

Mountain Charley

By John V. Young

Most colorful of Santa Cruz Mountain characters of the pioneer days was Mountain Charley McKiernan, one of the first white settlers in the region. Hunter, rancher, teamster, road-builder and stage-line operator, McKiernan was said to be the idol of every small boy who grew up in the region. According to his admirers, his motto was: "Right wrongs nobody."

The simple statement "I knew Mountain Charley" was the proud boast of many an old mountain man, and tales of this half-legendary figure have long survived him. After he was disfigured by a bear in a fight that is a legend in itself, it was said of McKiernan that no grizzly would argue with him over the right-of-way on a trail, a typical tall tale that in no way detracted from McKiernan's sterling reputation.

Charles Henry McKiernan was born in Ireland in 1825 (or possibly 1830). As a young quartermaster in the British army, he traveled to Australia and New Zealand, where he was stationed when word came of the California gold strike of 1848. His enlistment having expired, he signed on as a seaman on a ship headed for San Francisco.

Not waiting for their pay, the crew members jumped ship to join recruiters who met them at the pier with bottles of whiskey as inducements to work in the mines. The wages were up to \$20 a day. In Ireland at the time of McKiernan's departure the prevailing scale was about \$20 a year.

With his savings from his first year's work in the mines McKiernan organized a pack train to carry supplies to the Trinity mining district of northern California. Attacked by Indians on his second trip, McKiernan and his company lost everything but their lives.

Back at the mines, McKiernan accumulated a second stake and headed out for the Santa Clara Valley. There he found that conflicting claims to all the land made investment quite inadvisable. With a friend named Page, he entered the Santa Cruz Mountains early in 1850 to look for available land to homestead.

Following an old Indian trail from what is now Los Gatos, the two men stopped at a small pond the Spanish padres had called Laguna del Sargento, a long-time favorite camping place of the Indians. On the site were quantities of mortars, pestles, and flint arrowheads. Page went on to Santa Cruz, but McKiernan found the spot to his liking, and there he settled, completely alone. He established his homestead on the highest point of the ridge, where the southwest corner of Redwood Estates now joins Summit Road.

Near a spring McKiernan later built a frame house, said to have been the first such structure in the entire mountain range, from redwood lumber whipsawed on the spot. (Whip-sawing was a crude form of lumbering performed by two men using a long, thin, flexible sawblade with handles at both ends. One man stood in a pit under the log, the other man on top, alternately pulling up and down on the saw to make the cut. It was brutal work, but it did the job. Lumber cut in this fashion was worth about \$100 a thousand board feet in those days).

His home and corrals completed, McKiernan started to raise sheep and cattle and to hunt deer for market; but grizzly bears, cougars and wildcats soon made mincemeat of the sheep. Long-horned steers, better able to cope with the predators, were sold for \$6 to \$8 a head, mainly for their hides and tallow.

Deer meat was worth 10 cents a pound and was easy to obtain, at first. Since the deer had never heard the sound of a rifle before, they were still feeding by day and would only look around in curiosity when one of their number fell to McKiernan's muzzle-loading blunderbuss.

McKiernan made two trips a week to Alviso (in those days a seaport on south San Francisco Bay) with deer meat to be shipped to San Francisco. He was alone in the mountains until 1853, when the Lyman John Burrell family settled farther down the ridge, above the site where the town of Wright's later located. In the same year, one John Bean settled on Bean Creek near the present town of Glenwood, and Charles C. Martin homesteaded land adjoining McKiernan's. Martin operated a stage line and toll road on the Mountain Charley road, and later built a home in the Valley for his family.

There were no roads west of San Jose at that time, and no fences. Until McKiernan and his neighbors hacked out an ox-trail, later to become a stage route, only an Indian trail crossed the Santa Cruz Mountains. McKiernan later built several roads, one of which still bears his name. It was a cut-off route out of Los Gatos, running up through Moody Gulch near what is now Holy City, and across the site of Redwood Estates to join the old Indian trail near McKiernan's home.

