

Searles and the Grizzly

By Walter Chalfant



HRILLING adventures that came to the men of California when the West was new were of many kinds. Different from any other in these pages was the story of John Searles and the grizzly. It was told by Searles himself to P. A. Chalfant and published in the *Inyo Independent* about 1874.

Searles and his brother Dennis were among the first arrivals in Inyo County during the 'sixties. They were afterward the discoverers and locators of the great mineral area named for them, and now a large industrial center. The *Independent* said of John: "John Searles is one of the remarkable men of the coast. For daring and courage he is the equal of the famous Kit Carson or any other pioneer and Indian fighter. At one time he, armed with a Henry rifle and accompanied by but one man, followed a band of Indians who had driven away his stock, out east of the Panamint range, and not only recovered his stock but single-handed cleaned out the entire gang, killing four outright and wounding and driving off several others."

In 1870 the Sierra Nevada had an abundance of wild life, including bears of the different California species. In March of that year Searles and others went out from Visalia to hunt deer. Searles shot a buck which fell over a precipice. Going to see what had become of his game, he saw below two full-grown grizzlies and a cub, and got close enough to kill all three. That gave him a taste for grizzlies. His guide told of a region where the bears were plentiful and where two ferocious specimens had killed many cattle. Thither they went.

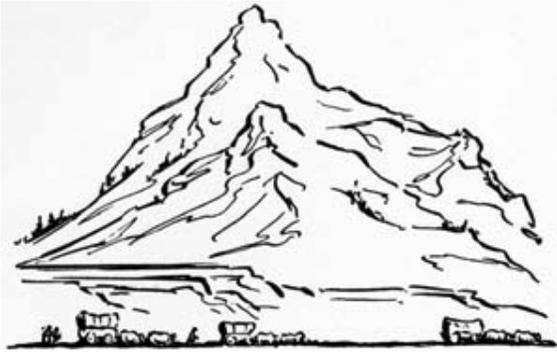
Stormy weather kept them in camp for a day or two. Searles found that he had shot away all his cartridges but four, and sent for more by hanging the cartridge box beside the trail for the first passerby to take to town and bring out a fresh supply. The order was filled, but as the messenger had thrown away the cartridge box, he brought back misfit ammunition. It could be used only by trimming the bullet, which allowed the cartridge to be forced into the gun, a Spencer rifle, though it took two blows of the hammer to fire it.

He set out with his four good shots and a supply of the misfits. Plodding along on foot he saw the nose of a big grizzly which was lying down. He killed the bear with two shots. He heard another grizzly in a thicket, and went after it. While he was working around for a sight of the animal, it suddenly rose in front of him, its nose not eighteen inches from his own. Brush prevented his backing off, and he pointed his gun for the base of the bear's jaw, hoping to reach its brain, and fired. At the gun's discharge the bear pitched over, gasping and pawing at its eyes, which had been burned by flame from the shot. Searles threw in another cartridge, expecting to shoot at the base of the bear's brain. The shell was one of the doctored kind, and had not been dented enough to explode, though he tried it twice more. The bear rose and turned on him; Searles thrust the rifle barrel into its mouth, but the weapon was brushed aside and he was knocked to the ground. The bear bit the lower part of his face, then with another bite injured his windpipe and laid the jugular vein bare. It next grabbed his shoulder, causing blood to spurt in a curve above him. As this mouthful of flesh was pulled clear Searles rolled over; his coat was now bunched on his back and the bear bit into it, then went away.

"What does a man think when a bear is tearing him to pieces?" said he in telling the story. "I thought: 'Twenty years in California to be killed at last by a grizzly!' I was disgusted."

Though he was as near dead as alive, his discomfort saved him. His wet clothing began to freeze, and cold sealed up the torn bloodvessels. In spite of his shocking condition, his jaw broken and dangling, his throat torn, his left arm useless, he managed to get to his horse, mount it and reach camp. He traveled three days to a Los Angeles hospital. There he heard the surgeons consulting as to how best to make him comfortable during the short time he had to live. While they talked of boring through sound teeth to wire the broken lower jaw, he managed to kick one of them from the bedside. Then came one who patched and pieced and plastered and in a few weeks Searles was up and around.

Later in his office at the borax plant he displayed a bottle in which were twenty-one fragments of bone taken from his jaw. His rifle showed the bites of the bear. His jawbone showed depressions where bony material had been removed, and his neck was stiffened from effects of the bite. Nevertheless he lived to a ripe old age, as venturesome and daring as in his youth.



during the fight. A young man named Hall said that fifty looked good to him and, despite arguments, arranged for his perilous ride.

Another tale of the region involves a grizzly. Mexican residents of the young town of Bakersfield had as one of the features of their September 16, 1874, celebration, a fight between a bull and a bear. They lassoed a 600-pound grizzly, brought him in, and chained him to an anchorage in the center of an arena they had built. Before the fight began, announcement was made that fifty dollars would be paid to anyone who would ride the bull

While the band played lively Spanish music, the door to the corral was opened, and through it charged a large black bull. The tips of its horns had been sawed off, and dripped blood. As it passed under a platform, Hall jumped astride and seized the surcingles, which bore double handholds. The bull made several jumps and plunges without dislodging Hall before it spied the bear. It charged the bear and knocked it over. The bear, on its back, used its long claws with fearful effect, disemboweling its antagonist. Hall was thrown high in the air, and landed unhurt. While the two vicious animals fought he scrambled from the ring.

This story, which was published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that month, was given to its writer direct by an eyewitness.

In the herd of a pioneer cattleman of northern Owens Valley was a bull that was in truth the monarch of all he surveyed so far as he saw fit to enforce the claim. Owner Givens had no objection to the bull vanquishing all bovine interference within his domain but was less favorable to its defiance of all human control. Herders, mounted or on foot, were chased until they wanted "nuthin' to do with that critter." When roundup time came, the presence of the unconquered warrior meant trouble for everybody.

One day Givens and a friend undertook to herd the animal, and soon found that they had enough. Their horses, if not themselves, were too valuable to risk, and they withdrew from the neighborhood. A vaquero named Russell Briggs arrived on the scene, and scoffed at the idea of their being driven off by the bull.

Dismounting, he drew a bowie knife and walked out to where the bull bellowed defiance to all comers. The bull promptly charged. Briggs jumped aside at the right instant, and as the animal passed he slashed it across the face. The bull wheeled and again came at him, receiving another slash. This was repeated several times, the bull showing no loss of courage. Within twenty minutes the bull was cut and slashed so much that from loss of blood it fell in its tracks. Briggs fell once as he dodged aside, but escaped uninjured. He offered to bet a thousand dollars that with no weapon but a knife he could whip any bull in California. The amount of the bet would not have been important to him if he had lost.

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