

**WYOMING GRIZZLY BEARS: 150 YEARS
OF JOURNAL, ORAL HISTORY, AND
NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTS (ca 1800-1950)**

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Paper No. 5

Presented at:

Opening paper at Grizzly Bear Conference

sponsored by Murie Audubon Society, Casper, Wyoming

1985

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WYOMING GRIZZLY BEARS:

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INTRODUCTION

Wyoming has a rich history. Much of today's image of Wyoming was formed as Indians, mountain men, explores, and settlers adapted to the rigors of the territory. More than any other animal, the grizzly bear lured the imagination of many people: stories about this fascinating animal abound. The few stories I have collected cover 150 years of Wyoming history. They reflect man's shifting attitudes towards the great bear--towards nature itself. Five basic views are expressed in the approximately 75 stories I have collected over the last 10 years. First, Indians relationships with the bear were both complex and varied. Joseph Campbell tells of Indian bear cults and calls the North American Indians the last of the great Pleistocene hunters. It seems that Indian views ranged from reverence to fear. Second, mountain men, a diverse lot, expressed a range of sentiments ranging from ones akin to those of Indians to ones where the bear was a powerful force that must be destroyed. Third, "Yankees" exploring, hunting, and as the first settlers, bringing commerce and "civilization" with them and a Manifest Destiny credo, saw the bear as a threat, a raw force to be eliminated or recast in man's design. Fourth, early agriculturalists, as sedentary dwellers, with their livestock, and their successors came to increasingly

compete with grizzly bears for space and food. Armed with guns, traps, and poisons they essentially destroyed the grizzly bear as a significant component of Wyoming's landscape in a few short decades. Fifth and finally, an attitude began to appear shortly after the turn of the last century which saw a need to protect the grizzly as part of our natural heritage in such sanctuaries as Yellowstone National Park and surrounding lands. This latter view as John Steinbeck (1976:218) expressed it meant "the understanding and the attempt to say that man is related to the whole thing...the knowledge that all things are one and one thing is all things...all bound together by the elastic string of time." These five views are elaborated in the five stores below and in the larger body of literature about the western frontier and settlement days where these five views are more completely and forcefully portrayed. Elements of all five views are scattered throughout the current debate about grizzly bears.

PAH-KSI-KWO-YI, STICKY MOUTH

Indian stories about grizzly bears are not as common as later settler stories. But artifacts, such as grizzly bear claw necklaces, paintings, including Geogre Catlin's portfolio, and some stories exist. Among the written accounts is J. W. Schultz's book "My Life as an Indian" published in 1920. Schultz was taken by Indians as a teenager, about 1868 and as he said, he "went all out" when he became a renegade. His accounting of grizzlies and the Indian attitude towards them follows in part:

"As for bears, the whole country was torn up by them. None of the women would venture out after fuel or pole for lodges or travois without an escort. Many of the hunters never molested a grizzly, the bear being regarded as a sort of medicine or sacred animal, many believing that it

was really a human being. It was commonly called Kyai-yo, but the medicine-pipe men were obliged when speaking of it to call it Pah-ksi-kwo-yi, stickly mouth. They too, were the only ones who could take any of the skin of a bear, and then merely a strip for a head band or pipe wrapping. It was allowable, however, for anyone to use the bear's claws for a necklace or other ornament. Some of the more adventurous wore a three or four-paw necklace of their own killing, of which they were very proud."

OSBORNE RUSSELL AND JIM BECKWOURTH WOUND A GRIZZLY

Osborne Russell's 1836 journal recounts travels in what later became Yellowstone National Park. Grizzly bears were common then and indifferent to humans. Not only have the bear's numbers been greatly decimated, but based on accounts such as Russell's, it looks as though his behavior changed too. Russell and his partner, Jim Beckwourth, committed the unwise act of going into a dense thicket to kill a grizzly they earlier attacked and wounded. This account comes from John C. Thompson's series "In Old Wyoming" from the Cheyenne State Tribune.

In 1834, when Russell was 20 he came west. His journals are perhaps the most comprehensive work detailing the life of the "mountain men" (Thompson 1948).

