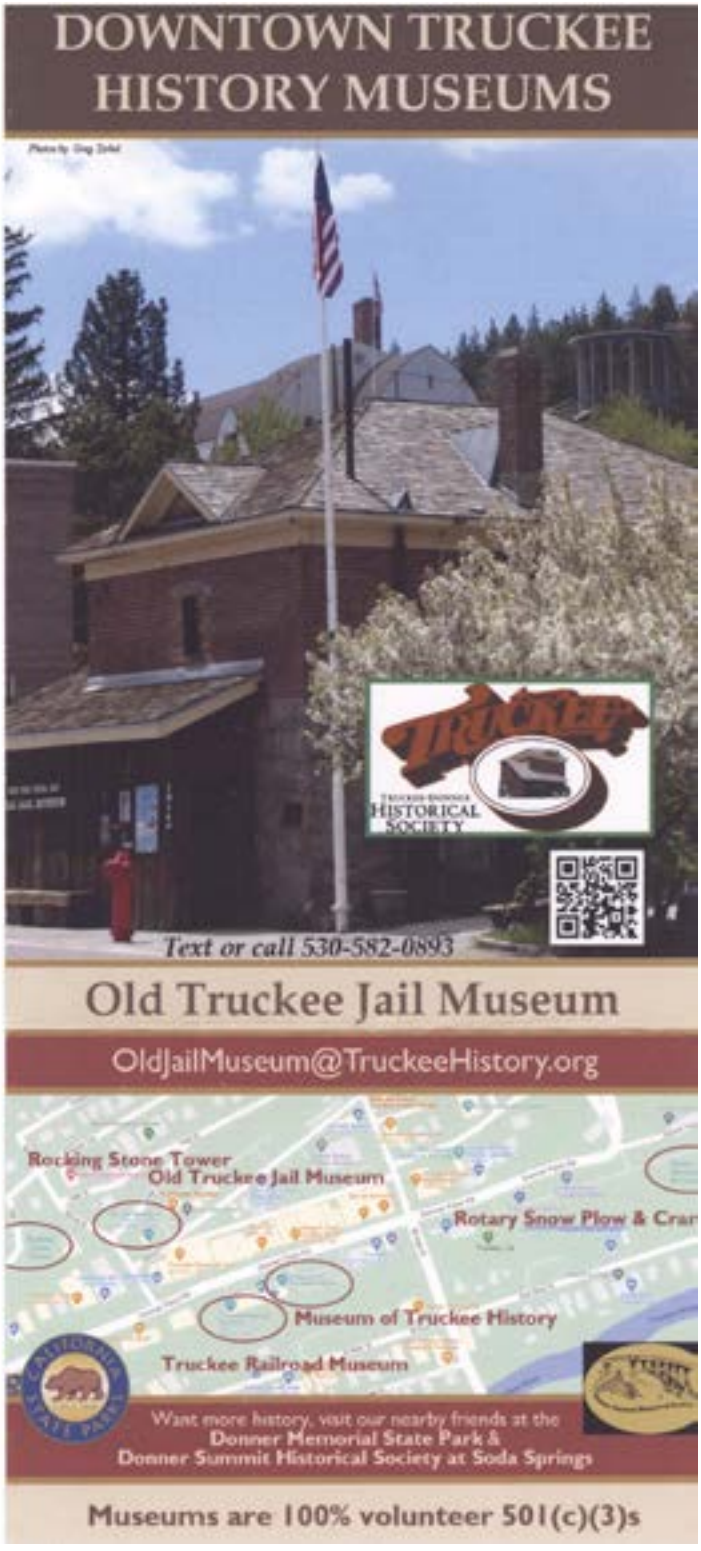
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