

January 1, 1954

Last of the Grizzlies

Victor Mossop, a resident of Monterey for almost half a century, has many tales to tell of the early life and happenings in Monterey County at a time when San Benito was also a part of Monterey County. Mr. Mossop was born in San Juan Bautista, the son of pioneer settlers, who on October 23, 1872 moved to Bitterwater Valley from San Andreas. Through all the years he has cherished bits of history, listened to old timers tell stories, saved pictures, and otherwise preserved pioneer history for future generations. Several times we have been fortunate enough to have Victor Mossop relate these stories for the diary or to loan us some of his valued clippings and pictures. Today we have a true story of pioneer days as told by J.M. Chambers, a copy of which was loaned to Mr. Mossop by his cousin Miss Carrie Mathews of Hollister, a niece of the principal character in the story.

This story was recorded by J. M. Chambers, the oldest son of Henry Chambers, who was badly bitten by "Old Clubfoot", the last grizzly bear known to have been seen in San Benito County. It is said that in the fall of 1871 trouble commenced with grizzly bears. At that time there were plenty of bear and deer everywhere. The bear got to be a great nuisance killing cattle, sheep and hogs. It was no uncommon thing to see from one to four bear tracks most any morning within three or four hundred yards of the house, Chambers said.

On one occasion a bear got after a drove of sheep, chasing them about three miles down a canyon killing sixteen head, according to a story published in the Hollister newspaper soon after the occurrence. Another time a bear came into the same camp, scaring the herder up a tree, keeping him there all night. Later Chambers recalled that one of his neighbors, a Mr. Short, living about two and one-half miles from the Chambers' place, reported that a bear had killed one of his cows and he wanted some of his neighbors to go that afternoon and watch for the bear.

When they arrived there they found the bear had been there and had eaten all he wanted and had gone. The men talked the matter over and decided to track the bear down. Henry Chambers and a man named McHaley followed him on the track through the brush.

The other three men, Short and his hired man, Bailey by name, and a man named Button, kept outside the brush.

According to Chambers' story as told to his son, they had not gone far when, "Pa and McHaley saw the bear standing broadside to them. Pa having a large rifle and being a good marksman, took the first shot. All of them had muzzle-loading rifles as there were no breech-loading guns at that time. The sun was very low and shining in Pa's face, so he over-shot.

"The bear came toward them and raised on his hind legs. Pa had not yet re-loaded his gun, so McHaley took a shot with his small rifle which only angered the bear. The bear turned down the mountain to a low bench where the brush was low and thick. There the other three men quit and left Pa and McHaley to track the bear. They had not gone far when there came a wave of brush toward them, and Pa, being in the lead, jumped to one side as best he could, the bear alighting where Pa had been standing.

"The next jump the bear was on top of him, knocking the gun out of his hand, breaking off the stock and leaving the lock and triggers. Striking Pa down, he chewed him very badly and then went for McHaley, knocking his gun from his hands, biting him on one heel and giving him another flesh wound that made it uncomfortable for him to sit down for some time. His injuries, though painful, were not serious. He must have been running or climbing a tree when that occurred."

"The bear then started to look for the other men, and finding Short's hired man, gave him a backhanded lick knocking him down the hill and filling his eyes with blood." the story relates. "He yelled as if the bear was killing him. Then the bear went on his way again looking for the remainder of his pursuers, but failing to find them started back for Chambers."

Space today will not permit the story to end, so we must postpone the outcome of the grizzly fight until Monday's issue.