



[The July [Heirloom](#)'s main article was about the 1844 Stephens Murphy Townsend Party and the 2025 History Expedition's planned expedition to reprise the horseback group of the Stephens Party trek to California. It was a masterful article if we do say so ourselves but it no doubt left readers in excited suspense about the outcome.

This month we can allay the suspense with two articles. The first, starting below, is by Bob Crowley the leader of the horseback group's trek and leader of [historyexp.org](#) which organized the previous four treks (see our [Heirloom](#) article index). The second article, on page 7, is an article about the September 2025 trek by our [Heirloom](#) staff. - ed.]

The Horseback Party of Six: A Chronicle of Grit, Genius, and Forgotten Collaboration

Bob Crowley

In the chill dawn of November 15, 1844, six figures—a motley blend of hardened men and two courageous women—emerged from the frost-laden banks of the Truckee River. For more than 170 years, their remarkable descent from the Sierra Nevada's icy high country into California's Sacramento Valley has been shrouded in half-remembered detail, their tale overshadowed by the tragedies and triumphs of later overland emigrants. Yet it is here, in the story of the Horseback Party of Six, a splinter group formed from the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party of 1844, that we find an archetypal American saga: individual heroism fused with communal ingenuity, men and women facing wild lands with little more than hope, skill, and the wisdom of people who'd crossed these mountains for millennia[1].



Chief Truckee – Rendering based on photos from direct descendants



Prologue: The Quiet Genesis of a Journey

History, as Henry Luce once charged Walter Isaacson and his journalistic cohort, should be told through its people. Here, the principal characters—Elizabeth Townsend, Ellen Murphy, John Murphy, Daniel Murphy, Francis Deland, and Oliver Magnent—are not icons or symbols, but flesh and blood. They were not democratically chosen, as legend would later misremember, but carefully selected for their stamina, resourcefulness, and capacity to survive.



2Map of Horseback Party route from Truckee (Donner) Lake to Sutter's Fort

Their charge? To find a path from the snowy grip of the upper Sierra Nevada down to Sutter's Fort, securing salvation for their larger party when roads and weather made further travel by wagon impossible. But as with all great journeys, their true quest was improvisation: to interpret cryptic fragments of maps and memory, to trust ancient trails that only the Washoe and Nisenan peoples truly knew, and to summon the collective endurance for a 26-day odyssey through trackless wilds.

Part 1: An Unsung Trail with Ancient Footprints

The Stephens-Townsend-Murphy wagon party was the vanguard of overland migration—they established the first viable wagon road over the Sierra into California, pre-dating the Donner tragedy by two years. Yet as with many true trailblazers, the Horseback Party's path was neither the most famous nor the most straightforward [10][12][1].

Their route—running from the confluence of the Truckee River and Donner Creek, up the river to Lake Tahoe, across

the west side, then plunging west across the headwaters of the American River—was an act of deduction and trust as much as exploration. “They followed the river...struck across the hills...followed the American River...crossed it many times...” wrote their contemporaries, their language as spare as the snowy draws and wind-shadowed ridges they traversed.

But overlaying these accounts, the History Expedition team saw a deeper pattern: the clear tracks of an ancient Native American trade route, a corridor running from California's great central valley to Lake Tahoe. Archaeology and oral accounts affirm it: For thousands of years, before the arrival of horses, the Washoe (Wá•šiw) and Nisenan traversed this pathway for migration, trade, and ceremony, wearing its contours into the land [1].

Part 2: Reconstructing the Unknown—Deduction and Boots in the Dirt

The party might have chosen any of several canyons rising from Lake Tahoe's west shore. After exhaustive study—diaries, archeological reports, field surveys—they opted for McKinney Creek and Burton Pass, a path offering a merci-

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ful 4% grade instead of the punishing climbs nearby. Along this “Southern Route,” the pass stood at 7,140 feet, a height daunting in late fall, but negotiable for determined riders and already familiar to Native travelers[1].

