

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Bearded Padre

In 1865, the mountain country across the Salinas river was infested with bears that proved very destructive to the livestock of the residents there. R.T. Buell was then occupying the Buena Vista Rancho, near where Carlisle S. Abbott lived. When Mr. Abbott wrote his "Recollections of a California Pioneer," he included an account of a bull and bear fight which he witnessed at the Hilltown crossing of the Salinas river.

Some of the vaqueros planned to catch a bear which had been killing their cattle. They built a six-by-eight foot pen, the floor and all made of logs about one foot in diameter, with a heavy plank sliding door held up by a figure four, having a spindle five feet long extending into the trap. In this pen they tied a young calf - which set up a lively bawling for its mother - and one of the largest cinnamon bears ever seen in the neighborhood walked into the pen, the door closed behind him, and he was a prisoner. He was transferred to an iron cage and taken to the Davis place at Hilltown, where cage and all were placed in a big corral.

A wild bull was now put into the corral, and notices stuck up in Castroville, Monterey, Watsonville, and around the country, announcing that there would be an old-fashioned bull and bear fight the following Sunday at twelve o'clock at the Davis place; and hundreds of people came.

The bull's horns had been filed until they were very sharp; and when everything was in readiness the vaqueros lassoed and threw the bull and tied to one of his front feet the end of a chain about seventy-five feet long, after which the bear was let out of his cage, lassoed, and thrown, and the other end of the chain tied to his front foot. This was to prevent either from running away from the other, and to insure a fight. But for this chain both animals were now loose in the corral.

Nor was there lack of music, for a white-haired Mexican from Castroville - sitting astride a pinto pony as old as its rider - had brought with him a cracked fiddle, and he started a lively tune, making that old fiddle fairly squeal.

The betting was two to one in favor of the bear when the fight started, Mr. Abbott recorded. There was a barn with a hay loft in it on one side of the corral, which was open from the eaves to a point about six feet from

the ground, and this was full of hay and constituted the reserved section, which was occupied by women and children, who laughed and cheered when the bull was getting the best of it, and who would cry when the bear was having the advantage.

There were 'salvos' of "Bravo Toro!" when the bull had the best of it, and "Bravo Oso!" when Bruin had things his way; and the fight certainly was fierce enough. Finally, when the bear, standing on his hind legs, got his "arms" around the bull's neck, and a vicious hold with his teeth, the bull, by a mighty effort, got one of his pointed horns between the bear's ribs, and tossed him three or four feet in the air, which finished the fight; for the bear had been gored in a vital spot, and died in a short time.

So ended the performance for the Sunday.