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BEAR CUBS

I SPENT THE FALL OF 1925 in the harvest fields of southern Saskatchewan. It was a very satisfactory change for me to be rid of the responsibilities and regimentation of the Game Branch and to be once more close to the good land, gathering its produce, meeting new people, and making new friends.

There I met Vern Kingsberg and Ridge Brown, who hailed from Dundurn, Saskatchewan. They wanted to go to Little Bear Lake in the coming winter to do some commercial fishing and asked me to join them in a partnership. This was just made to order for me, and I accepted, while planning to do some trapping on the side to give me some extra income. It was generally known that commercial fishermen made poor wages by the time the net profits of a fishing season were allocated between the partners.

At that time, Little Bear Lake was an excellent source of lake trout. The lake had never been commercially fished to any extent before our arrival, and we were quite successful in our fishing venture as far as tonnage was concerned. The largest trout netted by our party weighed in at forty-three pounds dressed. We were able to get a team and sleigh in with our outfit and also used this mode of freighting to transport our fish to market in Prince Albert. However, our "net" profit was small.

For the balance of the winter, I went trapping with George Patterson, whom I had met earlier in the winter. We trapped the country between Big Sandy Lake (then known as Big Bear Lake) and Fishing Lakes in a

country so beautiful that Fishing Lakes are now part of the Nipawin Provincial Park. We had a fair catch of lynx that winter, and we trapped muskrats on the Ballantyne River in the month of March, but the catch was small. In the spring Patterson left for Kinistino, Saskatchewan. I accompanied him as far as the White Fox River, where we spent a short time trapping muskrats, until Patterson decided to move on to Kinistino by way of Nipawin. I then began to pick up all my traps and prepared to walk overland to Prince Albert.

On my way westward the next day, I spotted two bear cubs climbing in a large spruce tree. Now, I knew that a market existed for live bear cubs and that if I could capture them unhurt I could increase my not-so-robust income for the season.

I would need help, what with the old mother bear probably lurking in the brush somewhere and the amazing agility of the cubs to consider. I had heard of a work crew cutting out the north boundary of the Fort-à-la-Corne Forest Preserve and knew they were not far from me because I had heard them chopping wood that morning. I walked about a mile to where I could hear someone felling a tree. From there, I soon located the camp and found the work crew.

I explained to these men that I needed their help to capture a couple of bear cubs. They were ready to accommodate me, since one of their number had shot the mother bear earlier in the day. They were now just going in for their supper and asked me to join them. I was in luck again, for no one was left out at mealtime.

The whole crew joined in the bear chase. One took an axe, and we all marched off to the site where I had last seen the bear cubs. They were on the ground when we arrived but scrambled up a tree at our arrival, not an ordinary tree but one of the tallest spruces I have ever seen. When the men cut down the tree, I grabbed one of the cubs and put it into a big burlap sack the men had given to me at the camp. The second cub was much more active and gave us the slip many times before we got it up a small tree, which we cut partly so that we could lower the cub gently to the ground. I reached up, took it by the neck and was able to put it into the bag after a brisk tussle, though it scratched my hands considerably before I could let go. However, I was happy that I was now the owner of two live and lively cubs. The men of the work crew wanted no part of my livestock. They had come along solely for the entertainment.

Now that I had the bears, I would have to feed and care for them until I could find a buyer. I had to find milk for the cubs. The site of their capture

was south of where the town of Choceland is today. At that time, there were only a few homesteaders moving into the area, but one day I had heard a cowbell some place back in the bush. Now, I struck out in the direction where I had heard this sound. I found a cabin in the dark and asked the man who answered my knock if he had any milk for sale. This man had no milking cattle, but he directed me to his nearby neighbour, who did possess a milch cow.

I came upon this man's place as he was about to enter his log cabin with an armful of wood. As it was very dark, I called out a greeting from a distance. At first he thought I was his neighbour, but I explained that I was a stranger, a trapper from the North with two small bear cubs in a sack and wondering if I might purchase some milk to feed them.

I can still see his reaction. He dropped his armful of stove wood and said, "I can get you some milk for the cubs, but where are you going and where will you stay for the night?"

"I'll camp in the bush somewhere," I replied.

"You are not going to camp in the bush," he said. "Come on into the house so my wife and I can see your bear cubs."

We introduced ourselves. They were Mr. and Mrs. Parker. Soon, they asked me if I had had my supper. When I told them I had some food with me, Mrs. Parker told me not to bother with that and proceeded to cook me a real meal. It was wonderful to meet such fine people and to receive such a warm welcome from absolute strangers. It was like meeting old friends. At that time I had no idea it was the beginning of a long and rewarding relationship with the Parkers. Starting the next winter, he would become my trapping partner.