"...grizzly bears are abundant. (They) are more numerous than in any other part of the mountains, owing to the vast quantities of cherries, plums and other wild fruits which this section affords. In going to visit my traps, a distance of three or four miles, early in the morning, I have frequently seen seven or eight standing about the clumps of cherry bushes on their hind legs, gathering cherries with suprising dexterity, not even

deigning to turn their grizzly heads to gape at the passing trapper, but merely casting a side-long glance at him without alternating their position."

In 1834 he wrote:

"We left the fort, and traveled about six miles, when we discovered a grizzly bear digging and eating roots in a piece of marshy ground near a large bunch of willows. (Jim) approached within 100 yards and shot him thru the shoulder. He gave a hideous growl and sprang into the thicket. (Jim) then said, 'Let him go, he is a dangereous varmint,' but not being acquainted with the nature of these animals, I determined on making another trail and persuaded (Jim) to assist me.

"We walked around the bunch of willows where the bear lay, keeping close together, when we heard a sullen growl about 10 feet from us, which as instantly followed by a snapping of the bear toward us, his enormous jaws extended and eyes flashing fire. We could not retain sufficient presence of mind to shoot at him but took to our heels, separating as we ran, the bear taking after me. Finding I could outrun him, he left and turned to the other, who wheeled about and discharged his rifle, covering the bear with smoke and fire, the ball, however, missing him.

"He turned and bounded toward me. I could get no farther without jumping into a large quagmire which hemmed me in on three sides. I was obliged to turn about and face him. He came within about 10 paces of me, his mouth wide open, gazing at me with a beastly laugh. At this moment I pulled the trigger, as I knew not what else to do and hardly knew that I did this, but it accidently happened that my rifle was pointed toward the bear when I pulled and the ball piercing his heart, he gave one bound from me, uttered a deathly howl, and fell dead, but I trembled as if I had an ague fit for half an hour after.

"...I secretly determined never to molest another wounded grizzly..

In reality, mountain men's views of the wilderness and the great bear were as varied as the men. Some argued that the Indian and animals would always occupy the land because only they could survive the rigors. Other mountain men worshipped the land, the animals, and the wholeness of living nature like the Indians and felt that humans could live with nature here only within a way similar to that of the Indians. Still others felt that the wilderness that temporarily met their wants--furs--would eventually give way to advancing white civilization and would be exploited in the interests of white man.

"WE SEE BEAR EVERY DAY OR TWO"

Casper Collins, who inspired the naming of Casper, Wyoming, reported grizzly bears as numerous on his travels between modern day Casper and Dubois in 1862 (August 13). This story also comes from John C. Thompson's "In Old Wyoming" series in the Cheyenne State Tribune.

"My father and I and a teamster chased two grizzlies about 3 miles and then came upon them in ravine. I was on my pony, my father on Woodpecker, and the teamster on a mule. I held their beasts while they got behind some rock within about seventy-five yards of the bear. There was an old bear as big as a cow, and a half-grown cub about the size of a common black bear. It was the night after a rainstorm and not one of the guns would go off. When the old bear heard the snapping, she stood on her hind legs and the cub ran like everything. She would run until she caught up with him, when she would stop until he got ahead again, when she would move on. They go in some rocks where we could not find them anymore.

Elsewhere in his letters he commented that "We see bear every day or two

but have shot none yet, they running away too fast. They are the regular grizzly, and one of them was so large that one of our officers mistook him for a buffalo."

During the decades after the economic collapse of the fur trade, a view of the west arrived on the scene, which I call "Yankee." This view characterized more closely the later explores, hunters, and settlers that came to fill up the wilderness. The emerging American paradigm of the inevitable destiny of purpose--commerce, domestication, exploitation--was a powerful tool in transforming wilderness into a human-dominated landscape. Under such a view, it seemed a moral duty to kill grizzly bears on sight. The new human presence filling the land was simply antithetical to the free roaming grizzly bear.

BIG FOOT WALLACE

This famous bear story was first printed in the memoirs of Wyoming Governor B. B. Brooks in 1939 and took place on Casper Mountain.

"In the spring of 1884, as the Platte valley roundup was working down the south side of the Platte river, about eight miles west of my ranch, three of the C Y cowboys, making a circle after cattle in the foot hills of Casper mountain, encountered a large silver-tip bear, that was slowly making his way up a shallow ravine. None of the boys were armed, so they decided to rope him.

