

# Rescue!

A Reader's Theatre of the First Rescue Party of  
the Donner Party, 1847

adapted from various retellings by  
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## Cast of Characters:

Longer parts:

Narrator

Reasin P. Tucker

Daniel Rhodes

John Rhodes

Short parts:

John Sutter

Alcalde Sinclair:

Thomas Rhodes

Ellen Rhodes

Margaret Reed

Patrick Breen

Harriet Pike

Naomi Pike

**Narrator:** Of the numerous stories of pioneers and their trek across the plains, one story of bravery deserves to be known by every Californian. Happening exactly 150 years ago this winter, the heroic rescue by two brothers and five others will now unfold as we perform a reader's theatre enactment. Imagine yourself transformed back in time when the gold rush was about to begin.

**Reasin P. Tucker:** One night about the last of January, 1847, I was out and about the Johnson Ranch when I could see a man coming down the Bear River, accompanied by an Indian. As they came closer, I could see that the white man was very haggard and in great distress. When he reached me, he said that his name was William H. Eddy and he was of the Donner Party. He told briefly how their wagon train had been caught in the snow east of the mountains by Donner Lake and was unable to go backward or forward. Everyone was starving. He told how fifteen of the group had forged across the pass and that of this group six beside himself were still alive and that those six were back on the trail. Gathering a few supplies, three men and I started out at once, the Indian acting as a guide. Fifteen miles back, we reached them during the night and brought them down to the ranch the next day. It had taken them thirty-two days since they left Donner Lake! No one knew if any of the people at the lake were still alive.<sup>1</sup>

There were only a few families living at Johnson Ranch and a great deal of help would be needed to cross over the pass to assist the Party. The closest help was Sutter's Fort, some distance away.<sup>2</sup>

**John Rhodes:** Let me introduce myself. I am John Rhodes. I was there when William H. Eddy struggled into Johnson Ranch. But before telling you about my

experiences with the Donner Party, let me tell you something about my family. I will have my father, Thomas Rhodes speak to you.

**Thomas Rhodes:** My wife and I heard of the California frontier when we lived in Ray County, Missouri in 1846 and decided to join a wagon train to that new land that spring.

**Ellen Rhodes:** Let me interrupt my husband to tell you that I was an amazing woman, if I don't say so myself. Somehow, the Lord blessed me with multiple births, for by the time I finished my child bearing, I had had four sets of twins and one set of triplets for a total of 21 children! Tonight this story is about two of the older sons, John, one of the twins, and Daniel.

**Thomas Rhodes:** My wife was indeed a wonderful woman, and as we arrived near Sutter's fort, I began investigating the country side for habitable places to live. Two of my sons, John and Daniel must now tell their story to you.

**John Rhodes:** Yes, let me introduce my brother Daniel.

**Daniel Rhodes:** Hello everyone.

**John Rhodes:** Daniel and I were there when William H. Eddy struggled into Johnson Ranch where we had come just 6 months previous. I volunteered to travel to Sutter's Fort to see if I could get help. Knowing that the trip usually took several days, I decided to proceed with all due haste. We had had a rainy winter and when I came to the Bear River which I had to cross, it was a raging torrent and the entire Sacramento plain was a vast quagmire. Lashing two pine logs together with rawhides, I ferried over the river taking my shoes in my hand and rolling my pants up, I crossed water varying from one to three feet. In a single night I reached Sutter's Fort.

**John Sutter:** You have no doubt heard of me, the John Sutter of Sutter's Fort and gold miner. When John Rhodes clamored into the Fort and told us of the plight of the Donner Party still stranded in the mountains, I offered to help round up volunteers and provisions. The next day, a party went back to Johnson's Ranch.<sup>3</sup> It was difficult to find men because the United States was fighting a war with Mexico at the time and there were very few men left in the vicinity.

**John Rhodes:** When we arrived with a few men and provisions back to Johnson's ranch, we found that Reasin Tucker had been busy.

**Reasin Tucker:** We and our neighbors slaughtered five or six fat cattle and while John was gone for help, we had dried or "jerked" the meat. We also scoured the country for horses and mules, but alas, it took ten or twelve days before the rescue team was ready to start.

