

OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION



THIRTY-THIRD ANNUAL CONVENTION
September 21 - 25, 2015

CONVENTION BUS TOUR C **TRUCKEE RIVER ROUTE** **THE DONNER PARTY**



TOUR DIRECTOR - HOWDY HOOVER

Welcome,

This tour will be following a portion of the Truckee River Route, the trail that the Donner party took in 1846. After a ride around the east and north shores of beautiful Lake Tahoe, passing turnoffs for Kingsbury Grade (Daggett Pass) and Spooner Summit of the Johnson Cutoff, crossing into California at Crystal Bay, we will intercept the trail at Alder Creek. This is the camp that the Donner family occupied during that famous snowbound winter.

At the stop at Alder Creek we will split into two groups. One group will tour the area where the campsites of George Donner and Jacob Donner were thought to be. Also the excavations of Donald Hardesty in 1990-1993 and Kelly Dixon/Julie Schablitsky in 2003-2004 will be pointed out and discussed. The location of the trail through this area will be pointed out including the more recent thoughts on this.

The other group will follow John Grebenkemper and his Historic Human Remains Detection dog Kayle. John is involved with the Institute for Canine Forensics, which uses these dogs to search for the scent of decomposed human remains, which can remain in the soil for centuries. John will work with Kayle at different areas of Alder Creek demonstrating how she goes on point when a scent is found.

Halfway through our Alder Creek stay the groups will shift over to the other tour. There are permanent non-flushing toilets at this site.

After our interesting and thought provoking stop at Alder Creek we will travel westward to the campsite of the rest of the Donner party. This is now Donner Memorial State Park.

At this stop we will have lunch, see the new visitor center and have a guided tour of the Murphy cabin and the Pioneer Memorial statue.

Box lunches will be handed out to be enjoyed at the many picnic tables in the park.

At the newly opened visitor center with its very professional displays of the Donner Party, the Truckee River Route, local Indian history, the Transcontinental Railroad, and the Lincoln Highway and a movie on the hour. There are new restrooms at the visitor center with flush toilets.

We will leave the park and follow the trail along the north shore of Donner Lake and drive up into the Donner Pass area. Our bus will park at the historic Summit Bridge (aka Rainbow Bridge).

