

CROSSROADS IN THE WEST: THE INTERSECTIONS OF THE DONNER PARTY AND THE MORMONS

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The histories written of western migration in the United States have sufficiently told the story of the ill-fated Donner Party. Most students of history are well acquainted with their entrapment by the snows of the Sierra Nevada Mountains during the winter of 1846-47. The facts of the party's suffering, death, and cannibalism are well documented and have often been recounted. Therefore, the purpose of this work is not to reiterate that history. Instead, this article will examine an area of this history less known yet no less significant to Latter-day Saint history. The reader will discover a few moments in time where the paths of the Donner Party and the Mormons crossed and mingled to become part of the fabric of both histories.

That such intersections occurred in 1846 is fascinating—considering the vast land traveled by each and the diversity of their missions. Perhaps there was not a better year for such events, though. Bernard DeVoto suggests that the year of 1846 was one of those years when “there are exceedingly brief periods which determine a long future.” He continues in commenting on the people and events of the year when he states: “The manifold possibilities of chance were shaped to converge into the inevitable, when the future of the American nation was precipitated out of the possible by the actions of the people.”¹

He implies that the events of the year 1846 were chance. That there was a higher source of power involved during this period I have no question. But the people and events of the year did impact a nation, so it is not difficult to see how many of the paths may have crossed during those times.

The Mormons and the Donner Party crossed paths in four ways. These intersections are (1) Mormons who

traveled with the Donner Party; (2) Mormons who rescued the survivors of the Donner Party; (3) Mormons who discovered and took care of the remains of the party; and (4) the effects of the Donner Party on the Mormon migration. This article contains the story of the Latter-day Saints who were at these crossroads.

Mormons in the Donner Party

Two Mormon family groups traveled with the Donner party. The first of these was the Murphy family. This family's status as Latter-day Saints is often called into question, so an investigation of their history is warranted.

Jeremiah and Lavina Murphy were introduced to the gospel in 1836 by Elder Wilford Woodruff and Elder Reed Smoot. Elder Woodruff comments in his journal about riding to a Mr. Jeremiah B. Murphy's in Weakly County, Tennessee, on 24 June 1836.² The Murphy family is mentioned often in Elder Woodruff's journal. On 6 August 1836, he wrote:

Preached at Mr Alexanders and Baptized 2 Brother & Sister Murphy. Brother Murphy was dissatisfied because he had not received the Holy Ghost as he expected. Probably looking for [a person was?] not the [cause/case?]. We told him to consider the subject well.³

The Murphy family is mentioned many more times in his journal in the latter part of 1836. Apparently, their home was somewhat of a center of early Church activity in the regions around Tennessee. On 23 September 1836, he wrote:

Rode to Feliciana. From thence took the Dresden road & with difficulty crossed the Obine swamp &

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creek my horse frequently wallowing in the cyprus slues nearly under water & mud. From thence I rode to Br Jere. Murphys weakly County Tenn whare I found the saints well & rejoiced to find his household well & all the saints. Distance of the day 30 miles.⁴

The Murphy household at this time consisted of Jeremiah and Lavina, both in their early thirties, along with the following children: Sarah Ann C. (age nine), Harriet F. (age eight), John Landrum (age six), Mariann Marjory "Mary" (age four), Lemuel B. "Lem" (age two), and William Green "Bill" (age seven months). Simon Peter would later join the family in March of 1838.

All indications are that the family had embraced the gospel and were very involved. At the end of September 1836, Elder Woodruff mentioned that the family was going south—to share the message of the Restoration with relatives. It is documented that Jeremiah's brother, Emmanuel, also joined the Church and was an active member for the rest of his life.

The history of the family becomes a little unclear after 1836. Evidently, Jeremiah died about 1839. Elder Woodruff mentions this event in his journal entry of 31 August 1860: "I had an interview with Emanuel Murphy who has Just arived from Tenessee. David Patten Baptized him in Tenessee in 1836. I was present. He also Baptized his Brother Jeremiah who afterwards Apostitized & died."⁵

The facts around Jeremiah's apostasy are unknown. Elder Woodruff's statement is the only one suggesting that Jeremiah did not stay in the Church. The history of his surviving family somewhat contradicts this idea.

Sometime in the 1840s, the family had relocated in Nauvoo, Illinois.⁶ This tie with the Church suggests that the widow Murphy and her seven children were still involved. Her son William later recounted the family history in an address he gave in Truckee, California, on 8 February 1896. In the rough draft of this talk, he mentions the family's dealings in Nauvoo. He states:

But a change of base found the family in northern Illinois where some adventure was notable that has gone into history: the building of the Mormon Temple at Nauvoo, Ill. where the subject of this sketch became acquainted with Joseph Smith,

Hiram Smith and Brigham Young. This acquaintance was that of a mere boy with leading men merely knowing [them and] not being on intimate terms.⁷

William would have been six or seven years old during the Nauvoo era, which explains his description of himself as a "mere boy." Thus, it appears the family had some relationship with the Church and its leaders.