**Alcalde Sinclair:** My name is Alcalde Sinclair and Capt. Sutter sent me to help John Rhodes carry supplies to Johnson's Ranch. As we assembled the volunteers and supplies, I addressed them saying something like:

"Men, you are about to embark on a perilous journey. Your obligation is only to suffering fellow-men. I urge you to do all in your power, without sacrificing your lives, to save these perishing emigrants from starvation."

**Daniel Rhodes:** Many years later, I recalled this event and said of it: "We concluded we would go or die trying, for not to make any attempt to save them...would be a disgrace to us in California...as long as time lasted."<sup>4</sup>

**Alcalde Sinclair:** I continued my speech: "But before you go, I should like to record each of your names". Here are the names I recorded: John Rhodes, Daniel Rhodes, Aquilla Glover, R.S. Mootrey, Joseph Foster, Edward Coffemire, M.D. Ritchie, James Curtis, William H. Eddy, William Coon, R.P. Tucker, George W. "Dan" Tucker, and Adolph Brueheim. Thus, the first relief party started.

**Reasin Tucker:** Let me tell the first of the journey as I recorded it later in my journal:

We mounted our horses and started. The ground was very soft among the foothills, but we got along very well for two or three miles after leaving Johnson's ranch. Finally one of our pack-horses broke through the crust, and down he went to his sides in the mud. He floundered and plunged until the pack turned underneath his body. He then came out of the mud, bucking and kicking; and he bucked and kicked, and kicked and bucked, till he cleared himself of the pack, pack-saddle and all, and away he went back to the ranch. We gathered up the pack, put it upon the horse Eddy was riding, and the party traveled on. Eddy and I decided to go back for the horse and that journey took two full days. We were very fearful that we would never catch up to the team because of the heavy rains.

My horse could only go in a slow walk, so I walked and led him to keep from freezing. The rain continued to increase in volume, and by dark it was coming down in torrents. It was very cold. The little stream began to rise, but I waded through, though sometimes it came up to my armpits. Sometimes I would get down on my knees in the darkness and feel for the road with my hands. I knew if the storm was raging in the morning as it was then, I might get lost and perish, so I concluded to stay right there until morning. I had no blanket, and nothing on me but a very light coat and pair of pants. I tied my horse to a little pine tree, and sitting down, leaned against the tree. The rain came down in sheets. The wind blew, and the old pine trees clashed their limbs together. It seemed to me I should surely freeze. In the morning, when it became light enough so that I could see two or three rods, I got up, but my legs were so numb that I could not walk. I rolled around until I got up a circulation, and could stand on my feet. Leaving my horse tied to the tree, I found the road, went about a hundred yards around the point of a hill, and saw the camp-fire up in a little flat about a quarter of a mile from where I had spent the night. Going up to camp, I found the men all standing around a fire they had made, where two large pines had fallen across each other. When I got to the fire, and began to get warm, my legs and arms began to swell so that I could hardly move or get my hands to my face.<sup>5</sup>

**Daniel Rhodes:** Let me continue the story. Because of the rain, everything we had was wet. We had stacked up our dried beef and flour in a pile and put the saddles and pack saddles over it as well as we could, but everything got wet. On the third morning it stopped raining about daylight and the sun came out clear and warm. We made scaffolds and spread our meat all out, hung up our blankets and clothing on

lines and by keeping up fires and with the help of the sun we managed to get everything dry by night. The next morning we packed up and started on until we came to a little valley where we found some grass for our horses. <sup>6</sup>

**John Rhodes:** The next day we got to Steep Hollow Creek, one of the branches of Bear River. This stream was not more than a hundred feet wide, but it was about twenty feet deep, and the current was very swift. We felled a large pine tree across it, but the center swayed down so that the water ran over it about a foot deep. We tied ropes together and stretched them across to make a kind of hand railing, and succeeded in carrying over all our things.

**Daniel Rhodes:** We undertook to make our horses swim the creek and finally forced two of them into the stream, but as soon as they struck the current they were carried down faster than we could run. One of them at last reached the bank and got ashore, but the other went down under the current and was washed down the stream about a hundred yards before we were able to get him out, but he almost drowned.

**Reasin Tucker:** To get the rest of the horses across, we tied ropes together and part of the men went across, then we tied a rope to each horse. Those on one side would force him into the water, and the others would draw him across. We lost a half day at this place.

