Appalachian Professor’s Research Finds No Evidence of Cannibalism at Donner Party Campsite

BOONE, NC – Research conducted by Dr. Gwen Robbins, an assistant professor of biological anthropology at Appalachian State University, finds there is no evidence of cannibalism among the 84 members of the Donner Party who were trapped by a snowstorm in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in the mid-1840s.

Remains from the Donner party’s Alder Creek campsite were excavated by a team of archaeologists from the University of Montana and the University of Oregon Museum. A sample of bones from the campsite hearth was analyzed by Robbins and Kelsey Gray, an Appalachian graduate. They will present the results of this project this week at the annual meeting of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists in Albuquerque, N.M.

James F. Reed and his wife, Margret W. Keyes Reed, were one of two families who were part of the Donner Party and survived after becoming snowbound in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in the mid-1840s. Research conducted by Dr. Gwen Robbins.
As the sponsoring chapter for this year's national convention, we look forward to greeting all OCTA members in Elko on August 10. We would also appreciate your signing up to volunteer for short sessions throughout the five days of the convention. We will have signup sheets for various activities at the registration desk. The more people we get to work a shift, the shorter the shifts will be. The overall execution of the convention schedule will benefit tremendously.

The spring symposium in Bakersfield was a triumph for our own Tom Hunt and the Kern County Historical Society. Another century-and-a-half mystery was solved in the locating and marking of Elisha Stephens' gravesite. Wildflower displays enroute and a great Basque banquet rounded out the celebration. Where to next spring, folks?

This year's chapter board elections were not contested—two candidates for two positions—but we do appreciate the mail voting just the same. This maintains the integrity of the election process and also allows for write-in votes. I mentioned last year that the ballots are also a good tablet for comments, hopefully constructive. This year we have had only one comment—in 85 ballots submitted to date—from Tom McCutcheon of Rock Springs Wyoming. Tom belongs to all chapters and laments our lack of more candidates. He says we have many good trails people in the chapter. That we do, Tom, to be sure. We also have nearly a third of the entire OCTA membership. Those of us who do devote hundreds of hours a year to chapter activities could definitely use some additional help. And the chapter would benefit tremendously with much greater efficiencies of operation and increased activities.

As I write this, candidate Michael Trueblood is having a tough round with diabetes. I'm sure he would welcome a card or two, sent to 7138 Sundown Dr, Sacramento, CA 95823.

This will be my last column as chapter president. It has been a difficult time for me personally, but I have enjoyed working with the board and
Robbins, an assistant professor of biological anthropology at Appalachian State University, disputes rumors that the party turned to cannibalism to survive their ordeal.

During the excavation of the Donner Party's campsite, 16,000 burned, fragmented bones were found. Many of the bones also had butchery and boiling marks. Robbins, an osteologist who specializes in bone biology and microstructure, examined the bones with three questions in mind: Are there any human bones in the hearth, which would provide material evidence for cannibalism? What kinds of other animals are present in the assemblage of bone fragments? and, What did the starvation diet look like?

Upon joining the faculty at Appalachian, Robbins continued her research on the remains. With a team of undergraduate students, she pored through the tiny fragments looking for remains that could withstand further testing. The majority of bone fragments were so small and so delicate that they would crumble if subjected to thin sectioning, but there were about 250 larger, sturdier pieces of bone that showed evidence of cutting, chopping and boiling.

Of these, 55 additional fragments were studied. The team produced thin sections from these specimens and examined them using a microscope, measuring each basic structural unit and characterizing the tissue types. From this work, they determined that humans were not among the food refuse examined.

A power analysis indicated that, statistically, Robbins and Gray can be 70 percent confident that if cannibalism made up a small fraction of the diet (less than 1 percent) at the site in the last few weeks of occupation, and if humans were processed in the same way animals were processed, at least one of the 85 bone fragments examined would be human.

So, what did the Donner family eat during that winter? Robbins’ team identified the remains as cattle, deer, horse and dog. While the historical record had indicated that cattle were the principal means of subsistence during that winter, there was previously no record that the Donner family also successfully hunted deer despite the 20 to 30 feet of snow on the ground that winter.

The historical record does indicate that relief parties in February brought horses to the camps and that a few were left behind. There was no record of the horses being consumed and no mention of eating dog.

The legend of the Donner party was primarily created by print journalists, who embellished the tales based on their own Victorian macabre sensibilities and their desire to sell more newspapers. In all, 47 people lived to tell the tale: 11 men and 36 women and children. The survivors fiercely denied allegations of cannibalism and one man even filed a defamation suit immediately upon reaching Sutter’s Fort near Sacramento. Although the court ruled in his favor, he was forever known to local residents as Keseberg the Cannibal.

