

Mormons leave behind rich history in El Dorado County

By Kathryn Reed

CAMP RICHARDSON – Trudging along in less than ideal conditions – mud so high the wagon wheels barely turn, cold so bitter it is impossible to ever get warm, hunger like the Donner Party knew. And yet, the worst may have been being driven from their home, unwanted, persecuted all because they were Mormon.

Life in the 1840s came alive at the rustic Camp Richardson Lodge last week as Frank Tortorich took on the persona of a young man caught up in the strife. Tortorich, who lives in Amador County, is an educator, researcher, guide, author and member of the Oregon California Trails Association.

William, the character Tortorich portrayed, knew Joseph Smith and later Brigham Young. Starting in the Midwest, marching with the Army to California, then heading back to the Salt Lake area, Tortorich led the nearly 40 people in attendance on what felt like a physical journey through time, as well as through history that has been left out of school curriculums.



Historian
Frank
Tortorich
enlightens
people about
the Mormon

migration that
involved El
Dorado County.
Photo/Kathryn
Reed

Smith's murder in June 1844 and Young's ascension to lead the Mormon people is part of the story.

It was after Smith was killed that the 25,000-person migration from Nauvoo, Ill., began for the people of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

A couple hundred, including Sam Brannan, went by boat around Cape Horn to California. It was in San Francisco where William would meet up with Brannan again.

A deal was struck between President James Polk and Mormon leaders that in exchange for protection along the route west 500 men would join the Army.

Young's prophecy that no Mormon would die in battle fighting the Mexicans proved true – though plenty died on the journey. They were part of the Mormon Battalion. It was a grueling march from Santa Fe to San Diego. By the time they arrived in California the war was over.

They were introduced to Catholics, who welcomed them instead of being afraid of people with a different religious belief.

It was now the late 1840s and Young had made his way to the Salt Lake Valley.

With the discovery of gold, some of the Mormons headed to what is now El Dorado County to find some nuggets to take to Salt Lake.

Tortorich talks about James Marshall and John Sutter's gold rush that started it all.

“James Sly, one of our brothers, loved the place. He built a corral about 6 miles up,” William says.

(Sly Park exit off Highway 50 may now have new meaning to people.)

The migration east to Utah included 17 wagons, two brass canyons, 150 horses and 150 oxen. The group knew about the Donner Party tragedy and had no desire to go over what was known as the Truckee River route.

Though they lost scouts to Indians along what is now Highway 50 in the American River Canyon, they believed this to be a less treacherous route.

“We went over this summit and it was beautiful; into a valley we called Lake Valley,” William told the audience. Then over another summit in the Sierra the men, women and children went. “Brother Biglar wrote in his diary we shall name this Hope Valley.”

(John Biglar became the third governor of California and at one time called Lake Tahoe Lake Biglar, but that never took.)

Finally, the group made its way along the Carson River, knowing its name because John Fremont had called it such after his friend Kit Carson.

All the wagon trains the Mormons saw headed west were advised of this new route over the Sierra instead of possibly having the same fate of the Donner Party.

William didn't live long upon his arrival in Salt Lake. His widow remarried a man with the last name Kimball. They moved into the Wasatch mountains, calling their outpost Kimball Junction. Today it is known as Park City.

This night was part of the Lake Tahoe Historical Society's Winter Program.