

# RELICS OF A HISTORIC TRAGEDY

by Jim McClain

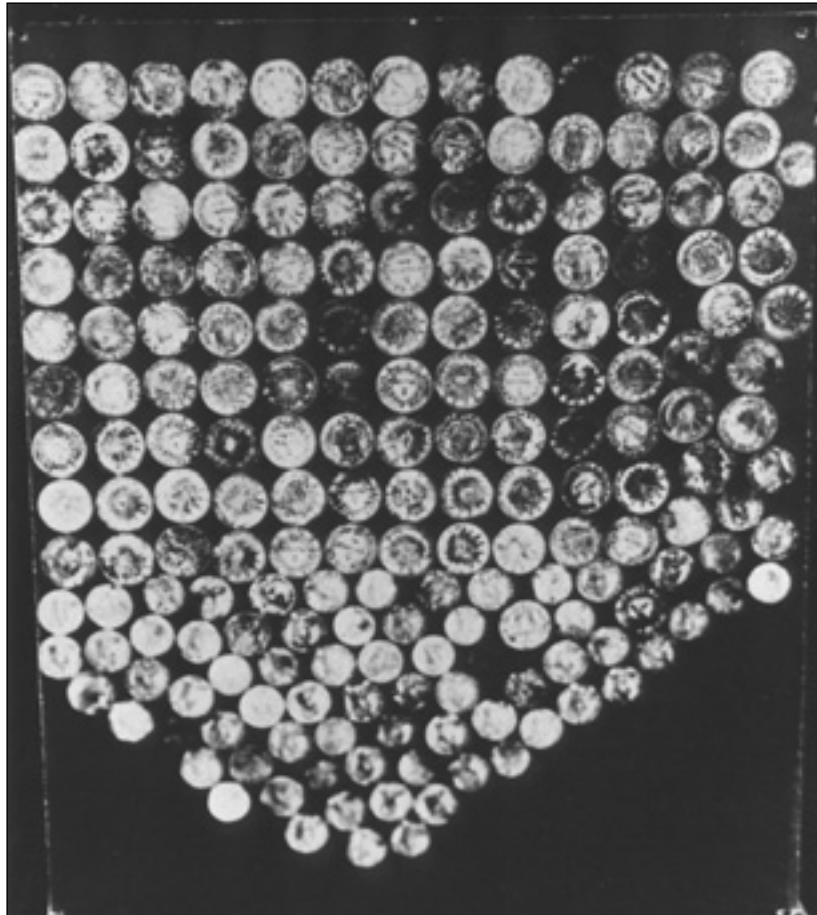
One of the artifacts on display in the museum at Donner Lake State Park is a freshly polished coin, one of a cache carried in the family wagon of Franklin Ward Graves and his soon-to-become-widowed wife Elizabeth, who only had several more months to live herself. The Graves family, with nine children, was one of nine families that composed the now legendary and tragedy-hounded Donner Party. They were some of the one thousand people of the 1846 overland migration to Oregon and California that would eventually involve from 350,000 to perhaps a half-million men, women, and children.

It is the winter of 1846-47; the setting is Alder Creek and the east end of Truckee Lake, later to become known as Donner Lake. Since November 4, 1846, heavy snows have blocked Sierra passes, trapping eighty-one people, including the Graves family, with all surviving in crude shelters, hoarding their food supply, and enduring a weather pattern that even in the Sierra Nevada rarely occurs. Already two attempts to scale the pass—barely two miles to the west—by stronger members of the group have failed. A third attempt was made December 16, with this assault on the mountain including party members Franklin Graves and two of his daughters. This attempt succeeded, although most of them, including Franklin Graves, died of starvation and exhaustion along the way. From the survivors, though, California learned

of the plight of the others still imprisoned in the unforgiving Sierras. A total of four rescues of the trapped emigrants took place beginning in February 1847. James Reed, who had been in California since October 28 following his banishment from the traveling party for the killing of John Snyder, took part in the second rescue arriving at the lake March 1:

As I passed Mrs. Graves told them I would be off [f] in the morning. The men that remained to-day cached the principle of her effects and got for her out of one of the wagons about eight hundred in gold and silver which was concealed in a slat or bracket that was nailed in the middle of the bed, the money being placed in groves made for the purpose.

On March 3, Reed, along with seventeen people including Elizabeth Graves and four of her children, began the journey over the Sierra pass. It was probably on that day that Mrs. Graves, in her weakened condition yet carrying nearly two hundred coins, decided it would be impossible to do so. Another story bantered about regarded two of the relief party men, who, observing her condition—perhaps jokingly—discussed playing a game of euchre to see who would get the coins in the event of Mrs. Graves's death. The following morning, some say, Elizabeth stayed behind in the camp and buried the coins at the base of a large rock or pine tree along the north shore of the lake. Obviously she intended to return some day and retrieve her cache.



The Elizabeth Graves hoarde of coins.  
All photos by Bill Goggin, photographer for Grass Valley Union.  
Courtesy Donner Lake State Park.

