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The Writing Works

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Odyssey Productions
H.B. Stubbs Exhibit Design
California National Historic Trail Interpretive Center

"Donner Camp Diorama"

Audio Visual Component

Final Script

Diorama Staging

NOTE: Once the overall narrative is approved, stage directions will be designed in more detail for accompanying props and lighting.

Overview: A diorama is revealed across three segments/scenes to depict (1) Donner Lake with the struggling pioneers, (2) their plight in the makeshift cabins, and (3) the dramatic rescue on February 18, 1847, when seven men of the Relief Party arrive.

Props: Accompanying props and other objects (such as a pair of snowshoes, a fur hat, a carved doll, an abandoned oxbow) will be incorporated into the scenes both in front of and behind the scrim.

Entrance: As the visitors enter the theater they encounter tall scenic rock formations with a pine tree on one side. Interpretive panels with large visual imagery are attached to the surface of the rock formations. The visitor passes from this vestibule into the theater proper.

The Stage: The theater stage is a landform about 16" above the floor level. A scrim hangs from the ceiling, embedded in the landform. On the scrim is an autumn panorama of the Sierra Nevada at the location now known as Donner Pass/Donner Lake. The landform replicates the geology of the Sierra Nevada, visually connects to the scrim and flows toward the theater seating. The seating appears to be part of the environment and consists of rock formations and blown-down trees. Spot lighting on the seating directs the audience to find a place somewhere in the seating area.

Audio. The aural background is a continuous loop of pleasant and light sounds of wind and birds appropriate to the Sierra Nevada in autumn. This ambient sound fades away as the program begins—triggered by a motion sensor with a push-button override.

"Donner Camp Diorama"

Audio Visual Component

Prologue (1 minute)

1. House lights dim.
2. The scrim is fully lit, depicting a gorgeous full-color panorama of the Sierra Nevada in late autumn. When the scrim is lit like this, the mural on the diorama back wall is concealed.

SINGING: Children's voices sing a folk
song from the times
Under and up about :15

Narration:

It's late October in the Sierra
Nevada, 1846.

SINGING: Fades out
SFX: Off in the distance a dog is barking
and oxen are bellowing.

As days shorten
and nights grow colder,
a wagon train party
sinks into desperation.

Bone-weary, confused,
nerves worn thin,
angry, despairing.

Known as the Donner-Reed
Party, when they started out
they numbered eighty-
seven:

The oldest, George Donner,
age 62.

The six youngest, nursing
infants.

They've journeyed 2,500
miles in seven months,
but the company, like the
wagons, has fallen to pieces.

Minor irritations have
festered into suspicions and
accusations.

Goodwill has given way
to wrangling and threats.

There's been a banishment,
and a killing.

Water refused to babies
parched from thirst.

An old man left behind to
die.

3. Snow begin to fall lightly on the scene across the scrim.

Curses and dissension have
fueled a growing panic.

4. It snows harder all across the scrim.

And now, with mountains
still ahead and 150 miles
to go...
It is snowing.

Scene 1. Trapped in the Snow

(2-3 minutes)

Transition:

5. General lighting comes up slowly on the left side of the diorama behind the scrim while the lights on the scrim in front of Scene 1 dim out.

SFX: The dog barking and oxen bellowing increase with the transition

6. The Scene 1 vignette is revealed as the scrim image in front of it evaporates. The scene depicts pioneers trying to make it up a steep section of the hillside in heavy snow. The landscape carries this off into great distance to create deep space. Three-dimensional figures depict people, animals and other things. The scenic in front of the scrim—a fallen tree, some rocks and other landforms—flow into the vignette.

SFX: Added to the audio are very faint sounds of children crying, along with sounds of grunting and heaving heavily against a relentless force. Strong winds whistle.

Background voices:

*get along,, cattle... move!*¹

*The snow is up to the axles. Maybe we should leave the wagons*²

*We cannot find the road.*³

*Maybe we could get over it if we don't get any more snow.*⁴

7. Spotlights shine on various people and animals as the story evolves.

Journal accounts:

¹ "This made us hurry our cattle still more, " Eliza Farnham (Oct. 31)

² "the snow increasing in depth all the way. At last, it was up to the axle of the wagons. We now concluded to leave them" Eliza Farnham (Oct. 31)

³ "we could not find the road;" Eliza Farnham (Oct. 31)

⁴ "we could git over if it did not snow any more" Virginia Reed (Nov. 2)

Child actor portraying Virginia Reed, age 12 at the time:

"the snow was then up to the mules side the farther we went up the deeper the snow got so the wagons could not go so thay packed thare oxens and started with us carring a child a piece and driving the oxens inn snow up to thare wast ... we went on that way 2 miles and the mules kept faling down on the snow head formost... we the Weman were all so tirder... "

Version for the actor to read:

The snow was then up to the mules's sides. The farther we went up, the deeper the snow got -- so the wagons could not go. So they packed their oxens and started with us carrying a child apiece -- and driving the oxens in snow up to their waist ... We went on that way 2 miles and the mules kept falling down on the snow head-foremost... We the women were all so tireder...

