

There Were Bears in These Hills

By MARGARET KOCH
Sentinel Staff Writer

That Saratoga bear we have been hearing about has "gone over the mountain" to Los Padres and probably won't show up in the Santa Cruz Mountains again...

These mountains of ours have been denuded of bears for more than 90 years — since 1885-6, when the last grizzly bear was killed in Bonny Doon.

Bears — grizzlies that is, were numerous in the Santa Cruz mountains when the first settlers — the early Spanish, arrived here to found the Mission and a little later, the Villa de Branciforte.

The bears were first hunted for their meat, then later as homesteaders invaded this area, they were killed as predators.

The last grizzly, an old female, had developed a taste for farmers' livestock in the Bonny Doon area but she met her match when she carried off Orrin Blodgett's hog — a hog which weighed in the neighborhood of 300 pounds.

Blodgett wrote later, in a report for the State Fish and Game Commission, that it all took place in November of 1886 as well as he could recall.

The bear came in the night and took the hog, kicking and squealing, from its pen, killed it, carried it a short distance and covered it with leaves and brush, intending to return later to feast again.

That was a habit of grizzlies with their kills. They liked their meat "high" or very ripe. The grizzly that almost (not quite) killed Charley McKiernan in the Santa Cruz summit area covered poor Charley with debris and left him for dead, also. (He lived to tell the tale, with a silver plate in his skull).

Blodgett found his dead hog and knowing the habits of the grizzlies, decided to watch for its return. He also took the precaution of tying up his dogs.

"On the night the bear returned we had given up watching and were about to go to bed when the dogs

began to bark... he wrote. "Thinking they had scented the bear I took my gun — an old muzzle loading shotgun — and went out..."

"As I approached the spot where the hog was buried (in debris) I heard the bear coming through the brush. In an effort to get a better shot I crawled to the corner of the fence and we met.

"The bear reared up and I aimed for the head and fired. I was lucky enough to hit it in the left eye and the slug went clear through, killed it instantly. I was so close that the powder burned the hair around the bear's eye..."

"It was an old female, gray around the muzzle, and weighed just 642 pounds dressed. I sold the meat to the John D. Chace meat market in Santa Cruz for 10 cents a pound and the hide for \$25."

Blodgett's recollection of the date was off one year, according to The Sentinel files. He shot the bear in 1885.

Blodgett the bear hunter died, age 95, in Oakland, in 1951.

When bears were numerous in the local mountains, in the early Spanish and Mexican periods of our history, they provided great sport for the localites.

Bear and bull fights were part of every fiesta at Villa de Branciforte, across the San Lorenzo River, and tiestas were practically continuous. The Villa was centered about where Branciforte elementary school is located, and North Branciforte Avenue was a mile-long horserace track.

Down in the "flat," between the river and Branciforte Creek, the bear and bull fights were staged in a circular wood stockade with platforms high above the ground for the spectators.

The bulls and bears were

fastened together, each at the end of a 30-foot chain. Naturally they weren't pleased with that arrangement and soon were fighting, whether they really wanted to or not. It is said that the bears usually won.

The way in which the fierce grizzlies were captured by the Spaniards was almost more interesting and dangerous than the actual bear and bull fight.

A party of horsemen would go out into the hills, locate a grizzly, lasso him from a number of vantage points, then drag him into town. He was helpless because he couldn't move or run in any direction except where he was dragged.

He would be put into a stout cage until the day of



the fight. Old records don't tell who put the chain on his paw or how that tricky task was done.

I have often wondered!

Spanish horsemen rendered the grizzly helpless with their lassos, then dragged him into town for a bear and bull fight. The artist's sense of humor shows in the drawing depicting a grizzly "pulling in" a greenhorn who didn't know the ropes. Drawings are from old book, A LA CALIFORNIA, 1874

