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Emigrant Camp Investigation

Lassen National Forest, California, 2000

by Dick Alvarez, PIT Volunteer

Peter Lassen pioneered an emigrant route into California during the gold rush of 1849. His route was intended to be an alternative to the difficult and treacherous Donner Pass route, named after the Donner emigrant group that met with tragedy there in 1846–1847. But Lassen managed to get himself and his group lost, and they barely avoided a tragedy similar to that of the Donner party. The government sent a relief train in the fall of 1849 to feed and care for the pioneers who had arrived via “Lassen’s Death Route” and were suffering from hunger and disease. Emigrants’ diaries indicate that the relief train probably was set up in what now is called Swain Meadow, on the Lassen National Forest. Our job was to assist FS archaeologists in determining if this was indeed the case. We would test excavate some areas to find clues, map the site, and assess archaeological materials recovered from the site and trail.

Our project leader, FS archaeologist Deborah Tibbetts, had arranged for our group to stay at the FS’s Bogard Campground. The whole campground sparkled with quaking aspen. Our water came from a well with a hand pump straight out of a western movie. As people arrived on Sunday afternoon, we introduced ourselves and shared our particular interests in archaeology. This was my sixth PIT project, and I am convinced that people just don’t come any better than those I’ve met on PIT projects.

The big questions were whether the government relief train really was located in Swain Meadow and, if so, then where in the meadow. With more than a square mile of meadow, all that we could do was guess. Deborah explained that American Indians and pioneer settlers generally were good woodsmen and knew how to select good campsites, so the locations they chose are fairly predictable. But the emigrants during the westward expansion were often less experienced, so their campsite locations are rather unpredictable.

Project director and archaeologist Doug Prather made a shrewd guess about where to look. Using metal detectors, we set to work on the task. Deborah had sent us literature about artifact identification, particularly wagon parts, which we hoped to find as indicators of the relief train location. We did not find wagon parts but did find an enormous number of old square nails and a variety of other artifacts that were from more-recent occupation of the meadow, when it was used for livestock grazing. Our most spectacular find was a mint-condition ten-dollar gold coin, dated 1884. Some old-time livestock herder must have been unhappy when he lost that!

Did we find the government relief train camp? Doug Prather noted that, unfortunately, the numerous square nails found in the meadow do not point to the location of the government relief train camp. Prior to 1790, nails were hand forged. Around 1790, machine-cut square nails were invented, and they were used primarily until 1890, when wire nails were invented. By the end of 1890, 50 percent of the nails being used were wire nails. By 1895, 75 percent of the nails being used were wire nails. Because our site had more than 50 percent square nails, we can cautiously assume that the site dates to before 1890. The gold coin backs up that statement. The real problem is that even though square nails have declined in usage, they have never gone completely away and are still being made today. This makes it difficult to use nails as a good diagnostic artifact. The nails we found weren’t associated with other artifacts that dated back to emigrant use, so Doug told us that we can’t assume that we found the emigrant camp.

I had asked to be involved in the mapping. So late one afternoon, Deborah handed me a very fine surveyor's theodolite and told me to be ready to start using it the following morning. A theodolite measures angles; in conjunction with a surveyor's elevation rod, it can measure distance. I spent the remaining daylight hours becoming familiar with that particular model and checked its calibrations and adjustments.

James Oddy, a high school student visiting from Canada, was rod man for the mapping. Cheryl Lioness, a schoolteacher visiting from Norway, patiently sat on the ground and recorded the measurements as I read them from the theodolite. In the evenings, at the table in our campsite, James and I plotted points on the map by lantern light. That was James's introduction to trigonometry. It helps to see a use for something before having it crammed into your head in school.

A little creek ran down the middle of Swain Meadow. We had to cross it at least twice each day. Somebody found the remains of a wooden plank and set it on the banks of the creek so that if we stepped on the plank in just the right places, it didn't rock too much. I don't like high places, and for me, anything more than a few inches high is a high place. That creek was just waiting for me to fall in. But through some mysterious and benevolent influence of gold rush emigrants and modern archaeologists (or maybe just plain luck), my center of gravity temporarily defied Newton's laws of motion and gravitation and refrained from dumping me into the creek. The theodolite's carrying case should have been watertight but wasn't. If I had fallen into the creek with that expensive equipment, it would probably have been damaged beyond repair. That is not recommended for somebody who wants to be accepted on future PIT projects. So each time we crossed the creek, somebody else discreetly took the theodolite from me and carried it over the plank.

Doug Prather conducted an evening seminar on Peter Lassen and the Lassen emigrant trail. I conducted one on the mapping methods we were using. Toward the end of the week, Doug's and Deborah's families joined us at the campground. By that time, families were joining one another for dinner all over the campground, and one evening, Deborah hosted a great barbeque. During the barbeque, Deborah passed the gold coin around so that we could see it again. Following Murphy's Law, somebody accidentally dropped the coin down a gopher hole! Within minutes, the place was swarming with metal detectors, and the coin quickly turned up.

Now, back home, it is almost with reverence that I look at those muddy field notes and remember how we collected measurements with the theodolite at Swain Meadow and then drew the map by lantern light at our campsite.