

NOTICIAS del PUERTO de MONTEREY

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Charles C. Nahl (attributed to), "Peter Rescued From the Grizzly," print, 1853. From: A. Delano *Pen Knife Sketches* (Sacramento, 1853). See story pg. 7.

The Grizzly Bear In California Art

By George E. Everett

Did you know that the "Teddy Bear" was named for Teddy Roosevelt after he prevented a wounded bear from being killed by dogs on a hunting trip to Mississippi in 1902? Of course you did! But did you also

know that T.R., in a less kind and gentle mood, shot grizzly bears on his North Dakota ranch in the 1880s? We shouldn't be too critical of our "most-environmentally-conscious president" for he was only behaving like a man of his time, and actually we should give him credit for writing one of the best books on the grizzly bear.¹ It has been said that "besides being a vigorous and successful hunter, Roosevelt was accurate and judicious as a naturalist-observer."²

By the time he arrived at Monterey on an official presidential visit in 1903, Roosevelt couldn't have hunted grizzly bears even if he had wanted to because there weren't any left. The last one in Monterey County was killed in 1886.³ As a species, the California grizzly bear, *ursus arctos californicus*, outlived Roosevelt, who died in 1919. But not for long. The last of the Rocky Mountain grizzly of Montana and Wyoming, and the Mexican grizzly of Chihuahua survive.⁴ The "grizzly" bears we see in zoos today are either brown bears or Kodiak bears from Alaska - slightly larger and more distant cousins of *ursus arctos californicus*.⁵ The last California grizzly to die in captivity was "Monarch," now stuffed and displayed at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco.⁶ Ironically, Monarch died in 1911, the same year that the Bear Flag, with its prominent grizzly image, became the official state emblem.⁷ It's as if Californians, guilty of grizzly genocide, wanted to atone for their sins by elevating the bear to supreme symbolic status. One wonders if the California condor, the tule elk, the mountain lion, the spotted owl, and other "threatened" species will be added to our state flag after they, too, are sacrificed to hunters, loggers, and developers.

Not only is the California grizzly extinct, but its habitat is all but destroyed, so it would be useless to import Montana grizzlies which require equally vast amounts of elbow room. No one will ever again see these magnificent shaggy creatures freely roaming the full length of our state, digging for the roots they savored, feeding off the carcasses of beached whales, and defending their cubs with unmatched ferociousness, but otherwise living in sublime symbiosis with their fellow non-human animals.

Fortunately, while Californians were busy exterminating their grizzly bears, they were also busy memorializing them in scientific studies, illustrated stories, and historical monuments. It can even be said that the grizzly bear is the most popular wild animal in California literature and art. It is not only the "state animal," appearing on the state flag and seal, and on numerous letterheads, labels, and logos; it is not only the official mascot of the State University, appearing on everything from sweatshirts to parade floats; it has been the subject of hundreds of illustrations in books and journals, and of dozens of paintings and drawings dealing with early California life. We can only touch on a few of the highlights in this brief history of "the art of the California grizzly bear."

The Painted Rock

The pictograph of "Xus," The Bear, found at Painted Rock in eastern San Luis Obispo County (fig. 1) could be the oldest grizzly bear image in

