



## **An Archaeology of Desperation: Exploring the Donner Party's Alder Creek Camp**

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The Donner Party is almost inextricably linked with cannibalism. In truth, we know remarkably little about what actually happened to the starving travelers stranded in the Sierra Nevada in the winter of 1846–47. Combining the approaches of history, ethnohistory, archaeology, bioarchaeology, and social anthropology, this innovative look at the Donner Party's experience at the Alder Creek Camp offers insights into many long-unsolved mysteries.

Centered on archaeological investigations in the summers of 2003 and 2004 near Truckee, California, the book includes detailed analyses of artifacts and bones that suggest what life was like in this survival camp. Microscopic investigations of tiny bone fragments reveal butchery scars and microstructure that illuminate what the Donner families may have eaten before the final days of desperation, how they prepared what served as food, and whether they actually butchered and ate their deceased companions. The contributors reassess old data with new analytic techniques and, by examining both physical evidence and oral testimony from observers and survivors, add new dimensions to the historical narrative.

The authors' integration of a variety of approaches—including narratives of the Washoe Indians who observed the Donner Party—destroys some myths, deconstructs much of the folklore about the stranded party, and demonstrates that novel approaches can shed new light on events we thought we understood.

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