

control group 0 without implants, which had 0% positive ANA tests.

HENRY N. CLAMAN, MD
*Professor of Medicine and Immunology
 University of Colorado School
 of Medicine
 Campus Box B164
 4200 E Ninth Ave
 Denver, CO 80262*

Previous Donner Party Research

TO THE EDITOR: The conclusions concerning Donner Party mortality presented by S. A. McCurdy in this journal¹ merely restate those that I presented in an article published in a major anthropological journal four years ago.² My article went uncited by McCurdy even though the results of my work have been discussed by such authors as Shipman³ and Diamond⁴ in widely distributed sources and were restated in my recent book on the history of the Great Basin.⁵

Even a passing effort by McCurdy to discover previous work in this area would have revealed my paper as well as those by Shipman and Diamond. For instance, it took me less than a minute to find the Grayson and Diamond references by searching under "Donner Party" in the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) catalogue. It is unfortunate that McCurdy made no effort to discover whether he was merely repeating the work of others and that he gave no credit to those who came before him. As a result, he gave the impression of producing novel results when, in fact, he had not. It is equally unfortunate that THE WESTERN JOURNAL OF MEDICINE did not choose reviewers who might be expected to be familiar with research in this area.

DONALD K. GRAYSON, PhD
*Burke Museum DB-10
 University of Washington
 Seattle, WA 98195*

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Dr McCurdy Responds

TO THE EDITOR: I appreciate the opportunity to acknowledge Dr Grayson's previous work¹ regarding the Donner Party, and I regret not having learned of it in time to cite it in my recently published article.² In preparing the manuscript, I read historical texts on the episode and conducted a MEDLINE search of the biomedical database back to 1966. Unfortunately, the anthropological research journal in which Grayson published was not indexed in

this database. Nor were the secondary sources he mentions. In the year preceding its publication, I shared drafts of the manuscript and discussed the work with colleagues and interested persons, presented it at the national American Public Health Association meeting, and finally submitted it for formal peer review. None of this brought his article to my attention. When I learned of his work shortly before release of my article, I called out of courtesy to let him know that it would be forthcoming and that I was sorry not to have known of his work in time to cite him.

Grayson and I both examined demographic characteristics of the Donner Party and their influence on mortality, but salient differences in approach, methods, and findings exist between our studies. He showed that persons dying were more likely than survivors to be old or very young, male, and to have smaller kin groups. This descriptive approach did not allow a quantitative comparison of these factors for their relative importance or effect on mortality.

My work is new in bringing an analytic and epidemiologic focus on quantitative assessment of risk factors. Multivariate regression techniques yielded relative risks for mortality that were adjusted for known cofactors, allowing comparison with respect to the strength of their independent effects. For example, the analysis shows in quantitative terms the preponderant effect of age (relative risk of 6.6 for those younger than 6 years and a relative risk of 8.4 for those 35 years of age or older). The comparatively weaker effects of male sex and traveling without other family members (each with a relative risk of 2.0) are also shown. Our findings also differ with respect to the effect of family size on survival. No independent effect of family size per se is evident after restricting analysis to persons traveling with at least one other family member. In keeping with the epidemiologic focus, I also noted possible implications for medical responses to starvation disasters. Age and sex identify high-risk groups and are immutable factors. In contrast, family networks may be affected by response efforts, which could influence survival rates.

I hope readers of the journal will find this epidemiologic analysis useful and interesting despite the unintentional omission in not crediting Grayson's previous work.

STEPHEN A. MCCURDY, MD, MPH
*Div of Occupational/Environmental
 Medicine and Epidemiology
 University of California, Davis,
 School of Medicine
 Davis, CA 95616-8648*

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