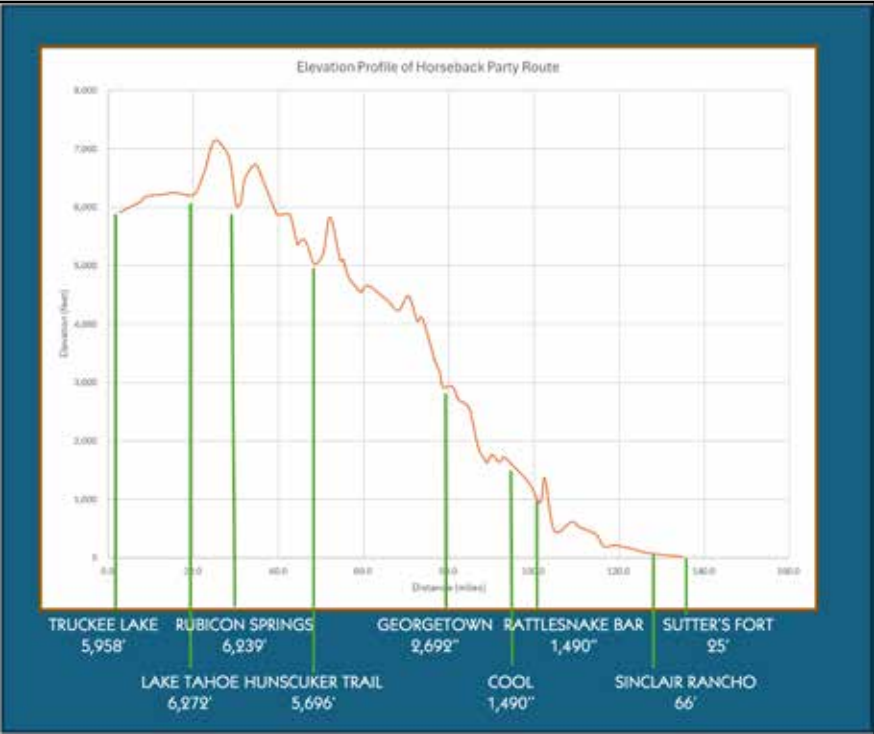
Armed with this hypothesis, the research team scoured the ground itself—meticulous surveys, GPS mapping, and elevation profiles. They found the remnants of the old trail, sometimes clear, sometimes hinted at by topographic logic: “If we want to know what they did, we have to retrace it as they would—step by uncertain step.”

Part 3:
Through Storm and Silence—
Endurance Measured in Miles

What does it mean to cross 135 miles in 26 days, much of it through snow, wild river canyons, and fog- choked valleys? The distance—measurable, mapped by GPS and memory—conceals more than it reveals. The Horseback Party averaged just over five miles per day, achieving 13 miles on their best day, halting entirely for thirteen days to hunt, rest, and recover [1].

- The route followed three great ecological zones:
- The High Sierra** (36 miles): Thin-aired, snow-laden, and bitterly cold.
 - Foothills** (69 miles): Steep canyons and treacherous river crossings, with land sliding relentlessly down toward the valley.
 - Sacramento Valley** (30 miles): Grassy flats and the first sight of orchards, cattle, and the warm promise of Sutter’s refuge.

Ridge travel made up not less than 30% of the journey; canyons and creeks forced frequent, hazardous crossings. The day John Murphy was swept off his horse by the river’s “force of a mill race,” only to survive by clinging to an overhanging willow, was just one of many mortal tests they faced[1][6].



3Elevation Profile of the Horseback Party of Six Route showing dramatic descent from Sierra Nevada peaks to Sacramento Valley

Part 4:
Moments of Human Stakes—
Collaboration Across Worlds

The party’s success was not just a feat of cartographic cunning or physical stamina. It was, above all, the product of a seldom-credited collaboration: the (Wá•šiw) people’s trail knowledge, the party’s willingness to accept Indigenous guidance, and the mutual recognition that survival in these mountains depended on humility as much as on courage[2][3][4].

Rather than flounder through wilderness, they moved from encampment to encampment, following trails inscribed by prior generations. The (Wá•šiw), whose skill at reading the snow and water was born of centuries in this land, offered not merely directions but the hidden logic of the Sierra: where horses could safely descend, where grass remained beneath the drifts, and how to read the subtle shift from ridge to river.

Metric	Value
Total Distance	135 miles [1]
Total Duration	26 days [1]
Average Daily Distance	5.1 miles [1]
Maximum Daily Distance	13 miles [1]
Days with Zero Movement	13 days [1]
Net Elevation Change	-5,820 feet [1]
Highest Point	7,140 feet (Burton Pass) [1]
Lowest Point	20 feet (Sutter's Fort) [1]

The group's pauses—at Gerle Meadow, Pilot Creek, the American River, Rancho del Paso, and especially Sinclair's Ranch (where they rested four crucial days)—were not random delays but strategic recalibrations, balancing the need for caloric survival against the imperative of forward motion. Two women, Elizabeth Townsend and Ellen Murphy, rode shoulder-to-shoulder with their male companions, their grit a quiet retort to contemporary assumptions about gender and endurance [1].