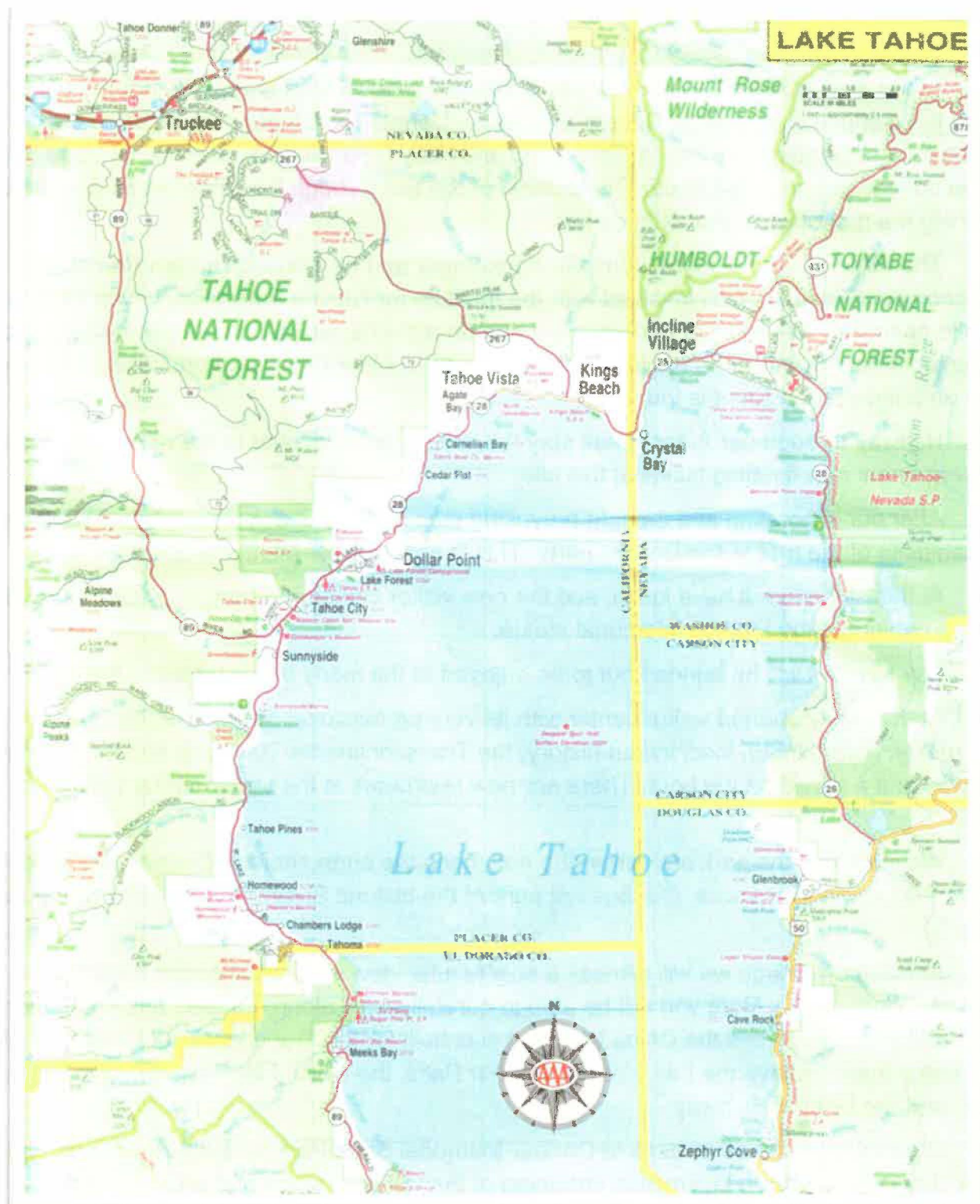
At Rainbow Bridge we will witness a spectacular view looking east over the trail and down on Donner Lake. Here you will be able to carefully walk along the road and some places of shale-like terrain, to see the China Wall that was built for the Transcontinental Railroad, the spot where many believe the trail crossed Donner Pass, the Dutch Flat- Donner Lake Wagon Road, and the Lincoln Highway.

Our return trip takes us back to Donner Memorial State Park for a short restroom break and a chance to do some last minute shopping at the visitor center gift shop.