More compelling evidence of Church activity exists. In the records of the earliest Mississippi River baptisms for the dead, Lavina's name appears several times as proxy for dead relatives.⁸ Joseph Smith first affirmed the ordinance of baptism for the dead in a funeral sermon for Seymour Brunson in Nauvoo in August of 1840.⁹ This event places Lavina in Nauvoo and active in the kingdom early in the 1840s.

William says that in the fall of 1842, the family decided to return to the south. They boarded the steamer *La Salle* at Warsaw, Illinois, where Lavina had evidently secured employment. They made it as far as Fox Slough, where river traffic ceased because of an early freeze.¹⁰ William wrote:

[T]he river closed with ice for the winter—a long dreary winter it was indeed. And yet to some it was not without its romance; as the two elder children, girls, were married on the boat that winter, one to the Mate, and the other to the Engineer, and with early spring, the released boat acted as a wedding barge, and reached St. Louis safe but not overly sound.¹¹

On 29 December 1842, Sarah married William Foster, and Harriet married William M. Pike.¹² The family then returned to Tennessee and took up farming. Mr. Pike and Harriet returned with them, leaving Mr. Foster and Sarah in St. Louis.

William Murphy made an interesting observation about his mother during those years in Tennessee. He states: "She was noted for her extensive erudition in Scripture, and the facility with which she handled the subjects then agitating the religious community, and the skills with which she rightly divided the truth."¹³

Whether this statement is an indication that Lavina was teaching the restored gospel or just involved with religious discussions is uncertain. But she apparently still

had strong religious leanings.

William further states that Lavina heard rumors of a wonderful land west of the Rocky Mountains. Mr. Pike believed these tales as well, so the family picked up and moved west. They stopped at St. Louis where the Fosters joined them. They met up with the Donner party in Independence, Missouri. Evidence of Lavina's logic for joining this particular group may be found in her daughter Mary's discussion of the facts with Daniel Tyler of the Mormon Battalion. He states that he had learned the following from her, after which he added his editorial comment:

In the spring of the latter year, a party about emigrating to Oregon or California, offered to furnish passage for herself and children on the condition that she would cook and do the washing for the party. Understanding California to be the final destination of the Saints, and thinking this a good opportunity to emigrate without being a burden to the Church, she accepted the proposition, but alas! the example of Sister Murray, although her motives were good, is an illustration of the truism, that "it is better to suffer affliction with the people of God" and trust in Him for deliverance, than to mingle with the sinful "for a season," and be lured by human prospects of a better result!¹⁴

Again, the evidence seems to suggest that Sister Murphy was considering the kingdom when making decisions for the family.

At this point, the family's history mingles with the well-known history of the Donner party. This story does not need retelling except for incidents that single out the members of the Murphy family. Interestingly, by taking the Hasting's Cut-off, members of the Murphy group were some of the first "Mormons" to traverse the final destination of the Latter-day Saint pioneers who would reach there almost a year later. By the end of August 1846, they were on the shores of the Great Salt Lake. The difficulties encountered by taking the cut-off were compounded by the salt desert they had to cross. By the end of September, the company reached the main emigrant trail on the Humboldt River and realized they were dangerously late in the season. Many families had already lost all their oxen and horses, and food was running short. And then there was a delay that directly involved

the Murphy clan.

Toward the end of October, the group became spread out in the mountains. Supplies were low, and C. T. Stanton had gone ahead earlier to seek relief for the party. He returned with supplies from Captain Sutter. At this point, the company believed in the wisdom of sending a forward party to secure more supplies. C. F. McGlashan shared the following insights:

Accordingly, two brothers-in-law, William Foster and William Pike, both brave and daring spirits, volunteered to go ahead, cross the summits, and return with provisions as Stanton had done. Both men had families, and were both were highly esteemed in the company. At the encampment near Reno, Nevada, while they were busily preparing to start, the two men were cleaning or loading a pistol. It was an old-fashioned "pepper-box." It happened, while they were examining it, that wood was called for to replenish the fire. One of the men offered to procure it, and in order to do so, handed the pistol to the other. Everybody knows that the "pepper-box" is a very uncertain weapon. Somehow, in the transfer the pistol was discharged. William Pike was fatally wounded, and died in about twenty minutes. Mrs. Pike was left a widow, with two small children. The youngest, Catherine, was a babe of only a few months old, and Naomi was only three years of age. The sadness and distress occasioned by this mournful accident, cast a gloom over the entire company, and seemed an omen of the terrible fate which overshadowed the Donner Party.¹⁵

This description tells not only of the death of Pike but also of the role these members of the Murphy family had in the party. William Green Murphy indicated that Mr. Pike was extremely loyal to Mrs. Murphy, especially when it came to her religious ideals.¹⁶ That this family was a central character in this story is further evidenced as the hardships increased. After the party became trapped in the early snows, several events occurred that again included the Murphys.

