

**Instructional Related Activities
Report Form**

Sponsor	Department
Bob Mayberry	English/Performing Arts

Activity Title	Date (s) of activity
Donner Party Cycle, part 2: The End of the Trail	Oct 26-Nov 2, 2012

Please Explain (1) description of activity; (2) how did the activity relate to a course(s); and (3) what you learned from the process.

(1) Production of the second half of my cycle of plays, written during my sabbatical, about the Donner Party wagon train and their 1846-47 journey from Independence, MO to Sutter's Fort, CA. This half of the cycle included four plays relating the chief events of the Donners' journey from central Nevada to California, including their experiences as they were forced to leave the river they'd been following (it literally disappeared into the Carson Sink) and cross the 40 mile desert without water or much food, the snow blindness they discovered in the Sierras, their long encampment at the lake (now named for them) near the Sierra Summit, the death of half their company, and the accusations and rumors of cannibalism among the survivors.

We began rehearsals the week classes started, began the technical work for the show on Friday 5 October, completed the technical work the weekend of 19-21 September, and held dress rehearsals on Monday and Tuesday, 22-23 September. We opened on a Wednesday night to a full house (88 seats) and ran the next three nights to nearly full houses. We completed the run of the show on Thursday and Friday nights, October 1-2, with a full house on Thursday and an overflow audience (110) for the final performance.

(2) The production did not directly relate to any classes, though obviously the actors involved learned a great deal relevant to their acting classes.

(3) We all learned more about California history than we expected. At one point, midway in the rehearsal process, we had to stop rehearsals and sit and talk about how California became a state and why there was such a push for white immigrants during the late 1840s.

We also learned about the virtues, and the challenges, of performing on a bare stage. We found imaginative ways to help the audience visualize the Nevada desert, snowblindness, and the isolation of the winter camps at Donner Lake.

I was surprised to learn that history still speaks to audiences. I guess I expected that our audiences, composed chiefly of students, might be somewhat indifferent to the historical narrative we were dramatizing. But quite the contrary, they seemed engaged and aroused by our personalizing and dramatizing a crucial event in California history, so much so that the audience often had questions for the cast or the director after the show.

I was pleased that casting some the Performing Arts graduates from previous years worked so well. The “veterans” served as models and mentors for the younger PA students, and I think the graduates felt honored by their campus and their program because of their inclusion in another production. I would recommend including graduates in more productions in the future.

Finally, I learned that this campus NEEDS a fall production, of some sort, to balance the well established and very successful spring production. The production served the University community by providing a theatrical event in fall, but more importantly it served the current Performing Arts students who had few other opportunities in fall to practice and extend their performance skills. It was gratifying and rewarding to watch them develop.

Bob Mayberry
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