

These weren't teddy bears

THIS IS A BAR' story, padner.

An' ah mean the champeen bar' story of 'em all.

This is the sayin' of Warren "Skip" Littlefield, who has been collecting them for his book on the local waterfront and environs.

And there were plenty of bears roamin' these environs back in the '50s and '60s — and I don't mean 1950s and 1960s. Probably roamed where you're sitting.

Littlefield's dogged research beared some 50 accounts of bears killing people and people killing bears, from the 1850s to the last sighting around the Bay Area in 1913.

So hunker down around the dying far, and we'll start. Citizens had to be mighty careful in them days. Settlers here followed this code: "When you see a bear, be careful; when you do not see one, be twice as careful!"

* * *

Fellow named Jacob Rink Snyder hunted bear around the Felton Big Trees area in 1845.

He tanned and sold their hides for 50 cents each.

"One day," goes the 1875 accounts in both The Sentinel and the S.F. Chronicle, "Jacob, while meandering through the sylvan grove, felt a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"Looking around he was greeted by a grinning grizzly. His blood all ran down to his toes as he muttered a fervent prayer to that Divine Being who can only grant assistance in cases of this kind.

"Jacob's gun was useless, as it was not primed. The grizzly seemed to say, "I've got the bulge on you. I've got you Jacob."

"Well aware of his desperate situation, the hunter came up with a happy idea.

"Jacob chewed tobacco, and at that moment had a large quid of it in this mouth mixed with hot saliva.

"As the bear was on the point of converting Jacob into mincemeat, the rifleman took deliberate aim, and squirted a jet of fiery liquid into each of his ursine majesty's eyes.

"The blinded bear roared and bellowed in pain.

"Jacob backed away and primed his gun and dispatched the floundering animal."

* * *

That hunter was a smart cookie. Besides being a potent chawer, he was the first surveyor of Santa Cruz County; and quartermaster under Fremont's army. He helped write the state constitution in Monterey.

And that bear incident must have left a strong print on his mind, for he was the man who placed the grizzly bear on the state flag in 1850, according to Stanley Stevens, associate librarian, UCSC.

* * *

In these parts, Littlefield said, the bear was more to be feared than the Indian.

Early California historian Theodore Hittell described the grizzly as "one of the most formidable and ferocious animals in the world, sometimes weighing 2,000 pounds." That's one ton.

It was able to knock down a bull or carry off a horse.

During the famine of 1772 in the Monterey area, Spanish governor Pedro Fages sent soldiers to hunt the bear. They brought back nearly 9,000 pounds of meat to the area missions and presidio, "saving the fledgling settlements from extinction.

Around 1816, bears were roped and put into rings with bulls. It became a popular sport.

Littlefield said the most noted bear and bull event in Santa Cruz was in 1867 on the banks of the San Lorenzo where it joins Branciforte Creek.

Tickets were sold for one dollar, children 50 cents.

"The bull charged the bear first, but the grizzly soon settled the fight by tearing the bull's tongue out and the animal had to be killed. And the Santa Cruz brass band entertained."

* * *

The most widely publicized bear story in this county was of the horribly mauling of Mt. Charley McKiernan near Glenwood, May 10, 1854.

He fought a female bear and lost the top of his skull. After the fight he crawled under an oak and plastered his

Wally Trabing's Mostly about People



exposed brains with oak leaves.

Charley wore a silver plate over his skull for 35 years. He was one of the few humans to survive hand to hand combat with a grizzly.

* * *

It was man against beast back then. There just wasn't room enough for both to live.

The man who gave Waddell Creek its name was killed by a grizzly in September of 1875. Also, The Sentinel reported on Sept. 3, 1870 that three men were killed near Hollister by a bear as they herded cows toward a dairy.

Henry White killed a grizzly in August of 1859 near Soquel with a buffalo gun at 20 yards. The bear had just killed a heifer. It was considered medium sized, weighing 700 pounds.

* * *

May, 1890. Hans Mandel, a Boulder Creek chef, and two loggers, claimed they were chased up a tree by a grizzly where they remained through the night. It was the last reported sighting of a grizzly in this area.

How accurate are all these reports? How true are the bear tales?

Well, on Oct. 18, 1897, Duncan McPherson wrote an editorial in The Sentinel.

It concluded: "Whenever you hear a returned hunter telling what a narrow escape he had from a grizzly — that his escape was effected purely through his own bravery — you may as well accept the story.

"No prudent person will look up the bear to prove to the contrary."