One of the cabins the party stayed in was identified as the Murphy cabin. It was located a short distance from Donner Lake. Because the majority of the party had struggled to make the summit and had failed, they built what protection they could and stayed. On 16 December,

a group of fifteen started out to make it over the summit and get help. This group became known as the "Forlorn Hope." William Green Murphy started with this group but soon found it impossible to travel without snowshoes, so he returned to the Murphy cabin. Stewart states: "The Murphy clan was well represented with Mr. and Mrs. Foster, Mrs. Pike, and the two boys Lem and Bill."¹⁷

As previously mentioned, William (Bill) returned to the main camp, but Lemuel (Lem) remained with the Forlorn Hope party. Lemuel died in the journey and is considered one of the first consumed by the others. Sarah Foster held him in her lap as he died of starvation, a boy of thirteen years. The heart-wrenching facts were given by Sarah herself. McGlashan wrote:

Mrs. Foster, as we have seen, fairly worshipped her brother Lemuel. Has human pen power to express the shock of horror this sister received when she saw her brother's heart thrust through with a stick, and broiling upon the coals? No man can record or read such an occurrence without a cry of agony! What, then, did she endure who saw this cruel sight?¹⁸

Lavina was never told of Lemuel's death before her own. The Fosters and Harriet Pike made it out of the mountains with few others. They stumbled into Johnson's Ranch and gave word of the need for rescue.

Meanwhile, Lavina had promised to take care of the Fosters' boy, George, and the two Pike children, Naomi and Catherine. Naomi was three years old and survived the ordeal, but Catherine was a nursing baby whose mother could not have given suck even if she had stayed. Mrs. Murphy attempted to keep the baby alive on a gruel made from melted snow and a few particles of flour, but this failed and the baby died in February. Earlier in the month, Lavina's own son, John Landrum, had also died. George Foster's death is at the center of one of the mysteries of the ill-fated party. Some of the children claimed that Lewis Keseberg murdered him for food. William Foster was never able to substantiate this claim with Lavina before her death.

Mary Murphy, who was about sixteen years old, William, age eleven, and his younger brother, Simon, age nine, were rescued and survived.

Lavina stayed behind while others were rescued so she could care for children until they could be saved. She is credited as a great humanitarian for her efforts. Toward the end of the ordeal, she had the responsibility for many children besides her own. McGlashan states: "Mrs. Lavina Murphy had charge of her son, Simon Murphy, her grandchild, George Foster, of the child James Eddy, and of the three little Donner girls, Frances, Georgia, and Eliza."¹⁹

By the time a third rescue party arrived, which included William Foster, George had died. McGlashan describes Mrs. Murphy's condition:

Mrs. Murphy had cared for her children and her grandchildren, and ministered to the wants of those around her, until she was sick, exhausted, and utterly helpless. She could not walk. She could scarcely rise from her bed. With all the tenderness of a son, Mr. Foster gave her such provisions as he could leave, procured her wood, and did whatever he was able to do to render her comfortable. He also promised to return speedily, and with such assistance that he could carry her over the summits to her children.²⁰

When the fourth rescue party came, they found Lavina dead and mutilated. Keseberg told the rescuers that Mrs. Murphy had lingered for about a week after the third party had left and then died.²¹ Stewart claims that the story of her death "failed to ring true" to Foster and Rhoads because Mr. Foster felt he had found her in surprisingly good health on the third rescue trip.²² Foster's account of Mrs. Murphy's health seems to contradict McGlashan's report from him after the third rescue. Mary also suspected foul play. In a letter she wrote to relatives about the events, she referred to her mother as "ill fated and persecuted."²³ Whether this statement means she was literally persecuted by a member of the party or whether Mary was simply referring to the conditions by which Lavina died may never be known. Daniel Tyler suggests foul play, but it is evident from his account that he was not aware of Lavina's failing health.²⁴

A brief follow-up of the "Mormon" survivors is fitting. William Green Murphy lived on until 1904. He became a prominent attorney in California and was well respected. Any direct connections to the Church are not

evident other than his comments in his letter previously cited. He was a religious young man during the Donner tragedy—as revealed by his reading of his mother’s favorite psalm to her on Christmas day of 1846.²⁵

The most notable survivor with Mormon roots is Mary Murphy. She was sixteen years old when rescued and found herself motherless at Johnson’s Ranch. She comments that while there, Mr. Johnson fell in love with her. She married him on 24 June 1847.²⁶ She later states that Johnson was a crude man for whom she literally slaved. He also had two “squaws” whom he refused to give up, so Mary divorced him later that year.²⁷ She moved to the Cordua ranch where Sarah and William Foster were working. She was introduced to Charles Covillaud, the ranch superintendent, and they were married on Christmas day of 1848.²⁸ Charles later bought the ranch and created a town in 1850 named for his wife Mary. She and her surviving sisters and her brother became pioneers of Marysville, California.

