

Hikers retrace portions of Donner Party's trail



Guide Greg Zirbel points out the mortars on a granite boulder. Photos/Jessie Marchesseau

By Jessie Marchesseau

TRUCKEE – The thermometer read 32 degrees when I pulled into the Sugar Bowl parking lot. It was 8am on the first Saturday in October, and summer was obviously over.

Sugar Bowl's Mt. Judah lodge was the launching point for the 21st annual Donner Party Hike. The yearly event offers a variety of guided interpretive hikes giving participants a chance to explore Truckee's abundant mountain trails while getting in a history lesson at the same time.

Included in the weekend event is an afternoon speaker. This year it was Ethan Rarick, author of "Desperate Passage – the

Donner Party's Perilous Journey West". Sunday's activities included a walking tour focused specifically on the Donner Party and entrance to the Emigrant Trail Museum.

The seven hikes available on Saturday provided hikers with options ranging from 3.5 to 6 miles in a variety of skill levels.

I chose the four-mile Summit Meadows hike. New to the roster this year, the route explores the Summit Valley, also known as Lake Van Norden. The area is part of a 2,900-acre parcel of land acquired this year by the Truckee Donner Land Trust.

Kathy Hess, Donner Party Hike event coordinator, said they add, subtract and change hikes frequently to keep things fresh for the hikers who return year after year. Of this year's 200 hikers, Hess said about 90 percent are from out of town. A little nip in the air was not going to keep them away, in past years they have seen snow.

From the lodge, some groups were shipped off to their trailheads by bus. Since the starting point for Summit Meadows was fairly close, our group carpooled. A short drive down Highway 40 brought us to Soda Springs and the Van Norden Dam where we parked our vehicles.

Built in 1890, the dam was breached in 1976, and what had been Lake Van Norden became a vast meadow surrounded by emigrant and Native American history. Though no longer full of water, the concrete walls of the dam still stand tall.

Sporting hats, mittens, beanies and jackets to ward off the crisp autumn air, we set out, passing through the parking lot, over a metal bridge, and climbing down into the spillway. Our guides for the day, Greg Zirbel and Penelope Curtis, led the way.

With 11 hikers and two guides, we must have been one of the smaller groups. Two men from San Francisco were participating

in the event for the ninth time, another for his fifth time. A few of the hikers were from Reno, a few from Chico. My friend Megan and I were the only ones from Truckee-Tahoe.

Meandering through the forest as a group, our first historical stop was at a large granite boulder. We gathered round while Zirbel explained how and why the Native Americans who once inhabited this place carved the bowl-like indentations called mortars into the granite. Each of us had a chance to see and touch the mortars that are hundreds, possibly thousands of years old. Zirbel passed around laminated black and white photographs of what the place looked like a century ago, something he did periodically throughout our journey.

We tromped along, branches and pine needles crunching beneath our feet.

“Aren’t you glad you’re not trying to find all this on your own,” Zirbel laughed. “It’s not really a well-marked trail.”

In fact, it’s not a trail at all. Having just been opened to the public this year, the meadow is practically devoid of trails. There are, however, several signs posted high up on trees for visitors to the Royal Gorge Cross Country Ski Resort which offered trails through this area last winter. Luckily, Zirbel had done the hike half a dozen times this season and was able to locate all the highlights along the way.

We passed by several boulders with mortars and metates, flat grinding surfaces, often with sweeping views of the valley for the women to admire while they worked. We walked down the wide indentation left from an old wagon road, stood at the site of an all-but-forgotten cabin and peered through the window frames of the old shepherders’ shack.

The last portion of the expedition was along a dirt road allowing for relaxed walking, chatting and reading of informational plaques along the way.

Many in the group had been on Donner Party Hikes in the past.

“It’s always interesting because you live around here, but you don’t see everything,” said Jeanne Wendel of Reno who was on her third Donner Party Hike.

Geoffrey Caldwell, an English teacher from San Francisco, said it is becoming a tradition for him and his wife who were on their fifth year at the event.

We reached our cars about three hours after we set out and just in time for a complimentary hamburger/veggie burger lunch.

On the deck of the Mt. Judah lodge, the sun was shining while nearly all of the 200 hikers milled about discussing their morning adventures and the wildlife they saw along the way.

Before long, Ethan Rarick took the stage to offer another history lesson, though this one did not involve any hiking. As author of “Desperate Passage – the Donner Party’s Perilous Journey West”, Rarick has a wealth of knowledge about the Donner Party and its individual members. He offered a short Donner Party narrative before opening the floor to questions of which there were plenty. He had answers for nearly every inquiry and dispelled a few myths as well.

Pulling out of the Sugar Bowl parking lot later that afternoon, I felt a little tired, a little smarter and a lot warmer.

ngg_shortcode_0_placeholder (Click on photos to enlarge.)