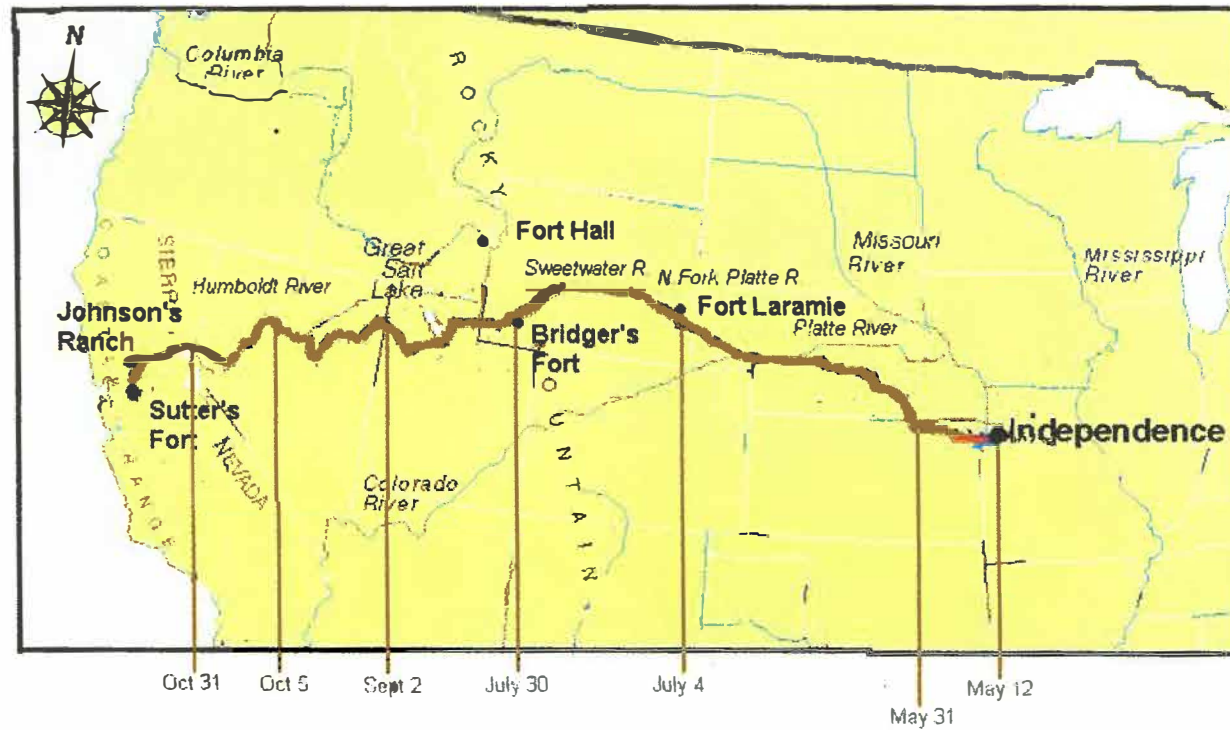
As we head back to Harveys hotel, we will go along the north shore of Lake Tahoe. There we will learn about local history including the infamous casino owned by Frank Sinatra. Also

along the east shore we will talk about Incline Village, the George Whittell mansion, the Johnson Cutoff and Pony Express trails.

No stops will be made along the lake until we arrive at Harveys.



TRAIL OF THE DONNER PARTY





**Archaeological Dig
at Alder Creek**

Kayle, a historic human remains detection dog, and her master John Grebenkemper will be giving us a demonstration on detecting very old graves at Alder Creek.



FORENSIC CANINE HIKE AND DEMONSTRATION AT ALDER CREEK

This hike will cover about one mile on relatively level ground. The first part of the hike will be on a dirt trail, but the rest of it will be off trail across dirt and grassy areas. There are rodent holes, fallen tree branches and soft sandy soil in places. **Those attending the hike should feel comfortable walking across unimproved terrain.**

In early November 1846, the George and Jacob Donner families arrived at Alder Creek. There were a total of 22 people who made the original camps. Eight of these would die in these camps.

Over the last five years forensic canines have been used to survey the area to locate where people died. The canines identified three different areas of more concentrated human remains scent. These likely correspond to three separate camps. A study of the historical evidence and human remains scent intensity leads us to believe that we can identify the occupants of the camps.

For greater detail, read *Forensic Canine Search for the Donner Family Winter Camps at Alder Creek*, by John Grebenkemper and Kristin Johnson, *Overland Journal* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 65-89.

The hike will stop at four locations of significance to the story of the Donner Family Winter Camps at Alder Creek

George Donner Tree

We will stop briefly at this location to gather everyone together on the walk around the interpretive loop trail from the bus. After everyone has caught up, we will leave the interpretive trail and walk to a site near the likely Jacob Donner camp.

Near the Jacob Donner Camp

We will stop near the location of the Jacob Donner camp, which will be about 100 yards to the east of where we are standing. In the nineteenth century, a creek flowed at the base of the hill toward the Jacob Donner camp. We have a good description of this camp from John Breen who visited it in November 1846.



The [Jacob Donner] camp was some distance from the road, on the left side as you go down the river, in a small valley on the north side and near a shallow ravine and some distance from the timber, which I thought singular on account of the labor in getting firewood.