That night we climbed a high mountain and came to snow. We camped that night without any feed for our horses and the next day, about noon we reached Mule springs. <sup>7</sup> The snow was from three to four feet deep, and it was impossible to go any farther with the horses. Unpacking the animals, Joe Varro and Wm. Eddy started back with them to Johnson's Ranch. The rest of us went to work and built a brush tent in which to keep our provisions. Billy Coon and the younger Tucker, Dan Tucker, were to stay there to watch the provisions lest they be stolen or eaten by wild animals.

**Daniel Rhodes:** Each of the ten remaining men who were to proceed, created a 75 pound pack of provisions and started out on foot. Each man took a blanket, a tin cup, and a hatchet, but most of the pack consisted of dried beef and flour. <sup>8</sup>

**Reasin Tucker:** By this time it was Feb. 11th. I recorded the following in my diary:

Traveled on through the snow, having a very severe day's travel over mountains, making about six miles. Camped on Bear River near a cluster of large pines.

**John Rhodes:** The next morning we decided to make snow-shoes. Our efforts were in vain. The clumsy snowshoes picked up clumps of sticky snow, and after an hour or two we found we could get ahead with more speed and less exhaustion simply by plunging knee deep into the drifts. Each man would step in the footsteps on the one preceding him so we would rotate the lead man who had the hardest time breaking trail.

**Daniel Rhodes:** It was clear we could not continue with our packs so we created a cache of supplies that we hoped would be there on our way back. <sup>9</sup> We did not know it then, but there was still 50 miles to go. That evening we found ourselves at the bottom of Bear River canyon having made a distance of only 6 miles.

**John Rhodes:** The snow was so deep, we could not dig to the ground and so we built a fire and with our blankets over our shoulders, we sat huddled together unable to lie down, dozing as we could until morning.

**Reasin Tucker:** At this point we found that we had made an error coming down into the canyon, for the walls of the ridge were so steep, we had to retrace our steps of the previous day. <sup>10</sup>

**John Rhodes:** The next day, there was mutiny. Three of the men flatly refused to go further. There was no way to force them, and after their desertion, we were all discouraged.

**Reasin Tucker:** To encourage the rest, I promised each man \$5.00 for every day from the time they entered the snow. Five dollars was pay for a lord, but it did not look so lordly when a man sat cold and exhausted in 10 feet of snow.

**Narrator:** At times like this, only the most courageous humans press forward - for no price in the world can substitute for determination, will, and a desire to save others. Again, these were the seven: Glover, Tucker, Moultry, Coffeemeyer, Sels, and the two Mormon brothers Rhodes. Of these seven, not one was an experienced mountaineer. They now had to be careful about their course, for they were passing through unknown country.

**John Rhodes:** Our backtracking and change in course was the right thing to do, for the next day, we seven made good time from the headwaters of the Bear to the Yuba River making 12 miles that day.

**Daniel Rhodes:** We were now somewhat heartened because we recognized the landmarks that would lead us to the top of the pass. But the next day, a storm blew up and after only three miles it became impossible to advance further so we stopped again to make snow-shoes.

**Reasin Tucker:** After struggling on for two miles more, we camped after making only five miles for the day. We feared that if the weather became worse, we might give out.

**John Rhodes:** The day following came some luck. The snowfall ceased and we toiled on, sometimes on snow-shoes, sometimes climbing the steep hillside where the snow was not as deep. We made five miles that day.

**Daniel Rhodes:** On the next day, we came to the open expanse of Summit Valley and after struggling ahead eight miles, we camped making another cache of provisions to be picked up on the way back. We estimated the snow in the valley to be close to thirty feet deep. It was now almost two weeks since we had begun our journey.<sup>11</sup>

**Reasin Tucker:** On Thursday, the 18th of February, we faced the pass. A mile away and 500 feet above us, we could see the gap between the jagged peaks. Even with our lightened packs, we were exhausted by a week of almost sleepless struggle against the snow. We began to climb.

**Daniel Rhodes:** Glover and I were failing so badly that we divided our packs with the other climbers who took our share of the load. My brother John took mine.

**John Rhodes:** Every step up was a victory and finally the slope eased off and we floundered through a narrow passage between two high slopes and suddenly, the view toward the east and the lake opened to our view. We could see down the face of the pass and across the frozen lake - over the forest-covered valley toward distant mountains. We saw no trace of life.

