S1E1: Stephens–Townsend-Murphy Party
The First Wagons To California

The first half of the nineteenth century marked a new era in the rapid westward expansion of the United States. Fur trappers and traders established a foothold in the lands west of the Missouri River. And by the 1830s missionaries began making the arduous journey to Oregon in the mostly unexplored northwest. But it wasn't until the early 1840s that the migration by "pioneers" began in earnest. Alta California, still part of Mexico, began a siren call for what would be hundreds of thousands of immigrants over the next 40 years. The promise of rich land, moderate climate and religious freedom were hard to resist. But getting there was not easy. Two-thousand miles of rugged, unforgiving land lay between the Missouri River and Alta California.

In 1841 and 1843 two wagon trains attempted the journey, but facing tremendous hardships and starvation, they would abandon their wagons and continue on horseback and foot. It wasn't until 1844 that wagons were successfully brought into Alta California over the nearly impenetrable Sierra Nevada mountains. On November 25, 1844 the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party crested the summit with 5 wagons, and opened the west for all who follow.

The story of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party is one of intrigue and mystery. While other immigrant parties would document their journeys in diaries, the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party kept no records. It wasn't until almost 40 years later that their story was told by one of its members – Moses Schallenberger. And as history is known to do, their story became lost in the notoriety of others who would follow. As historian Kevin Starr would lament: the accomplishments of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party were "forgotten under the power, the dystopian power, of the Donner Party".

In this minicast we're going to rediscover those accomplishments, and hopefully "pull back the veil" that hides some of the intriguing facts about this heroic migration. And along the way we might even solve a mystery or two…

The Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party of 1844 mainly composed of families with small children, left their homes in Missouri to emigrate to a foreign land of promise in the West. With their farm wagons pulled by oxen and herding cattle and additional oxen alongside, they traversed approximately 2,000 miles of mainly uncharted territory. These pioneers were not seeking gold, as would later travelers. Instead, they were searching for the classic immigrants' dream of a better life for themselves and their children.

The successful completion of a venture as daring as crossing a wilderness in a wagon train depended upon a combination of good luck, good leadership, and the ability to keep the group united when difficult decisions had to be made. Three men stand out as leaders: Elisha Stephens - hunter, trapper, and blacksmith - was chosen by members of the party to be the Captain. His word was final, and the outcome of his daily decisions meant success or failure for the expedition. Those who knew Stephens said he was "born to command."

Another leader, the most prominent individual in this group was physician Dr. John Townsend, an educated professional man, who was traveling with his wife, Elizabeth Townsend and her brother, Moses Schallenberger.

The third leader of the party was Martin Murphy, Sr., patriarch of the largest family group in this band of overland immigrants. Originally from County Wexford, Ireland, Murphy settled in Canada in 1820. In the early 1840s, followed later by other family members, he moved to Missouri where his wife, Mary

Foley Murphy, and a granddaughter died of malaria. Certain that he and his family could practice Catholic faith in California, they moved, once more, heading west.

To organize the journey, Captain Elisha Stephens hired 80-year old Caleb Greenwood to be the guide. Also joining the group was 64-year-old Isaac Hitchcock, a mountain man with some frontier experience. Departing Council Bluffs in mid-May, the wagons crossed the Missouri River on flat-bottomed boats while the livestock swam across.

Following the North Platte River, past Chimney Rock and Scott's Bluff, the party arrived at Fort Laramie, Wyoming, a fur trappers' trading post, on June 20th. About 4,000 Sioux Indians were camped nearby to trade at the fort. The travelers traded with the Sioux, exchanging tired horses for Indian ponies and replacing worn boots and shoes with moccasins.

Leaving Fort Laramie in late June, the wagon train traveled 110 miles southwest along the Platte River. From the Platte River, the wagon train turned directly west to the Sweetwater River and camped near Independence Rock. On July 4th, 1844, Mary Murphy Miller gave birth to Ellen Independence Miller, named to commemorate the date and place of her birth. Crossing the Continental Divide at South Pass the party noticed that water began flowing toward the west.

Moving on to Big Sandy Creek, the group faced the first major decision, which helped to ensure the success of their journey. Instead of staying on the established trail to the Green River, the group leaders decided to take a cutoff suggested by experienced trapper, Isaac "Old Man" Hitchcock.

Expecting the cutoff to be about 25 miles or one long day's journey, the party did not carry extra water or cut grass for the oxen. Instead, the trail was 45 miles of rough desert, resulting in very slow travel, with no source of water along the way. The cutoff, the first rough trail encountered by the group, was anything but a routine one-day's journey.

Continuing north along the Bear River, the weary travelers arrived at Fort Hall on August 10. After remaining at the fort for several days, the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy wagon train parted ways with Oregon-bound travelers who were heading northwest on the already established Oregon Trail.