5 Elizabeth Townsend

Part 5: A Legacy Written in Topography

If the canonical story of western expansion privileges the drama of “rugged individuals,” here, the deeper truth is harder and more inspiring: it is a saga of group intelligence, cross-cultural borrowing, and the slow accretion of knowledge over generations.

After nearly four weeks, on December 10, 1844, the Horseback Party rode into Sutter's Fort, bringing news and hope to their fellow emigrants, and testifying, as surely as any railroad or highway, that the Sierra was not an impenetrable wall but a passageway—if one moved with humility, patience,

and at times, the help of those who'd come before[7][8][9].

Epilogue: Rethinking the Meaning of Pioneering

The Horseback Party's greatest lesson is that westward expansion was never a solitary conquest by outsiders. Instead, it was a negotiation—sometimes tense, sometimes generous—between cultures and intelligences, a process of “moving from encampment to encampment,” always testing and learning anew.

The route they took, for a moment blanketed by miners and wagon trains during the Gold Rush, would eventually revert to recreation, to solitude, to the indelible memory of six pioneers whose greatest act was not bravado, but the willingness to accept guidance, slow down, and persevere. Their story, recovered at last, stands as a quiet rebuke to the myth of Western solitude—and as a fresh inspiration for every modern sojourner who follows trails already ancient when the first saddle horses passed by [1].



4 Ellen (Helen) Murphy



6 Sutter's Fort - Image: Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion

Footnotes

- [1] "Story of the Murphy Party" as published in Foote, H.S., Pen Pictures from the Garden of the World, Chicago, 1888, and reprinted in Stewart, George R., The Opening of the California Trail, (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1953), 78-79. The story appears to consist mostly of "Overland in 1844", a manuscript by Moses Schallenberger, plus some information provided by the Murphy family.
- [2] Brewer, Ruth B., "The McKinney Creek Gap: An Historical Trail, or, the San Buenaventura Revisited", University of Nevada Reno Special Collections, (1977).
- [3] Sample, L.L. The Reports of the University of California Archaeological Survey: Trade and Trails in Aboriginal California, Report No. 8, (Page 2), (September 15, 1950)
- [4] Brewer, Ruth B., "Amateur Archaeologists... The Rio de San Buenaventura Revisited", Nevada- Archaeologist, Volume 4B, No. 2, (1984).
- [5] From north to south, the others are Ward Creek at 8,350 feet, Blackwood Creek at 7,690 feet, General Creek at 7,540 feet, and the stream above Eagle Falls at 7,900 feet.
- [6] Foote, Pen Pictures, 51-52, as reprinted in Stewart, The Opening of the California Trail, 78-79.
- [7] McGlashan, C.F., The History of the Donner Party, (A.L Bancroft and Company, San Francisco, 1881), 60- 61.
- [8] Stewart, George R., The Opening of the California Trail, (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1953), 28-31.
- [9] Stewart, The Opening of the California Trail, 28.
- [10] "Story of the Murphy Party" in Stewart, The Opening of the California Trail, 79
- [11] Stewart, George R., The California Trail: An Epic With Many Heroes, (McGraw-Hill, 1962), 71. See, also, McLynn, Frank, Wagons West: The Epic Story of America's Overland Trails, (Grove Press, 2002), 224.
- [12] The First Pioneer Wagons Crossed the Sierra Over 160 Years Ago.



Below: Hal Hall.



At the Start



Left: Jen Hemen

Below: the 2025 expedition



There's a lot to do to get an expedition on the road, especially when the expedition includes horses and all of their accoutrements.

Here is the September 29th start of the expedition at the Pioneer Monument at the Donner Memorial State Park. People started gathering before dawn ready to send the expeditioners off. The sky was a brilliant orange that faded to white as the sun came up.



Once there was light and everything was organized expedition leader Bob Crowley spoke about the coming adventure, heroism and the people they were honoring with their trek over the Sierra.

In addition to the riders and their equine friends, there was also a cadre of support people carrying supplies, equipment, and personnel baggage for the participants. They would meet up again after a day of riding down the west shore of Lake Tahoe.





Picture by Keith Sutter, expedition photographer. Here are the six reprisers of the Survivors and Heroes expedition

The Second Article - Survivors and Heroes

The 2025 Expedition

[**Editor's Note:** to read about the background story, the 1844 Stephens, Murphy, Townsend Party, see our July '25 [Heirloom](#) on the Donner Summit Historical Society website, donnersummithistoricalsociety.org.]

