

Death of Siskiyou's Old Reelfoot Recalled

Grizzly Among Worst Stock Killing Bears In Southern Oregon

By DALE VINCENT

Just to mention the name of "Old Reelfoot," the grizzly, back in the 70's and 80's, was enough to raise the hair on a brave man's neck—and to make the frontier women call their kids inside their log cabins and drop the bar across the door.

"Old Reelfoot" was one of the worst stock killing grizzlies the West has ever known—crafty, and with immense strength. He would fell a beef critter with one blow, crush its spine with his powerful jaws, and eat his fill. For 20 years, from 1870 to 1890, Old Reelfoot killed literally hundreds of cattle.

Bear's Home Range

His home range was along the Oregon-California border, between Klamath river on the East, and Pilot Rock on the West—a wild, rough piece of mountain country. Here on Camp Creek, Bill Wright had a small, one-man cow outfit, a log cabin that sat on a bench overlooking his corrals and a hay meadow.

On a spring day in 1890, old Bill saw a huge brown grizzly bear rush from the edge of the timber straight across his meadow toward one of his bulls. The bull raised his head and snorted, but too late. The huge grizzly had felled him with one blow, and his powerful jaws crunched through his back bone. The bull sank to the ground.

Bill hurriedly took down his rifle from the buckhorn rack on the wall. Levering open the loading gate, he slipped home a cartridge. A few more he put into his pocket, and without a backward glance moved silently out of the cabin.

Good Hunter

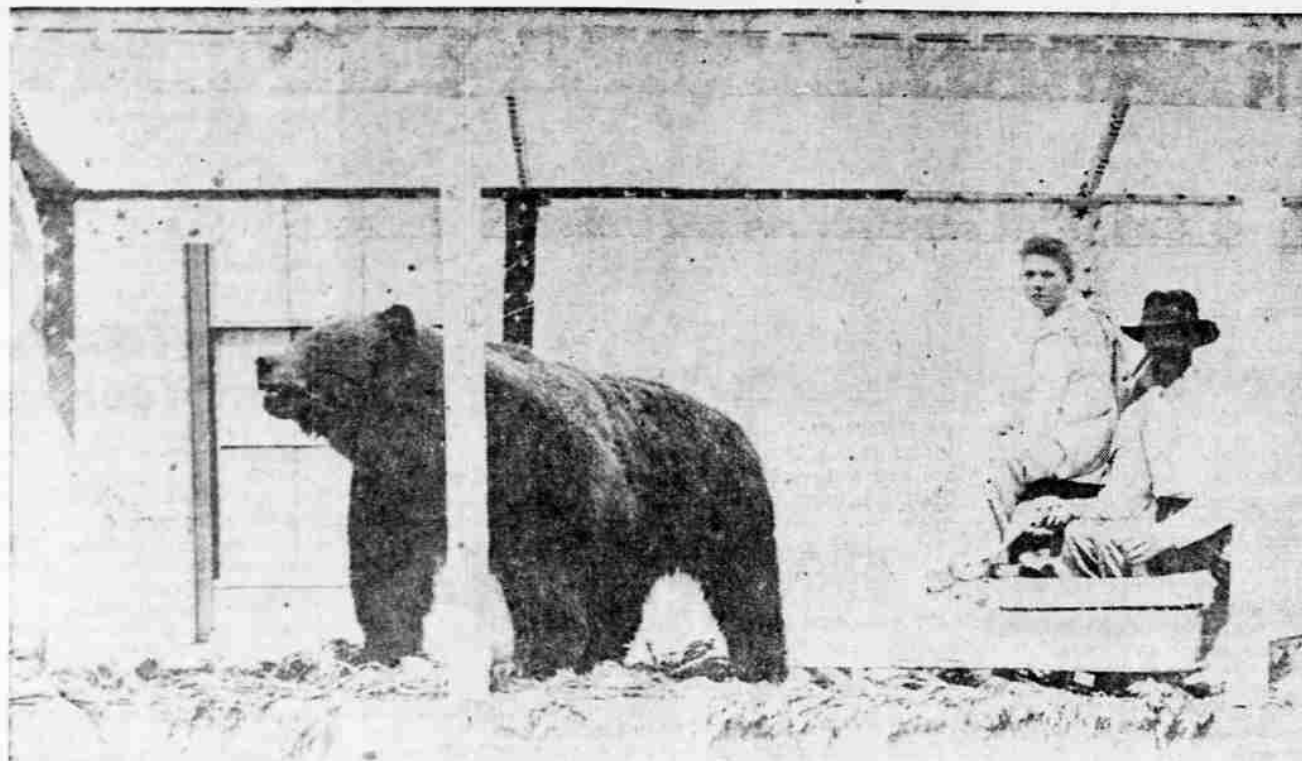
Bill was a good hunter. He had been raised in this wild frontier country and he knew that a grizzly was "bad medicine." He swung in a wide circle until within 100 yards of the dead bull, then he stopped to listen. Everywhere was silence. He moved on to within 25 yards, but could see no bear. He stood, watching and listening, until finally a sense of being alone settled quietly upon him. Then methodically he cut for tracks, and on the soft dirt found the huge print of a left front paw. Three toes were missing—unmistakably the brand of Old Reelfoot.