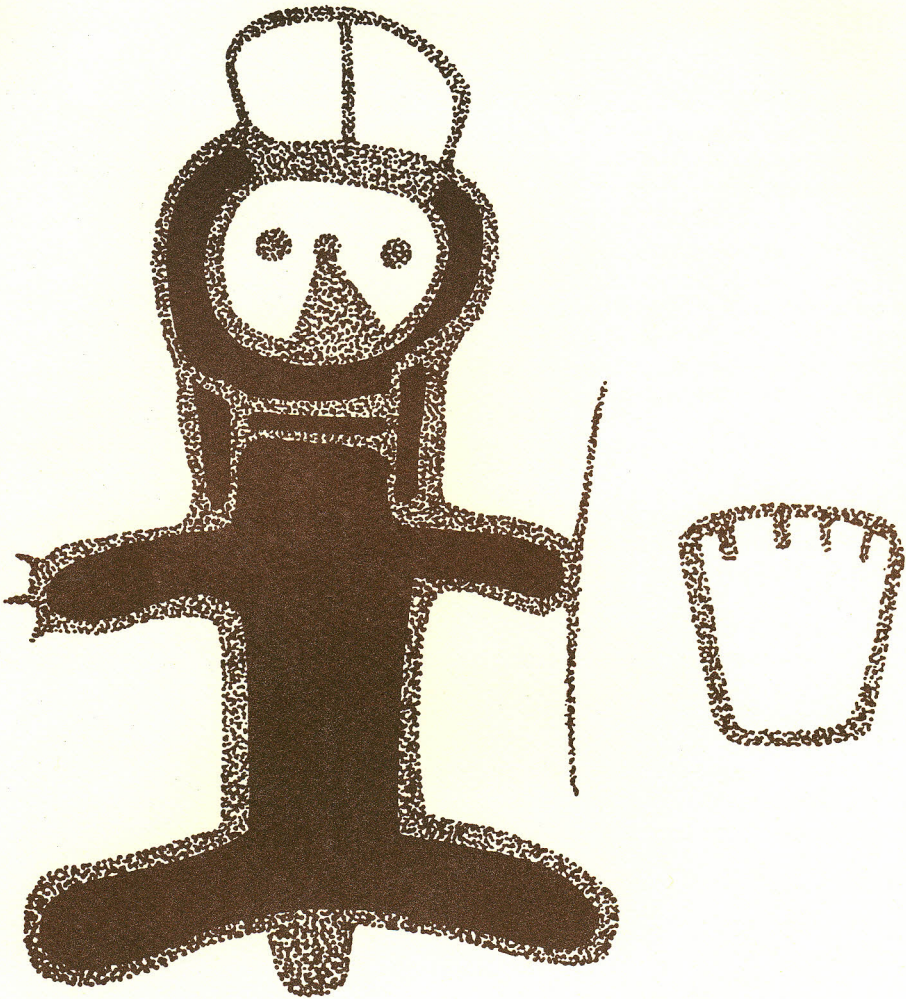


Fig. 1: California Indian Art: "Xus" (Bear), wall painting, 3.5' h.; no date; located at Painted Rock, San Luis Obispo County.
From a drawing by Georgia Lee.

California. These wall paintings have not been dated, but are presumed to be the work of Chumash or Yokut Indians who shared the site for ritual purposes long before the first Spanish settlements of the 1770s. The bear is depicted in semi-human form. The four legs, stubby tail, the three claws of its right forepaw are clearly *ursine*, and the artist has provided a painted paw print on the wall nearby to identify it as such; but the upright pose, the mask-like face, the bow-like object in its left forepaw, and the crown-like treatment of its ears, suggest that this is not the image of a simple bear, but of a bear-shaman, or human witch-doctor in bear form. These religious healers, common to California Indian culture, often took the form of grizzly bears, and were thus to be

feared and/or admired, depending on the circumstances. According to one legend:

"...one has always to watch shamans, for sometimes they turn evil...they take on the character of bears. The people they touch begin to die...it is sometimes necessary for the people...to kill the shaman."¹⁰

When the Spaniards arrived, the introduction of Christianity eclipsed the authority of the shamans and drove the native mythology underground, but the Native Americans of California never ceased to treat the grizzly bear with respect and prudence-something the Europeans, and particularly the "Americans" of the late nineteenth century, never learned to do.

Early European Artists

Bears are difficult to draw because they do not have slender legs, long necks and tails, or horns, like other large mammals, but offer the artist a compact furry mass relieved only by snout and claws which are not sufficiently prominent to create a distinctive outline. Thus the artist of the grizzly bear must either exaggerate claws, teeth, and eyes, or distort the overall shape to achieve an expressive effect. The two earliest European drawings of grizzly bears demonstrate this difficulty (figs. 2a and 2b).

Louis Choris made his drawings for the first published picture of a California grizzly while acting as official artist for the Otto von Kotzebue expedition to North America in 1815 and 1816.¹¹ The bear's snout looks more *canine* than *ursine*, and the frozen pose and fuzzy pelt suggest a stuffed pull-toy without wheels rather than the young grizzlies we know from later photographs. The artist of Godman's *ursus horribilis* also fails to convince us, but in a different way. He exaggerates the wild hairiness of the bear, its large head with ferocious open eyes, and its formidable claws as if to frighten us into believing that the grizzly really is horrible. But the effect is grotesque and naive, rather than frightening.