The voices of the survivors of the Donner Party ordeal have long been overwhelmed by the spectacular imagery of a legend that swiftly took on a life of its own. Their descendants are still today affected by the stigma of this tale.

The archaeological record provides a new picture of the party’s activities. In the trash and debris left around the hearth in the spring of 1847, archaeologists found pieces of slate and shards of broken china. These pieces of slate and crockery around the hearth suggest an attempt to maintain a sense of a “normal life,” a family intent on maintaining a routine of lessons, to preserve the dignified manners from another time and place, a refusal to accept the harsh reality of the moment, and a hope that the future was coming.
Robbins’ research will be published in the July issue of the journal American Antiquity. The archaeology team also is finishing a book manuscript for University of Oklahoma Press to be released in 2011.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY BY LESLIE FRYMAN

There have been no excavations of the Donner Camp since 2002-2003 so I don’t know what the Appalachian State University has to do with anything, but the Donner Archaeology Project (the name of the 2002-2003 study conducted by University of Montana archaeologists Dixon and Schablitsky) is referred to in this article, so possibly the professor quoted (Robbins) is a faunal bone specialist or archaeo-osteologist who did some special studies on the bone assemblage from that project. Dixon and Schablitsky had professors from Oregon originally studying the bone - maybe one of those folks got a job at AppSU, I’m just guessing.

One thing - the 2003 study DID confirm the location of Donner’s 4-mo campsite in the meadow where the USFS "Donner Site" picnic area is off Hwy 89, 5 miles north of Truckee. Several cooking hearths used during winter months, along with period artifacts and lots and lots of completely over-processed bone fragments confirmed it was a winter camp, with women and children and wagons present, and its occupants were hungry enough to boil down food bone in cooking pots until it was reduced to small dry bits with absolutely no nutritional value left, then burn those bits as fuel in their campfires. This was consistent with primary records describing how the Donners recooked food bone to bits for broth, then burned them for heat as they were having difficulty gathering dry wood.

The presence of human bone at the campsite could not be confirmed precisely because of the reduced condition of the bone assemblage - it was too small to identify beyond large, medium and small mammal categories, though all three of those were present (human would fall into medium, but so would deer and dog). No DNA could be lifted from the boiled, burned bone bits either, which was too bad, since the project archaeologists had already tracked down and collected DNA from a Donner descendant.

Elisha Stephens was born in South Carolina in 1804 and moved to Georgia with his family at a young age. However, he was to spend most of the first half of his life in the frontier lands bordering the Missouri River.  

...Along The Way (continued) and various committees involved in maintaining chapter activities. As a relative newcomer to OCTA—10 years is not that long compared to many of you—I never cease to be amazed by the knowledge many of you “old timers” have. Around my non-rut-nut friends I can sound like an expert, but when with a group of you experts, I just hold my tongue and listen.

If you have not done so by the time you read this, make those last minute plans to attend the convention in Elko. There will definitely be something for everybody. Review the schedule and register at www.octa-trails.org.

Bob Evanhoe, President
CA-NV Chapter

CAPTAIN ELISHA STEPHENS and the STEPHENS-TOWNSEND-MURPHY PARTY OF 1844

Elisha Stephens was born in South Carolina in 1804 and moved to Georgia with his family at a young age. However, he was to spend most of the first half of his life in the frontier lands bordering the Missouri River.
Like many other Americans of his time, he had many occupations: blacksmith, trapper, hunter, guide, soldier, farmer, and explorer. During the 1820's and 1830's, it appears that he participated as a free trapper in the northwest fur trade, thus developing the skills of a mountain man which were to serve him well in later life.

Immediately prior to his decision to embark on an overland journey to the Far West, records show that he was employed by the Indian sub-agency at Council Bluffs, Iowa as a blacksmith to several of the Indian tribes that were under that sub-agencies supervision.

In 1844, at the age of 40, he resigned from his position as a government blacksmith because of poor health, purchased and outfitted a wagon with his severance pay, and signed on with a wagon train whose destination was Mexican Alta, California. This train would later become known as the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party.

He was immediately elected captain of that train and also-apparently on an on-again/off-again basis--of several other wagon trains setting out from Council Bluffs at the same time but destined for Oregon. Some of the members of the Oregon-bound trains were critical of Stephens, but within the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party, Stephens was respected and served as captain for the entire journey. As one member of that train later put it, "we had great confidence in our leader." It proved to be a confidence which was fully merited.