On March 5 the group arrived at what Reed referred to in his diary as the prairie or starved camp, known today as Summit Valley. It was here that Reed wrote: "The sky looks like snow and everything indicates a storm, God forbid." The storm, by some accounts, was the fiercest of the seasons. Continued travel became impossible; the freezing and starving people settled in to survive as best they could. When the storm finally broke on March 8, the Breen family and Elizabeth Graves and her children were unable to continue. Reed, urged on by necessity, struggled onward with those still strong enough to travel.

The third rescue, led by William Eddy, arrived on

the incredible scene in Summit Valley on March 12. The events were recorded by J. Quinn Thornton in an interview with William Eddy in 1847. Elizabeth Graves was dead. Franklin Graves Jr., age five, was also dead. There was evidence of cannibalism. Thornton wrote: "Her little child about thirteen months old sat by her side with one arm upon the body of its mangled mother sobbing bitterly, 'Ma! Ma! Ma!'"

The story of the cache of coins became relatively obscure until the 1879 publication of Charles McGlashan's *The History of the Donner Party*. McGlashan wrote, "All that is known is, that she buried it behind a large rock on the north side of Don-

Five-franc piece dated 1824 given in memorium by Elizabeth Graves's descendant to Donner Lake State Park. Note sand and gravel abrasions.



ner Lake. So far as it is known, this money has never been recovered, but still lies hidden where it was placed by Mrs. Graves." The publication touched off something of a treasure hunt in the Donner Lake and Truckee area. Then, on May 19, 1891, the *San Francisco Examiner* published the following headlines:

HALF A CENTURY BURIED  
THE LOST TREASURE OF THE DONNER PARTY  
FOUND AT LAST  
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And text followed: "On the 14th Edward Reynolds, a miner from Sierra Valley, while prospecting for quartz on a hillside at the upper end of Donner Lake, discovered the money that was buried in 1847 by Mrs. Graves, one of the lost Donner emigrants." The *Grass Valley Union* reported: "TREASURE TROVE AT DONNER LAKE." The *Union* reported that offers for the coins came pouring in: \$200 for each coin; \$30,000 for the entire discovery. No dates later than 1845 assured the authenticity of the coins.

One mystery was solved, but another took its place. Where are the coins now? Can it be assumed that Edward Reynolds dealt some of the coins to dealers? Did William Graves, aged eighteen at the time of his mother's death and having come out from the lake with the first rescue party, obtain an unknown number of the coins for the Graves family? A brief news item in the *Grass Valley Union* dated July 10, 1891, suggests he was negotiating a claim with Reynolds soon

after the discovery. Did Charles F. McGlashan acquire some or all of the coins?

On the second day of the dig for the coins, the *San Francisco Examiner* stated that Reynolds and his partner, Amos Lane, involved Mr. and Mrs. Charles F. McGlashan in the search, which resulted in the discovery of additional coins, one of which was presented to Mrs. McGlashan and then set into a watch case. Based on the McGlashan connection with the discovery, the reference department at the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, has stated that the entire hoard of coins was obtained by McGlashan.

Whatever the initial disposition of the coins, it is currently evident that some or all were at some time distributed among the Graves family members and that they were and are now viewed as family treasures. One, a U.S. half-dollar, is in a safe-deposit box in San Francisco filtered down through the family tree by Nancy Graves Williamson. The coin at Donner Lake State Park was given in memorium by a Graves descendent, Eleanor Henry.



Edward Reynolds and his partner Amos Lane at the coin cache site of Elizabeth Graves.

On a weekend in May 1993, a Graves descendant family reunion was held at the site of the Johnson Ranch near Wheatland, which in 1847 was the eastern edge of civilization in California. The reunion commemorated the point of arrival of the Donner survivors. Many of these Graves descendants talked about their ancestors' coins, which they deem their "Donner money." It was said the Graves children identified the coins by the teeth marks on a dollar coin where one of the babies "teethed." The coin in the watch case given to Mrs. McGlashan is now in the Bancroft Library. It was included with a number of the Donner artifacts in a gift to the library by Douglas McGlashan Kelley in 1956 and Mrs. Kelley in 1959.

Finally, since McGlashan was such a driving force behind its construction and dedication in 1918, there is a possibility that some of Elizabeth Graves's coins are inside the Pioneer Monument that towers over Donner Lake State Park. At the dedication of the monument an archive was placed into the base of its east side. In a Searls Library publication, written by Donner scholar Doris Foley Larson, that lists the contents of the archive is the single word: "coins." The archive in the monument is scheduled to be opened in the year 2018. The "coins" will then be identified. Is it possible the coins belonged to Elizabeth Graves?

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*Jim McClain has been a member of OCTA since 1986. He taught U.S. history, with a particular interest in Western history, for thirty-five years at Nevada Union High School, and currently teaches the Elderhostel program at Sierra College. A member of Trails West, McClain has guided tours for OCTA members of the Forty-Mile Desert.*