The Bear Flag

The best-known "botched" bear image in the history of California art is the one painted by William Todd, brother of Mary Todd Lincoln, on the flag used at the Sonoma revolt of 1846. Experts disagree as to whether the grizzly bear was chosen for the flag because the rebels wore full beards, causing them to be called "los osos" by the Mexicans, or because the animal was a symbol of strength and fortitude. As one of the rebels later told H. H. Bancroft: "A bear always stands its ground, and as long as the stars shine, we stand for a cause."¹² Whatever the image was supposed to mean, it was so ineptly drawn that the Mexicans jokingly referred to it as "The Pig Flag."¹³

The bear on Todd's flag has undergone many changes since 1846. Sometimes it has been posed *rampant* (rising on its hind legs), sometimes *passant* (walking), as Todd apparently intended, sometimes

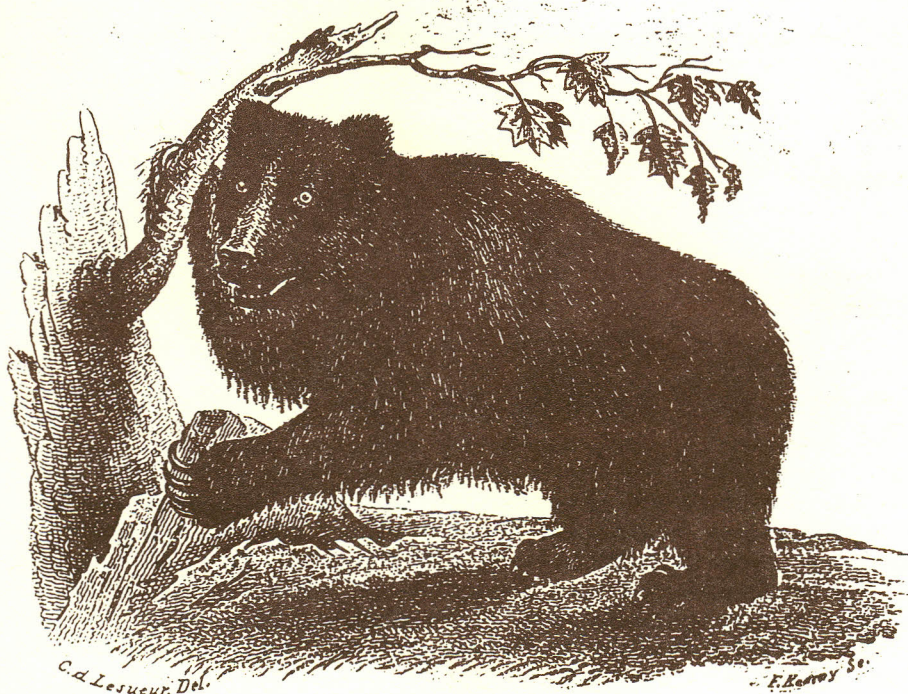
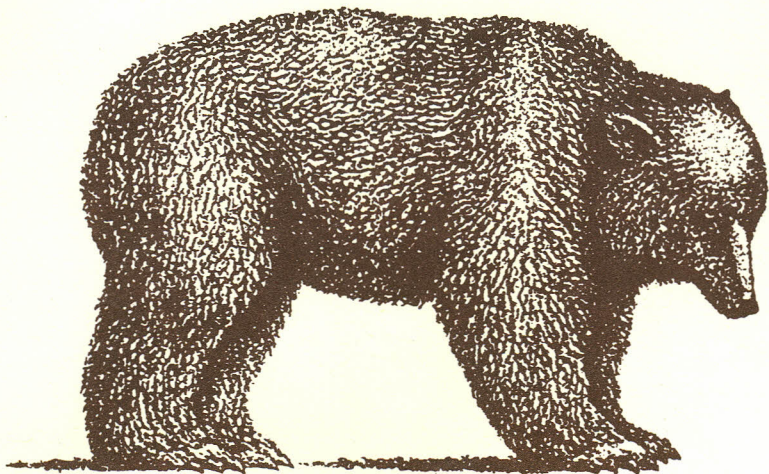


