

Elisha Stephens

1804 - 1887

Jon Hassinger
445 Woodhams Road,
Santa Clara, Ca.
(408) 241-2546

Introduction

This piece began as reminiscence about Stevens Creek, but somewhere in the early research the ghost of a strong, honest blacksmith reached out and grabbed my shirt - just to get my attention, understand.

“Now you lissin har. It jus’ ain’t far the way Ah’ve been treated. Even misspelled ma name. Now, don’t that beat all? And givin’ thet prissy Fremont all the credit really sours mah milk. Henyways ye lay yer sights, it ain’t right. Now, siddown thar an’ write ‘bout me. An do yer best!”

Once I’d recovered from the mild prompting, I began writing about the life and times of Elisha Stephens, blacksmith, mountain man, pioneer, and hero. More research needs to be done and the myriad historical mistakes straightened out, so when I go fishing at Stephens Creek, he won’t pick on me quite so much, and perhaps he’ll finally show me his best fishing spots!

JH

There are many exceptional men and women who have helped settle the beautiful Santa Clara Valley, but one of the greatest and most neglected is Elisha Stephens. Stevens Creek and Stevens Creek Boulevard are named in his honor, yet his story goes largely untold. It's surprising that the man who was first to successfully bring a wagon train across the California Trail and the first settler in the Cupertino area, had his name misspelled when the stream running through his property was changed from "Copertino Creek" to "Stevens Creek" sometime before 1876. Yet this is the case.

Now, finally, he's beginning to get some of the recognition he so richly deserves. A memorial has been placed at Blackberry Farm in Cupertino, and a peak alongside Highway 80 at Donner Lake has been renamed, both honoring him – with his name correctly spelled.

Elisha Stephens was born in the Carolinas where as a young man he learned the blacksmith trade, a decision which served him well for many years. Being a blacksmith not only enables one to shape iron into useful items, it also forges character. A blacksmith must be strong and skilled. One of his main tools is a twenty-pound hammer, which he swings at a slow, measured pace coaxing the hot iron on his anvil. Try this sometime. A twenty-pound hammer will quickly wear you out, but the blacksmith can swing it all day. He's also mastered the skill needed to make everything from kitchen utensils to axes, wheel rims to knives, gun triggers to nails. The blacksmith in Elisha Stephen's era, being handy with pliers, might even have been asked to pull a tooth or two!

This brings up another characteristic practiced by the successful blacksmith: effectiveness in dealing with people. Being a small businessman in a trade that is so important, the "village

smithy” is in constant demand and interacts with everyone, from the grandmother who needs her scissors sharpened again to the professional wheelwright placing another order for wheel rims.

Therefore, becoming a blacksmith gives a clue to the development of Elisha Stephens’s character. As he fashioned metal in front of a flaming forge, with the bellows roaring in the background, he was also strongly influenced. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow states the personality of the young adult Stephens very aptly in the first two stanzas of his poem “The Village Blacksmith”.

Under the spreading chestnut-tree
 The village smithy stands;
 The smith, a mighty man is he,
 With large and sinewy hands;
 And the muscles of his brawny arms
 Are strong as iron bands.

His hair is crisp, and black, and long,
 His face is like the tan;
 His brow is wet with honest sweat,
 He earns what’er he can,
 And looks the whole world in the face’
 For he owes not any man.

It was a strong, self-reliant Stephens who now decided to travel into this new country – the unexplored West.

In South Carolina and Georgia, hunting, trapping, and fishing were universal skills that virtually all boys from that era acquired. So he showed no hesitation in becoming a trapper when the unexplored West beckoned him. According to Thomas A. Baker, “He early became imbued with a spirit of adventure and soon joined the wild and restless hunters and trappers of the Great Northwest.” He ranged all over the vast area of the Rocky Mountains as a free trapper

(one who has made no contract to sell pelts to one company). For approximately two decades, he lived among the wild animals and Indians.

To give some idea of the mountain man's lifestyle and equipment, here's a quote from Osbourne Russell, one who was actually there:

A Trappers equipment in such cases is generally one Animal upon which is placed... a riding Saddle and bridle a sack containing six Beaver traps a blanket with an extra pair of Moccasins his powder horn and bullet pouch with a belt to which is attached a butcher Knife and a small wooden box containing bait for Beaver a Tobacco sack with a pipe and implements for making a fire with sometimes a hatchet fastened to the Pommel of his saddle his personal dress is a flannel or cotton shirt (if he is fortunate to obtain one, if not Antelope skin answers the purpose of over and under shirt) a pair of leather breeches with Blanket or smoked Buffalo skin, leggings, a coat made of Blanket or Buffalo robe a hat or Cap of wool, Buffalo or Otter skin his hose are pieces of Blanket lapped round his feet which are covered with a pair of Moccasins made of Dressed Deer Elk or Buffaloe skins with his long hair falling loosely over his shoulders complete the uniform.