This grouping of wagon trains set out from Council Bluffs in late May of 1844 via a route which took them along the north side of the Platte River as far as Ft. Laramie. This route was to become known after 1847 as the Mormon Trail. Hired to serve as guide for the combined trains and traveling with two of his sons was the famous mountain man, Caleb Greenwood.

According to several accounts, Greenwood was hired to serve as guide only as far as what was vaguely termed "the Rocky Mts." [South Pass ... Ft. Bridger ... Ft. Hall?] since he readily admitted to the emigrants that he had no first-hand knowledge of the route beyond that point. Another account states that Capt. Stephens, himself, claimed no knowledge of the country beyond Ft. Laramie.

Also travelling in his own wagon as part of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party was another seasoned mountain man identified only as "OldMan Hitchcock" [Isaac Hitchcock]. Ironically, it was Hitchcock, elected by the train, to guide the wagons for only a few days out of the long journey and not Greenwood who was responsible for the Party's first great achievement, the opening of a much used cut-off between the Big Sandy River (Wyoming) and the Bear River (Idaho).

By rights, the cut-off should have borne Hitchcock's name but through a series of unfavorable circumstances, it became first known as Greenwood's cut-off and then, from the Gold Rush year of 1849 on, as Sublette's cut-off.

By far the greatest historical accomplishment of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party was to be the first wagon train from the States to succeed in bringing their wagons over the summit of the Sierra Nevada and eventually on into the settlements of Mexican Alta, California.

The route they pioneered went directly west from the Sink of the Humboldt River, through the Truckee River canyon to Donner Lake at the base of the Sierra Nevada, and then up and over the crest via Donner Pass. Only a few of the wagons were taken over the summit before a rapidly deepening snowpack forced those wagons together with the women and children of the party to go into a winter long encampment on the upper Yuba River.

Most of the men continued on foot to New Helvetia (Sutter's Fort) in search of relief. As soon as the melting snow would permit in the spring of 1845, both the wagons and the women and children at the encampment as well as those wagons that...
had been left east of the summit were retrieved and brought into the settlements. At Donner Lake, the wagons had been under the care of seventeen-year-old Moses Schallenberger.

No lives had been lost on the entire journey, and the emigrants arrived with two additional babies born along the trail. The floodgates of overland emigration to California had been opened!

Stephens' subsequent life as a Californian can be summarized as follows: Along with most of the other men of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party, he was immediately conscripted by Captain Sutter to serve (briefly and without even seeing combat) on the losing side in the Micheltorena War.

From 1846 until 1848, he served in the Bear Flag Revolt as an ordnance blacksmith in San Diego under the command of Commodore Stockton.

In 1848, he bought land near San Jose [Stevens (sic) Creek is named after him] and began raising grapes, fruit trees, and blackberries as well as doing some trapping and continuing to add to his reputation as an eccentric. He named his farm Blackberry Farm.

His obituary states that he had some small success in the Gold Rush. In 1864, declaring that the San Jose area had become much too crowded for his liking, he sold his farm and moved down to the Kern River country where he purchased a small acreage on which he raised bees and chickens.

Tom Baker, whose father, Col. Thomas Baker, was the founder of Bakersfield, relates that Stephens once told him that he had first passed through where Bakersfield now stands while on a trip to San Diego via Tejon Pass in 1844. At that time, the site was a dense forest of cottonwoods, willows, elders, and sycamores, and he was forced to swim across the Kern River.

While passing through Fort Tejon, he was compelled to turn out of the pass and go up on the ridge because of the great number of grizzly bears eating acorns under the big oak trees. There were so many they looked like bands of cattle, huge and shaggy, and as large as two-year old steers."

At the age of eighty-three, Stephens suffered a stroke and was to spend the rest of his life as a resident of Kern County Hospital. He died on September 9, 1887 and was buried without a marker at Union Cemetery.

The mystery of his final resting place was to remain unresolved until 2009 when it was determined by members of the Kern County Genealogical Society that he had been buried here in a family plot along with a number of relatives.

This marker was funded by the California-Nevada Chapter of the Oregon-California Trails.
Association and was placed on May 1, 2010 in cooperation with the Kern County Historical Society.

AWARDS GIVEN AT BAKERSFIELD SYMPOSIUM
Thanks to Carol March and Susie Winner for the following photos . . .

