

A Howling Wilderness: The Summit Road Area – Santa Cruz Mountains

By Stephen Payne

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Situated between the Town of Los Gatos and the City of Santa Cruz, in the central coast counties of California, is the Summit Road area of the Santa Cruz Mountains. The Summit area spans two counties: Santa Clara and Santa Cruz, and is roughly bounded on the west by Highway 17 and on the east by Loma Prieta Road. The northern boundaries are the Moody Gulch area, Patchen (an early post office and present state landmark) and Wright's Station (abandoned). The southern boundaries are the Skyland-Highland area, Hester Creek School (abandoned), and the little burg of Laurel. This area encompasses roughly twenty square miles.

The first written record of this area was left by Spanish explorers in the mid-1700's. The Spanish called the area the Sierra Azul (Blue Mountains) and found the area to be a rough and wild land enclosed by giant coast redwoods (*Sequoia Sempervirens*). An apt description of the Santa Cruz Mountains was written by a padre in Santa Cruz:

"The adjacent mountains were wild and rugged, the canyons deep and dark with the shadows of the forest. Coyotes broke the stillness with their dismal howls, and herds of deer slacked their thirst in the clear waters of the San Lorenzo. Grizzly bears were numerous, prowling about in herds, like hogs on a farm." (38:4/22/1934)

In the early 1850's when the first settlers came into the Summit area of the Santa Cruz Mountains they found that the region's condition was the same as described by the long forgotten padre. Lyman Burrell, who moved to the area with his family in 1853 wrote years later what they found at their new home:

"It seemed like a vast, solitary wilderness-no houses, and no roads. I knew that bears and lions dwelt here, but I feared them not." (17:12/31/1881)

"At that time there was no one living in this vicinity. It might truly have been called a howling wilderness: for these beautiful hills and valleys, now covered with orchards and vineyards, comfortable houses, schoolhouses, good roads, with all kinds of improvement going on, and everywhere teeming with busy life, were then the abode of fierce and dangerous animals. They made their homes in the thickets and hollow trees, and went forth both day and night to seek food for themselves and for their young. Wild cats and lions were often seen prowling about while the sun was shining: and the night was often made hideous by the howling of the coyotes." (17:1/28/ 1882,9-96)

To this wilderness area came the pioneers of the 1850's. In order to have livestock on their little ranches carved out of the forests of giant redwoods, they had a constant battle with the numerous grizzly bears and mountain lions of the area. The most famous of the early pioneers was "Mountain Charley" (Charles Henry McKiernan). McKiernan hunted throughout the area in the 1850's and killed "hundreds" of bears. Although McKiernan usually won his encounters with the four-hundred to one-thousand pound creatures, two almost killed him.

McKiernan's first run in with a bear, while not as famous as his second, was, nonetheless an exciting adventure. While hunting near Lyman Burrell's ranch, in 1853, McKiernan saw a large bear lying near a pond. McKiernan rode his mule to within thirty feet of the sleeping bear, dismounted with his musket, took aim at the back of the bear's head and fired. Assuming that the bear was dead, he was slowly reloading his weapon when the bear rose up and charged him. He grabbed at his saddle horn and tried to mount his mule, but the frightened animal jerked back, threw him, and ran off. Seeing the running mule, the bear returned to her cubs and McKiernan began to search for his gun. Because of his activity the bear was again aroused and charged McKiernan.

He took to his heels, and never man ran as he did until he reached home. The bear got pretty close to him at times, and would doubtless have caught him had she not been mortally wounded.

On the following day McKiernan returned to the spot with a rifle in hand and found the bear lying dead with her two cubs at her side. McKiernan took the two cubs home to raise, but four months later the cubs killed some hogs and he was forced to destroy them. (29)

Mountain Charley's second encounter with a bear almost ended with the bear getting the best of McKiernan. On May 8, 1854, McKiernan, in the company of John Taylor, a neighbor, was out hunting with Taylor's dog. After killing five deer the men were in the process of dragging the carcasses out of a gulch when they spotted a bear four hundred yards below them feeding with her cubs. The men decided to kill the bear and started down an animal trail after it. But as they were going down the trail, the bear started up it. As they were climbing over a mound, the

startled men saw the bear on the other side. "The bear gave a snort and plunged at them." Taylor took a hurried aim and shot, but the bullet missed and he headed for the nearest tree. McKiernan also fired, hitting the bear over its eye, dazing it momentarily. Not having time to reload his gun, McKiernan hit the bear over the head until the rifle broke. The enraged grizzly rose up

"with its tremendous jaws open, and made a snap at Charley, catching him over the left eye and forehead, crushing the skull and tearing out about five by three inches of it."