Fig. 2: (a) Louis Choris, "The Grey Bear of Northern California," drawing, 1816. From: L. Choris, *Voyage pittoresque autour du monde* (Paris, 1822).
 (b) Anonymous, "The Horrible Bear," print. From: J. Godman, *American Natural History* (Phila., 1831).

attendant (standing still), and sometimes even *couchant* (lying down)!¹⁴ At one stage in the development of our state flag, the bear was almost more *lupine* than *ursine*, resembling a cross between a bear and a wolf.¹⁵ Finally in 1853, the design for the Bear Flag was standardized in its present form by Don G. Kelley of the California Academy of Sciences,

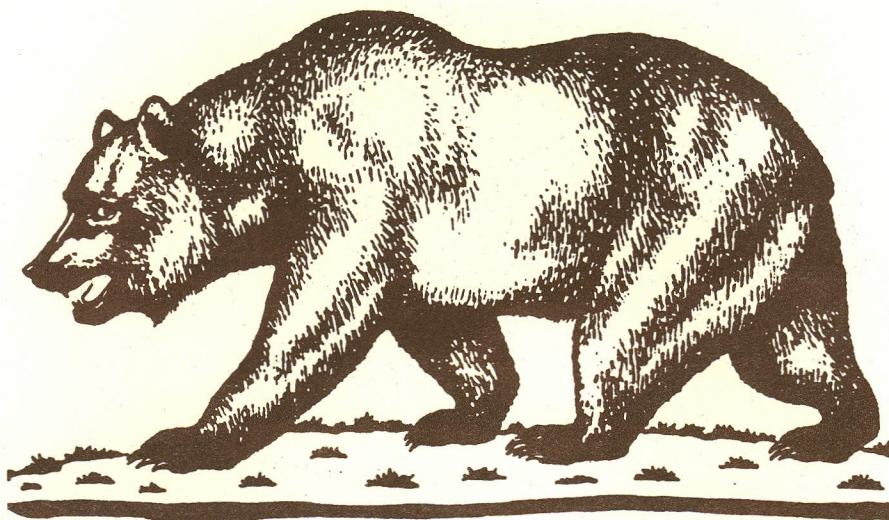


Fig. 3: Don G. Kelley, "The State Animal," drawing, 1953. From: *California Blue Book*, 1958.

whose grizzly bear drawing (fig. 3) was based largely on the realistic watercolor painted by Charles Nahl in 1855, and now in Colton Hall Museum, Monterey.

The Great Seal

The other official state emblem-The Great Seal - has a much smaller grizzly bear image, but one that has undergone an equally interesting metamorphosis. When U.S. Army Major Robert S. Garnett's design for a proposed state seal was submitted to the State Constitutional Convention at Monterey in 1849, it included a small-scale bear standing in the foreground, its head lowered to eat the fruit of a California grapevine. The original drawing is lost, but impressions made from the engraving of it show that the bear was not very well drawn and that its legs were mostly cut off by the frame.¹⁶ The grizzly bear had been suggested for the seal by delegate J. Snyder, one of the Bear Flag rebels, but delegate O. Wozencraft thought a large bag of gold would be a more appropriate symbol for the state, while delegate M. Vallejo insisted that the bear be restrained by a *reata* in the hands of a California vaquero. Both amendments were rejected, and Garnett's bear was accepted with the following official description: "... at her (Minerva's) feet crouches a grizley (sic) feeding upon clusters from a grapevine."¹⁷

Subsequently, the Great Seal was subjected to many changes, including one in which the animal looks more like a frog than a bear. The profusion of different bear images prompted this remark in the San Francisco Recorder of Feb. 4, 1937:

"What is the bear doing?...In some versions the rascal is lying down, apparently sound asleep-hibernating al fresco, so-to-speak - in others he is standing up. In some he appears to be smiling, in others growling. And in all versions, he looks something like a cross between a wolf and a boar, though he is probably a grizzly."

