Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

The Patrick Breen Diary was part of the original Hubert Howe Bancroft collection.

Biography

Patrick Breen was born in Ireland circa 1805. In 1828 he emigrated to Canada and sometime thereafter moved to Iowa territory, where he became the owner of a farm. In about 1831 he married Margaret (maiden name unknown). Breen was naturalized in 1844. Patrick and Margaret had seven children -- John, Edward, Patrick, Simon, Peter, James, and Isabella. In the spring of 1846, the Breen family joined a party of emigres bound for California. The party's ill-fated journey across the Sierra Nevada Mountains was partially documented in the diary Breen kept while stranded in a mountain camp at Donner (then called Truckee) Lake. After their rescue, the family arrived at Sutter's Fort, New Helvetia, in March of 1847. The Breens then lived for a short time on the Consumnes River and then in San Jose. In February of 1848 they settled in San Juan Bautista -- becoming its first non-Spanish-speaking residents -- where Breen would live as a rancher for the remainder of his life. Patrick Breen died in 1868.

Though of little formal education, Patrick Breen was able to read and write -- abilities which were considered a mark of distinction for an Irishman of his time in this country -- and thus could document one of the more tragic events of the nineteenth-century overland journeys.
Scope and Content

The diary of Patrick Breen was recorded between November 20, 1846 and March 1, 1847, in what is presently the Donner Pass region of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, in Nevada County, California. At the time of the diary's composition, Breen and his family were part of a group of pioneers -- which came to be known as the Donner Party -- completing an overland journey from the Great Plains to California. After reaching Donner Lake (then Truckee Lake), the group met with relentless winter conditions which prohibited further travel. As these conditions persisted, food supplies were depleted and hunger and sickness came to prevail over the stranded party. For many, leather hides provided the only remaining sustenance. Several eventually died of starvation. Others, in desperation, resorted to consuming the flesh of those already dead. The survivors were finally rescued by a relief party led by James F. Reed -- an original member of their party -- and shortly thereafter reached their destination at Fort Sutter in New Helvetia. The diary begins during the early stages of the winter of 1846-47 -- one of the harshest on record for the region -- and proceeds to chronicle on a daily basis the disastrous toll the increasingly severe conditions took on the party. The last entry is recorded the day of the arrival of Reed's relief party.

The overall style displayed in Breen's diary is terse, prosaic, and, with respect to the actual conditions it records, understatedly matter-of-fact. The mood gradually develops from a mild anxiety concerning the weather in the early entries to a more exclamatory desperation as the crisis worsens. Topics recurrent throughout the diary are weather, health, food, deaths, visits, situations at nearby cabins, and the psychological states of various party members. The entries are brief and are characterized by erratic spelling, frequent abbreviations, and minimal punctuation. A few Irishisms --such as shanty (for "cabin"), thim ("them"), Paddy ("Patty"), and Donno/Donngh ("Donner") -- appear throughout the text, reflecting the diarist's national origins.

The diary was one of the few possessions Breen took with him after the arrival of Reed's relief party. Breen gave the manuscript to George McKinstry, who later (circa 1871) gave it to historian and publisher Hubert Howe Bancroft. The diary remained in Bancroft's collection and, as part of that collection, became property of the University of California in 1905.

Reprints of the diary date from May, 1847, when George McKinstry sent a declaredly verbatim copy of the diary to the California Star for publication. The McKinstry version, as well as others based on it, are considered to be corrupt for obvious reasons such as incompleteness, flagrant editorial alterations or deletions, or outright falsification of the record. Frederick J. Teggart's 1910 version (as volume 1, number 6 of the Publications of the Academy of Pacific Coast History) is the first complete scholarly edition of the diary. In 1946, The Book Club of California published The Diary of Patrick Breen, edited by George R. Stewart, which includes both a complete transcription and a facsimile reproduction of the diary.

The diary was made from 8 sheets of note paper which were folded and trimmed to make a 32-page booklet. The diary was written in ink. Breen's entries fill the first 29 pages of the manuscript. The remainder of the pages are blank with the exception of the word "journal" written by Breen in the upper left corner of the last page. The pages measure approximately 16 by 10 cm. Needle holes in the pages indicate that the diary was at one point sewn together. On the 25th page of the original diary, in the lower right corner, is an embossed logo for Southworth Co.

The original booklet has been rebound in half calf and marbled paper with four covering sheets. On the fourth front covering page there is a hand-written title. Tipped in between pages 30 and 31 of the original diary is a short hand-written letter by George McKinstry describing the origin of the diary and his acquisition of it from Patrick Breen. Both of the above texts are reproduced in the container listing.

The transcription provided in the present container listing is based on Stewart's 1946 version, but omits the various editorial corrections and insertions -- provided for clarity -- found therein. Page breaks in the original diary are indicated in the present transcription by bracketed page numbers inserted before the text of each item entry.

Container Listing

Banc MSS C-E 176 Patrick Breen Diary