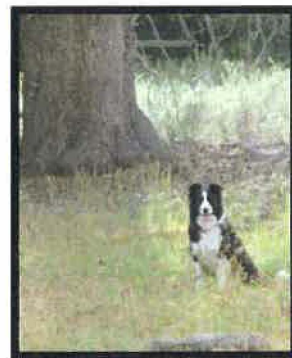
The firewood that was cut in the deep snow left tall tree stumps behind. Two of those tree stumps were standing in the alcove in front of you in this picture taken in 1927.

View of George Donner Camp

The forensic canines and other evidence implies that the George Donner camp was located near the lodgepole pine tree in front of you.

This is the strongest source of human remains scent in the Alder Creek area. Five of the eight people who died were buried in the snow at the George Donner camp.

This pine tree was certainly a large tree in 1846 when the Donners camped here.



Forensic Canine Demonstration at Lodgepole Pine Tree



The photo shows Rhea, another forensic canine, alerting to human remains scent by lying down.

While we are standing under this old pine tree, Kayle will provide a demonstration of how she searches for human remains scent.

Kayle sits to indicate that she has detected the scent of dead people. The dogs only find human remains; they do not alert on animal remains.

You may photograph her while she works, but please, remain quiet.

At Dog Valley, the group was halted by an accident, described by Elitha Donner Wilder in a letter to her younger sister many years later:

