Hanging by a Rope: The First Wagons Over the Summit

Around the middle of November 1944, a band of weary travelers known as the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party reached Truckee Lake in the Sierra Nevada. With nearly 2,000 miles behind them and six months on the trail, the hopes and dreams that Alta California held for them were less than 100 miles ahead. One last obstacle stood in their way – the summit looming another eleven hundred feet above them.

History in the Making

Little did they know that they and their eleven wagons were poised to make history by being the first pioneers to bring wagons into Alta California. But they had a problem. After thirty days of literally dragging their wagons up the Truckee River, they didn't have enough healthy oxen to get all the wagons over the summit. Some were lost or killed and others suffered tremendously from the freezing cold water and sharp rocks in the Truckee River. It was already snowing and the threat of even more cast a sense of urgency over the pioneers huddled at present day Truckee, California. They had decided whose wagons would go forward and whose would be left behind.

11 Wagons

Before we look at their decision, let's take an inventory of their wagons. The Murphy family, being the largest contingent, owned three of the wagons. One for Martin Murphy, Sr. and his four adult children. Another for Martin Murphy, Jr. and his wife and their 4 children. And one for James Murphy and his wife and young daughter. The four young adult Sullivan siblings, who were "adopted" by the Murphys had one wagon. Dr. John Townsend had a wagon for his wife, her brother and their servant, Francis Deland. James Miller, his wife and their five children, including newborn Ellen Independence Miller occupied one wagon. Isaac Hitchcock and his daughter and her five children occupied another. William Patrick Martin and his two adult sons had one wagon. And Elisha Stephens and a hired teamster shared another wagon. There is some uncertainty about the last two wagons, but historians generally agree that Allen Montgomery and his wife Sarah had a wagon by virtue of their recent marriage. And Joseph Foster had a wagon since it is recorded that he owned several oxen.

Fateful Decision

So now we have our eleven wagons. How did they decide which wagons would go and which would stay? If you look at the wagons that were chosen, four of the five were owned by families who had young children. This would seem logical since those families would need provisions for the children if they were delayed in reaching their destination – Sutter's Fort. Those wagons belonged to Martin Murphy, Jr., James Murphy, James Miller and Issac Hitchcock. Reinforcing that logic, a very pregnant Mary Bolger Murphy was within days of giving birth. So, it made sense to have the necessary provisions and a place for her to care for a newborn.

The last wagon belonged to William Patrick Martin. This one begs the question of "why?" His two sons were in their early twenties. There were no reports that they had any health issues, so they were probably capable of taking care of themselves. But we do know that William Patrick Martin was 68 years old, so it may have been that they were worried about his ability to travel the rest of the journey. Interestingly, Martin's daughter, Ann was married to James Murphy. And guess what? She was also pregnant. About 6 or 7 months at the time. So, it could have been that Martin's wagon was taken "just in case." Or maybe Martin had some of high value that couldn't be left behind. We will never know.

Townsend Wagon

It's likely that some of the contents of the wagons left behind were consolidated into the 5 wagons taken over the summit. Most likely any remaining food supplies, gunpowder, etc. But Dr. John Townsend's wagon was a unique case. He supposedly brought fine broadcloths and silks to sell in Alta California and had a large cache of very valuable medical instruments and books. In fact, he would later value his loss at several thousand dollars. So why was his wagon left behind? Most likely, with all those items it was felt that it was simply too heavy for the oxen to pull over the summit.

Up and Over

On November 25, 1844, in several feet of snow the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party crossed the summit. Faced with the 10-foot granite wall, they unloaded the wagons, unhitched their oxen and carried their belongs over the summit through a narrow passage discovered by Caleb Old Greenwood. Then using ropes and chains and through sheer willpower, determination, and strength of character pushed and pulled the wagons into Alta California - and opened the West.

One of the defining characteristics of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party was cohesiveness. They were able to work together to make the tough decisions required to ensure the safety and well-being of the entire party – not just individual families. And working as a unit, they accomplished what seemed to be an impossible task. Today, when we look up at the summit of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, we marvel at their strength, determination and sheer willpower.

And what about the remaining six wagons? That's another story of courage and perseverance of a young man named Moses Schallenberger who we'll learn about in an upcoming episode. Stay tuned!