"Now, lassoing a bear may seem rather a hazardous undertaking to people not familiar with cowboy sports, and so it proved on this occasion; yet it is a feat frequently accomplished on our yearly roundup, and with comparatively slight danger to the boys. Usually, as soon as the rope tightens about the bear's neck, he begins to tug and hang back, the long

hair about the neck prevents the noose from loosening after once being tightened, and in five or ten minutes the bear chokes to death. A buffalo will do the same thing. I have known several instances of cowboys roping and killing, in this manner, full-grown bear and buffalo.

"In this case, two of the boys were riding well-trained cow ponies. As soon as they saw the bear they made a dash to head him off from the mountains, uncoiling their long grass ropes as they went. The third boy, named Wallace, was riding a large half-broken colt, and had to stop and get his rope uncoiled from the saddle before starting. By the time he was ready his companions had turned the bear down the gulch, so Wallace struck out diagonally down another gully, which joined the one the bear was in, about a quarter of a mile below. The colt got rattled at the free use of the spurs and at the dangling noose which Wallace held in his right hand, and made extra fast time down the gulch. In fact, Wallace was scarcely able to control him at all.

"Rider and bear reached the point where the two gullies joined at the same moment. Both gulches were narrow, with steep banks. Wallace tried in vain to check the horse. The bear reared up on his haunches. Horse and rider shot by and turned up the gulch down which he had just come. They passed so close to the bear that Wallace actually struck him on the head with his right hand. The bear struck both horse and rider with his paws, tearing the horse's flank with one, and the boy's leather chaps with the other. In striking at the bear's head, Wallace had unintentionally dropped the open loop about its body.

"When the bear struck the bronco he commenced bucking, and threw Wallace off. The boy was unhurt, and, scrambling to his feet, made a dash up the side of the gulch, while the bear turned up the ravine which Wallace had just ridden down.

"The other end of the rope was, of course, made fast to the horn of the saddle, and when the bucking horse ran out on it, the weight of the bear threw him. In struggling to get up, he broke the front cinch of the saddle, and soon bucked through the flank cinch. Away went the bear up the gulch, dragging the saddle behind him. The other two boys met the runaway horse and roped him. Wallace explained as rapidly as possible, and held his own horse while the other two boys went after the grizzly.

"Going up the gulch about half a mile they found the saddle wedged in between two boulders. The bear had bitten the rope off, and was gone. They carried the saddle, which was somewhat in need of repairs, back to Wallace. In looking at the bear's immense tracks in the sand, they noticed that two toes of the left fore foot were missing. Evidently the bear had been in a trap at some time. In rehearsing the story at camp some one named that bear Big Foot Wallace.

Brooks continued. "Two years later I had a man herding my cattle, back in the mountains, where he lived alone in a tent, some 10 miles from the ranch. One day he came in to get provisions. In coming over he tried to turn a bunch of cattle, and in some way, crippled his horse; so he took a little Spanish mule that I had at the ranch to ride back. Behind his saddle he tied a miscellaneous assortment of grub, such as potatoes, bacon, canned goods, sugar, coffee, baking power, etc.

"When about half-way on his return he rode up on a little knoll, and right under him, not 50 feet away, was an enormous bear, eating a calf he had just killed. I had had a number of cattle killed during that year by wild animals, and this man was carrying a Winchester, slung to his saddle, for just such an emergency; but on this occasion it was useless.

"The man told his story, and he and I saddled up two horses and started back, hoping the bear had not left. We found my calf half eaten

up, but no bear. The tracks led off up the mountain, and in the dust of an old cow trail they were plain. Two toes were missing from the left fore foot, and we knew it was Big Foot Wallace that was doing the killing.

"My cattle continued to disappear, and that fall I set two big 40-pound steel traps, but failed to catch the thief. Once in an October snow I followed his big tracks for miles. They led me eventually into a dense grove of Jack pines and deadfall timber, and I finally came to where he had been lying under some logs. He had either heard or scented me, and had made off, so I gave up the hunt.

"The next year he was worse than ever. There is a small lake that nestles on the side of the mountain, some five miles south of the ranch, and that fall, while up there after geese, I found a two-year-old steer partly eaten up, and the tracks of Big Foot Wallace all about him. I knew it would be of little use to set traps. My cattle were thick about there, and I could not safely set a trap, unless I built a V-shaped pen, as we usually do for bear. This would be useless, for old Wallace was too cute to ever go near a pen. So I returned to the ranch, and that night, Post Hole Jack and I took a few blankets and went up and laid for him.