An interesting note tying Mary to Mormonism is found in an 1861 letter from a Catholic bishop named Eugene O’Connell. He had concerns about Mary’s marriage because of the divorce from William Johnson. He was writing to All Hallows College, Dublin, Ireland. In his letter, he states:

Now it is time to tell you to what religion Mrs. Covillaud or Mrs. Johnson (her first husband’s name) belonged, before and after her union with her present consort. (Her maiden name was Mary Murphy and she came to California with the Donner party in 1847.) She was a Baptist, and then became a Mormon, and to her knowledge received baptism validly among the Mormons.²⁹

Mary was later baptized a Catholic and was well known in her new religion. If she was a baptized Latter-day Saint, a good possibility exists that other Murphy children of proper age were baptized while the Murphy family resided in Nauvoo. However, the other children are never associated with the Church in any of the histories.

The questions still remain as to Lavina Murphy’s status as a Latter-day Saint. Of the tragic events in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Wilford Woodruff made two statements in his journal. On 10 July 1847, the pioneer

company met riders from the west. They found out about the Donner tragedy at this meeting. Of this event, Elder Woodruff states:

The subject was brought up again concerning the emigrant Company who perished in the Mountains last winter. They were mostly from Independence & Clay County Missouri And were A mob company & threatned to drive out the mormons that were in Calafornia & started for Calafornia with that spirit in there hearts. But it seemed as though they were ripe for Judgment. The snows fell upon them 18 feet deep on a level & they died & eat up each other. About 40 persons parished & were mostly eat up by those who survived them. Mrs L. Murphy of Tenn whom I Baptized while on a mision in that Country but since Apostitized & joined the mob was in the company died or was killed & eat up. Her bones sawed to peaces for her branes & marrow & left stre[we?]d upon the ground.³⁰

Again, when visiting with Lavina’s brother-in-law, Emanuel Murphy, Elder Woodruff states the following while discussing Jeremiah Murphy:

His wife Apostitized & started for Calafornia in 1846 & got lost in the Sira Vada mountains and most of the Company Starved to death and the living Cattle Dead. Mrs Murphy was Eat up & some of her Children. Two of her Sons were saved.³¹

Elder Woodruff appears to have had some strong feelings about Mrs. Murphy. In response to Elder Woodruff’s statements, Elder B. H. Roberts states that there was one inaccuracy about his original statement:

It is reported in some of our “Mormon” annals that the Donner party was from Missouri; but that is not borne out by the facts. Its composition as to the states whence its members started from was as follows:

Twenty-nine were from Springfield, Illinois, and constituted the original Donner Reed party—“Reed being the most prominent member of it.”

Thirteen were from Marshall county, Ill.

Ten from Keokuk, Iowa.

Thirteen from Tennessee.

Four from Belleville, Ill. . . .

It appears from the above that only four of the

87 were from Missouri.³²

Mormons had an inaccurate idea of the demographics of the Donner party. Elder Roberts points out one other suggestion about the meaning of Elder Woodruff's statement:

Wilford Woodruff, who baptized Mrs. Murphy, while on his mission in Tennessee, says she apostatized and joined the mob. See Willford Woodruff's Journal, 1847, entry for 10th July, by which he means no more, perhaps, than that she lived among those who were mobbing the saints in Illinois.³³

That Mrs. Murphy left the gathering of the Saints cannot be questioned. But the faith she had in the Church apparently had great meaning to her and is reflected in her actions in the 1840s and in the testimony of her children. Though she was misled, her intentions apparently were with the Church in mind.

One other Mormon group is often not associated with the Donner party but must be mentioned. In June of 1835, Thomas Rhoads³⁴ was a farmer and part-time surveyor in Edgar County, Illinois. Levi Jackman and Caleb Baldwin, missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, found his family. After several weeks of teaching the family and their neighbors without success, the missionaries were going to leave. They were persuaded to teach one more sermon after which Polly Rhoads, a daughter of Thomas, joined the Church, and others in the family followed. Thomas and his wife and several of their children were baptized on 23 June 1835. They were active Latter-day Saints, and we can assume their later children were also baptized. In April of 1836, they had a son and named him Caleb Baldwin Rhoads in honor of the missionary who brought them the gospel.³⁵

The Rhoads family was still living in Illinois when the mobs and riots against the Church reached a climax in the mid 1840s. After the death of Joseph and Hyrum Smith in Carthage on 27 June 1844, persecution against the Mormons increased. While members of the Rhoads family were in church meetings, their home, along with those of their neighbors, was burned by the mob, and a close friend of Thomas was killed. This is the time when they contemplated moving west.

