

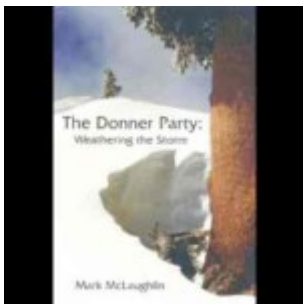
Donner Party had issues beyond cannibalism

By Kathryn Reed

Successfully crossing the Sierra in the winter of 1847 was part survival of the fittest, part luck and part tenacity.

For the Donner Party, it was mostly tragic. And while much has been written about cannibalism that took place, that is not the focus of Mark McLaughlin's book "The Donner Party: Weathering the Storm".

McLaughlin spoke last week to a full room at the South Lake Tahoe Library. His book, published in 2007, centers much on the weather. It was one of those epic winters, where winter started in October.



During the talk and slide presentation, McLaughlin delved into a bit of the legacy of lawyer Lansford Hastings. Hastings is important in the Donner story because he had created a shortcut.

The problem is the shortcut was ideal for men on horseback, not wagon trains full of families, with some who were not all that healthy.

Jim Reed (no relation), while he wasn't the captain of the party, was the take-charge person in the group. It was George Donner who was captain, but he could be pushed around.

A seasoned mountain man had warned the Donner Party not to take the Hasting's shortcut. But Reed said to heck with that advice. That one decision could be seen as their total undoing because it added three weeks to their journey.

The Donner clan had to hack their way through brush to make a road. It was roughing going through the Wasatch mountains.

“They nearly died of thirst in the Utah desert,” McLaughlin said.

By now the number of wagons in the party have been condensed. Goods are discarded. Some people are on foot. Half of the Donner Party was 18 years old or younger, according to McLaughlin.

Reed gets into a skirmish that ends with the death of a man, though self-defense is claimed.

Some have gone for help. Sutter’s Fort is known to provide supplies. Reed takes off, too, at about where Winnemucca is today.

But then the snow comes, and it keeps coming. Reed is trapped; unable to bring goods to his comrades – including his wife and four children. He tells John Sutter he needs to get supplies to the others. Sutter said they should be fine based on what Reed said they had.

What Reed didn’t know is the Paiute Indians had shot many of their animals and that people were ill. There were no fish to be had; lakes had been freezing.

Reed was finally successful in what was the second rescue party.

There are still descendants of the Donner Party who reunite every 10 years at Donner Lake.