

Reconsideration of the Truckee Trail Route: Hoke Valley to the Donner Creek Crossing

Appendix 4

Appendix 4: The 1847 Mormon Battalion Diaries

In 1846 over 500 Mormons traveled from Council Bluffs, Iowa to California to fight in the Mexican-American War of 1846 to 1848. By the summer of 1847 many of these men began returning to the east. A small group travelled with General Kearney to Fort Leavenworth, leaving Sacramento in June of that year. A larger group left Sutters Fort in August 1847 to join the new Mormon settlement at Great Salt Lake.

The Mormons with General Kearney

Now let us turn to the Mormon Battalion members traveling with General Stephen Kearney to Fort Leavenworth starting in June 1847. The two diarists were Henry Smith Turner and Nathaniel Jones. On June 21 the party crossed the Sierras at Stephens Pass and camped on the west end of Donner Lake.

Henry Smith Turner. June 22 1847. *Reached the "Cabins," where 25 or 30 of a party of emigrants, in attempting to pass the last winter, had perished from starvation. Their bodies & bones were strewn about, presenting a revolting & distressing spectacle. The Gen'l directed Maj. Swords to collect these remains & inter them, which having been done we continued our march 10 miles further; & encamped on Greenwood's Creek [Prosser Creek].* June 23 1847. *Cross Greenwood's Creek...*

Nathaniel Jones. June 22 1847. *We came down the lake to some cabins that had been built by some emigrants last fall [Donner Lake Camp]... After we had buried the bones of the dead, which were sawed and broken to pieces for the marrow, we set fire to the cabin. I started about two in the afternoon came seven mile and camped. **One mile above here there was another cabin and more dead bodies but the General did not order them buried.***

The key sentence is the final one. Nathaniel Jones has proceeded 7 miles from the Donner Lake Camp and is just one mile below another cabin with additional dead bodies. This is the Donner Party Alder Creek Camp. Seven miles is a reasonable mileage from Donner Lake Camp to Alder Creek or Prosser Creek. Henry Turner who was traveling in the same company writes that he traveled 10 miles from the Donner Lake Camp and stopped on Prosser Creek before crossing it. His estimate of 10 miles is a bit high but not too far off. It is possible that both Turner and Jones camped on Prosser Creek or perhaps Jones camped a few miles short of Prosser Creek on Alder Creek. In any case, the Donner Party Alder Creek Camp was just up the hill from them. This is consistent with my routing but not consistent with the Wiggins routing.

The Mormon Battalion part of August 1847

A large party of Mormon Battalion members left Fort Sutter in late August headed east. An advance party which included diarists Robert Bliss, James Pace and Henry Bigler reached the Truckee area on September 5th and camped for several days. A second group of Mormons joined them on September 7th. This second group included diarists John King and Levi Hancock. Here they met Captain James Brown who was carrying a letter from Brigham Young to the Battalion. In the letter Young asked that only those with adequate provisions proceed to Great Salt Lake. All others were to go back to California and return the following year. Here the group split up with many people returning to California and some continuing to the east, including most of our diarists. Those wishing more information about the storied Mormon Battalion can consult a number of books including *The Mormon Battalion: U.S. Army of the West* by Norma Baldwin Ricketts. Utah State University Press, 1996.

These five diarists when analyzed together confirm that the Truckee Trail ascended the Alder Creek watershed and that the Mormon camp from September 5th through the morning of September 8th was along Alder Creek about a mile downstream of the Donner Party Alder Creek camp. The Donner tragedy had just ended a few months before. Bodies and body parts were still plainly visible on the ground.

Robert Bliss, James Pace, Henry Bigler and the rest of the advance party camped near the west end of Summit Valley (near modern Soda Springs) the night of September 4, 1847. Here are their entries for September 5th.

Robert Bliss. September 5, 1847. *Continued on march up the Mts for about 5 miles & came to the height of the Mts or the Region of perpetual Snow; here I Stood on Snow some 4 ft Deep & viewed the Mts crowned with Snow all around me[.] I thought no wonder we have frosty nights & cannot Sleep on account of cold in our blankets[.] we soon descended one of the steepest Mts I ever saw; how emigrants ever got their waggons up the Mt I know not[.] Some 4 miles down the Mt we passed some cabins where some of the last Emigrants Died or killed each other; I am told out of 90 only about 30 lived to go through to the Sacramento River[.] to see the Bodys of our fellow beings Laying without Burial & their Bones Bleaching in the Sun Beams is truly Shocking to my feelings; we came 18 or 20 miles & encamped on a fine Stream of water & plenty of Grass*

James Pace. September 5, 1847. *weather clear & frosty[.] we journeyed early crost the main ridge or Backbone of the Calaforna Mountain[.] travled a distance of 20 Miles past the Shanty's whare [the] Emigrants perished the winter before[.] **we camped in a vally 1 Mile below Sum Shantys whar a Mans body lay on the top of the ground uninterupted[.]***