McKiernan tried to protect his head with his arms, but the bear took the upraised arms in its mouth, "crushing down with her grinders upon one arm, while her tusks passed entirely through the other, escaping the bone. " At this point the bear dropped the still-conscious hunter and went down the hill to protect her cubs which Taylor's dog was attacking. Taylor, thinking that McKiernan was dead, left for McKiernan's home to get a horse to pack his friend's body home.

After chasing Taylor's dog away from her cubs, the bear returned to McKiernan, dragged him to a clearing under an oak tree and pawed over him. Finally the bear left.

When Taylor returned, he found McKiernan sitting up and conscious, but paralyzed from the waist down with shock. McKiernan told Taylor that he had been conscious throughout the entire ordeal.

After taking McKiernan to his house, Taylor went to San Jose to get a doctor. Taylor returned the next morning at sunrise with Dr. A. W. Bell, who, after examining the hole over McKiernan's left eye and nose, sent for his partner, Dr. T. J. Ingersoll. Dr. Ingersoll reached McKiernan's house about nine that evening with a silver plate hammered out of two Mexican pesos. After examining his patient, Dr. Ingersoll, found that the silver plate was too small. The next day Dr. Ingersoll returned to San Jose, had another plate made and returned by eight that evening. The two physicians cleaned the wound and completed surgery by eleven that night--without the benefit of anesthetics.

A week later Dr. Ingersoll was forced to remove the silver plate as it was irritating the wound. Twelve months later the wound became infected and again Dr. Ingersoll, this time with a Dr. Spencer, was forced to operate. During this surgery chloroform was used to put McKiernan to sleep. This was the first reported local instance of the use of the new anesthetic. After the doctors removed an abscess caused by a wad of hair in the wound, McKiernan recovered completely.

The wound left McKiernan's face disfigured. From the time of the accident to the end of his life he wore large brimmed hats, pulled down to his eyebrows, to hide the scars. (29; 13; 38: 4/22/1934; 18: 3-5; 20: Vol. I 12/21/1957, 4, Vol. III Autumn 1960, 13)

McKiernan lived to tell his tale to many a small mountain child. But, his encounter was not the only one between a pioneer and a grizzly.

Down the hill at Lexington, a huge Frenchman,"with a mighty barrel chest, enormous biceps and ham-like fists" fought a bear without benefit of a weapon. The Frenchman was out hunting one day when he suddenly came upon a bear. Quickly firing his rifle without taking proper aim, he managed only to wound the beast in the shoulder. The bear immediately charged the Frenchman who tried to club it with his rifle. The bear knocked the rifle out of the man's hand and bit down on his left wrist. Then the bear grabbed his left arm with both of its paws. At this point the powerful Frenchman's right arm was free and he began to slug the bear's chest with all his might. The bear hung on to the man's left arm, biting and clawing at it, while the Frenchman was hitting her with his free hand. Finally the bear had had enough and, letting the exhausted man go, she lumbered off into the woods. The man's friends found him unconscious with blood streaming from his arm. Although he lost his arm, the Frenchman lived. The bear was found the next day-dead from injuries caused by the Frenchman's mighty blows.
(38:6/24/1934)

Lyman Burrell was another of the early pioneers unfortunate enough to have experienced a brief encounter with a grizzly bear. One day in the mid-1850's Burrell and his son, James Birney Burrell, were in a pasture, building a fence to hold some pigs they owned. The pigs were nearby foraging in the field and began to make some strange noises. Taking up his axe, Lyman Burrell went up a trail to investigate. To his surprise he saw a mother bear and her cub running down the same trail at him. With only his axe in hand Burrell decided that his best move would be to run as fast as he could toward the new fence. Lyman Burrell wrote of the incident in 1882:

"I turned back and ran as fast as possible in the trail, with the bear and cub behind me. I soon came to a short turn in the trail, where I stumbled and fell flat on the ground, ... The old bear instantly took one of my limbs between her jaws. She gave me one good, strong bite."

Fortunately in the confusion the bear decided to keep going and did not further molest Burrell. By the time his son reached the scene with a rifle, the bear and cub were gone.

