Three Men, One Cabin, Buried in Snow

Imagine being alone. Really alone. For three months. In a cabin nearly covered with snow.

When the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party reached Truckee Lake in November 1844, they made some tough decisions. Without enough healthy oxen to pull all their wagons over the summit, some of the pioneers had to make sacrifices – leaving their wagon and all their worldly possessions behind. Left to the mercy of the wilderness, Mother Nature and the local inhabitants. Not an ideal situation.

Creating a Backup Plan

Realizing the severity of the situation, one young man stepped forward. Calling him a young man by today's standard would be a stretch. But in 1844, 17-year-old Moses Schallenberger would have been considered a man. That's what life on the trail was all about. Everybody had to contribute well beyond what would normally be expected by a person their age.

Moses volunteered to stay behind with the wagons after the rest of the party crossed the summit and headed on to Sutter's Fort. Ater all, it was only going to be a couple of weeks until the rest of the party reached the fort and returned with supplies and fresh oxen and retrieved the remaining wagons. And surely the snow would stop. After all, when it snowed in Missouri, it melted in a couple of days.

Fortunately for Moses, two other men volunteered to stay with him. Allen Montgomery, aged 29. And Joseph Foster. Unfortunately, we don't know Foster's age, but he also was probably young. Both Montgomery and Foster owned wagons that were being left at Truckee Lake, so they probably had a vested interest in helping young Moses. Or maybe they were just good friends who wanted to help a fellow traveler who had endured the hardships of the last 2,000 miles.

Life at the Lake

After helping the main party cross the summit on November 25, 1844, the three men headed back down to Truckee Lake, bringing two scrawny cows for food. Rather than try to use the wagons for shelter, which were full of goods, supplies and personal belongings, they decided to build a small cabin. Calling it a cabin was a stretch. Just some saplings covered with rawhides and pine brush. About 12 feet by 14 feet. No insulation. No windows. Not even a door. Just enough shelter to keep them out of the elements. They slaughtered the cows and stashed the meat in the snow, already 2 feet deep. And then they settled in and waited for the snow to stop and then melt. But this isn't Missouri. It's the Sierra Nevada…

After about a week the snow had not stopped, and it surely hadn't melted. And it didn't appear that the weather is going to change anytime soon. Three young men need a lot of calories to survive. Their supply of meat was rapidly being depleted. Finding game in the mountains in

several feet of snow was unlikely. Deer had moved below the snowline. Bear had gone into hibernation. They quickly realized the severity of their situation. It was time to change plans.

Escape Plan

Schallenberger, Montgomery and Foster decided to try to join the rest of the party on the other side of the summit. Having no real experience in rugged mountains, they didn't know much about traveling in deep snow. They fashioned crude snowshoes, but didn't really know how to use them, connecting them to both heel and toe. In essence, rendering them ineffective. Then they headed for the summit. It was a hard climb of over 1,100 feet, and by the time they nearly reached the top, Moses couldn't make it any farther. Suffering from severe cramps, he could take only a few steps before having to stop and rest. The situation was dire.

The three men made yet another gut-wrenching decision. Moses decided to go back down to the cabin. Montgomery and Foster would continue over the summit to reach the main party and hopefully soon return for Moses. With sad goodbyes, they headed out and Moses began his descent back to Truckee Lake. After hours of stumbling through the deep snow, he finally reached the cabin and collapsed.

All Alone

At this point we know that the plans of the Stephens-Murphy-Party were turned totally upside down. The men of horseback party of six and the 17 men who left the Winter Encampment were pulled into John Sutter's makeshift army and spent 6 weeks in a fruitless effort to quell the rebellion led by Juan Bautista Alvarado. The rest of the party was stranded just over the summit at Big Bend on the Yuba River. And Moses Schallenberger is now alone in a small cabin at Truckee Lake with just a meager supply of beef.

For the next 3 months Moses Schallenberger was on his own. Like the party on the Yuba River, he was expecting help to arrive shortly. But it didn't. Montgomery and Foster never returned. It was up to him to figure out how to survive.

His priority was obviously food. He could stay warm. But food was another matter altogether. He was an experienced hunter. But again, there was really nothing to hunt. Tracks of elusive animals were found, but not the animals themselves. Luckily for Moses, Elisha Stephens' wagon was left at Truckee Lake, and in it he found traps. This would be Moses' salvation. Over the weeks that turned into months, he trapped a variety of animals – foxes, coyotes, even a crow. As he would describe it, the foxes were edible. Maybe even tasty when properly cooked. But the coyotes and the crow, those were a different story. Revolting at best. Imagine a diet of nothing by meat for almost 3 months…

Besides hunger, boredom, loneliness and a sense of desperation were part of his daily routine. Nobody to talk to other than himself. Fortunately, in Dr. John Townsend's wagon he found books. Lots of books. So, he could at least pass the time reading. His favorites were "Lord

Chesterfield's Letters to His Sons" and the works of Byron. He would read by firelight as late into the night as possible so he could sleep later into the next day. Anything to pass the time and shorten his misery.

A Mirage Appears

At the end of February 1845, as Moses was standing outside his cabin in the late afternoon, he saw a lone figure emerge from the forest. At first, he thought it was an Indian. But he then realized it was his friend Dennis Martin, who on the pleading of Moses's sister, Elizabeth Townsend who was already at Sutter's Fort, had come to rescue him. His nearly 3-month ordeal was over. With another pair of makeshift snowshoes, Martin helped him back over the summit and into the safety of his fellow travelers as their completed their amazing, heroic journey.

Moses Schallenberger is just one example of the strength, fortitude and perseverance of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party. Enduring almost unimaginable hardships, they never lost hope and never lost sight of the needs of each other. Thanks to them, the West was opened!