"The night was dark, and we could only watch late in the evening and early in the morning. We kept this up three nights. The second night the bear came and ate his fill, but we didn't get to see him. The wind was usually from the foothills, and our mode of procedure was to ride up to a certain gulch, about 400 yards to the east of the dead steer, leave our horses and blankets and creep over to some rocks about 75 yards from the carcass. Here we would lie and watch till it got too dark to shoot, then crawl back, roll up in our blankets and at daylight, repeat the performance.

"The fourth day was a busy one at the ranch, and Jack and I did not

get away until quite late. At the foot of the mountain it commenced to rain, and promised to be such a disagreeable night that we debated strongly about returning home; but the boys at the ranch had been laughing at us about our bear, and we concluded to stay it out.

"Darkness came on early, and we were unable to reach our old camping ground. Finally, when about 300 yards below where we thought the bait lay (it was so dark that we were not certain where we were), we concluded to camp. We unsaddled our ponies and groped about to find a rock to pick them to. Then we put our saddle blankets on the damp ground, unrolled our bed blankets, and putting rubber slickers over these, we turned in and slept like troopers.

"It was broad daylight when we uncovered our heads. The new born day was crisp and beautiful. Our horses had wound themselves up during the night, among the rocks. As we were so late, we decided to just saddle up our ponies and ride up to look at the bait. We had finished saddling and were in the very act of mounting, when up the mountain-side, not two hundred yards away, came our bear.

"I shall never forget how he looked. The sun was not yet up. The faint wind was in our favor. Everything was as still as death. Even our horses, whose heads were turned the other way, seemed to have gone to sleep again; and there, coming, coming slowly, steadily, noiselessly on, like some avenging monster, was the largest grizzly I have even seen. He was moving diagonally towards us and would pass within forty yards. We had crouched on the ground beside our horses, slipping our Winchesters out of the scabbards, as we did so. Old Wallace, for I knew him instantly from his immense size, was walking deliberately up the gradual rise of the mountain his great head hanging low. He looked neither to the right nor the left, but seemed to think that everything would, of course, get out of

his way.

"On and on he came! I felt a certain thrill of exultation at the certainty of his death. Here was what we had been waiting for. Here was the destroyer of my cattle. Here was the author of my many troubles, the monarch and terror of the mountains, marching unconcernedly on and up to meet us on open ground, in battle royal, in the first bright gray of a September morn. Now was to come the test between blind, brute fury and strength on the one hand, and nerve, skill and improved weapons on the other. At last, he was within forty yards.

"'Now, Jack! Bust him!' We dropped our bridle reins, and stepping to one side of our horses knelt to shoot. The bear never looked up. Bang! Bang! The great brute suddenly leaped into life. The hair on the back of his neck stood up like the bristles of an angry boar. He hurled, partly fell, and bit savagely at his shoulder and side where the bullets had struck. Our frightened horses started down the mountains, dragging their bridle reins a trifle to one side to keep from stepping on them.

"Bang! Bang! Another tumble. Then a terrific half growl and half roar. He saw us now and tried to charge, but the Winchesters talked fast and furiously. The leaden hail was too much for even his big savage bulk to face. He would fall, roll over, bite himself, struggle to his feet, and would try to come on, only to fall again. Finally he lay still.

"We advanced and fired one shot into his great head. Not a quiver. He was dead. Then we both hurried up with same question in our minds. Yes there were two toes missing on the left forefoot.

Big Foot Wallace was dead.

The 1880's and 1890's spawned many bear stores of this type. Grant Mills of Tensleep (1887?) killed six grizzlies in an afternoon. Roe Avent (1880's) and a friend killed five grizzlies in a single day on Gooseberry

Creek. George B. McClellan recounts killing 28 bears (both blacks and grizzlies) in six weeks in the Big Horn Mountains in the fall of 1885. Harry Younts described over 40 grizzly bear kills. A. A. Anderson, living at the head of the Greybull in the 1890's, tallied nearly 100 kills over his life time. Killing bears for bounty was a large scale, widespread activity throughout Wyoming at this time. Grizzly bears, with their low reproductive rate, could not withstand the very high mortality inflicted by man.