Horses and people began gathering before dawn at the Donner Memorial State Park. The sky was a brilliant orange as the sun began to clear the mountains to the east (top picture on the previous page). Dragon, Barney, Direct, Miss Em, Daisy, and Mysti, as well as their riders, the support crew, and a photographer on his own trusty steed (an ebike) were ready to go.

This event, a reprise of the route the horseback group of the 1844 Stephens Murphy Townsend Party, is way more complicated than the previous expeditions History Expeditions (historyexp.org) has undertaken.* There was exhaustive research of possible routes, the story, and characters. Literally almost one thousand sources were consulted which eventually developed into the most likely route of travel over the Sierra Crest and down to Auburn.

Then there were field trips for route exploration so that every segment was covered multiple times. There was outreach to various people and organizations. All that had also been done for the previous expeditions. This time, though, was different. Horses were involved because that's how the original group did their 1844 trek. Horses involved training for four of the six protagonists in our story who had no or little equestrian skills. The horses needed little training though. That all meant handlers, riding lessons, familiarizing the horses with their riders, all of the accouterments that go with equestrian activities, horse trailers, and most importantly, deciding which trek segments were safe for horses. The geography has changed a bit since 1844 with trails now very unsafe for horses and the possibility of running into Jeeps and OHV's (off highway vehicles). Of the 120 mile trip about 60 miles was on horseback, 40 was on foot, and 15 was trailering around dangerous spots or private property.

On October 3, 2025, six horseback riders emerged from their 120 mile trek from the Donner Memorial State Park in Truckee to Auburn. There were smiles on all their faces despite the drenching rain and very cold of the day before. It turns out that modern water proof clothing is not completely waterproof in the face of a downpour.

*Forlorn Hope (2021), Donner Rescue Expeditions (2022), Grosh Brothers (2023), and Snowshoe Thompson (2024). Except for the Grosh Brothers expedition which had nothing to do with Donner Summit the stories are all to be found in our [Heirloom](#) article index on the [Heirloom](#) pages at donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

The 2025 trek took four nights and five days from Truckee to Lake Tahoe, down the west shore to McKinney Cr. Up and over the Sierra Crest and down the other side following the American River to Airport Flat, Uncle Tom's Cabin, and finally to Auburn avoiding dangerous trails rutted by vehicles and erosion.

Along the way a horse got sick but wouldn't travel without other horses so two horses retired, one just temporarily and a new horse was pressed into service.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is a small bar built in 1865 on the Georgetown Divide. It was a stop on the third day of the Survivors and Heroes expedition. Naturally a bar would attract the interest of any expedition passing by and indeed it did for this expeditions.

Bo Elgby, part of the expedition support crew, was idly paging through a photograph album at the bar when he saw a picture of a horse in the bar at some indeterminate time in the past. Someone then got the bright idea to ask the bartender if the expedition could bring a horse or two into the bar. It would be funny. Spurring the request was the old joke about a horse that walked into a bar. The expedition prevailed on the bar tender to put on the shirt Bob just happened to be carrying (see left and below). That done, the expedition's three mares were led into the building and up to the bar. They didn't drink much.