With eleven wagons and fifty people (plus newborn Ellen Independence Miller), the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party left Fort Hall in mid- August. Following the Snake River to the Raft River, they headed toward the headwaters of the Humboldt River. Under the leadership of Captain Elisha Stephens, the California-bound party became trailblazers. This was increasingly uncharted territory for even the most experienced frontiersmen in the party: Stephens, Greenwood, and Hitchcock.

The natural elements of the landscape were beginning to change. Unlike the Oregon Trail, no clear wagon tracings were visible once they left Fort Hall. Previous wagon trains attempting to follow this new trail had failed. The Bartleson-Bidwell party in 1841 and the Chiles-Walker party in 1843 did make it to California, but without their wagons, abandoning them along the way.

About October 1st, the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party reached the Humboldt Sink and made another fateful decision destined to aid the success of their venture. They encountered an old Paiute Indian whom they named "Truckee", and decided to trust him. Although he could only communicate using signs and diagrams in the dust, Truckee indicated a path to the west. His map revealed a river (now the Truckee River) 50 or 60 miles distant that flowed easterly from the mountains.

With Truckee as their guide, they prepared well for the dangerous crossing of the treacherous desert ahead, without maps or guides, and get through the mountains before the start of the heavy winter snow. Beginning early in the morning, the group started their forced march, continuing until almost midnight when they arrived at an area of hot springs and rested for two hours.

Resuming their desert march, the party arrived at the river they named for their guide, "Truckee", the next afternoon. With good grass and water at this location, the travelers camped for two days, resting the animals.

Setting out again, the group began their epic journey along the Truckee River toward the summit of the Sierra Nevada. A great sense of urgency prevailed because winter was fast approaching and the group had no certainty as to where they were or what lay ahead. Adding to the increasingly critical situation was the advanced pregnancy of Mary Bolger Murphy, Martin Murphy, Jr.'s wife.

Due to the many winding twists and turns of the Truckee River, the wagons were forced to cross the river as many as ten times in one-day's travel. A few days later, after following the course of the river to the west, the wagon train finally came into open country known as Truckee Meadows, site of present-day Reno, Nevada.

Beyond the open country, the river narrowed. Due to steep canyon walls, the oxen were prevented from gaining footholds on the riverbanks and had to be led right through the riverbed. The water softened the animals' hooves and the stony riverbed wore their hooves down, making their feet so painful that walking was tortuous; they cried out at night from pain and hunger.

Shorter days, colder nights, and the first snow made the journey more difficult. They needed to arrive in California before the heavy winter snowfalls began.

In early November, following weeks of travel up the winding canyons of the Truckee River, the eleven wagons reached fertile meadowlands and heavily forested country. Before them stood the granite cliff domes of the Sierra Nevada. The travelers had reached a point where the Truckee River forked, near present-day Truckee, California with the main river bearing southwest and the tributary (now known as Donner Creek) heading due west.

While camped at the fork, the group leaders made a decision to send six of the younger adults ahead on horseback. Daniel, John, and Ellen Murphy, Elizabeth Townsend, Oliver Magnent, and Francis Deland, headed southwest, following the more direct route along the main river, to get help from Sutter's Fort. The six on horseback followed the Truckee River southwest to its source near Lake Tahoe. From the lake's western shore, the group descended McKinney Creek to the Rubicon River, then down the middle fork of the American River, possibly following Indian trails in the area. Gradually working their way down the foothills, the group finally reached Sutter's Fort in mid-December.

Meanwhile, the main body of the party and their eleven wagons headed west up the Truckee tributary until they came to a lake (now called Donner Lake). Camping at the lake for several days, the men searched for a route through the steep granite cliffs rising straight above them. Realizing the difficulty ahead, the remaining party was once again divided. Six wagons containing valuable goods were left at the lake, with the hope they would be retrieved in the spring. Joseph Foster, Allen Montgomery, and Moses Schallenberger volunteered to remain as guards.

Left by themselves, Foster, Montgomery and Schallenberger built a log cabin for shelter (which was used two years later by members of the ill-fated Donner party). The three men depended on hunting for food, but very heavy snow soon made hunting impossible. With their limited supplies running out and facing starvation, the three fashioned crude snowshoes and set out to join the main party. Along the way, Schallenberger became too ill to travel and returned to the cabin.

All alone, with the six abandoned wagons at the south end of Donner Lake, Schallenberger survived on coyote, fox, and other small animals he trapped using the steel-jaw traps left behind by Captain

Stephens. Adequate bedding and tools, left in the wagons, also contributed to Schallenberger's survival during his long isolation in the wilderness.