Bill Wright remembered when Bruce Grieve had tried to trap this great silver-tip, and after a number of failures, had finally succeeded in catching him by the toes of the left front paw. Three of these toes were left in the trap, the toenails measuring 4 1/2 inches long. From then on the grizzly was known as Reelfoot.

Bill also remembered that Major Baron, a cattleman of the Pilot Rock country, had tacked notice on a pine stem which read: "A reward of \$500 will be paid by me to the man who can prove he killed Old Reelfoot—Major Baron, Ashland, Ore."

Personal Pledges

Soon other stockmen joined the major in tacking their own personal pledges on the tree. Smaller ranchers offered \$25, others \$50, a few went to \$100, and in the year 1889 the tree



ON DISPLAY—Old Reelfoot, a grizzly which killed many cattle in southern Oregon, was mounted and displayed throughout the country and in several European countries. The picture above, which was rephotographed from an older

picture, shows the wagon in which the bear was mounted. Its size can be judged by comparison with the man and boy at one end.

man—knew that distance meant safety—and he rapidly put much of it behind him.

Slow Anger Starts

Now, right in his own pasture, the infamous old grizzly had killed Bill Wright's best bull. A slow anger started to burn in the old man's chest—an anger that grew until he could think of nothing else—and as Bill Wright walked back to his cabin, he knew that either he or Old Reelfoot was going to die.

Carefully, Bill laid his plans. He rode down creek and asked Purl Bean to go on the hunt with him. Purl was only 17 years old then, but already a good mountaineer, a crack shot, and an exceptional tracker.

Purl brought along his 44-40 Winchester, and a wicked-looking homemade hunting knife. Bill Wright took his 56-52 rim fire Spencer. They both carried light packs, extra ammunition, and jerked venison.

They took off on the cooling tracks of the big grizzly that led up Camp creek into the wild Siskiyou mountains. At dusk the men camped on Soda mountain, built a small fire, and ate some of the jerky. Then lying close to the coals. They slept soundly.

Rough Country

They felt the old grizzly was traveling while they slept, so at the first cold light of dawn they were on the trail—gnawing jerky, as they fought their way around the mountainside. The tracks led over the roughest kind of country, and frequently they lost valuable time in searching for "signs." At other times the trail was clear, often marked by torn-up rotted logs where the bear had searched for grubs.

Reelfoot's trail soon gave evidence that he knew he was being followed. He took off straight west over the roughest country the Siskiyou could offer—through tangled masses of brush, across steep canyons—and then, at last he doubled back toward the head of Camp creek. They caught sight of him once



BILL WRIGHT—This picture shows Bill Wright when he was 87, one year before his death. Wright, along with Purl Bean, tracked Old Reelfoot before finally killing him. They found 10 bullet holes in the bear.

as he moved up hill and into the snow, almost to the crest of the Siskiyou. It was more difficult for Reelfoot to break trail through the crusted snow, and easier for them to follow.

