Freezing, Starving & Alone: Life at Winter Encampment

On November 25, 1844 the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party, using brute force and sheer willpower, pushed and pulled 5 wagons on the snow-capped summit of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, forever cementing their place in history. The first pioneers to bring wagons into Alta California. Not only did it bring them nearer to their destination of Sutter's Fort, but it opened the West for hundreds of thousands of pioneers who followed.

Winter Encampment

After spending a month of struggling up the Truckee River followed by several days climbing to the summit through 2 feet of snow, and then their amazing crossing into Alta California, it was time for a break. After all, Mary Bolger Murphy was in the last days of her pregnancy. And Ann Martin Murphy, around 6 months pregnant, wasn't far behind her!

Earlier we learned that 6 members of the party split to take the route via Lake Tahoe and then over the Sierra Nevada to Sutter's Fort. After crossing the summit, the remaining 45 members of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party traveled another 12 miles or so, reaching what is now known as the Big Bend area on the Yuba River. Here they decided to set up camp, now called the "Winter Encampment", to rest and recruit their livestock. It was close to the end of November, and winter was approaching fast. They were still above the snow line and more snow was on the way.

Elizabeth Yuba Murphy

It was at the Winter Encampment on December 1, 1844 that Mary Bolger Murphy gave birth to a baby girl, Elizabeth, along the banks of the Yuba River. Realizing that Mary needed time to rest and recuperate, the decision was made that the party would once again split, with the bulk of the men heading on to Sutter's Fort to get supplies and return for the rest of the party. With this, the crude shelters, mostly tents at this point, were replaced with wooden structures with cowhides and tree branches for roofs. Not permanent by any means, the thought was that these shelters would be sufficient until the advance party could return and bring the remainder of the party into Sacramento Valley.

Separation of the Party

In early December, 17 men of the party along with the Sarah Armstrong Montgomery and the four young Sullivan siblings, ages 13 to 21, headed out on horseback and foot. James Miller and William Patrick Martin, who was 68, stayed with the remainder of the party at the Winter Encampment. Those included Mary Bolger Murphy and her five children ranging from a few days to 12 years old. Ann Martin Murphy and her 2 year old daughter. Mary Murphy Miller and her 5 children from 5 months to 8 years old. And Elizabeth Patterson, with 5 children from 6 to 12 years old.

The men drove most of the remaining cattle ahead of them to break through the snow and brush, leaving just enough at the camp to sustain those staying behind for what they thought would be only a couple of weeks. But as we know, their plans were derailed when they arrived at Sutter's Fort. They were drawn into the vortex of a political revolt during which they would spend 6 weeks pursuing Juan Bautista Alvarado and his co-conspirators around central and southern Alta California.

Life at Winter Encampment

For the first couple of weeks life at the Encampment, while very uncomfortable from the cold and snow, the situation was probably bearable. They had sufficient food, having consolidated their supplies of their 11 wagons into the 5 that were brought over the summit. And they had cooking utensils and bedding and tools. Anticipating that their journey would shortly be over, they were probably in good spirits. After all, they had already traveled almost 2,000 miles in 8 months. So what was another couple of weeks? But they were also anxious not only about the advance party, wondering if they had safely arrived, but also about the six members of the party who had separated earlier, taking the route along Lake Tahoe and then over the Sierra Nevada. And then of course there were the three young men back at Truckee Lake – Allen Montgomery, Joseph Foster and young Moses Schallenberger. How were they fairing? Were they able to build adequate shelter? Did they have enough food? Was their health holding up?

After a couple of weeks, the party at the Encampment began to realize something was amiss. Joseph Foster and Allen Montgomery suddenly appear, informing them that heavy snows had set in and Mose Schallenberger was now alone in the cabin. Foster and Montgomery also realized that something must be wrong, and after resting, decided to head on to Sutter's Fort rather than stay in the Encampment and consume what was becoming scarce provisions.

At this point, things began to take a turn for the worse. After another month, now approaching the end of January, with food supplies depleted, the situation became dire. Hunting and trapping was not an option in the deep snow, and fishing in the rapidly running waters of the Yuba River proved fruitless. The daily routine turned into survival mode. Elizabeth Patterson began boiling shoe leather and strips of cowhide cut from the shelter roofs to make a gelatinous soup. Anything to provide nourishment for her children. It was time to act. James Miller and his 8 year old son William decide to leave the camp to seek help.

A Rescue is Mustered, Schallenberger Saved

In late January, the "revolt" into which the men of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party had been drawn proved to be nothing more than chest-pounding and bugle blowing. Finally receiving permission from John Sutter and Manuel Micheltorena to return to Sutter's Fort, they raced north. Reaching the fort, Dennis Martin, the older son of William Patrick Martin, was already planning a rescue and headed out in advance of the other men. Elizabeth Townsend, who had

reached the fort with the party of six on horseback, pleaded with Martin to recuse her brother, Moses, having heard of his plight from Foster and Montgomery.

Heading into the Sierra Nevada, Martin would encounter James Miller and his son, who informed him of the dire conditions in the Encampment. Taking the basic supplies he carried with him, he headed on, trudging through the deep snow. Finally reaching the Encampment in mid-February, he found the members alive, but hungry – and elated to see him. Ensuring their safety and assuring them that help was on the way, he headed east over the summit to find and rescue Moses Schallenberger, still snowbound at Truckee (Donner) Lake. Experienced using snowshoes, he fashioned a crude pair which helped him navigate the treacherous mountain slopes. Luckily there had been a break in the snow for several days, allowing him to make good time.

In late February, 1845, young Moses Schallenberger, who had spent nearly 3 months alone, living on only what he could trap, sees a lone figure emerging from the woods. Having nearly given up hope, he couldn't believe that he was saved. Martin gave him some of the meager food he was able to carry, and fashioned some crude snowshoes for him. They then headed west, bound for Sacramento Valley.

Finally, a Reunion!

By this time the rescue party had reached the Winter Encampment and began the descent out of the Sierra Nevada. Martin and Schallenberger would join them as they entered the Sacramento Valley. During the descent, the cradle in which infant Elizabeth Murphy was secured, fell from the horse to which it was attached. As the cradle floated down the Yuba River her father Martin Murphy, Jr. rescued her – and gave her the middle name "Yuba."

Around the first of March the party gathered on the north bank of the Bear River – a joyous reunion. However, their journey was not yet over. Swollen by floods, they were unable to cross the river. After about a week, the waters finally receded and they soon arrived at Sutter's Fort – almost one year after they had left their home in Irish Grove, Missouri.

The perseverance and resilience of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party exemplifies the spirit of the early pioneers. Overcoming one obstacle after another, they proved that the West was indeed open for settlement – and changed the landscape of America.