



BEAR FIGHT IN THE CRATERS

By Tom Williams
Sawtooth Miner and Hunting Guide

ONLY A TENDERFOOT will pick a bear fight with a six-shooter. If I had known that in 1905 when I started trapping in the lava beds of eastern Idaho, which have since become the Craters of the Moon National Monument, I would not have had my narrowest escape.

It was along in late November that I nearly cashed in my chips. I had been trying all fall to catch a grizzly bear that ruled the roost. Luck was bad. All I could catch was fox and coyote no matter how many bear traps I set and how plain I made it that I didn't want coyotes getting gummed up in the works. It seems a coyote will be sure to get in a trap if you don't want him to. They are the meanest animals in the country that way.

Bears hole up for the winter rather early in the craters because it starts getting cold as a January pump handle long before Thanksgiving. I had nearly given up hope of skinning out a grizzly rug when I left my cabin early one morning to take a final look at the traps. I had to cross the road to get to the lavas, and right in the middle of the road what should there be but a large bear track. It had been raining the night before so I knew the sign wasn't over two hours old.

You don't need a heavy slug to shoot a coyote so I hadn't packed my rifle. Well, maybe you do. It all depends. That is my excuse for not having a rifle, even if it is not a good reason. All I carried was a

.45 Colt, which is heavy and makes a roar like an old cannon but is a big bluffer in a pinch.

When you have a good dog you have about all the weapons you need for an ordinary trip through the mountains. A dog that is wise to the hills will know about any foreign stuff long before you get into trouble with it.

Mickey, my bear dog, was as good as they come. She never backed down from anything that clawed or roared. She would rather fight than eat. Several times she came near being eaten herself because she didn't have sense enough to let go. Once we were running cougar on Lost River and she chased an old one all over southern Idaho before she caught up with him in a pile of rocks. There was a sort of opening about as big as a skillet. The lion squeezed through with Mickey right at his heels biting the fuzz off at every jump.

I told her that was far enough and that she had no business going underground for a cat. If they wanted to play that way that was their trick and they could stay hid. Mickey just shook her head and said she could handle any cougar that went in a gopher hole like that. Before I could stop her she went into the cave, too.

In about a minute there was the most awful howling you ever heard. I figured that was the end of my dog. Out they came, and I'll be damned if the lion wasn't in the lead trying to get back to the trees. Mickey was talking for all she was worth. She was cut up pretty bad but too mad to know it. That's the kind of dog Mickey was. Whip her weight in wildcats.

So I didn't feel scared about meeting up with a bear as long as she was on my side. On the other hand, that bear track looked mighty large.

I told my dog we ought to go back for the real artillery because we were a cinch to meet that bear. Mickey looked up and sneered. I don't let my dog call me a sissy, so we went off into the craters.

I could see old Skeleton Butte in the east. The nearer cinders of what they called Blue Dragon Flow were purple in a cold way. Nothing was stirring but a few big bats and some rabbits running in the sagebrush. Mickey and I had the place to ourselves. That is, the two of us and the bear track did. We knew the bear that made it was not long out of sight.

By taking a wide circle I hit the trapline at the far end. I wanted to give the bear plenty of time to mix with one of the traps in the hollow if she was going to do any business with me at all.