The rest of the main group struggled on, finally reaching a mountain which seemed like an impossible barrier for the five remaining wagons and oxen to climb. Several days were spent searching for a pass over the mountain. Trudging through snow two feet deep around the north side of the lake, the people and their wagons finally started up the mountain toward the summit.

Just below the summit, each of the wagons was unloaded, its contents carried up to the top. By doubling up the oxen teams, the empty wagons were slowly pulled up the slopes. When they reached a vertical rock wall about ten feet high, a narrow rift in the rock was found, just wide enough for an ox to pass. Removing the yokes, the oxen passed through one at a time. Chains were attached from them to each wagon, enabling the oxen to pull the wagons up the face of the rock. With the men pushing, one by one, the wagons reached the summit!

On November 25, 1844, the main body of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party and their five wagons crossed over the summit of the Sierra Nevada into California. They were the first group to cross the Sierra with wagons, an event that signified the opening of the California Trail.

In early December the travelers stopped and prepared a camp at Big Bend on the Yuba River. With several feet of snow on the ground, and another storm threatening, the group made yet another difficult decision. Most of the men would go on to Sutter's Fort to seek help, while the women and children would stay behind with Patrick Martin and James and William Miller. It is here on December 1, 1844 that Mary Bolger Murphy gave birth to a baby, Elizabeth Murphy.

Meanwhile, the men who had left earlier from Big Bend to Sutter's Fort drove the few remaining cattle ahead of them to aid in clearing a path downhill. Arriving at the fort in mid-December, the men reunited with the party of six who had arrived a few days earlier. The next move should have been to obtain supplies and return to the survival camp in the mountains, but that was not to be. By a twist of fate, the timing of their arrival and John Sutter's politics deterred the men from returning immediately to the women and children left behind.

Arriving in Alta California in the 1830s, John Sutter, a Swiss citizen, built a large adobe fort, complete with cannon, a trained militia, a mill, and factories, to help arriving immigrants. When the twenty-one men from the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party descended into the Sacramento Valley and arrived at Sutter's Fort, they found themselves in the middle of a civil war. A revolution had begun in Alta California.

A battle was developing between the Mexican Governor of Alta California, Manuel Micheltorena, and his predecessor, Juan Bautista Alvarado. On December 23, 1844, Micheltorena sent an order to Sutter to gather all the men he could collect into a military unit, march south to San Jose to surprise and seize Alvarado, who was camped nearby with his forces.

It is difficult to imagine how Sutter was able to coerce this group of twenty-one men to abandon their planned rescue mission of the women and children back at Big Bend and join Sutter's forces to subdue Micheltorena's enemies, but it was most likely the promise of land grants.

Sutter's volunteer army headed south on New Year's Day, 1845. In San Jose, Sutter's men joined with Micheltorena's forces, giving the Murphy clan their first glimpse of the Santa Clara Valley, where many of them would later settle.

By mid-January, the army arrived in Soledad, now part of Monterey County, where the men from the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party either received permission to return to Sutter's Fort or just

abandoned the military operation, such as it was. Worried and anxious about the fate of their women and children in the mountains, the men quickly returned to Sutter's Fort.

Gathering supplies and whatever assistance they could muster, the men of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party left Sutter's Fort and headed back to the mountains to rescue the families left behind at the Big Bend camp. They had not gone more than halfway when they met James Miller and his son who were coming from Big Bend to seek help for the others. The two had left the camp when they realized that aid from the valley might not arrive. James Miller described the rapidly deteriorating conditions at the Big Bend camp.

Dennis Martin from the rescue group raced ahead of the others because he was worried about his father, Patrick Martin. He also wanted to fulfill a promise made to Elizabeth Townsend to find her brother, Moses Schallenberger. Martin arrived at the Big Bend camp a few days ahead of the main rescue party and found the group at the camp in desperate circumstances, existing on a diet of boiled cowhides. Reporting that help was coming, Dennis Martin continued over the summit to search for Moses Schallenberger. Martin found Moses emaciated, but alive, and fit enough to travel.

At the end of February, Dennis Martin and Moses Schallenberger arrived at the camp at Big Bend. Finally, all the members of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party moved down the mountain to safety, thus ending their epic journey.

Several historians sum up the significance of this pioneering adventure. George R. Stewart in his book, The California Trail, an Epic with Many Heroes, writes "In the history of the California Trail, the year 1844 was critical, and the achievement of Stephen's party was decisive. After these wagons followed the migration, which poured into central California year after year. This success was achieved at a minimum of cost. No lives were lost, and the party, in fact, arrived two stronger than when it had set out. Jo Ann Levy in the documentary, Forgotten Journey, The Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Saga, sums up their success in a few short words, "They opened the West."