

## Big, mean and hungry...



### Ursus horribilis

Big, mean and hungry, the California grizzly threatened creatures of the local terrain for centuries — yet never so often nor as menacingly as in its last years. The bear's habits were unsettled with the introduction of Spanish civilization, or rather, the cow. And it was in the era of the California that grizzlies grew to become voracious beefeaters.

The story of the grizzly bear is a short one in the history of ranching. First mentioned when bears were sighted by Vizcaino's crew during explorations off the Monterey coastline in 1602, the grizzly was feared and respected in this region until it was exterminated in the 1880s. Indeed, the animal's impression was so strong and lasting that it became the emblem for both state and county flags.

"Ursus horribilis" was the name of this gray-haired bear, largest of the California quadrupeds. "Horrible, fierce, large and fat," was an early padre's opinion. In appearance, the beast had stiff, wiry hair and was enormous in size — up to four feet tall and seven long, weighing about 1,000 but up to as much as 2,000 pounds, and able to run as fast as a horse.

Grizzlies terrorized the Ohlones long before the Spanish arrived. The bear occupied pretty much the same territory, for one thing, and favored the chaparral and brush better than the forest. He also enjoyed many of the same things to eat, and competed for such resources as salmon, berries, clover and acorns. When first seen by Vizcaino's party, the bears were nibbling in some numbers on a whale carcass, and that, too, was a favorite in the Indian diet. So the native people met the awesome bear regularly in the course of everyday life. Bears hated to be surprised, and the Indians knew

fairly well how to avoid them. But grizzlies were always gluttonous, and when food was scarce the bears were known even to attack tribal huts in darkness, consuming the inhabitants. Early Spanish visitors made note of badly scarred Indians, and reported seeing them mauled to death.

In 1792, shortly after the founding of Mission Santa Cruz, soldiers were sent to hunt grizzlies who had already developed a fond taste for the livestock. As the herds of cattle, sheep, pigs and horses grew, the bears had no shyness about helping themselves, and did so even in front of the herdsman. Beef disappeared regularly; pork was a special delicacy. In general, the bears left people alone unless driven by hunger or maternal instinct.

When the Mexican land grants were distributed after 1822, the economy depended upon the cattle hide. Beef were wild, and so exceedingly abundant that any hungry traveler was free to butcher a cow and eat the choicest cuts of meat, provided the hide was left undamaged. This the bear did not do. And as the herds prospered, so did the bears — which became more numerous and much fatter in a very short time.

Vaqueros who worked the ranchos had a fine sense of sport, though, and the bear-and-bull fights were a colorful and exciting entertainment. To capture a grizzly, four or more well-mounted riders surprised the bear on an open plain. One would throw his reata over the animal's head while another caught the hind leg and a third secured a foreleg. Two vaqueros then coaxed their horses in front while the others followed, each keeping the lasso stretched taut, so even if the bear broke one reata, the others held. In this way, the grizzly was dragged to a pen at Branciforte or the mission. If still alive, he was pitted against the fiercest bull. These matches were so popular they remained a custom through the early decades of American settlement.

In attacking a man, the bear would rise on his hind legs, and strike his prey with a powerful forepaw. He would then commence to bite his victim. If the person would lie still, face down, the grizzly might be content to bite a bit more about the arms and legs, and then draw away some distance to watch. If there was no movement, the bear might go away. But if the man moved, the grizzly would return; if he fought, it was quite likely he could be torn to pieces.

Shooting a grizzly was generally a waste of gunshot, and was certain to make the bear very angry. Thick hair, tough skin and heavy coats of fat combined with a huge bone structure to protect the animal's vital organs, so that even if shot through the lungs with large rifle balls, it might be an hour or more before the bear began to slow down or lose strength. Hunters knew it was next to impossible to kill a bear outright. When merely wounded, the grizzly became even more ferocious, using all his weight against his opponent. There were often occasions when a hunter would shoot something else, a deer or elk, only to find a bear in competition for the corpse. There was nothing to do then but let the grizzly have his dinner.

Sometimes the tables were turned, and the grizzly was killed and eaten itself. Their behemoth carcasses would be displayed with great pride outside local butcher shops. The taste of young bear was considered quite good, with a porklike taste and texture, juicy yet very greasy. An old bear was so strong in taste most folks considered it nauseating.

The best grizzly story in Santa Cruz County, ironically, occurred on what is now McCrary family property. The site was on the northwest side of Scott's Creek, above the old Seaside School, and had once been a tract of the Gianone family ranch.

Back in the spring of 1865, a poor woodsman and two of his children were fishing at the headwaters of Scott's Creek. The two boys surprised a she-bear who took after them, but they safely escaped up a tree. The father heard the commotion and came to the rescue, running within ten feet of the enraged animal before he realized the situation. It was too late. The bear rushed him, caught him by the leg, and tore it viciously. The loyal family dog made an attack on the bear, who let go momentarily, only to resume biting the man about his face and head. It was only with the dog's continuous harassment that the bear left.





Since the father, a man named E.S. Harris, was poor and the head of a large family, a public subscription of \$75 was collected to pay for his medical care. And on May 7, 1865, a Dr. Peake of Santa Cruz successfully amputated Harris's leg in order to save his life. It first appeared doubtful the father would survive, according to news accounts, but within two weeks Harris recovered enough to write an article himself, expressing his gratitude to the community.

Today Lud McCrary recalls that this tract of land on the former Gianone Ranch is called "Harris Flat." Upon it is a tiny cemetery with the graves of a pioneer woman and some of her family. But there is also an extremely small one, a little plot once surrounded by a white picket fence. It is Harris's leg buried there. No one knows where Harris is, or where he died, but his leg is on McCrary property — and remains there as something of a testimonial to both man and beast in the wilder days of north coast history.

In many of the tales about bears, it seems that those who survived face-to-face confrontations almost always did so with the help of a canine friend. Mountain Charley McKiernan, for example, was reputed as a bear hunter. But in fact it was his dog who saved his life when McKiernan was attacked in May of 1854. Mountain Charley shot a she-bear at close range and suffered the consequences until the dog took after her cubs and diverted the bear's attention.

William Waddell, founder of a lumber mill on Waddell Creek, had lived at what had been known in mission days as "Arroyo de los Osos" (Gulch of the Bears). While hunting with his dog in October, 1875, he met one. He was mauled terribly, but did escape, only to die later of infection to his arm. A year later, in November, George W. Bruce was attacked in the same canyon and escaped with less injury. Locals believed the attack was made by the same bear.

As late as 1882, a young couple out too late on a date used the "treed by a bear" excuse. The last recorded killing of a grizzly was in 1885, and the last was seen in '86.

Many bears died of poisoning, a method used as early as 1866. It was about that time the last of the wild Spanish cattle died in a drought. The bears were used to having dead meat just lying around, as if for them, and now it was laced with strychnine. Furthermore, the fields of clover had been turned to crops. Livestock was protected by a maze of fences. Whalers had reduced the tidbits on the beach to only an occasional morsel. The hills were noisy with the falling of timber. Railroads were built. Somehow, man had gotten the edge on life, and kept it.