Chuck Dodd received the Chapter’s Lifetime Achievement Award

Tom Hunt was given the Chapter President’s Trail Boss Award for Dedication to Trails Research and Preservation

Vince Correll was presented a Certificate of Appreciation for Outstanding Service as a Chapter Board member

Mary Ann Tortorich was presented with a Certificate of Appreciation for being founder and editor of the Chapter E-News

More on Page 9
Dee was born in Gerber, CA, on October 23, 1920 to Robert Bertram and Georgianna McKenzie, Dee was a resident of Sacramento County since 1923. Dee passed away peacefully at age 89 at his home in Citrus Heights on May 3, 2010.

He is survived by his beloved wife of 66 years, Ruth Mary, and their sons Robert of Sacramento, Gary (Martine) of Santa Barbara, Aaron (Suzie) of Fair Oaks, and David (Diana) of Newman, CA; daughters-in-law Martine, Suzie, and Diana; granddaughters Cristina and Sofia; and grandson Daniel. He was predeceased by his parents and his brother Earl G. McKenzie of Sacramento.

Dee attended Washington Elementary, Sutter Jr. High, and graduated from Sacramento High School in June, 1937. He later received an A.A. degree from Sacramento Jr. College in 1945, and a B.S. in Civil Engineering from Stanford University in 1949 where he earned Magna Cum Laude, Phi Beta Kappa, and Tau Beta Pi awards.

He flew B-24's in the 8th Air Force in England during World War II where he earned the Distinguished Flying Cross and five Air Medals as a Captain pilot on a lead crew in the 491st Bomb Group. He also served in the Northeast Air Command in Newfoundland, Canada, during the Korean War.

Prior to WWII, he worked for the Western Railroad, the CA State Controller's Office, and the Army Air Corps at McClellan Field. Following the war he served as a civil engineer for the City of Sacramento, the State Division of Highways (now Caltrans,) and Sacramento County, from which he retired as Director of Public Works in 1986. Dee was active in emigrant trail organizations and often participated in Trails West field trips and attended Chapter activities. ~
Other Awards given during the Symposium:

**Bob Evanhoe** was presented with a Chapter Certificate of Appreciation for Outstanding Service as Chapter President.

**Susan McCabe & Stephen Christy** of the Carson City Field Office of the BLM, each a Chapter Certificate of Appreciation for making signs available marking the Fernley Swales Preservation Easement.

**Trash Pros** for Outstanding Support of the Annual Fernley Swales Cleanups by allowing free dumping at their transfer station. ~

FOR MEMBERSHIP, INQUIRIES OR TRAIL TALK SUBMISSIONS
Contact the Chapter at: CA-NV OCTA Chapter, P.O. Box 1521, Yreka, CA 96097
EMAIL: canvocta@sbcglobal.net

CHANGES IN CHAPTER DUES STRUCTURE

One Person Membership............... (Individual) $10
Two or More Person Membership...... (Family) $15
Sustaining Membership.......................... $35

Family Memberships can Receive Two Ballots
Sustaining Memberships can Receive Two Ballots
To receive two ballots, two names must be listed in the application.

WANTED Raffle Items – Auction Items
If you have something that you can donate to the Elko Convntion, please contact John or Susie Winner at: 530-622-5636 or swinner@dataentree.com
Proceeds benefit the Chapter
For updated news on the Elko Convention, visit:

www.canvocta.org or www.octa-trails.org

SEE YOU IN ELKO – AUGUST 10 - 14
CHAPTER NEEDS RAFFLE – AUCTION ITEMS. CONTACT JOHN & SUSIE WINNER AT: SWINNER@DATAENTREE.COM
Or Phone: 530-622-5636

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED – ORPHANS OR NOT HELP AT THE CHAPTER’S TABLE SELLING T-SHIRTS, HATS . . . Short or long shifts. Proceeds benefit the Chapter.
Contact Joyce Everett at: joy4everett@yahoo.com
TRAIL TALK INDEX

ACTIVITIES CALENDAR......... PG 1
DONNER PARTY FINDINGS........ PG 1
ALONG THE WAY.................. PG 2
CHAPTER DIRECTORY ............. PG 2
CAPT. ELISHA STEPHENS STORY... PG 4
BAKERSFIELD AWARDS......... PG 7
DEE McKENZIE...................... PG 8
CHAPTER CONVENTION NOTES.... PG 9-11

TRAIL TALK IS PUBLISHED THREE TIMES A YEAR.
DEADLINES FOR ARTICLES AND NOTICES ARE:

SEPTEMBER 15, 2010
FEBRUARY 1, 2011
MAY 15, 2011

SUBMISSIONS:
canvocta@sbcglobal.net