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Donner Party cannibalism legends remain unproven

SACRAMENTO, Calif. -- (Jan. 12, 2006)--The Donner Party used tea cups and other tableware and ate domestic and wild animals while stranded in the Sierra Nevadas during 1846-47, but all group members may not have resorted to cannibalism.

Results of recent analyses of bone fragments found at the Donner Family campsite in California's Tahoe National Forest are inconclusive with regard to cannibalism, according to research presented today by scientists at the Society for Historical Archaeology's conference on historical and underwater archaeology.

Julie Schablitsky, historical archaeologist and adjunct assistant professor at the University of Oregon Museum of Natural and Cultural History and Kelly Dixon, assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Montana, lead a team that has investigated the Donner tragedy over the past three years. In 2003 and 2004, the team found a cooking hearth and an associated shelter at the site, located at the Alder Creek Camp in the forest's Truckee Ranger District, along with thousands of pieces of burned bone. They also found wagon parts, writing slate, musket balls, pieces of tea cups and plates, bottle shards, and lost jewelry. The archaeological findings revealed the size and location of the cooking shelter and activity areas within the camp.

Mitochondrial DNA testing was done on the bone fragments to determine if they were human in the hope of establishing links to Donner descendants. However, the genetic material was too degraded to amplify and as such, no DNA could be lifted from the bone.

In the course of testing, Guy Tasa, an osteologist and senior research associate at Oregon's Museum of Natural and Cultural History, and Gwen Robbins, an anthropology doctoral candidate at Oregon, examined the bone fragments to determine particular animal species. Tasa visually examined the bone while Robbins conducted osteon (principal organizing feature of compact bone) analysis on the samples. They found the Donners lived off of their livestock and wild game. However, no human bone was identified in the collection they tested.

Shannon Novak, assistant professor of anthropology at Idaho State University, looked for trauma and "pot polish," on the bone fragments. The presence of pot polish indicates that bones have been boiled in water and is an indicator of starvation. Novak discovered that many bone fragments were sawed, chopped and cut as well as polished, suggesting extreme desperation and starvation among the group.

At this point in the team's research, it can be said that residents of the camp consumed domestic and wild animals, including the family dog. However, no clear evidence of cannibalism has emerged from the Alder Creek camp site. Schablitsky and Dixon, using historical and archaeological data, have concluded that if cannibalism occurred at the Donner camp, it took place during the last few weeks of their entrapment, by less than 12 individuals, and that the bodies were not processed to the bone.

"Archaeologists often find themselves studying popular mysteries and epics laced with a contradictory array of personal recollections, sensationalized media accounts, and myriad secondary histories," said Schablitsky. "The Donner Party is among these, representing a true account that has fallen victim to false assumptions and oversimplifications. Our group has used archaeological data, psychological and physiological analogies, as well as new technology, to reconstruct the Donner Party saga's complexity and humanize the very real people who were trapped in the Sierras during that ill-fated winter of 1846-47."

"The tale of the Donner Party has focused on the tragedy of survival cannibalism, yet the archaeological remains inspire us to consider more significant implications, such as what it was like to be human, doing whatever possible to survive in one of the snowbound camps," said Dixon. "This research will revise the popular, sensational accounts which have captured the public's attention for nearly 160 years and remind us of our survival capabilities in the face of unfamiliar environments or unexpected circumstances."

Over the last several months, the History Channel and the New Yorker have followed the team's work. The History Channel will air a 30-minute segment on the Donner Party in their new cannibalism documentary scheduled for this spring. The New Yorker will publish a comprehensive story later this month.

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 Kelly Dixon, assistant professor of anthropology, University of Montana, (612) 247-6414 (cell phone), kelly.dixon@mso.umt.edu
 Media note: Drs. Schablitsky and Dixon are available for interviews on Jan. 12 after 2:40 p.m. (PST) while they are at the Society for Historical Archaeology meeting.

Guy Tasa, Museum of Natural and Cultural History, osteologist and senior research associate, Museum of Natural and Cultural History, University of Oregon
 Shannon Novak, bioarchaeologist, Department of Anthropology, Idaho State University
 Gwen Robbins, bone histologist and graduate teaching fellow, Department of Anthropology, University of Oregon
 Richard Scott, cannibalism expert, University of Nevada-Reno

Links (images): <http://waddle.uoregon.edu/gallery/search.php?searchstring=Donner>



Julie Schablitsky and Shannon Novak uncovering fire hearth at Alder Creek Camp in the Tahoe National Forest near Reno, Nevada. Photo credit: Kelly J. Dixon, University of Montana
 Click [here](#) for a high resolution photograph.

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