Frosty Morning

It was on the cold frosty morning of April 10, 1890, in a brushy, snow-choked draw off the head of Camp creek, just three miles east of Pilot Rock that the two mountaineers came into an opening in the trees and there—less than 80 yards away—stood Reelfoot.

Bill Wright and Purl Bean pulled up short. Men and bear stood facing each other. Standing on his hind feet the big grizzly spread his huge arms wide and charged straight for them.

The bear came forward with a rocking motion. Hate glared from the fierce black eyes, and breath came from his nostrils like smoke in the frosty air.

Bill snugged a leathery cheek to the stock of his rifle Spencer, and putting the front bead on the bear's throat, he turned loose the first shot. Deliberately, he levered out the empty shell and placed a new cartridge in the chamber.

Drops to Knee

Purl Bean had dropped to one knee, and the boy's repeating Winchester was sending one 44 slug after the other into the old bear's chest.

But a grizzly is hard to kill—and the leaden slugs seemed only to madden him. Thoroughly enraged, the grizzly came toward them—tearing up brush with his teeth, and sending snow and sticks flying with his mighty paws.

At 30 yards Old Reelfoot stumbled and went down, fighting the reddening snow. The men stopped firing and stood watching. For a moment the bear lay quiet, then as the black-powder smoke drifted away, Old Reelfoot slowly got to his feet. He stood, dazed and blinded, sniffing the air. Then the big bear's nostrils got the scent and he came toward the men. There was still crushing strength in those powerful arms.

Bill and the boy fired point blank at the head and throat—still it seemed as if nothing would stop that fast rush. With terrifying speed the distance between men and beast was being used up.

Bear Drops

Then, suddenly as if hit in the head with a pole axe, the bear dropped—stone dead—20 feet from where they stood.

Purl Bean's hunting knife was nine inches long, and with this as a "ruler" he computed the following measurements: length, 8 feet; width of chest, 40 inches; length of claws, 4 1/2 inches;

width between ears 10 1/2 inches; around head in front of ears, 42 inches. Bill Wright at the time, estimated the bear's weight to be 1,800 pounds.

Horses were brought in, and the hide was packed out. The bear had been hit 10 times in many different places.

Old Reelfoot was mounted and placed on a wagon, drawn by mules. This wagon exhibit was shown many places throughout the west, and finally disappeared.

Contacts Museums

Gordon Jacobs, Hornbrook, Calif., was there in 1890 when the bear was killed, and has spent a number of years and quite a sum of money trying to locate the mounted Reelfoot. He cabled the London museum and also the museum in Paris, because one of the soldiers who returned from World War I reported that he saw the stuffed bear in Europe. The museums were very cooperative. They put in months of research, looked over many museums in Europe, and in the United States. They bent over backward in trying to help.

But to this day, Jacobs has never found one lead as to where the old bear disappeared.

The only things remaining are some photos and one claw which is on exhibit in the museum at Yreka—one of the claws that was left in Bruce Grieve's trap.

Furnished Information

Norman Campbell, gunsmith, who lives in Gold Hill, lived on Camp creek at the time the bear was killed and furnished information about the guns and ammunition used by Wright and Bean.

Bill Wright's nephew, George Wright, now lives a few miles out of Hornbrook, Calif., and still has his uncle's old 56-52 Spencer.

Fred Bean, Purl Bean's son, now lives in Phoenix, Ore., and provided the pictures and much of the data contained in this account.

Fourth in Series Of Classes Scheduled

Louis D. Ringette, deputy sheriff of Josephine county, will instruct a class in handling mental cases Monday before the Jackson county law enforcement officers.

The class, the fourth in a series of Oregon Regional Police schools, will be held in the council chambers in the Medford city hall Monday afternoon.