**Reasin Tucker:** It was midday and we spent the afternoon climbing slowly down the pass toward the frozen lake. It had been weeks since the first of the Donners had left camp for help. Discouraged, we expected no one to be alive.

**John Rhodes:** Spontaneously, we all hallooed together - "hall--ooo, halloo." Suddenly out of the snow we saw a woman emerge, like some kind of animal from a hole. We staggered toward her and she to us, crying.

**Margaret Reed:** Are you men from California, or do you come from heaven?"

**Daniel Rhodes:** Other human figures, ghastly and horrible sights, began to appear - their flesh was wasted from their bodies. They wept and laughed hysterically. They cried out as well as they could in hoarse and death-like voices, confusedly:

**Patrick Breen:** "Relief, thank God, relief! Have you brought anything for me?"

**Reasin Tucker:** We distributed food but only in very small quantities lest they eat too much and die. And since it was now night, we camped and guarded our food stuffs lest they be stolen by these starved skeletons.<sup>12</sup>

**Reasin Rhodes:** The next morning we went down into the snow to inspect the living quarters of these pitiful people. They had carved steps down the many feet to their cabins, but what dreadful places. The dead were everywhere - and the cabins were the most filthy and revolting things I have ever seen.

**John Rhodes:** Tucker, Moultry, and I then took some supplies and traveled 8 more miles to where the Donner family was camped and in two days brought back to the main camp six who wanted to try to get down the mountains. Gathering 17 more living skeletons, mostly children, we determined to begin the trek home. As we were preparing to go, I remembered my promise to Mrs. Pike that I would bring back her children. Alas, when we arrived one of the Pike children had already died. Three-year-old Naomi Pike was so weak that she would never be able to make the trip. I determined that I would carry her in my coat.

**Reasin Tucker:** We warned John that to carry a child all that distance was not possible.

**John Rhodes:** I replied that I had made a promise to the little woman and if I could get this child to her mother, I would do so. I could hear her as clearly then as before the trip:<sup>13</sup>

**Harriet Pike:** Mr. Rhodes, Mr. Rhodes. My two babies are back there at that camp. They are all I have. My father was killed and my mother and baby sister died of starvation and I am only 19 years old. Oh, please promise me you will bring my babies back to me!<sup>14</sup>

**John Rhodes:** I would do it. I would do it!

**Narrator:** Anxious to leave while the weather held, the rescuers led 23 emaciated people, including 17 children, toward the granite face. They slept under icy stars on the snow pack. Three children were too weak to travel and had to be sent back. and much to the rescuer's dismay, the thongs from their snowshoes were stolen in the night and eaten. Each person was allowed once ounce of meat daily and one teaspoon of flour twice daily.<sup>15</sup>

**Daniel Rhodes:** When we reach the place where we had cached food hanging on a tree, we were horrified to find that wild animals had destroyed it. We would have to walk and starve for two more days. John Denton, one of the old men gave out and begged us to leave him. A fire was built and he was left lying on a bed of freshly cut pine boughs. Later when the second rescue party came by, they found his body. Beside it was his journal where he had written his last entry - a poem about his memories of childhood.<sup>16</sup>

**Reasin Tucker:** We sent four ahead to the next cache of food to retrieve it and bring some back. They met us the next day. That night, the oldest Donner boy got into the stores and gorged himself - dying the next morning.

**Narrator:** For days, they struggled down the mountains, coaxing the children every step of the way, stopping every night huddled around a fire. Four children had to be carried now who were too weak to walk. After days and days, the leaders caught sight of something ahead, men winding in single file through the trees. They thought it might be Indians. Then they knew it was another relief party! A cry of "Bread! Bread!" went up from the straggled line of starving children. Not only did the party have some food, but James Reed who was on his way back up the mountain was reunited with his wife and daughter.<sup>17</sup>

**John Rhodes:** From here down, we were supplied with more and more to eat, and then horses. The winter finally turned to spring. On March 4th, we arrived at Sutter's Fort and I fulfilled my duty giving my three-year old living pack to her mother!

**Narrator:** There were four expeditions to save the Donner Party, or what remained of it, that winter and spring. According to the Rhodes Family. John Rhodes went on three of the expeditions.