And to *really* give a flavor of what this life was like, here are some examples of the jargon typically used by the trappers:

Ah'll swar by hook - I'll swear to it.

on his own hook - On his own, by himself.

baccor or baccy - tobacco, probably more often referring to chewing tobacco.

cold doin's - very cold weather.

corncrackers - contemptible term referring to farmers.

diggins - home.

feedbag, also *meatbag* - eating a meal, also the stomach.

gone under or *his lights went out* - one who has died or been killed.

greenhorn - the still popular term describing the newcomer.

green is weared off - when a greenhorn becomes an experienced trapper.

greez hungry - very hungry for food.

haf froze fer har or *haf starved fer har* - great desire to lift a scalp.

he's got a tough bark - a man with a tough hide, hard to kill.

henyways ye lay yer sights - no matter how you look at it.

hollow woods - indian expression for the small kegs used to haul alcohol.

honeydew or *ol virginny* - expressions referring to tobacco.

hyars damp powder an no ways ter dry hit - a bad situation with no apparent way out.

knows fat cow from poor bull - means He's a smart trapper. Derived from the fact that bull meat was tougher and less enjoyable than the less muscular and more fatty cow meat. Also eating "poor bull" might mean to have to resort to gnawing on bones and boiled hide to stay alive.

mud hooks - human feet.

no more sign of em then a squaws heart - no sign of the enemy or game, the same as it's very hard to tell what's really going on in a woman's heart.

punch the far - add wood to the fire.

pups - children.

quit this arrer out 'n me - pull or cut the arrow out of me.

robe season - winter season.

robe warmer - an Indian woman.

skelp locked on tight - expression meaning a trapper is good enough to keep his hair.

some punkins - something or someone who is surprisingly nice.

sours my milk - that really upsets me.

trappers oath - an oath of truth, or pledge taken by placing the end of a rifle barrel and stuffing it into the mouth to emphasize that the mountain man really means what he's saying, that he's telling the truth or will keep a promise.

waah! or *waugh!* or *wagh!* - expression of surprise of admiration used by both trappers and Indians. Spoken with a grunt to imitate the grunt of a mildly surprised bear.

wal, ah'll be et fer a tater - well, I'll be darn!

Elisha Stephens had apparently had enough of hunting and trapping, because at around the age of forty, history says, he took a job working at Council Bluffs, Iowa, as a government blacksmith, making items for the Indians in the area.

Council Bluffs, located on the Missouri River, was considered the "jumping off place" for pioneers in covered wagons heading west on the Oregon Trail. But the local conversation was not about Oregon so much as *California*. The community was abuzz with enthusiastic stories of the beauty and promise of that great land.

In March of 1844 Elisha Stephens made the acquaintance of the Townsend and Murphy parties, who were looking for experienced guides to take them to California.

Stephens was getting itchy feet again and wanted to see California, and so joined the party. After some discussion, he was elected "Captain" of a combined group of twenty-seven wagons, some of whom were going to Oregon, and the rest to California.

The letter he wrote to the government subagency still exists. It reads:

March 23, 1844.

Mr. Elliot Sir, This is to inform you that I wish to cease working as a blacksmith for the Indians under your agency for no cause than bad health at the close of this quarter.
Yours Most Respectfully, Elisha Stephens.

Together with the party going to Oregon, the eleven wagons of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party crossed the Missouri River and headed west into what was then known as the Great American Desert. The wagons were simple, small farm wagons, not the famous “prairie schooners” which were much too large and heavy for use in mountainous country. Oxen pulled these tiny pieces of civilization and, contrary to what might be believed, people didn’t ride in the wagons. It was easy to keep up with the slow, but very powerful oxen, who, if allowed to grab a mouthful of prairie grass now and again, were content to chew and plod along. So, at the rate of perhaps ten to fifteen miles a day, these pioneers didn’t ride across the country to the West Coast – they walked. All day. It was necessary to travel along the banks of the rivers so that there would be adequate game for the people and, just as importantly, plenty of grass and water for their animals. So they began their journey, following the Platt River through the Great Plains.