About 55 officers have been attending the classes which started the first of the month. Two other classes on auto thefts and the officer in court will be taught March 20 and 27.

Solidarity of Demo Party Due to Grass Roots, Chairman Says

Baker, Ore.—The Democratic Party of Oregon owes its solidarity and strength to the grassroots activities of precinct committeemen and women working through their county central committees, Democratic State Chairman Robert Boyer, Medford, told a group of eastern Oregon party workers at a conference held here Saturday.

Representatives from Baker, Union, Malheur, Wasco, Umatilla and Harney counties met the chairman at the first of a series of area conferences which Boyer has organized to discuss party objectives and aims for 1958. Others will be held throughout Oregon within the next three months.

Hits Hard

Hitting hard at "splinter

groups" whose activities drain manpower away from the county central committees," Boyer said. "Democratic social groups, discussion clubs and all worthwhile political organizations are to be encouraged, but they can only be effective and meaningful when they channel their energies and purpose through the county and state organizations which are the party structure."

The speaker reminded assembled Democrats of Mrs. George Gerlinger's parting admonishment to the Council of Republican Women, which ended its 11-year career in January, 1957: "We urge all units to become independent clubs in their respective counties and work with and under the direction of the county central committee."

The GOP lost the 1956 election because they did not have outstanding candidates and because their organization divided itself into a competitive hydra-headed monster, Boyer said.

"You Democrats who have worked so hard and done such an outstanding job under the unified banner of our party organization will never make the same mistake," he asserted. "The Democrats are going in one direction together—straight ahead to victory."

Petitions Object To Coyote Poisoning

A petition bearing 500 to 600 signatures of residents opposing any type of coyote poisoning program or appropriation of funds for that purpose was presented to the county court Friday afternoon.

Two more petitions, which will bring the number of signatures to about 700, are expected to be submitted to the county court Monday, it was reported.

Sponsors of the petitions, are members of the Southern Oregon Hound association. Basis for objection to a coyote poisoning program was potential danger to lives of humans, dogs and game, petition circulators said.

The signers include hound owners and other residents of various parts of the county. The petitions resulted from a reported effort by residents in the Lake Creek area to obtain permission to poison coyotes there.

LOW BIDDER

Portland—(U.P.)—Bonneville Power Administration reported Saturday that Pettijohn Engineering company of Portland was the apparent low bidder with \$234,975 for clearing the right-of-way and construction of the 25-mile Oregon City Chemawa 230,000 volt transmission line.

equipment, which will be ordered in the near future.

Champlin said four copies of fingerprints will be made. Copies will be forwarded to the state bureau in Salem, the federal bureau of investigation, and the California state bureau of identification. Fingerprints are forwarded to California, Champlin said, because it neighbors Oregon, and has the second largest identification bureau in the country.

When fingerprints are forwarded to both Salem and the FBI in Washington, D. C., copies of records of persons are returned, and will be included in the file here, Champlin noted.

Johnson is expected to arrive in Medford tonight and remain until the system is operating, Champlin said.

Police to Organize System of Records For Identification

The Medford police department tomorrow will start organizing an identification record system, the last major step in the records modernization program which was recommended in the Beall survey of the police department in 1951, Police Chief Charles Champlin announced today.

Assisting the department in organizing the record system will be Lewis Johnson, assistant director of the state bureau of identification and investigation, state police headquarters, Salem. Champlin requested assistance from state police superintendent, H. G. Maison, in organizing the system.

Third Type

The identification record system is the third fundamental type of record keeping of the police department. The other types, complaint and arrest records, have been in use for several years here.

The record system will consist of an identification jacket containing fingerprint card, physical description sheet, photographs, names, aliases, and criminal records of persons arrested by the department and lodged in city jail, Champlin said.

The identification file was recommended by Beall for organization in the future. The survey recommended the system "should not be considered until manpower and funds permit the establishment and continuance of the program."

Equipment Needed

Champlin said most of the equipment needed for development of the system has been obtained. Among equipment yet needed, he said, is photography

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