John and Daniel stayed in California with their families. They had numerous children and did much to tame the land in the Sacramento and Gilroy areas. John Rhodes built a school and served in the state legislature. He died in 1866 from pneumonia - a persistent illness he got every winter after the rescue. He is buried in the Sloughouse Cemetery owned now by the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers. Many boy scouts and other volunteers in the community have restored much of the cemetery and keep it in good condition to this day. If you go to the cemetery just outside of Dillard and ask Mrs. Ellen V. Rosa, she will take you to the cemetery and retell the stories of these wonderful brothers and others who sacrificed so much in service to the Donner Party.

**Naomi Pike:** And let me end this story. I am Naomi Pike - the three-year-old girl John Rhodes carried out of the mountains. I did not remember many details, but my mother always told me that she looked into the eyes of each of the men who were to

start on the rescue journey and she picked John Rhodes - a man of large stature and kindly eyes. In my 90th year, I have outlived John, being the next-to-the-last survivor of the Donner Party to die, but I shall be eternally grateful for this man of courage!<sup>18</sup>

## Bibliography

1. Thanks to Ellen V. Rosa, 10501 Dillard Rd, Wilton, CA 95693 who generously shared family records and took the author on a tour of the cemetery where John Rhodes and many others of the family are buried. Ellen is the descendent of Catherine F. Rhodes Sheldon, the 14th child of Thomas and Elizabeth Rhodes and sister of John and Daniel.
2. Pigney, Joseph. *For Fear We Shall Perish*. Dutton, 1961.
3. Cowan, Richard O. and William E. Homer. *California Saints: A 150-Year Legacy In The Golden State*. Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 1996. Dist. by Bookcraft, Inc., Salt Lake City, Utah.
4. Thornton, J. Quinn. *The California Tragedy* Bio Books, 1945.
5. Carter, Kate. *Our Pioneer Heritage*, vol. \_\_\_\_\_, p. 478-79.
6. Haulman, Donald J. *The Family of James Patterson, 1758-1838: Revolutionary War Beteran*, c. 1995. (9886 E. Belmont, Sanger, CA 93657, 209-251-0823 - copies are \$39.95 with \$3.00 shipping.)

## Footnotes

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- <sup>1</sup>McGlashan, C. F. *History of the Donner Party: A Tragedy of the Sierra*. Stanford University Press, 1880 (reprinted, 1940), p.110-11) (San Jose State University Library)
  - <sup>2</sup>McGlashan, p. 111-12.
  - <sup>3</sup>McGlashan, p. 114-16.
  - <sup>4</sup>Merritt, Robert E. and James H. Merritt. *The Merritt's Tradition: A True Story of America's Migration and Strong Willed Pioneers, 1630-1994*, p. 68.
  - <sup>5</sup>McGlashan, p. 116.
  - <sup>6</sup>McGlashan, p. 116.
  - <sup>7</sup>Stewart, George R. *Ordeal by Hunger: The Story of the Donner Party*. New Edition. Houghton Mifflin, 1960, p. 176-83 (San Jose State University Library)
  - <sup>8</sup>Pigney, Joseph. *For Fear We Shall Perish*. Dutton, 1961 (San Jose State University Library)
  - <sup>9</sup>Stewart, p. 184.
  - <sup>10</sup> Stewart, p. 188-89
  - <sup>11</sup> Stewart, p. 190-91
  - <sup>12</sup> West, Naida. "The Daring of the Brave." *Sierra Heritage*, Jan/Feb, 1994, p. 24-25.
  - <sup>13</sup> Obituary of John Rhoads, May 26, 1866 (probably Sacramento newspaper)
  - <sup>14</sup> Obituary of John Rhoads.
  - <sup>15</sup> Murphey, Virginia Reed. *Across the Plains in the Donner Party*. Lewis Osborne,



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Palo Alto California. , p. 45-48. (San Jose State University Library).

<sup>16</sup> Stewart, p. 200-206; the poem was published in McGlashan, p. 151.

<sup>17</sup> McGlashan, p. 154.

<sup>18</sup>Obituary of Mrs. Naomi Pike Schenck in The Dalles Oregon newspaper, April 4?, 1934. (death date was on the 4th, probably appeared several days to a week later)