On June 20, 1844, they reached Fort Laramie, in what is now Wyoming. After resting for a few days, they continued on. About July 24th, they came to a place called Independence Rock, a large bare uplifting of reddish stone which was very distinctive against the green buffalo grass. Here Mary Murphy Miller gave birth to Ellen Independence Miller.

Otherwise, the crossing of the Rocky Mountains was uneventful, except for a shortcut one of the guides urged the party to take, because it would save 100 miles. He claimed it would only be twenty-five miles without water, but it turned out to be forty-five, a long way for thirsty

oxen. They drove the animals late into the night in their effort to save themselves from disaster. Toward the end of the second day, the cattle picked up the smell of water and began to run toward it almost breaking up the wagons in the process. However, all managed to arrive safely on the banks of the Green River.

In early September, the party entered what is now Idaho and arrived at Fort Hall, which was located in the mountains north of the Great Salt Lake. At the Raft River in mid September, the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party broke off from those going to Oregon. The eleven wagons, moving southwest, were now on their own. Eventually they came to the Humboldt River which led into the Alkali Desert known today as Nevada. When the Humboldt vanished underground the party was once again without food or water for their animals and in the middle of an unforgiving desert. Afraid they were lost, they were becoming desperate, when Caleb Greenwood, one of the scouts hired by Stephens, saved the day. He'd been scouting ahead and now returned with a Paiute chief apparently named Truckee, which is Paiute for "I agree," "very well," or "all right." In other words, "truckee" was an expression of agreement and perhaps not an Indian name at all. At any rate, the helpful Paiute Indian said there was a river to the west flowing out of the Sierras. It was named in honor of the chief – Truckee's River.

The Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party now desperately drove their cattle night and day and in thirty-six hours arrived at the river, exhausted but alive. Refreshed by the good grass and water, the group forged ahead toward the looming Sierras, an almost impossible barrier between them and their Promised Land. But they'd come too far and there was no thought of turning back. Soon after they reached what is now Verdi Nevada, and the Truckee became steep, the river banks giving way to rock walls which closed in on the pioneers, forcing the oxen to frequently walk in icy, waist deep water. In the deepest part of the canyon, they were

forced to cross the stream ten times in less than a mile. The oxen, their hooves softened by the water, were in pain and didn't want to go on. But they were driven on anyway. Then it began to snow. With this added misery, they grew even more anxious to get over the summit of the Sierras.

Finally, they got to a flat area with easier going and then to a river fork - a southern flow, and one heading straight to the summit. Near the present town of Truckee, the party split up. Those headed south were on horseback and went for help, because the party had now realized they were in trouble. The main party pressed on to Donner Lake and, through the falling snow, could now see the summit. Due to the rapidly worsening weather, they couldn't afford the time it would take to get all eleven wagons over the summit, so six wagons were left behind with three men to guard them: Joseph Foster, Allen Montgomery, and Moses Schallenberger. It wasn't long, however, before the three men ran out of food. There was no game at this 7,000 foot elevation, the animals all having moved down the mountain for the winter and the one cow they'd been left, eaten. They had to leave. Schallenberger tried to walk out with the other two in their crudely fashioned snowshoes, but suffering severe leg cramps, was forced to turn back by himself to the little cabin the men had fashioned. He had just turned eighteen. Fortunately, Elisha Stephens had left some of his traps behind. He certainly didn't forget them, so perhaps he'd sensed that the men might get into trouble. This saved Moses Schallenberger's life. The young man quickly set Stephen's traps. His first catch was a coyote, which tasted terrible, but the foxes were edible. Coyotes and foxes spend the winter at higher elevations, where they pounce on and eat great numbers of mice, which scoot around under the snow by the thousands. So, meager as it was, he had food. For three months the teenager was forced to live this way,

until his rescue on February 28, 1845. His lonely struggle against the bitter cold and solitude of the Sierras is another story in itself.

Meanwhile, the main party took the five wagons toward the Sierra summit. As they trudged through the heavy snow and cold, they came to a ten foot high wall, a sheer impassible ledge. There was no way around it. They were on the verge of panic and discussed abandoning the wagons and scrambling over the summit.

Years later Elisha Stephens stated that at this point a miracle occurred. Realizing the predicament they were in, he knelt down in the snow, began to pray, and had a vivid vision of a small passage through the rock wall, a way to the summit. It was found: an opening just wide enough for the animals and wagons to squeeze through. The wagons were unloaded, and with chains attached to the yokes of the oxen, the animals pulled from above as the men pushed on the spokes of the wheels from below, until at last, on November 25, the summit of the Sierras was reached. In that historic moment, the Stevens-Townsend-Murphy party had succeeded, opening the way for others to follow.