By 1891, the seal had been changed to improve the bear's pose and position: it had stopped eating and raised its head, and its body was raised to reveal more of the legs. When the Great Seal was standardized in 1937, the grizzly bear was shown this way (fig. 4). Unfortunately, this bear seems too tame to suggest strength and fortitude, and as Storer and Tevis point out: "On all seals, the grizzly is a dumpy figure, poorly representative of his race."¹⁹

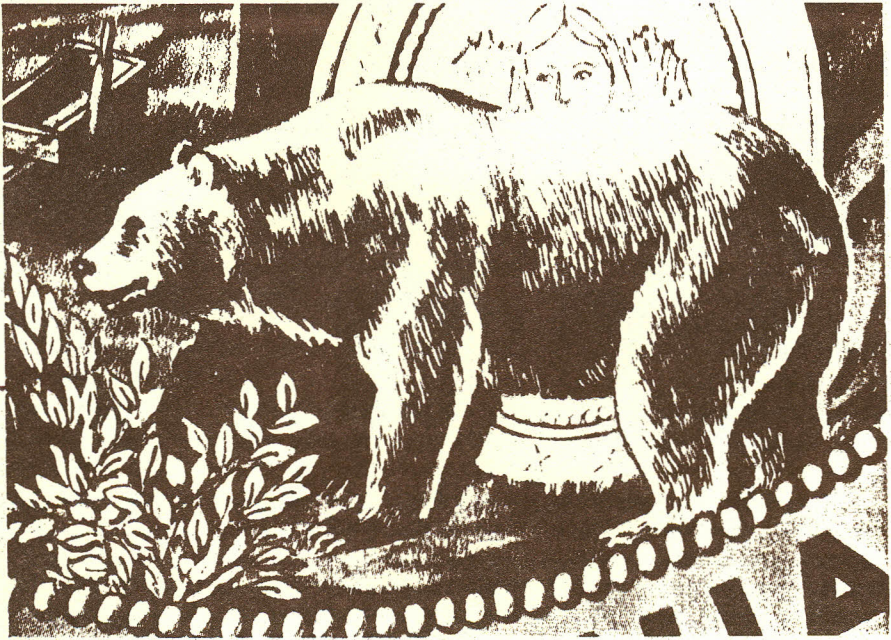


Fig. 4: James Cairns, "Grizzly Bear" (detail of the official Great Seal of California), 1937.

Grizzly Bears and People

Pictures of people with grizzly bears fall into five categories: encounters, hunts, captures, bull fights, and taming. In the "encounter" category, a striking example is the illustration in Delano's *Pen Knife Sketches* showing a colossal grizzly about to dispatch the father of a California mining family while one courageous daughter rushes forward to fire point-blank at the bear's head (see pic., front cover). The

picture has been attributed to Charles Nahl,²⁰ and is rendered in his best romantic-realistic style, in which scenes were based on real events and natural forms, but exaggerated for dramatic effect. The bear is so furious that the hair on its back stands straight up; the father is paralyzed with fear since the knife in his left hand has proved useless; and obviously the daughters are totally dependent on their rifle. What a thrill this scene must have given to readers "back east" who were avid readers of such Gold Rush stories.