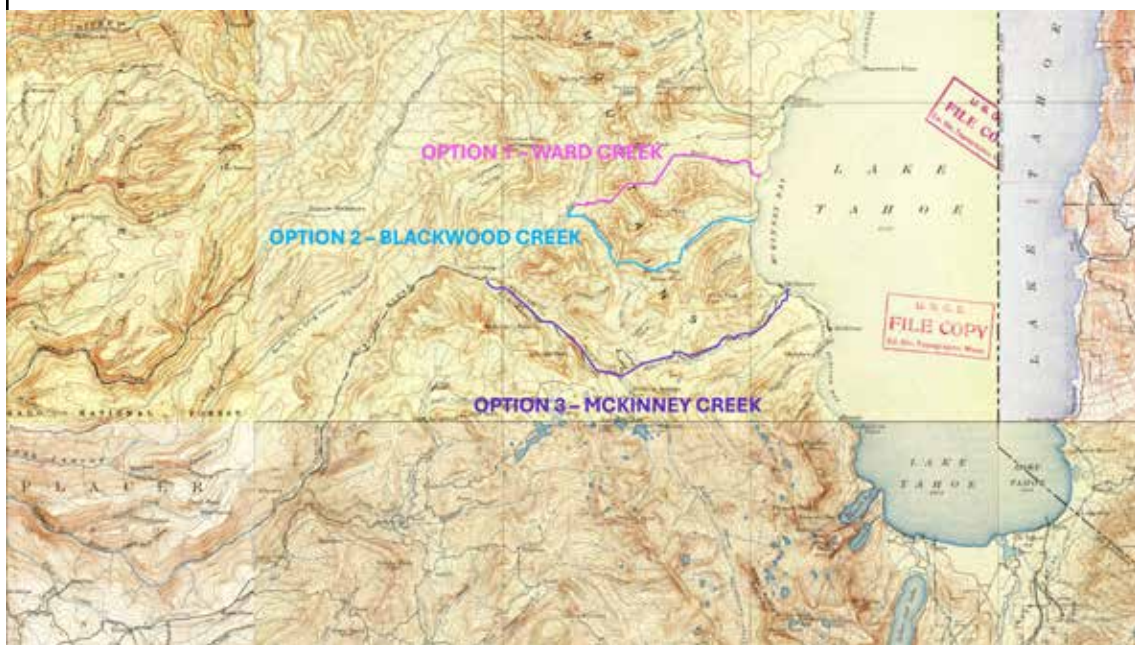


The natural riposte to the joke is, "why the long face."

You can see expeditioning can be fun.



Given a few minutes to reflect at the Auburn Staging Area at the Auburn Overlook Park The Heirloom staff sprang into action to get the first reflections. Readers of History Expeditions over the last five years will want to know how this Survivors and Heroes adventure compared to the previous four. Bob Crowley laid it out. This one was the hardest despite lack of snow. Horses and their accouterments increased



After much research the team developed three possible routes for the 1844 Horseback party's crossing of the Sierra. Further research narrowed the crossing down to Option 3 in the map to the left.

the logistics immensely so it was number one in logistics. It was also number one in research developing almost one thousand sources. It was number one in teamwork. The story was middling compared to the Forlorn Hope and Donner Rescue Expeditions. In general the 2025 trek was the most difficult.

The team was not done with the arrival in Auburn. That evening they gave a presentation about the trip to an overflow crowd in Auburn. The next day they presented at the Donner Party Hike event on Donner Summit, and that evening there was another presentation at the Donner Memorial State Park.

One might wonder why normally sane people would opt for such an endeavor of 120 miles or why their support crew would come back adventure after adventure. There's the adventure of course and developing new historical facts from research but everyone involved said the prime factor was the people involved.

In their own words

"The best day of my life" as he described getting drenched and cold from an intense rainstorm Bo Elgby

"It was amazing despite record breaking rain and freezing"

Jen Hemen, member of the trekking team. Jen had last ridden horses as an eleven year old so this was a horse girl's dream come true.

"It was amazing"

Tim Twietmeyer, team member

"All we could think about was fire fire fire" during the day four downpour
Bob Crowley, team leader

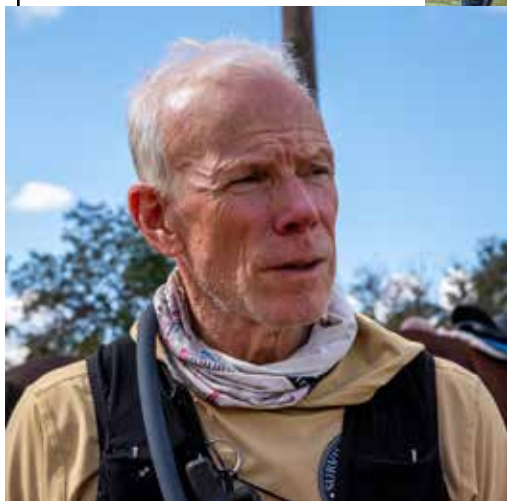


The artwork above was done by Bob Crowley, expedition leader with the help of AI. The subject is the 1844 original Horseback Party of Six.

Hal Hall, team member,
being interviewed by KOLO
channel 8 from Reno.



At the End



Bob Crowley



Tim Twiemeyer, team member, and Bo Elgby, member of the
support crew.



The expedition team coming up the trail into
Auburn



Kassandra DiMaggio, giving her friend a rest



Bob Crowley and Tim Twietmeyer posing for pictures.

Some of the rugged geography the expedition encountered. The team is somewhere in the trees below. They could be heard talking as they came up the trail. This is entering Auburn



Bob Crowley, team leader and at the left above, is a funny guy. Here he has added cartoon bubbles above each of the team leaders' heads to show the members of the 1844 Stephens Townsend Murphy Party's Horseback Party. From left to right: Bob Crowley, Elke Reiman, Kassandra DiMaggio, Barney (the horse) Tim Triemeyer, Jennifer Hemmen, and Hal Hall