They had just made it over the top before the first heavy winter snow, but now it began. The party traveled for two days following the South Yuba River but could get no further because the snow was now chest deep, too deep for the oxen to go on. No one had seen snow like this before. Back east it would snow, then melt off the next day. Here it just kept getting deeper. Trapped, they put together some log cabins roofed with oxen hides.

In this seemingly hopeless environment, now Mary B. Murphy went into labor and gave birth to Elizabeth Yuba Murphy, new life coming into the world in the midst of strife and despair.

Seventeen men went for help, leaving behind two men with the women and children. The seventeen arrived at Sutter's Fort on December 13, 1844 where they met the party that had taken the southern route. They were introduced to John Sutter who apparently *ordered* the arrivals to join him in a glorious military expedition he was about to undertake. The rescue party agreed because, in light of Sutter's authority, they thought they had no choice. Sutter loudly declared to one and all, in an obvious political exaggeration, that one-hundred-fifty recruits had just arrived to serve his cause, ignoring the fact they were only 23 and had families stranded in the Sierras.

On January 1, 1845, with music playing and colors flying, they left the fort and marched toward Santa Barbara. When they neared Monterey, on January 15th, it finally dawned on Stephens and the others that they'd been *asked*, not ordered, to go on the military expedition. They then appealed to Sutter and he reluctantly gave them permission to turn back and mount a rescue of their families.

The people at the survival camp had stayed in the snow and bitter cold for two months. Food was running out and they were reduced to eating boiled cowhides. Finally, the party sent the last two men out for help. They met the rescue party coming to get them. Then Dennis Martin, who was expert at making and using snowshoes, trudged over the summit to rescue Moses Schallenberger. He fashioned a second pair of snow shoes, and showed Moses how to properly use them. The two men soon joined the main party and on March 1, 1845, and all now walked out of the Sierras and into the beautiful Sacramento Valley below.

In the end, the party, under the excellent leadership of Captain Elisha Stephens, lost no people - it had in fact gained two! This was a remarkable success, a fulfilled dream. In the words of Bernard Murphy:

Our first view was like that of Moses viewing the Promised Land. We could see the plain of the Sacramento from the hills and everything appeared fresh and green from the first rain; and we thought we had found an earthly paradise, at last.

In the ensuing years, Elisha Stephens traveled around California, exploring and marveling at its beauty. Then he settled down in what is now Cupertino, where he purchased land along a creek variously known as Copertino Creek and Grizzly Creek. It is hinted by some historians that Stephens was a recluse. This is not so. It's simply that he'd spent a great deal of time alone, as a hunter and trapper in the Northwest, and was used to solitude. Additionally he was the first English speaking person to live in the Cupertino area, and his nearest neighbor was miles away. So, who was he supposed to talk to? The fact is, he considered the company of others a treat and though he didn't want anyone living too close, people were certainly invited to visit. Consider, for example, this dinner invitation to Frank Grant in which Elisha Stephens generously offered to share his favorite food – rattlesnake. Apparently Grant, never having tried rattlesnake, politely refused, to which the obviously friendly Stephens had this to say:

You don't know what's good! Ever eat frogs? Rattle snakes beat frogs all to pieces! Just cut the snakes' heads, hang 'em on the clothesline and let all the oil run out. I save the oil for my rheumatism. Then you cut the skinned snakes in little chunks, roll the pieces in eggs and bread crumbs and fry 'em. Beats frogs all to pieces. Stay anyway, Grant; I always got beans on the stove!

These are friendly words that indicate a sociable man, not at all the grumpy, growling tolerance typical of a glowering recluse.

With a little research, I quickly found that Stephens wasn't the only one who liked rattlesnake. The Internet is littered with recipes, from a fancy one called "Cornmeal Crusted RattleSnake With Cactus-corn Succotash," to a simple preparation called Texas Snake Cakes.

The snake cake recipe is easy and, in honor of Elisha Stephens, you should consider adding it to your list. It only requires one rattle snake per person, and the fixin's. Here's how it's done:

First, just like Elisha Stephens, cut the head off, being careful of the fangs. Even though the snake is dead the fangs are still dangerous. Next, peel the skin off, clean out the innards, and then crab boil for about twenty minutes. Crab boil mix is available at your local grocery store. The boiled meat will now easily peel off the bones. Chop into bite-size pieces. Next, dip the tender morsels into a bowl of beaten egg, and lovingly cover with salt, pepper, and bits of green onion. Fry pieces in oil, just like Stephens did 150 years ago, until brown on both sides. The smell of frying snake will probably attract a Texan or two, so employ them to let out with occasional war whoops, as this will add to the flavor. With your favorite tartar sauce and rice, serve to everyone still present. Yum.

