The Magnificent Obsession: How Six Modern-Day Adventurers Prepare to Channel Their Inner 1844 Pioneer

Picture this: A group of otherwise sensible adults spending their evenings hunched over 180-year-old diary fragments, arguing passionately about whether Moses Schallenberger really did survive on fox meat and dried peas during his solo winter at Donner Lake. Welcome to the wonderfully peculiar world of History Expeditions, where six endurance athletes believe the best way to honor forgotten American heroes is to recreate their most death-defying journeys.

This September, these modern-day masochists will attempt something that's never been done: a 135-mile horseback crossing of the Sierra Nevada following the exact route of the 1844 Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party's "Horseback Party of Six". Yes, the same route that included two brave women, Elizabeth Townsend and Ellen Murphy, who chose to ride through winter wilderness rather than stay with the main wagon train. Apparently, even in 1844, some people had a flair for the dramatic.

The Mission: More Than Just Saddle Sores

The expedition's goals are refreshingly noble: honor the first successful wagon crossing of the Sierra Nevada, spotlight the remarkable courage of 18-year-old Moses Schallenberger's solo winter survival, and finally give proper recognition to a success story that's been overshadowed by the tragic Donner Party. As the team puts it, they want to "honor the souls who survived this ordeal and became the shoulders upon which California was built."

The Year-Long Obsession Begins

For the past twelve months, these six adventurers have been living and breathing 1844. Their preparation reads like a graduate-level history seminar crossed with extreme sports training. They've scoured museums, historical societies, and private collections worldwide, hunting down primary sources with the dedication of treasure hunters. PhD dissertations on Native American trade routes? Check. Archaeological studies of Sierra Nevada migration patterns? Double check. Oral histories from indigenous communities whose ancestors guided the original party? Triple check.

The research phase alone would make most academics weep with envy. They've analyzed paleontological evidence, studied 19th-century weather patterns, and even consulted scientific studies on granite erosion to understand how the landscape has changed since 1844. One team member was reportedly spotted in a Berkeley library at 2 AM, cross-referencing diary entries with topographical surveys, muttering something about "elevation profiles" and "ancient Washoe encampments."

From Archives to Saddles

But research is only half the battle. These aren't your typical weekend trail riders—they're veteran endurance athletes who've been conditioning like their lives depend on it. Trail

running at dawn, horseback training sessions that would make a cavalry officer proud, and logistics planning that rivals a military operation. They've mapped every water source, identified camping spots, and coordinated supply drops with the precision of a NASA mission.

The gear preparation alone is an art form: carefully selected maps which have been transformed into digital routes for both the discovered historical route and the slightly altered Expedition route, backpacking and camping equipment, and enough oatmeal to fuel a small army. They've planned for early morning coffee rituals before feeding, cleaning and saddling their steeds, evening storytelling sessions under the same stars the original party saw, and yes, nightcaps featuring Shackleton whisky—because even historical accuracy needs a little enhancement

The Beautiful Madness

What makes this expedition truly special isn't just the physical challenge or historical significance—it's the obsessive attention to honoring every detail of the original journey. Each team member carries tribute cards featuring photos and biographies of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party members, turning evening campfires into intimate memorial services. They'll follow ancient Native American trade routes, crossing Burton Pass at 7,140 feet and descending nearly 6,000 feet through the Rubicon wilderness.

As they prepare for their September 29th departure from Donner Memorial State Park, one can't help but admire their magnificent obsession. In an age of virtual everything, these six adventurers are choosing the most analog experience possible: following in the literal hoofprints of forgotten heroes, one painful mile at a time.

Rediscovering California's True First Pioneers Through Epic Horseback Journey

The History Expeditions team is embarking on an unprecedented 120-mile horseback crossing of the Sierra Nevada, retracing the newly discovered route of the 1844 Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party's "Horseback Party of Six". This September 29-October 3 expedition represents the culmination of a year-long research odyssey that has taken expedition team, along with an all-star team of American West historians, deep into archives, museums, and historical societies worldwide. Robert Keahey, David Antonucci, Dan Rosen, Bill Holmes and Bill Oudegeest – a who’s who of American West historical facts and resources – have joined the team to help drive the research wide and deep, assuring the answers to the most pressing questions are accurate and well documented.

Their mission extends far beyond adventure tourism. The expedition aims to honor the first successful wagon crossing of the Sierra Nevada—a triumph that opened California to overland immigration two years before the tragic Donner Party attempted the same mountains. The original Horseback Party of Six, including two remarkable women, Elizabeth Townsend and Ellen Murphy, accomplished what many deemed impossible: crossing treacherous winter terrain on horseback to reach Sutter's Fort in just 26 days.

A Year of Obsessive Preparation

The team's preparation reads like a masterclass in historical detective work. They've analyzed primary sources from around the globe, consulted PhD dissertations on Native American trade routes, and studied archaeological evidence of ancient migration patterns. Their research has revealed that the party's success depended heavily on Indigenous knowledge—following established Washoe trade routes that had been used for thousands of years.

The physical preparation has been equally intensive. These veteran endurance athletes have spent months conditioning for their days in the saddle – and on foot, covering terrain that drops nearly 6,000 feet from Burton Pass to the Sacramento Valley. Their gear preparation reflects meticulous attention to technical riding and running gear, appropriate camping equipment, carefully selected maps, and enough oatmeal to fuel their dawn-to-dusk riding schedule.

Evening Rituals and Morning Resolve

Each evening, the team plans to gather around campfires for tribute ceremonies, sharing biographical cards of the original party members while gazing at the same stars that guided the 1844 pioneers. Their mornings will begin with coffee and oatmeal—simple fare that echoes the survival rations of their predecessors. Even their planned nightcaps of Shackleton whisky reflect a commitment to honoring the spirit of historical adventure.

Living History in Real Time

The expedition will be tracked via GPS and documented by an embedded film crew, allowing the public to follow their progress in real time. This modern technology serves a historical purpose: proving definitively that the route they've reconstructed through months of research actually works as a viable crossing.

Starting at 7 AM on September 29th from Donner Memorial State Park, the team will follow the ancient trail south to Lake Tahoe, west over Burton Pass, through the Rubicon River watershed, across Gerle Meadows, and along the Georgetown Divide to Auburn. It's a journey that transforms academic research into visceral understanding—the kind of experiential history that reveals truths no archive can capture.

Their adventure represents something profound in our digital age: six individuals choosing the most analog experience possible to honor forgotten heroes who literally opened the American West to wagon travel. In just five days, they'll traverse not only 135 miles of rugged Sierra terrain, but 181 years of history—proving that some stories are worth living, not just reading.