

AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF DESPERATION

Exploring the Donner Party's Alder Creek Camp

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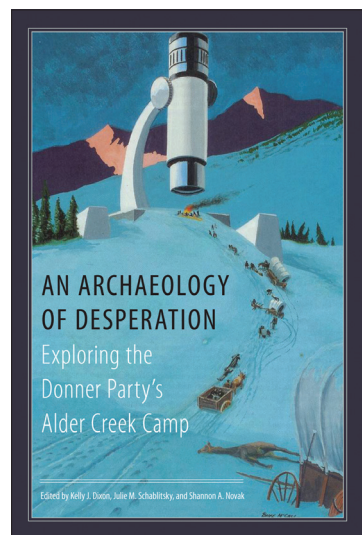
OCTOBER

\$34.95s CLOTH 978-0-8061-4210-4

384 PAGES, 6 × 9

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ARCHAEOLOGY/HISTORY



Uses science to understand survival among the West's most storied overlanders

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.

Kelly J. Dixon is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Montana and author of *Boomtown Saloons: Archaeology and History in Virginia City*. **Julie M. Schablitsky** is Senior Research Archaeologist at the Museum of Natural and Cultural History, University of Oregon, and the editor of *Box Office Archaeology: Refining Hollywood's Portrayals of the Past*. **Shannon A. Novak** is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Maxwell School, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York, and author of *House of Mourning: A Biocultural History of the Mountain Meadows Massacre*.

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