THE LESLIE'S ILLUSTRATED NEWSPAPER, August 11, 1858

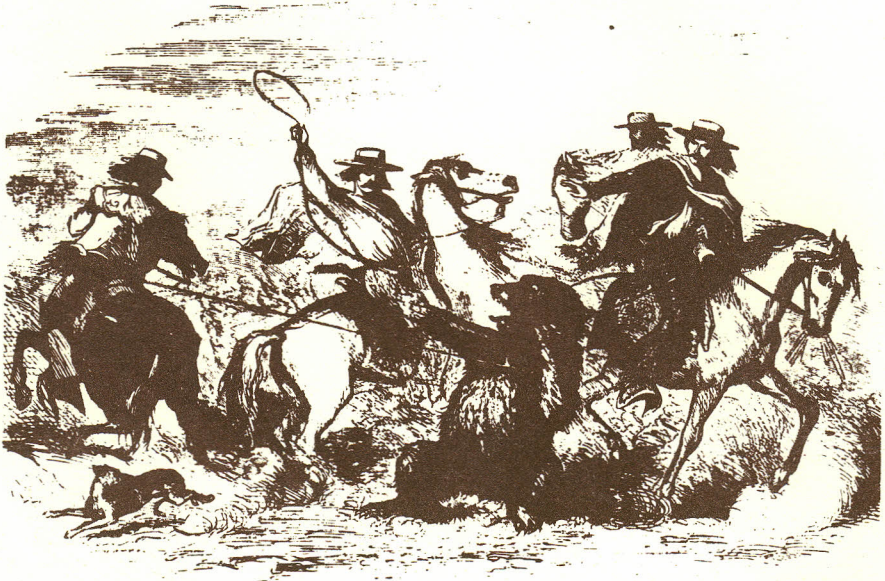


Fig. 5: Anonymous, "Grizzly Bear Hunt in the South," print, 1858. From: Frank Leslie's

Since "the capture of the grizzly bear" was the theme General Vallejo had advocated for the Great Seal, he would have admired the engraving showing four Mexican vaqueros lassoing a grizzly with their *reatas* (fig. 5). Again, the style is Nahl's, but with less exaggeration. The violent portrayal of the bear, already ensnared by two *reatas* but unwilling to submit to capture, is contrasted to the cool, yet determined demeanor of the horsemen encircling him. No guns are in evidence here: only cooperative skill with the rope and the horse is necessary to capture the bear, who is not to be killed, but saved for a bull-and-bear fight.²¹

Jo Mora's rather corny re-telling of a bull-and-bear fight story is far surpassed by his marvellous illustration of the event (fig. 6). Though Mora never witnessed any of these fights, his insistence on historical accuracy and his keen eye for natural form are combined here to create a truly convincing scene. Each animal is drawn with perfect anatomical correctness, and the two are posed so that the viewer can see every necessary detail. The feet of the two animals are shown chained together so that they cannot escape each other, and the artist captures the significant moment when the bull has just gored the bear, and the latter has responded by clamping his jaw on the bull's neck. We cannot

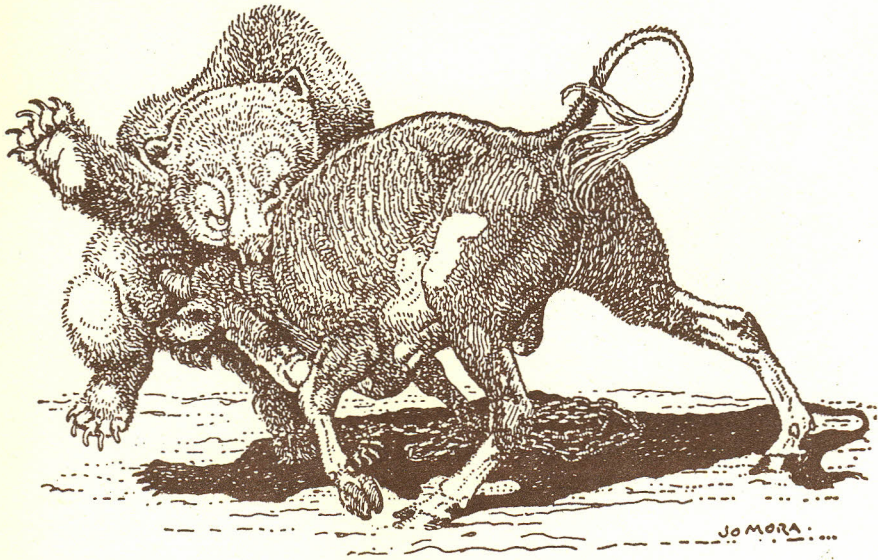


Fig. 6: Jo Mora, "For the Heavyweight Crown - Toro vs. Oso," drawing, 1949. From: J. Mora, *Californios* (New York, 1949).

see the bear's teeth, but we can feel the strength of his bite through the expression on his face. The bull's sharp hooves are of little use to him because he cannot rise on his hind legs; but the bear's paws, with their three-inch claws, are ready to strike. Needless to say, in these contests the bear almost always won, even if he received a fatal goring in the process.