Voice portraying Lewis Keseberg:
[German accent]

"We lost our road, and owing to the depth of the snow on the mountains, were compelled to abandon our wagons, and pack our goods upon oxen.

**"I foresaw the danger plainly
and unmistakably.**

**"The terror amounted to a panic.
The mules were lost, the cattle
strayed away, and our further
progress rendered impossible."**

Background voices:

*another storm!*⁵

what should be taken, what abandoned? ...

my box of tobacco?

*no, no, not my calico!*⁶

I can go no farther. I must sit down and rest.

*I beg you, for God's sake, get over the ridge before
halting*⁷

**Voice portraying Jean Baptiste
Trudeau:**

[16-year-old French Canadian]

**"The snow came on with
blinding fury..."**

Voice portraying Elitha Donner:

[from Springfield, Illinois]

**"In a few days the snow was
four feet deep."**

Voice portraying John Breen:

[born in Iowa; father born in Ireland]

**" ... to make matters worse
another storm began..."**

Transition:

⁵⁵ " to make matters worse another storm began" John Breen (Nov. 2)

⁶ "There was also much confusion as to what articles should be taken and what abandoned. One wanted a box of tobacco carried along; another, a bale of calico, and some one thing and some another...." Lewis Keseberg (Nov. 2)

⁷ "Some of the emigrants sat down to rest, and declared they could go no farther. I begged them for God's sake to get over the ridge before halting." – Lewis Keseberg (Nov. 2)

8. The lighting begins to fade out.

SFX: Background sounds of crying, wind and heaving heavily increase and crescendo

9. All lighting blacks out.

Voice portraying Lewis Keseberg:
"We returned to the lake, and prepared, as best we could, for the winter."

SFX: Audio abruptly stops.

Scene 2. "That Camp of Snow and Suffering" (2-3 minutes)

11. In the center of the diorama, the scene behind the scrim at first is lit by a light that appears to be a candle. Then slowly and delicately, general lighting fades up while the lights on the scrim in front of Scene 2 dim out. (Exact lighting here and elsewhere to be determined during blocking.) The candlelight begins to come up slowly and flicker.

SFX: Soft moans, perhaps wild, gusty sounds of wind that quiet down almost eerily

FADE UP:

Voice portraying John Breen:
"each family built some kind of house, and killed all their cattle, as they could not live; the ground being covered with snow."

**Voice portraying Jean Baptiste
Trudeau:**

**"It was the first of November,
I think, that we went into that
camp of snow and suffering ..."**

12. The Scene 2 vignette in the middle of the diorama is revealed as the scrim image in front of it evaporates. The scene is a deeply-buried makeshift log cabin, its outside edges visible, and the interior exposed. Inside, two or three people are nestled in makeshift beds or cots. They are wrapped in tattered rags of clothing and blankets. A fire is smoldering below a pot of something that has a ladle in it, and a knife is on a makeshift table. We see bones. This is a look of desperation, of having been there awhile and waiting out their tragic circumstances.

Background voices:

an owl, for supper⁸

these miserable cabins⁹

it's snowing faster¹⁰

*the prospect is appalling... we offer our prayers to
God¹¹*

Narration:

Eighty-one had made it this
far: 25 men, 15 women, and
41 children.

They constructed three
windowless cabins of pine

⁸ "On the 5th he succeeded in killing an owl, of which supper was made." Thornton (Nov. 5)

⁹ "Here again were their warmest hopes blighted; and they again turned with heavy hearts towards their miserable cabins ." Eddy, recorded by Sinclair (Nov. 22)

¹⁰ " Snows faster than any previous day ", Patrick Breen (Dec. 13)

¹¹ "Offerd, our prayers to God this Cherimass morning the prospect is apalling but hope in God *amen*", Patrick Breen (Dec. 25)

logs, a lean-to, and a number of crude tents.

The living conditions started out miserable and steadily grew worse.

In time, all that was left to eat were ox-hides—boiled for hours into a glue-like jelly—and bones, and wood-mice, if they could catch them.

When there was nothing else, they ate their pet dogs. The Reeds' little dog "Cash" was last, and the family lived on him for a week.

Patrick Breen was the only member of the party to keep a day-to-day journal. By

January, the endless
snowstorms ceased to be the
main topic.

Actor portraying Patrick Breen:

*[Stevens says, "the brogue was still
on his lips"]*

**"Thursday 17th. Bealis died
night before last."**

**"Monday 21st. ... sad news Jake
Rinehart & Smith are dead the
rest of them in a low situation
snowed all night."**

**"Friday, February the 5th.,
Eddys child died last night."**

**"Tuesday, 9th. Pikes child all
but dead."**

**"Wednesday, 10th. Milt Elliot
died las night at Murphys
Shanty."**

**"Friday, 12th. A warm thawey
morning ... we hope with the
assistance of Almighty God to
be able to live to see the bare
surface of the earth once more."**

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To see the complete script, contact me at matrazzo@msn.com