In the spring of 1846, Thomas and his family packed

their belongings and moved out of Edgar County and joined Brigham Young and those Saints headed west. On the Mississippi River, they experienced great suffering. Thomas approached Brigham to see what Brigham could do to ease the suffering. Brigham explained the details of what had to be done to prepare for the long journey to their new home beyond the Rockies. Feeling helpless, Thomas made a suggestion to Brigham by stating:

[L]et me go now. I have nearly 200 persons who will gladly follow me to wherever I may choose. Let me take them and go westward until I find a suitable place—I understand that California has much to offer in a good climate and soil—let me take these and blaze the trail west. Should I venture too far, I'll return when the settlement has been made by you.³⁶

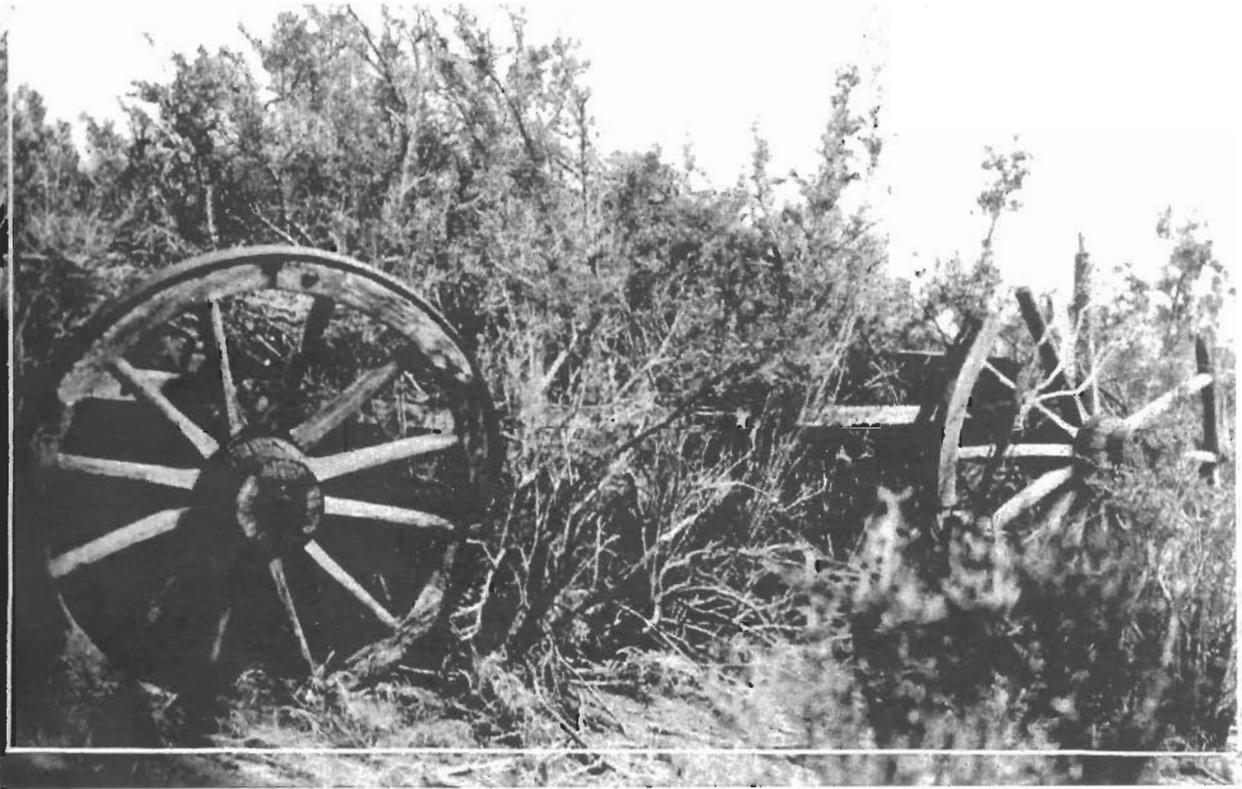
Brigham held a council at Mount Pisgah on 21 April 1846 to consider the western migration. The council granted Thomas permission to go ahead. Brigham was skeptical at first—but permissive. He wrote:

[G]o with my blessing. Your company will be the Trailblazers that will pave the road to Zion. When the spring comes, I will follow with the strongest of my company and after that, another will follow me, and so forth until all the Saints have been removed from this place; and soon, we may be able to establish the Zion of which Brother Joseph spoke of . . . wherever westward that place may be.³⁷

The blessing of the leaders of the Church is also evidenced by the fact that Thomas later returned to Utah.