(Author's note: Portions of this road are still in use, mainly by local residents, running south from Summit Road near its junction with Highway 17 to join the old Glenwood Highway at Scotts Valley. It is narrow and winding, having only one lane with turnouts. The site of his cabin is designated by a historical marker.)

McKiernan, along with many others, tried his hand at gold mining on and near his property, even to the extent of staking out a claim in company with four other men, but nothing came of the venture. No paying amounts of gold were ever found in these mountains.

The Famous Bear Fight

Even for a region as rich in legendary lore as the Santa Cruz Mountains, the story of Mountain Charley McKiernan's fight with a grizzly bear is outstanding as a tale of heroism and fortitude, one that has needed no embellishment (although many versions exist). As told (1934) by McKiernan's son, James, residing at the old home place near the summit, the legend differs only in minor detail from several other versions current at the time.

Grizzly bears in the 1850's were too plentiful for the ranchers, who hunted them relentlessly to stop depredations on their livestock. They also made a profit selling bear hides and meat. The grizzlies were huge, shaggy creatures weighing from 800 to 1200-pounds (the only species of bear in these mountains), and were always treated with respect. They were best hunted from an uphill stand with a fast horse ready for a quick getaway if necessary. Often it took several bullets to put a grizzly out of action. McKiernan had often shot grizzly bears; in fact, he was one of the best known bear hunters in the mountains.

On May 8, 1854, McKiernan and a friend named Taylor started out for a gulch about a mile southwest of the McKiernan place, where Taylor was planning to take up some land. After shooting a couple of deer, the two men spotted a she-grizzly with two cubs. As both men were excellent shots, they decided to go for the bear and headed up the gulch to approach the animal from above.

When they arrived at their chosen spot, the bear and her cubs had disappeared. Following a deer trail in pursuit, they came upon the she-bear around a bend, standing and facing McKiernan at a distance of no more than six feet, her forepaws outstretched for a raking hug.

McKiernan fired instantly, with the muzzle of his gun up against the bear's chest, while Taylor fired over McKiernan's head into the bear's face. McKiernan reversed his gun to club the bear with the stock, but the bear beat down the

weapon and seized him with her powerful forepaws, crushed the front of his skull in her jaws, then tossed him aside and started for Taylor.

Meanwhile Taylor's small dog had attacked the two cubs. Their squalling distracted the mother and she turned to their rescue, giving Taylor a chance to escape to the ridge top, supposing that McKiernan had been, killed instantly. The bear chased the dog away, then returned to McKiernan and dragged him to the end of a clearing under an oak tree and after pawing him over left him. The bear was never seen again.

His rifle reloaded, Taylor returned to the scene to find McKiernan sitting up and conscious, but paralyzed from the waist down. The fight had lasted only seconds, and McKiernan said he had been fully conscious all the time and had recalled every act of his life in the process.

Taylor bound up McKiernan's head with his shirt and leaving his loaded rifle for protection went for help. Accounts differ as to whether a doctor came to the ranch to attend McKiernan, or whether he was taken either to San Jose or to Santa Cruz for the medical attention.

In any case, the doctor hammered a silver plate out of two Mexican dollars and fitted it into the broken place in McKiernan's skull where the bear had chewed away the bone over his left eye up to the top of the frontal bone. Within three weeks the plate had started to corrode and had to be removed, to be replaced some time later with another plate. McKiernan suffered through the entire ordeal without anesthetics until the wound healed. He suffered from severe headaches for two years, however, until a specialist in Redwood City removed the second plate and found a lock of hair under it. By this time anesthesia had become more generally available, sparing McKiernan the pain of the third operation.

Although terribly disfigured (he wore a hat low over his left eye the rest of his life), McKiernan enjoyed full health until 1890, when he became ill with an obscure stomach ailment. He died on January 18, 1892, thirty-eight years after the bear fight that made him famous.

Sources

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