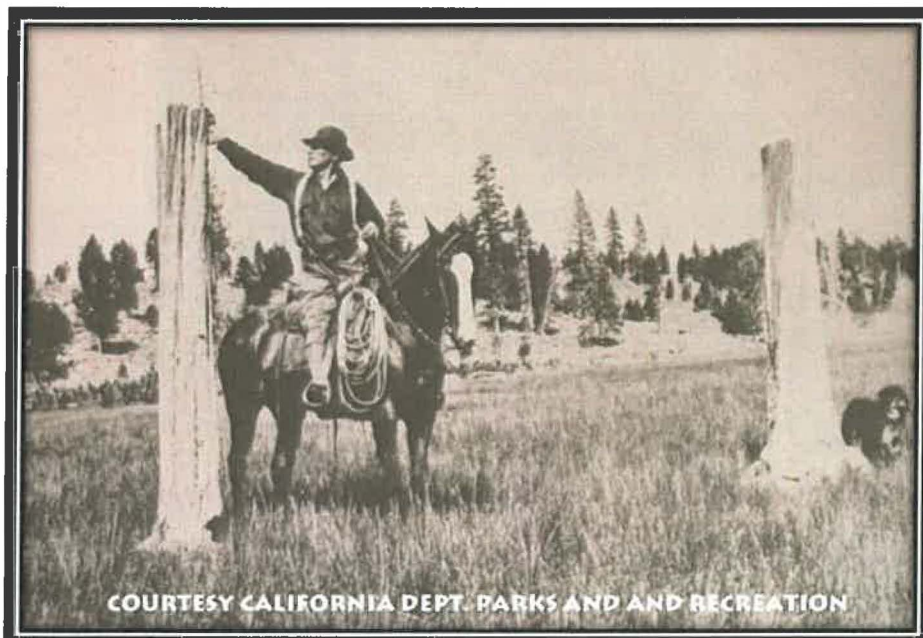
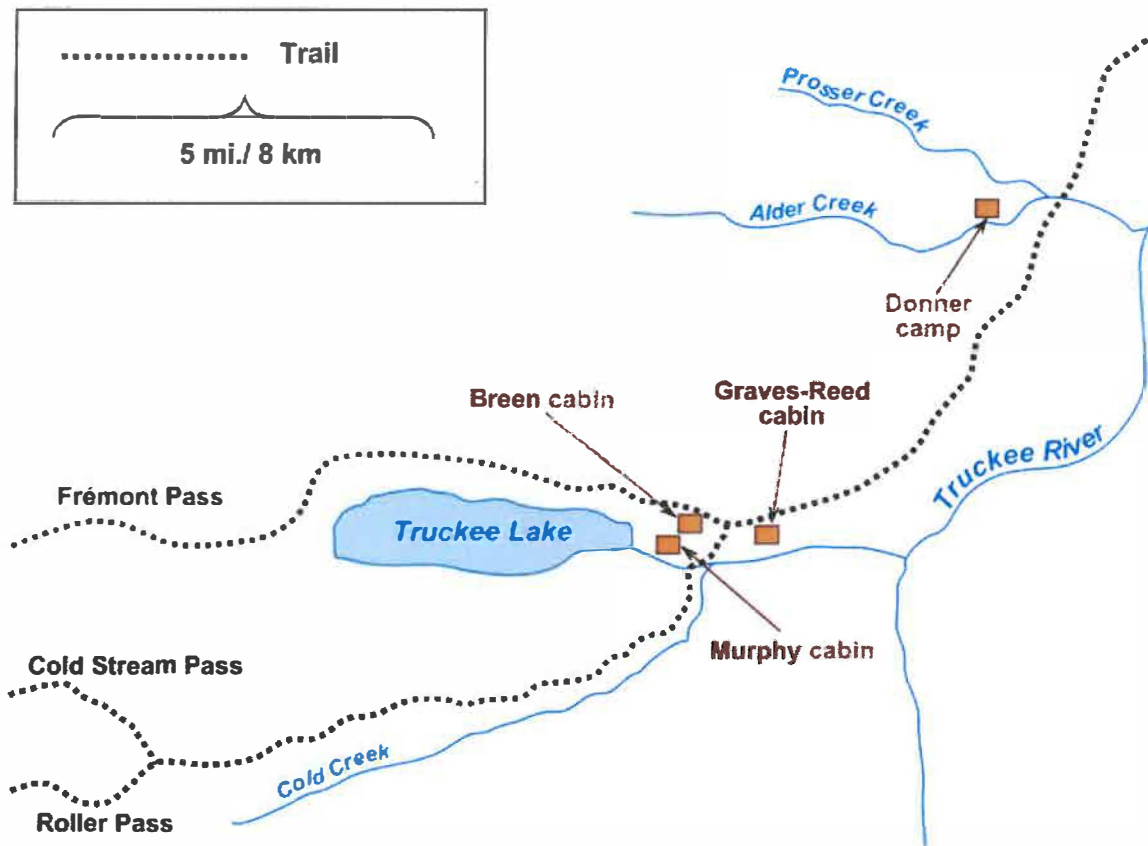
We were 12 to 16 miles from the place where we camped for the winter[.] Coming down a long sliding hill, father was driving, you [Eliza] and Georgia were in the wagon, your mother and Frances were walking ahead when near the bottom the axel of the fore wheel broke, and the wagon tipped down tumbling everything over you two children. Father and Uncle Jake rushed to get you out[.] ...

While father and uncle were hawing a new axel tree, here came two men from our old company ahead of us told of the snow.

It was a sad bit of news, and our folks concluded to look for a place to camp. They fixed up and started on until we came to a place that suited for a camp... The snow covered the Mts. but Alder Creek Valley was free.



Donner Party Winter Encampment



Peter Weddel in this 1930 photo points out a treestump at Alder Creek. The height of the stumps was the depth of the snow when the Donners cut them.

