

The Mormons and the Donner Party

The Mormons and the Donner Party

Eugene E. Campbell

A busload of tourists, enroute from San Francisco to Salt Lake City, had stopped at the large stone monument near Donner Lake that commemorates the tragic experience of the Donner Party a hundred years before. One member of the group, a Latter-day Saint, was astounded to hear the bus driver inform the tourists that this was the place where “the Mormons massacred the Donner Party!”

Realizing that the bus driver had been misinformed and was evidently confusing the Mountain Meadow Massacre with the Donner tragedy, the Mormon corrected him by declaring: “The Mormons had nothing to do with the Donner Party.” Unfortunately, he was almost as mistaken as the bus driver, for although there was no direct connection between the Mormon Church and the Donner Party, it is interesting to note that one of the larger families in the party was Mormon, and that other members of the Church were instrumental in obtaining relief for the stranded group, and participated in the first successful rescue attempt, and that members of the returning Mormon Battalion were the first to reach the scene of the disaster and were instructed by General Kearny to bury the remains. Then, too, it should be mentioned that the Donner Party pioneered the route that the Mormon Pioneers used to enter the valley of the Great Salt Lake.

Daniel Tyler, in his *Concise History of the March of the Mormon Battalion* gives an account of his meeting with Mary Murphy Johnson, who was one of the survivors of the Donner Party. Tyler was a member of the returning battalion members who had marched from Los Angeles to Sutter’s Fort, where they had seen some of the survivors of the tragic affair, and who were continuing on their way to Salt Lake Valley. About forty miles north of Sutter’s Fort, they arrived at Johnson’s ranch where the following incident took place as recorded by Tyler:

The company travelled 18 miles today and arrived at Captain Johnson’s Mill on Bear Creek. . . . This man Johnson. . . was said to have been one of Captain Fremont’s battalion and his young wife was one of the ill-fated party which had been snowed in at the foot of the Sierras. Mrs. Murry [Murphy] who was a Latter-day Saint, was among the number that perished in that horrible scene of death. The circumstances under which she became a member of that company were explained to us by her daughter, Mrs. Johnson. The lady, being a widow with several children dependant on her for support, while residing at Nauvoo, heard of a chance to get employment at Warsaw, an anti-Mormon settlement 30 miles down the river. Thinking to better her

condition, she accordingly moved to Warsaw and spent the winter of 1845–46 there. In the spring of the latter year, a party emigrating to Oregon or California offered to furnish passage to her and her 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 Sr. Murry [Murphy], 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. . . .

According to B. H. Roberts, Wilford Woodruff said that he had baptized Mrs. Murphy while on his mission in Tennessee, but that “she apostatized and joined the mob.” Roberts indicates that by “joined the mob” President Woodruff meant “no more, perhaps than that she lived among those who were mobbing the saints in Illinois.” Apparently the Murphys thought of themselves as Mormons, no matter what their official status was at the time.

The Murphy family consisted of the mother, Mrs. Lavina Murphy; four sons, Lemuel B., John L., William G., and Simon P.; three daughters, Mary, Harriet, and Naomi. Harriet was married to William Pike, and had two infant daughters, Naomi and Catherine. Naomi was married to William Foster, and they had an infant son, George. Both of the sons-in-law accompanied the party.

The family endured the hardships of the entry into Salt Lake Valley, and the desert crossing with the rest of the company without unusual incident, but early in October near the present site of Reno, Nevada, tragedy struck. C. T. Stanton, a member of the party who had gone on ahead to secure provisions, had just returned with a pack train furnished by Captain John Sutter, and assured the company that more supplies might be obtained if others went on ahead. According to McGlashan’s account, the two Murphy brothers-in-law, Wm. Pike and Wm. Foster, volunteered to go, and began making preparations. Pike was cleaning a pepper box pistol and handed it to Foster, but in the exchange, the pistol exploded, and Pike was fatally wounded. He died within twenty minutes.

After this tragic event, the company pushed on, but found themselves caught in a heavy snowstorm just as they were about to reach the summit above Donner’s lake. Sadly they turned back and built the makeshift cabin that was to house the Murphy and Eddy families for so many weeks. The date was November 3.

On November 12, an attempt was made to climb out of the valley, but the snow was deep and soft, and the party returned to camp. Another attempt was made on November 21; the group included Mrs. Murphy and three of her half-grown children, but this, too, was unsuccessful. An eight-day snowstorm made further attempts impossible.

In desperation, the members of the camp began to manufacture snow shoes, and by the middle of December, sixteen pairs were ready for an attempt. On December 16, seventeen members of the party, the "Forlorn Hope" group began their climb. The Murphys were well represented as Mr. and Mrs. Foster, Mrs. Pike, Lemuel, and William were with the group. The latter two did not have snowshoes, and soon William, a boy of eleven, was forced to turn back. The rest of the group continued on, and the survivors, after thirty-three days of incredible hardship, reached Johnson's Ranch. Lemuel Murphy had died, and Foster had lost his mind temporarily. Eating human flesh had kept them alive, and the Murphy girls witnessed the dismemberment of their brother's body. During this time, John L. Murphy had died at the camp.

The first rescue party did not reach Donner's Lake until February 18, 1847, and they were able to save only those who were strong enough to walk. Two of the seven men who risked their lives to rescue the emigrants were Mormons, John and Daniel Rhoads. The day after they arrived, little Catherine Pike passed away. Mary and William Murphy were chosen to go out with the first rescue party, and finally, John Rhoads agreed to carry the infant Naomi Pike out with him. This left of the Murphy family only Mrs. Murphy, who was now half blind and childish, her son Simon and baby George Foster unrescued. When William Foster made a courageous rescue attempt in the middle of March, he found his baby dead, and his mother-in-law unable to move. He was able to rescue Simon, however. Before another party could make their way in, Mrs. Murphy was dead.

Samuel Brannan, leader of the Mormons in San Francisco, and editor of the local newspaper, played an important part in the raising of funds for the rescue attempts. Then, in April, he decided to ride through the Sierras and meet Brigham Young's company and lead them to California. He saw the emaciated survivors at Sutter's Fort, and a few miles up the trail, came upon the last survivor, Lewis Keesberg, crawling down the trail. He shared his lunch with Keesberg and then continued his journey.

In June, twelve members of the Mormon Battalion, chosen as a bodyguard by General Stephen W. Kearney, who was taking John C. Frémont back to Ft. Leavenworth under arrest, came upon the scene of the Donner tragedy. General Kearney detailed the men to bury the remains and clean up the camp.

Mary Murphy, who was only thirteen years old, was married to William Johnson of Johnson's Ranch in June 1847, a few months after her rescue. In November of the same year she was advertised as having left him, and in 1848 she married to C. Covilland of Nye's Ranch. In 1850, when the city of Marysville, California, was laid out, it was named in honor of Mary Murphy Covilland.

Of the thirteen members of the Murphy family, only seven survived. They were Harriet and Naomi; the baby, Naomi Pike, who was rescued by John Rhoads; Mary and William who hiked out with the first rescue party; and Simon, who was rescued by his brother-in-law, George Foster, who had just barely survived the “Forlorn Hope” experience, but who had recovered and had accompanied the second rescue team. This would be about average for the group as far as loss of life is concerned. Of the eighty members of the Donner Party at Truckee Meadows, forty-four, just over half, survived.