Taming The Grizzly Bear

No account of the California grizzly bear in art would be complete without a reference to Grizzly Adams, the mountain man who captured, tamed, and exhibited these animals in the third quarter of the last century.²³ Adam and his trained bears were the subject of many drawings by Charles Nahl, such as that in fig. 8a. It shows the hunter with "Ben Franklin," one of the grizzlies he raised from a cub and trained to help him capture more bears.²⁴ The cover of the "dime novel" in fig. 8b shows Adams and one of his bears performing at Barnum's Circus in the 1850s. The bear-tamer not only dressed in colorful costumes for these appearances, but often expected the bears to do the same. One circus illustration even shows two huge grizzlies dressed as a woman wearing glasses and a man smoking a pipe!²⁵ As if the extermination of the California grizzly bear were not enough, their captors had to add insult to injury by subjecting them to ridicule in the process.



GRIZZLY ADAMS AND BEN FRANKLIN

Fig. 7(a)

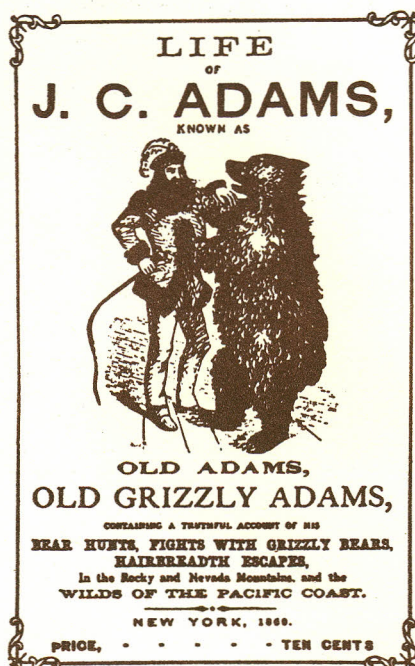


Fig 7(b)

FOOTNOTES

1. *Hunting the Grisly and Other Sketches*, New York, 1893.
2. Tracy I. Storer and Loyd P. Tevis, Jr., *California Grizzly* (Berkeley, 1955), p. 298.
3. Donald M. Craig, "The Only Good Grizzly is a Dead One," *Noticias...Monterey*, June, 1960, p. 2.
4. Storer and Tevis, *op. cit.*, p. 292.
5. Noel Simon and Paul Geroudet, *Last Survivors* (New York, 1970), pp. 35-39.
6. Storer and Tevis, *op. cit.*, p. 5, et seq..

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7. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
8. J. N. Bowman, "The Bear Flag," *California Blue Book*, 1958, p. 3.
9. Myron Angel, *The Painted Rock*, San Luis Obispo, 1910.
10. Malcom Margolin, *The Ohlone Way* (Berkeley, 1978), p. 19.
11. Storer and Tevis, *op. cit.*, pp. 301-02.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 273.
13. Todd's flag was destroyed in the San Francisco fire of 1906, but a replica had already been made by the Society of California Pioneers for its Sonoma Chapter in 1896. This can be seen in the Sonoma Mission today (*ibid.*, p. 275).
14. The latter pose was used in an ad for California Tomorrow, with the caption: "For a Better California Tomorrow, We'd Better Wake Up Today" (*New York Times*, May 30, 1990, p. A11).
15. The 1899 marching flag of the Native Sons of the Golden West (Bowman, *op. cit.*, p. 3).
16. J. N. Bowman, "The Great Seal of California," *California Blue Book*, 1958, p. 10.
17. Storer and Tevis, *op. cit.*, p. 270.
18. The Great Seal design used as the logo for *California Historian* magazine, which differs from the regulation design in many other ways as well.
19. Storer and Tevis. *op. cit.*, p. 272.
20. *Ibid.*, fig. 24.
21. The process of capturing bears in this manner was described in great detail by William R. Garner (*Journal of Commerce*, New York, July 30, 1847). The description was reprinted with a new illustration by F. Peterson in *Noticias...Monterey*, June, 1960, pp. 1-4.
22. *Californios* (New York, 1949), pp. 134-35.
23. The best account of Adams is by Theodore H. Hittell: *The Adventures of James Capen Adams, mountaineer and grizzly bear hunter of California*, San Francisco, 1860.
24. Storer and Tevis, *op. cit.*, p. 220, passim.
25. *Ibid.*, fig. 27.

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