The Rhoads party included John Pierce Rhoads and his wife, Matilda Fanning, and their six children; Daniel Rhoads and his wife, Amanda Esrey; Turner Elder and his wife, Polly Rhoads, and their one son; Joseph and Isaac House; John Patterson and his wife, Christine Forster, and their baby; Mathew and Robert Fanning; the Esrey boys; Mr. Whitman; and Thomas and Elizabeth Rhoads with eleven unmarried children and two grandchildren.³⁸

The party left the Saints and headed westward across Iowa. They eventually came to the Missouri River where they camped near another group of emigrants. Two men from the other wagons came to Thomas and asked him to join them at a separate fire. They intro-



Broken Wagon
courtesy LDS Church Archives

duced themselves as George Donner and James Frazier Reed. They did not know much of overland travel and asked to join the Mormon wagon train of the Rhoads company. Thomas consented, if they were willing to be under the rule of the Mormon wagon train and subject to the wagon train's laws. Donner and Reed agreed to this stipulation. As they talked, the two groups found they had much in common.³⁹

The Rhoads party and the Donner party traveled together with few incidents. They had occasional meetings with Indians—who seemed to get more hostile the farther west the train moved. They continued together until Fort Bridger. Lucinda Rhoads, daughter of Thomas, recorded the following:

We came to the point where two routes to California lay before us (Fort Bridger). Some of the discontented were strongly in favor of taking the Hastings cut-off, while the conservative people wanted to continue along the middle route. My father insisted upon the latter, while Donner and his followers

declared their intention of following the Hastings cut-off.⁴⁰

On 20 July 1846, the two companies went their separate ways. The Rhoads party went northwest on the middle route and passed through Salt Lake Valley.⁴¹ This event makes them the first Mormons to view the Church's future home. They continued, arriving at Johnson's Ranch about 1 October 1846. They entered the Sacramento Valley on 5 October 1846, making them the first Mormon family to migrate overland to California.⁴² Thomas's conservative choice to take the middle route saved his family from the fate of the Donners.

Mormons Who Rescued the Survivors of the Donner Party

The preservation of the two oldest Rhoads boys turned out to be a blessing for the ill-fated Donner Party. When members of the Forlorn Hope party arrived at Johnson's Ranch, they found three or four families. Among them was John Rhoads. Help was needed from Sutter's Fort, so John volunteered to go. McGlashan

recorded the following:

Lashing two pine logs together with rawhides, and forming a raft, John Rhodes was ferried over the Bear River. Taking his shoes in his hands, and rolling his pants up above his knees, he started on foot through water that frequently was from one to three feet deep. Some time during the night he reached the Fort.⁴³

A rescue party that included John and Daniel Rhoads was organized. Stewart identified the brothers as "Mormons."⁴⁴ There is some evidence that Thomas volunteered his sons and himself, but his sons influenced him to stay and take care of Elizabeth, who was ill.⁴⁵ Sutter supplied them, and seven men set out for the site of the tragedy. John was considered one of the leaders of this rescue party. Not one of the seven was an experienced mountaineer.⁴⁶

The rescuers found the survivors on 18 February 1847. Their journey had been difficult. On 21 February, they left the camp with twenty-four of the starving emigrants, leaving seventeen back at the lake. The first group rescued included Mary and William Murphy. Also included was three-year-old Naomi Pike, who was carried by "Big John Rhoades."⁴⁷ This would have been a monumental task. Of this event, Naomi later says:

I owe my life to the kind heart of John Rhodes, whose sympathies were aroused for my mother. He felt that she was deserving of some relic of all she had left behind when she started with the first party in search of relief, and he carried me to her in a blanket.

McGlashan adds:

We have before spoken of this noble man's bravery in bearing the news of the condition of the "Forlorn Hope" and of the Donner Party to Sutter's Fort. Here we find him again exhibiting the nobility of his nature by saving this little girl from starvation by carrying her on his back over forty miles of wintry snow.⁴⁸

John's sympathies for little Naomi and her mother may suggest a possible knowledge of them as fellow Mormons. At least they may have exchanged informa-

tion while traveling together when the two parties had been one.

John not only played an important role in the first rescue party but also returned with the fourth and final attempt. It was then that he and William Foster found Mrs. Murphy dead and partially consumed.