Burrell's wife managed to patch up his leg and he was able to work, after a six-months' convalescence. The encounter with the bear taught Burrell to have more respect for the grizzly bear: "Until this happened, I had never felt any fear of wild animals; but after this, I never had the least desire to meet a bear." (17:3/9/1882,10-11)

Charles McKiernan's son, James V. McKiernan, told John V. Young that when the early pioneers hunted bear they did so in the following manner:

". . . always the grizzly was treated with respect, and the best shot was a downhill shot, with a fast horse for a quick getaway if necessary." (38:4/22/ 1934)

Although the pioneers tried to keep their distance from the giant grizzly, sometimes the bears would come to them. While the Burrells were building their first home in 1853, they, not realizing it, located their cabin next to a bear path. Every morning the Burrells would awaken and find new tracks outside their cabin, although the bears never bothered them while they were in the house. Once Lyman decided to put up a large gate to cut off the path. One night a bear came up the path and encountered the gate. Rather than going around and jumping the low fence, the bear "took hold of it, wrenched it from its fastenings, and laid it on the ground, - thinking, no doubt, that he was lord of the forest, and always should be."
(17:12/31/1881,13,16b; 1/28/1882,14b)

Although the foul-tempered grizzlies were a major problem in the wilderness of the Santa Cruz Mountains, the more numerous and agile mountain lions created problems too. When the early pioneers tried raising sheep, goats, or even pigs, the lions would quickly deplete their stock. Even the building of large fences would not deter the spry cats.

One night as the Burrells were sleeping, they awoke to the screechings and growlings of their dog and a mountain lion, fighting at their front door. Lyman jumped out of bed, grabbed his rifle and flung open the door. He could not see well enough to shoot so instead, shouted warnings at the animals. Presently the dog returned victorious and the lion ran off into the night:

He (the dog) was not badly wounded. He seemed greatly pleased with his victory. He was so excited over it that he sat on the steps and barked all the rest of the night. (17:1 / 28 / 1882,13-13b)

The mountain lions would stop at nothing to get a sheep, goat, pig or even small calf. The Burrells were raising some calves in a pen. One night a mountain lion jumped the fence, killed a calf, and jumped the fence again carrying the dead animal. Upon this discovery, Lyman put a full-grown Spanish cow inside the pen on the following night, thinking that the lion would be back for another meal. He was right! That night the lion came back, but this time met with more than its match. The cow gored the lion and pushed it clear through the fence, breaking several planks in the process. The Burrells never again had trouble with lions getting their calves in that pen. (17:3 /4/ 1882,4)

Other early settlers had problems with the many mountain lions of the district. In 1874, Walter Young's mother was taking some freshly-killed venison into Santa Cruz from their ranch on Summit Road. Traveling down the San Jose-Soquel Road on horseback, she heard a rustling in the bushes. She knew at once that a mountain lion had caught the scent of the deer meat and was stalking her. Rather than attempt to outrun the quicker lion with her horse on that section of overgrown road, she rode on slowly, keeping an apprehensive watch for the lion. The stalking cat crossed the road behind her several times, but Mrs. Young remained calm. Reaching a clearing on both sides of the road near a neighbor's house, Mrs. Young decided that that was the time to make a run for it. Her horse raced through the clearing and rider, horse, and venison reached safety. (40:7/21/1959)

On another occasion Walter Young's father, William A. Young, was out hunting near the San Jose-Soquel Road. Walking through the woods, Young was forced to crawl through a section of brush that was quite thick. Midway through he heard a wildcat's growl. Turning around on his hands and knees, he spotted the cat ready to spring. He was a good shot and managed to get the cat before she got him. In searching the area, Young found the reason the wildcat was after him. She was protecting several kittens. (40:7 /28/ 1959)

Aside from the obvious threat of wild animals the settlers faced other problems. The early pioneers of the Summit area had to carve their own roads out of this wilderness. The rugged mountains were covered by giant first-growth redwood trees, along with madrone, oak and bay trees. Any open area was covered with a heavy covering of manzanita, scotch broom, sage and other almost impenetrable brush. The steep canyons with year-around running water were almost impassable. Early roads no more than paths, would often wash out at the first heavy winter rains; and to clear land or build a good road required a great amount of work and time. The giant trees, often fifteen or twenty feet in diameter, had to be brought down by axe and saw. Then the stumps were either blasted from the earth or left in place while vineyards and fruit trees were planted in the new clearings.

But, even with all the hard work and danger associated with this wilderness, the pioneers came. They built ranches, stores, post offices, schools, churches, wineries, packing sheds and lumber mills. Even a railroad was cut through the canyons and trees, and tunneled through the heart of the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Source

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