Wanting to know more about Elisha Stephen's close relationship with rattlers, I drove to Stevens Creek and hunted down a park ranger, a job in itself, as they are elusive, unless you are fishing without a license or parked illegally. A rattlesnake is caged up in their station office, but the ranger was unable to tell me anything about it. So, following the tradition of newspaper journalists, I've made up the following interview out of whole cloth:

As it turns out this ranger-retained rattler is a descendent of a long line of snakes, a few of which managed to escape the enthusiastic Stephens. The snake exclaimed,

He was a legendary hunter. Licking his lips hungrily, he scoured his property. No rattler within two days crawl of his residence was safe. I'm told that one time my great grandfather fifty times removed, only eluded that wild man because there was no more room in the sack. Petrified with fear, because of his narrow escape from the frying pan, Great Granddad and his whole family left and slithered upstream for a week. Had they not picked up and moved immediately, poor Great Grandpa would have been hung on a clothes line to drain along with his neighbors, and I wouldn't be here to tell you this tale.

In his 84-year life, Elisha Stephens was photographed once. Having one's picture taken was quite an undertaking in those days and Stephens certainly had no time for such foolishness. The subject had to pose frozen in place for long moments as the photographer rummaged around

under a black hood, until, finally, with a blast of light and a *poof* of smoke, it was over. History tells us that Phoebe McClellan Payne asked for a picture of the old explorer “just as he was” and Stephens cut a collection of tree limbs and wild bushes “so he could peer out of the forest” and thereby create an authentic looking shot. Phoebe apparently got the help of one Mr. Herring to take the photo in 1864.

However, I believe, in their bumbling effort to be factual, historians have badly understated what actually happened. It is much more likely that the comely, dewy-eyed McClellan followed the recalcitrant mountain man around until he wanted to hide when he saw her coming, yet because she was so sweet he couldn't be upset. Her newest passion, photography, needed subjects, and what better than the pioneer who had successfully led the first wagon train over what would become known as the Donner Pass? It was something he wasn't getting much credit for, because Fremont, with his eloquent writing style, was attracting all the recognition and praise for settling California.

“Mister Stephens, sir?”

“Oh... good mornin', Phoebe.”

“I was hoping you'd changed your mind...”

“Nope.”

“But you've never been photographed.”

“Nope.”

“Oh, please Mister Stephens.”

“Gol-dang it, Phoebe, go git a picture of yore pa!”

“I have.”

“All right then, yore maw.”

“Done it.”

“The neighbors?”

“All of them.”

“But why me Phoebe?”

Phoebe had waited for this moment and now pulled the trigger, “I need a picture of you just as you were because you are the greatest explorer ever. You brought the very first wagon train over the California mountains, you blazed the trails and prepared the territory for others; and that Mister Fremont is getting all the credit!”

“Wal, Ah’ll be et fer a tater! Why didn’t you say so before, Phoebe? You know, what we *really* need is a good picture of me, jus’ as Ah was. Lemme git some tree branches an’ stuff an’ we’ll set her up!”

Because of the gold rush of 1849, throngs of people had migrated to California, and some of those now leaked into the Santa Clara Valley. This annoyed Stephens, and when someone took up residence within two miles of him he finally boiled over declaring, “It’s getting’ too darn crowded around here!” a familiar refrain he pioneered, and which Californians have been whining ever since.

At the age of 82, Stephens was afflicted with partial paralysis (probably a stroke) and, with his old injuries acting up, he took up residency in the Kern County hospital, where he spent his last two years - or so history says, as usual drying out this great and colorful man. I would be very surprised if this or any former mountain man willingly entered a hospital. Elisha Stephens was tough as a bear trap and twice as durable. It probably took good friends, a lot of promises, considerable pain, and several incidents with his health, before he grudgingly consented to

check in 'for a day or two.' I've known people like Stephens, and the last thing in the world they want is for someone to take care of them.

There's disagreement as to when Stephens purchased his plot of land in Heaven. A few say 1884, others 1887. Somehow, that's appropriate. The death of a man this fearless and vigorous should be a mystery... as though in a way, he's still around, still farming the sweet land along his creek, picking the blackberries, tending his orchard, and harassing the snakes. God bless you, Elisha Stephens.

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