After the death of his wife, Thomas returned to Utah and remained true to the faith; however, his children did not. They remained in California, and their separation from the Church may have been too much for them to remain members—as was the case with so many in the early days. To be separated from the main body of the Church was usually detrimental to membership. John's first wife, Matilda, died, and he remarried a staunch Catholic named Mary Murray. He was later baptized in the Catholic Church. Daniel had great success in the gold fields during 1848-50. He became a banker and died well off, leaving his children with property.⁴⁹

We also have evidence that Samuel Brannan, leader of the Saints who had sailed to San Francisco on the ship *Brooklyn*, contributed to the rescue missions to the Donner party. He was editor of the local newspaper and raised funds for the rescue attempts.⁵⁰ He also published reports of the sad circumstances and the bravery of the rescuers, giving their names and praising their efforts.⁵¹

Mormons Who Discovered and Took Care of the Remains of the Donner Party

In April 1847, Samuel Brannan rode through the Sierras to meet Brigham Young. On the way, he saw the survivors of the tragedy at Sutter's Fort. Farther up the trail, he came across Lewis Keseberg, who was the last survivor. Keseberg was crawling, so Sam shared his lunch with him and continued on.⁵² Although this event should not count as an encounter with the remains of the party, Sam had contact with the survivors.

In June 1847, General Stephen W. Kearney was traveling back to Ft. Leavenworth with John C. Fremont to bring him up on charges. Fifteen members of the Mormon Battalion traveled with them as a guard.⁵³ They came upon the gruesome scene of the Donner tragedy. The corpses were in the open and had the appearance of "mummies."⁵⁴ The Battalion members were commanded to bury the remains. Stewart quotes one of the guards when he wrote:

A more revolting and appalling spectacle [wrote one member of the party] I never witnessed. The remains were, by an order of Gen. Kearny, collected and buried under the superintendence of Major Swords. They were interred in a pit which had been dug in the centre of one of the cabins for a cache. These melancholy duties to the dead being performed, the cabins, by order of Major Swords, were fired, and with every thing surrounding them connected with this horrid and melancholy tragedy, were consumed. The body of George Donner was found at his camp, about eight or ten miles distant, wrapped in a sheet. He was buried by a party of men detailed for that purpose.⁵⁵

Apparently, their efforts to eliminate signs of the tragedy were not adequate, for others following them would see more.

After being discharged from the Mormon Battalion, many of the members were on their way to Utah to meet up with the Saints. They stopped at Johnson's Ranch and interviewed Mary Murphy, as previously mentioned. On 3 September, they came upon other wagons at the site where General Kearny's party had buried the remains. As they continued on the trail, Tyler recorded:

[We] were horrified at the sight which met our view—a skull covered with hair lying here, a mangled arm or leg yonder, with the bones broken as one would break a beef shank to obtain the marrow from it; a whole body in another place, covered with a blanket, and portions of other bodies scattered around in different directions. It had not only been the scene of intense human suffering, but also of some of the most fiendish acts that man made desperate by hunger could conceive.⁵⁶

They left the scene with it indelibly etched in their minds. Levi Hancock, another member of the company, recorded in his journal on 7 September the following:

[W]e went down in a hollow south for a number of miles and come to where the man eater lived [map] who it is said eat the widow murphy after he cut her throat he had two pales of blood when he was found it was dry he sayed he got it out of dead mens bodys who died by starvation the people say it cannot be got it is the worst looking place I ever saw this creek

is called now fether Creek on the account of the destruction of many beds fethers strung down it.⁵⁷

Interestingly, Levi identifies the incident with Lavina Murphy. He may have learned of it from her daughter Mary when the group stopped at Johnson's Ranch. He also declared that he had never seen a "worst looking place."

Effects of the Donner Party on the Mormon Migration

As the Mormon pioneers made their way into the Salt Lake Valley, they took the Donner Party route with only one exception. The final mile or so, where the Donners wearied of cutting their way through the brush and hauled their wagons up the steep north slope of the canyon, the Mormons continued through the brush and went down the canyon floor into the valley. So many of the emigrants followed this trail that it was named "Pratt's Cut-off" after LDS Apostle Parley P. Pratt.⁵⁸

This road cut by the Donner Party played an important role—particularly for the first pioneer company. Because they were not detained by having to cut through as the Donners had been, they were able to arrive in the valley early enough to get a crop planted and prepare for the coming winter. As DeVoto stated: "Nevertheless God had used the mobbers and apostates to prepare a way for His chosen, who took the trail the Donners had made."⁵⁹ His use of the terms *mobbers* and *apostates* is probably in reference to Wilford Woodruff's quote about the Donner Party. Despite DeVoto's cynicism, the Latter-day Saints were benefited by the road making of the Donners.

Conclusion

In the year of 1846, the western United States became a melting pot of travelers for new lands. These pioneers were bound to bump into each other. As this article has illustrated, in many ways, the Mormons and those who belonged to the Donner Party had lasting effects on one another. An analysis of the history of any single group of people will reveal the intersections with others of their day. The effects of these intersections may have lasting effects on either group.