While I was with the Parkers, the cubs were well fed and kept safe and sound in a wooden piano box. I returned to White Fox River for my tent and traps, for Parker would take me, my outfit and my bear cubs in his team and wagon as far as Henribourg, where he had to go to pick up a load of furniture shipped in from southern Saskatchewan, which had been his home before he came north.

It was the time of the spring thaw and flood, which meant hard travel for the horses. It took us two days to get to Henribourg, and the first night we camped in the vicinity of the present hamlet of Weirdale.

That morning I had no more milk for my growing and ever-hungry cubs. After we had travelled for a few miles, I saw five cows in a clearing and no buildings nearby. I got out my camping tea pail and went milking. A complete stranger to the cow that appeared most likely to give milk,

I approached her, hand held out, uttering what I hoped was friendly conversation. She tossed her head and moved away. As this situation called for some strategy, I returned to the wagon, where I talked to Parker. He took my tea pail and scooped some oats from the sack of oats he carried to keep his horses going.

“Try her with some oats,” he said. “That way you can get better acquainted with Bossy and might get some results.”

I must say that she appreciated the oats and willingly bartered her milk for them. As I walked off with the foamy white bear feed in my tin pail, I looked back at the cow and found that she was looking at me, so that I know we parted the best of friends. I have sometimes wondered what must have been the thoughts of the cow’s owner at milking time, though I had taken only enough milk to tide the bears over until Henribourg, which we reached at about 3 P.M.

Here I hitched a ride to Prince Albert by car. I registered at the Prince Albert Hotel, which today is called the National Hotel. I asked Mr. Biggs, the hotelkeeper, if he had a place where I could keep the cubs for a couple of days.

Mr. Biggs was very accommodating. “Yes,” he replied, “as long as you’re registered at the hotel, you can keep the bears in our coal bin. It’s been cleaned out and isn’t in use in the summer. Provided you care for them yourself and clean up the bin when you leave, there will be no extra charge.”

It was one of those instances of kindness and help that I received from friends, acquaintances, and even complete strangers in those times. I remarked to Parker when he came into town next day how lucky I had been to find a place to keep the cubs while I went looking for a buyer.

I then left for Saskatoon, for it was there I heard there was a market for live bear cubs. A dealer was buying them to fill an order for several small cubs. When I arrived, however, I was informed that the order had been filled.

As I left Prince Albert, Mr. Biggs had warned me he would feed the cubs only until the next day, and he expected me to be back then. I met his deadline, but when I walked into the lobby, he looked at me coldly and said, “You have a big bill to pay for the damage your baby bears have done to my coal bin.”

I thought he was joking. “What can they damage in a room with concrete walls and floor?” I asked.

He then took me down to the coal bin so I could see the damage for myself. Much to my surprise, there was a steam heating pipe that came

through the north wall near the cement floor and ran up the wall to the ceiling, then across the ceiling and out the south wall. The pipes had been covered with a heavy wrapping of insulation, and those pesky cubs had climbed up the pipe and across it many times, thereby tearing off all the insulation! It was a terrible mess.

I went over to see my old friend Mr. Van Ryswick at the confectionery to see if he could suggest someone who might want to buy the cubs. He could not help me in that respect, but he allowed me to keep the cubs temporarily in a shed at his place.

Finally I sold them for a song to Mr. F.F. Lund the taxidermist and creator of the Lund Wildlife Exhibit. Mr. Lund took his exhibit to fairs and exhibitions and used my cubs as a live exhibit to attract customers into his tent, where his mounted wild animals were on display. A leading attraction for several years, the cubs were kept in a unique cage built to closely resemble their natural habitat. Unpeeled poles were mounted as cage bars installed vertically to become realistic tree trunks. They were mounted into a heavy wooden floor, and the ceiling was made of the same plank-weight wood. The ceiling was camouflaged with green spruce boughs to top off the unique cage.

These bears could be observed by all and sundry at no charge. They were one black and one brown bear, and their antics were highly educational and entertaining to a great many people, particularly to school children, who had never seen live bears, and to almost everyone who had never been able to observe them at such close quarters. The highlight of their activities was the wrestling match they staged regularly and voluntarily. They were handsome beasts, well-fed and clean, and they seemed to be quite happy as they flung each other around the cage.

I have often wished, however, that I had left them to roam in the woods. It was another good experience from which I learned something. I am now in complete agreement with the advice to leave young bears and other baby wildlife where you see them alone in the bush. They are probably not orphans because the mother is usually nearby but out of sight.

I also agree with an old saying: "Give your enemy a bear cub or a buck deer fawn to raise as a pet. He is then certain to have a great deal of trouble."

There was one fringe benefit from this episode. Had it not been for the bear cubs, I would never have met Mr. and Mrs. Parker.