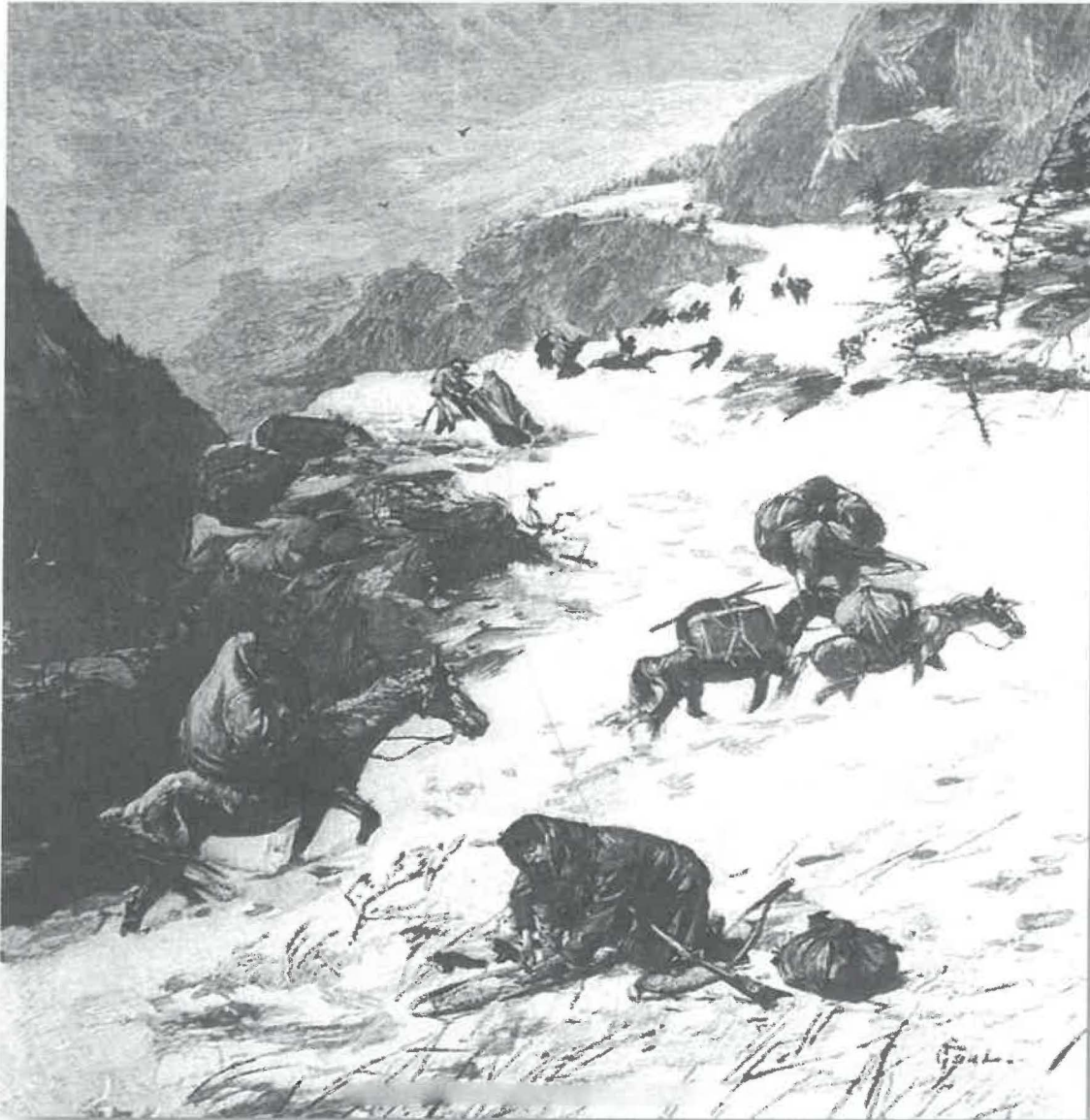


This Pioneer Monument at Donner Memorial State Park was dedicated on June 6, 1918. It was the idea of local historian and newspaperman Charles McGlashan. He wanted to honor all the emigrants that came west in the 1800s.

Donner Pass

Came to this place on the 31st of last month; went into the pass; the snow was so deep we were unable to find the road, and turned back to the shanty on Truckee Lake. Stanton came up one day after we arrived here. We again took our teams and wagons and made another unsuccessful attempt to cross the mountains, as snow fell all the time. It snowed during the space of eight days after our arrival, with little intermission.

Patrick Breen, November, 1846



We hope you enjoyed the tour