In the first set, just as I had expected, there was a danged

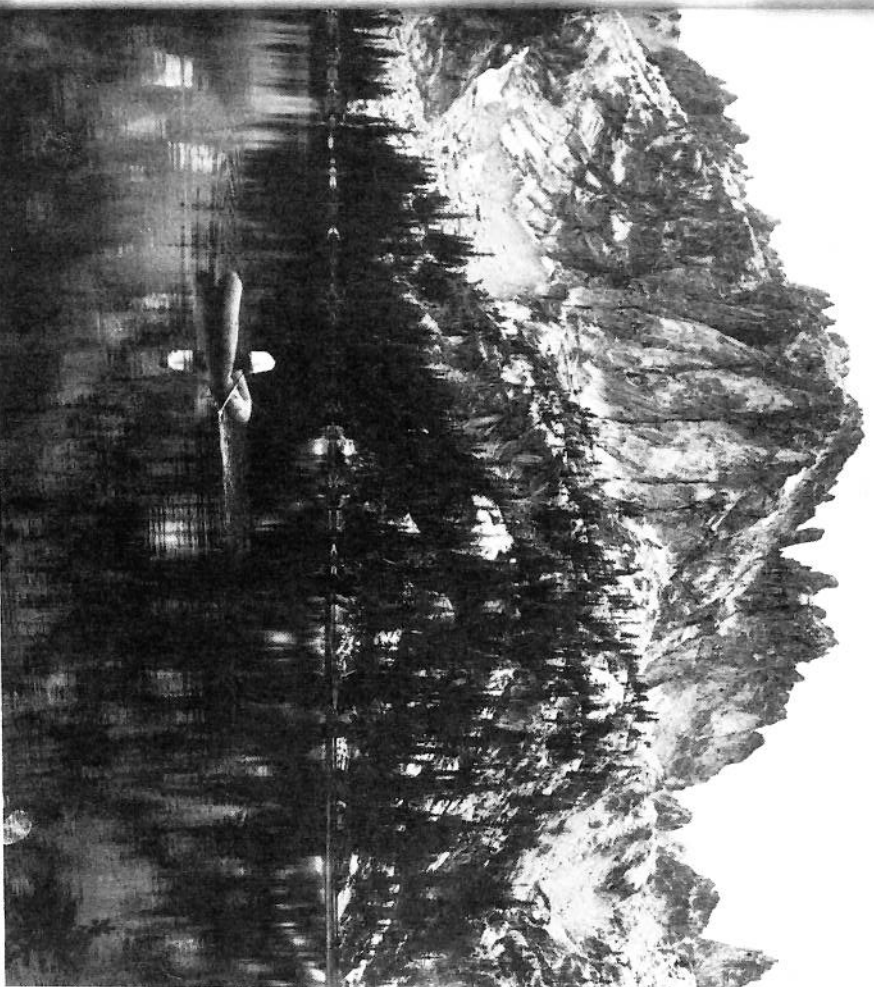


Photo by Ernie Day

Baron Lake and Mount Veritas

coyote with both his front legs caught in my bear trap. I let him have one behind the ear with a club to put him out of his misery. I didn't dare shoot the pistol for fear it would scare the bear out of the valley.

The next trap was sprung. Nothing was left but a fox foot. It was cut clean off. I felt sorry about that, but a fox should have been more foxy than to try to steal bait out of a bear trap. Lucky it didn't catch him on the snout. Lucky for the fox, that is. As for me it meant blowing about \$50. Foxes were worth something in those days.

I stalled around as long as I could, resetting both traps and mak-

ing a new lug for one in case any more bear came around and started dancing on the pans. I was really itching to peek over the ridge where the bear was most likely to be. Mickey kept running ahead and sniffing. She whined like there was a bear right close. I couldn't smell, but I had a hunch she was right. I was excited. I hadn't bagged a real good bear for three years.

Scrambling low, we topped the rim of an old crater. Nothing was in sight at first, but there was a racket going on behind a ledge. Somebody was pounding on the lava like a jackhammer. I was ready to turn loose a blast on a trapline jumper when the biggest bear I ever saw lurched around a stump and let out a roar that nearly started Big Butte spouting lava again.

She was a monster grizzly, mad as six hatters. Her jaws were foaming, and she roared and fought the trap that held her by a front leg. That trap weighed better than fifty pounds, and she swung it like a bracelet. She banged it against the lava as though she would bust the bottom out of the crater or snap that steel into chunks the size of bird shot.

I crouched down and wondered about my hunch that bears were too big to handle with a six-shooter. I had heard of people killing bears with a pistol, but it didn't seem reasonable at the time. Mister, she was a whopper.

Mickey didn't think so. She wagged her tail and rubbed against my leg a second or two. She whooped it up straight for the bear. Either the bear didn't give a hoot about the dog or she didn't see Mickey, because the first thing I knew Mickey had her by the breeches.

The bite didn't go deep. Mickey was smart enough in a bear fight not to hang on long at a time. She knew more about the business than I did, but her brains leaned more to the sport of the thing than the danger.

Things began to look bad when the old bear biffed Mickey a good one. That made me mad. I slipped into the crater and picked up an ax where I had cut some trees for the set. As soon as I got close enough to take good aim and still be far enough away to run for it, I fired a couple of shots into the bear.

All they did was make her snort and come for me. Even on three legs and held back by the trap and clog, she made time too danged fast. I dodged behind a bush and let her have two more right in the chest. Might as well have been cream puffs. Then I emptied the gun right at the bear's head within six feet of me. One shot took her in the nose. Did that make her mad! She was about as

boiled up as a bear ever gets, but she didn't seem to be slowing down.

I knew I would soon be lying under a bush without a funeral if I didn't find something else to do right now. I saw a small place where the lava had run when the crater was active. A little tree had fallen across the break. With a nickel's worth of luck, that would give me a getaway. I figured the clog trailing the trap would catch under the tree so I would have time to climb out of the hole. I didn't waste any time thinking about it; I made for the hollow.

I had to jump. The bear hit me at the same time. It wasn't a gentle tap. She hit better than I jumped. It wouldn't have taken more than a six-inch poke with that trap to knock me cold. As it was, the old devil reared back on her hip pockets and let drive. I hardly felt it coming. That was all I knew for probably two hours. I was out like a light.

When I came to I found I had turned completely over and lit sitting down with my back to the bear and just out of reach. She was a couple of yards away, standing on her hind legs and straining at the clog. Her mouth was big as a furnace door and twice as red inside. There were slashes across the tree and a pile of lava chips where she had tried to get at me.

I was pretty groggy but not so stupid as to stay there long. I grabbed the ax and busted the grizzly as hard as I could, right between the eyes. I had to throw the ax to do it. She stopped roaring and yelled "Oh," just like a human. Yes, she did. Then she died and fell over the tree. I dropped on top of her and passed out again.

Mickey came up and licked my hand. That brought me around. I got up and went over to a rock pile and sat down and tried to fill my pipe. I shook so much I spilled the tobacco. I knew how close I had come to being the one that was dead. Mickey kept trying to tell me what a fine fight we had been in, but I told her if the Lord would forgive me that time for trying to shoot a grizzly with a pistol He wouldn't have to do it again.

I still sweat ice sometimes when I look at the bear hide on the cabin floor in Sawtooth Valley. She spread over eight feet across the shoulders. I guess I wasn't born to be killed by a bear.

It wasn't until the afternoon after the fight that I discovered she had hit me twice. She must have raked pretty close with her free paw while she swung the trap with the other because my pants were ripped and there wasn't enough left of my shirttail to wipe my skinning knife.

— This story was related to Dick d'Easum by Tom Williams at Stanley in the winter of 1931.