Notes

1. Bernard DeVoto, *The Year of Decision: 1846* (Boston:

- Houghton Mifflin Co., 1943), 4.
2. Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff's Journal 1833-1898*, 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983-1985), 1:79.
 3. *Ibid.*, 85-86.
 4. *Ibid.*, 98.
 5. *Ibid.*, 5:489
 6. See 1842 Hancock County tax record for Lavina Murphy, Family History Library, Salt Lake City, film 0071706, fifth item, p. 221.
 7. William Green Murphy address given at Truckee, California, 8 February 1896. Original in possession of Hyrum Cheim, Marysville, California.
 8. See Nauvoo Baptisms for the Dead Books A, B, and C dated 1841-1845. Found in Historical Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
 9. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 49.
 10. Documentation of the early freeze is found in *The Wasp* dated 17 December 1842.
 11. William Green Murphy address.
 12. See Records of Marriage in Clark County, p. 44, dated 29 December 1842.
 13. *Ibid.*
 14. Daniel Tyler, *A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion in the Mexican War: 1846-1847* (Glorieta, New Mexico: Rio Grande Press 1881), 312.
 15. C. F. McGlashan, *History of the Donner Party: A Tragedy of the Sierra* (San Francisco: Wohlbruck, 1934), 59-60.
 16. William Green Murphy address.
 17. George R. Stewart, *Ordeal by Hunger: The Story of the Donner Party* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960), 119.
 18. McGlashan, *History*, 86.
 19. *Ibid.*, 185.
 20. *Ibid.*, 186.
 21. Stewart, *Ordeal*, 261.
 22. *Ibid.*, 262.
 23. Letter from Mary Murphy to relatives dated 25 May 1847. In possession of descendant, Green T. Lee. Copy found in the Yuba County Library, California Room, Marysville, California.
 24. Tyler, *Mormon Battalion*, 313.
 25. Mary Murphy's Story compiled by Stephen G. Hust. Original found in the Yuba County Library, California Room, Marysville, California.
 26. See marriage certificate of William Johnson and Mary Murphy, found in the Yuba County Library, California Room, Marysville, California.
 27. See Mary Murphy's Story.
 28. *Ibid.*
 29. See Jack Steed, *The Donner Party Rescue Site* (Santa Ana: Graphic, 1993), 22.
 30. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal 1833-1898*, 3:227.
 31. *Ibid.*, 5:489.
 32. B. H. Roberts, ed., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, by Joseph Smith, 2d ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1932-51), 3:209, footnote 50.
 33. *Ibid.*, 210-11, footnote 53.
 34. Spelled also *Rhoades* and *Rhodes*. See *Footprints in the Wilderness* for the spelling of *Rhoades*. *Historic Cosummes and the Slough House Pioneer Cemetery*, National Society Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, written by Norma Baldwin Ricketts (Salt Lake City: Utah Printing Co., 1978), uses the name *Rhoads* throughout.
 35. *An Enduring Legacy*, Daughters of the Utah Pioneers (Salt Lake City: Utah Printing Co., 1978), 1:308.
 36. Rhoades Family Records, in possession of Gale R. Rhoades, as cited in Gale R. Rhoades and Kerry Ross Boren, *Footprints in the Wilderness: A History of the Lost Rhoades Mines* (Salt Lake City: Dream Garden Press, 1980), 29.
 37. *Ibid.*
 38. *An Enduring Legacy*, 1:309-10.

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39. Rhoades, *Footprints*, 30.
40. *Deseret Evening News*, Salt Lake City, Utah, 23 July, 1904.
41. Rhoades, *Footprints*, 37.
42. Norma B. Ricketts, "Thomas and Elizabeth Rhoads—Pioneers of 1846," unpublished manuscript.
43. McGlashan, *History*, 108-09.
44. Stewart, *Ordeal*, 177.
45. Rhoades, *Footprints*, 53.
46. Ricketts, "Rhoads—Pioneers of 1846."
47. Rhoades, *Footprints*, 58.
48. McGlashan, *History*, 138-39.
49. Ricketts, "Rhoads—Pioneers of 1846."
50. Eugene E. Campbell, "The Mormons and the Donner Party," *BYU Studies* 11 (Spring 1971): 310.
51. Rhoades, *Footprints*, 60.
52. Campbell, "The Mormons," 310.
53. Larry C. Porter, "From California to Council Bluffs," *Ensign* (August 1989): 43.
54. Stewart, *Ordeal*, 276.
55. *Ibid.*, 276-77.
56. Tyler, *Mormon Battalion*, 313-14.
57. Journal of Levi Ward Hancock, entry of 7 September 1847, LDS Church Archives (pages not numbered).
58. Stewart, *Ordeal*, 278.
59. DeVoto, *The Year of Decision*, 464.