Henry Bigler. September 5, 1847 *At about seven we were on the march passing through a nice little valley two or three miles long and about three-fourths of a mile wide. We ascended the mountain passing over snow three feet deep. We now had gained the summit and main chain of the great Sierra Nevada mountains, and on the east side at the top was a windlass, where emigrants had to haul up their wagons over a very steep ascent in order to gain the summit of the great Sierra Nevada. Passing down the mountain to the head of Truckee River some six or eight miles, we came to a shanty built last winter, and about this cabin we found the skeletons of several human beings. ... After leaving this painful looking place about three miles, we camped in a handsome little valley by a creek, where good water and grass was plenty.*

According to Bliss the distance to Roller Pass was about five miles. This is an accurate distance. Bliss puts the total distance today at 18 – 20 miles while Pace puts it at 20 miles. My estimate of the distance from Roller Pass to the Donner Lake camp is perhaps 7 miles which is consistent with Bigler. Bliss has it as 4 miles which is far too little. Bliss and Pace imply a mileage from the Donner Lake camp to their camp tonight at about 6 – 8 miles. Bigler puts it at 3 miles. Bliss gives us the information that this night's camp was on a "fine Stream of water & plenty of Grass." Bigler agrees that they were in a "handsome little valley by a creek." This stream could only be Alder Creek or Prosser Creek. However, Pace locks in the location when he writes that "we camped in a vally 1 Mile below Sum Shantys whar a Mans body lay on the top of the ground uninterrupted[.]" We know where the Donner's Alder Creek camp was.¹ One mile below the Donner's Alder Creek camp would be along Alder Creek under what is now Prosser Reservoir.

On September 6, 1847 John King and Levi Hancock were camped just a bit west or perhaps northwest of Devils Peak. On the next day they travelled all the way to the Alder Creek Camp.

John King. September 7, 1847 *This morning we started very early and after traveling about twelve miles we crossed the back bone of the California Mountains [Roller Pass] and continued for about eighteen miles passing several lakes and beautiful streams of water[.] we traveled 30 miles and **encamped on a stream of water in a valey of Death for in this valey the most of the emigrants died last winter...***

Levi Hancock. September 7, 1847...*I stoped to the place whare the men eat each other[.] **this day the boys said they saw one man lying on the plane up about one mile above us in a hollow[.] the most horable sight my informent ses he ever saw[.] some of the flesh was still dryed up like a mumma clothes on[.] has bin draged about by wild anemels[.] many bones seen skulls backbones [and] thy bones of human beings[.]***

King gives a reasonably accurate mileage from Devils Peak to Roller Pass of 12 miles. He then lists the mileage from Roller Pass to that night's camp as 18 miles. I estimate the mileage at 13-14 miles so this is a significant overestimate. However, both King and Hancock confirm that tonight's camp is in the same valley as the Donner's Alder Creek camp. Hancock estimates the mileage from the Donner Camp to the Mormon camp as one mile. This is the same distance estimated by Pace on September 5th. King confirms Bliss' statement from September 5th that they are camping on a stream.

On September 8th, the Mormon party divided. Those with adequate supplies continued toward Salt Lake. This included Bliss, Pace, King and Hancock. Bigler returned to California. The journey east is another check on the Mormon camp location from September 5th through the 8th. On the night of the 8th, the eastbound Mormons camped in Dog Valley.

Robert Bliss. September 8, 1847 *parted with many good Brothring here hoping to meet next Summer at Salt Lake & continued our Journey some 18 miles & encamped in a small valley surrounded by Mts covered with pine.*

James Pace. September 8, 1847 *cule & frosty this morning we parted[.] a number returned back to the settlements to work all winter[.] we travled a distance of 15 miles encamped on a small Creek[.]*

John King. September 8, 1847 *This morning a part of my ten went back with [others.] we started quite late and traveled 14 miles and encamped for the knight[.]*

¹ See Grebenkemper & Johnson, "Forensic Canine Search for the Donner Family Winter Camps at Alder Creek". The Overland Journal V33 N2 (Summer 2015), pp 64-87

Levi Hancock. September 8, 1847 *we left & traveled an easterly course[.] made 18 miles & camped ...*

Bliss, Pace, King and Hancock give mileages to Dog Valley of 18, 15, 14 and 18 miles respectively. I put the mileage from Alder Creek at around 15 – 16 miles. How do we know they camped in Dog Valley? Because Bliss and King both describe the travel from Dog Valley to the Truckee River on September 9th.

Robert Bliss. September 9, 1847 *Came over a Mt to the Trucky River[.] continued down the Same about 25 miles & encamped where the river puts through a Mt.*

John King. September 9, 1847 *This morning we started very early and after traveling about four miles, we came to the trackey river[.]*

In fact, the 4 mile estimate of King for the distance from Dog Valley to the Truckee is quite accurate.

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