This period stands as a separate chapter in the history of grizzly bear-human relations in Wyoming. It represents a period when large scale, organized efforts using traps, poisons, and repeating rifles was in full swing--tactics previously unseen in this part of the continent. Grizzlies came to be viewed increasingly as competitors of the sedentary humans. The cost for man was high, but the cost for the great bear was higher--extinction.

THE YELLOWSTONE SANCTURARY

Very early in this century, some thoughtful people recognized the grizzly's vulnerability to extinction from over hunting. The value of Yellowstone National Park to bear conservation was appreciated even then. S. N. Leek (in 1916) in an article in a magazine "In The Open" gives this view.

"The Yellowstone Park was established at a time when many of our big game animals were threatened with extinction. Their extreme plentifulness but a few years before had lead people to believe, (that is if they ever thought of it at all), that the extermination of the myriads of big game animals was impossible. However, they were rudely awakened to the fact that if even a few individuals of some of the species were to be saved, they must act at once. This was the case with the antelope, grizzly bear,

beaver, mountain sheep, and buffalo. A few of all of these were included in the park, and now it contains the only herd of wild buffalo in the United States, ...and may be the means of saving the antelope...

"The park has been of no more benefit to any one of these animals than it has been to the bear, and were they exterminated now, the park would lose one of its great attractions... Outside the park, all men's hands have been turned against these noble game animals. They were killed at all seasons of the year, in all manner of ways, even had a bounty put on their heads, and added to this was the price of their fur. Every means was employed to outwit and capture or destroy them until but for their cunning and sagacity, and the impenetrable nature of some of their retreats not one would be left today.

This final view as expressed by Leek, for example, is one of an emerging recognition that the bear, like wild nature, was rapidly becoming a thing of the past. Grizzly bears were disappearing rapidly as we superimposed the American design on the Wyoming landscape. If either the bear or nature were to survive, "sanctuaries" were needed. So Yellowstone National Park became the show case of nature and the last stand for the grizzly bear in this part of the North American continent. This sentiment was still a minority one in Wyoming in the late 1800's. Today many realize that, as the bear inches towards extinction, we are losing more than just one species--we are losing part of ourselves in a very real sense. The grizzly bear hunter, William Wright, in the early 1900's gave up his gun for a camera and documented grizzly life in its native Yellowstone for future generations. The Canadian grizzly bear biologist, Steve Herrero, captured this last sentiment well when he said: " We should preserve grizzly bear populations, not because their ecological function is critical, but because of what they can do for human imagination, thought, and experience."

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the grizzly bear, more than any other animal, lured the imagination of many people--stories about this fascinating animal abound. They collectively detail much more than simply encounters with the great bear. Accounts in journals, diaries, and later newspapers and oral histories reflect not only our view of the bear and its place in nature, but as well a view of ourselves and our place in nature. To the mountain man Hugh Glass, who respected them, the grizzly bear was "the lord of the American wild," a sovereign to be prudently avoided, especially at close range. The bear's physical prowess and unpredictable personality seemed to symbolize the dominion and capriciousness of nature. Nature is a place to draw strength, character, and personal and societal definition but also an enormously lethal power to be reckoned with. Tom Altherr (1976) described how James F. Cooper's writings, especially *The Pathfinder*, seemed to show that "nature in the New World must be in some sense be both the standard and determinant of the American character." In the west, the grizzly bear is just that, it both serves as a standard and a determinant of (our) character.

This brief selection of bear stories was offered spanning over 100 years of Wyoming history. I hope they will encourage all of us to ensure a living, healthy future for our few remaining grizzly bears.

NORTHERN ROCKIES CONSERVATION COOPERATIVE is a nonprofit corporation whose goal is creative, cooperative, practical problem-solving in the conservation of nature. Although its focus is on species and ecosystems in the northern Rocky Mountains, it seeks exemplary projects with national and international significance. The work of the Cooperative is basic and applied ecological research; educational activities; organization and management development, research, and consulting; and policy research and analysis. It conducts active independent programs in these four areas and offers these services to existing agencies and conservation and business organizations. NRCC's staff, board, and associates present and publish papers on a wide variety of topics. These are reprinted and distributed in this series.

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