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## The Archaeology of the Donner Party Review

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*The Archaeology of the Donner Party*. Donald L. Hardesty. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1997, xii + 156 pp., 38 figs., 4 maps, 15 tables, 3 appendices, bibliography, index, \$27.95 (hard cover).

Reviewed by:

**DOUGLAS D. SCOTT**

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Don Hardesty and his contributors have given us a new perspective on the Donner Party trag-

edy of 1846-1847. *The Archaeology of the Donner Party* is a concise and well-written account of the history, archaeological investigations, and reinterpretation of the events. This slim volume is a model of multidisciplinary research and a team approach to producing a publicly oriented archaeological interpretation of interesting events of our recent past.

The book's six chapters and appendices give the reader the story of the Donner Party both in historical and archaeological context. The introduction sets the stage for this contextual placement in both time and space, as well as stressing the multidisciplinary nature of today's historical archaeological investigations. Chapter 1 gives us the details of the Donner Party and the tragedy resulting from being snowbound with limited resources. The second chapter, by Michael Brodhead, places the Donner Party trek in a holistic context of the entire overland emigration era, 1840 to 1860. In a well developed style, Brodhead provides the reader with a neat encapsulation of the emigrant experience on the trail, and places the Donner Party in a comparative context.

In the third chapter, Hardesty and Susan Lindstrom delve into the archaeological investigations of the Murphy Cabin site. They effectively use the historical sources to place the cabin in context. They also build to the story of the modern excavations by recounting the early efforts made to document and locate the cabin site for various memorialization purposes. In a pleasant prose style, Hardesty and Lindstrom then recount their excavations at Murphy Cabin and the finding of the remains. This chapter alone is a good example of how the application of modern investigation techniques can squeeze just a bit more data from a previously excavated or impacted site.

Chapter 4 relates the investigations of Alder Creek Camp. Here Hardesty demonstrates the value of combining traditional excavation and sampling strategies with metal detecting to

achieve large area coverage. Using metal detection equipment, the investigators were able to focus on specific areas where traditional excavation strategies allowed for a more detailed material culture recovery.

The fifth chapter is entitled "Donner Party Baggage." Along with the appendices, which should be read in concert with this chapter, the artifact assemblage is described and interpreted. An important finding is that the "baggage" of the party consisted of what would be expected on an overland trek of people seeking a new home. As such, the artifacts are the physical evidence of what was in a wagon traveling on the Oregon Trail. By themselves, the artifacts are interesting in this context, but the additional interpretations presented in the appendices by Donald Grayson and George Miller offer some fascinating insights into the story by detailing the zooarchaeology, ceramic assemblage, and demographics of the members of the Donner Party. Hardesty has incorporated Grayson's and Miller's observations and conclusions from their respective appendices into his "Baggage" chapter and the final chapter. However, the material in the appendices is so interesting and important, it is this reviewer's opinion that it should have been worked directly into the body of the last two chapters. By way of example, Miller con-

cludes from the smallest of ceramic sherds that the Donner Party members were not carrying old or cast-off ceramics to California. Rather, the ceramic evidence demonstrates that they may have purchased new plates and dishes for the overland trip. Certainly, the ceramic types reflect that these Oregon Trail travelers were well aware of their middle-class social and economic status. Although the ceramic assemblage is small, both in size and quantity, Miller effectively demonstrates the importance of going beyond mere typologies and looking for the meaning of objects.

*The Archaeology of the Donner Party* is well illustrated and a fine contribution to the archaeological literature. Hardesty and his contributors have demonstrated, in their fluid prose style, that archaeology need not be boringly presented in long, technical, descriptive passages. This is a readable and informative book. The archaeology is professionally presented, yet written in a manner easily understood by the lay reader. The layout and design are well done and truly enhance the narrative contribution. For those interested in the Overland Trail experience, any emigrant experience, the westward expansion movement, or more specifically the Donner Party story, this is a book that should be on your shelf.

