

Bear Stories

By Thomas J. Firth

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Whenever people get together in the backcountry the campfire is usually the center of activity. It's the first place folks gravitate to in the morning for warmth and a hot cup of coffee. It is where most of the cooking is performed and around which most of the meals are eaten. And, it is also the place where we sit around in the evening reflecting upon the day's events and most importantly, swapping tall tales and telling stories.

I suppose it goes back to childhood and our fascination with being scared silly by ghosts, goblins, Bigfoot and any other such creatures we have no control over. Bears certainly can fall into this category since we know they are very real and our control over them in the backcountry is limited at best.

We've always seemed to have this entrancing captivation concerning bear encounters. That is exactly the reason many outdoor magazines often have a picture of a snarling bruin on the cover and a caption below reading, "Mauled By Griz" or "Attacked By a 30 Foot Grizzly and Survived!" It sells copies! Most folks who have spent any time in the backcountry generally have at least one bear story and while my encounters have been relatively mild, I've been privy to hearing some of the most frightening bear tales ever from some of the most credible and interesting individuals ever to set foot in our country's vast wilderness. One such story that bears repeating (pardon the pun) was told by Lecil Hadley some years ago about an encounter he had as



a youngster with a "Purdy smart bar!"

Lecil grew up about twelve miles northwest of Conner, Montana, near the Idaho state line. This is the Bitterroot Country, and when Lecil was a youngster it was also grizzly bear country.

As Lecil explained it, he'd been given instruction from his father, a grizzled old rancher from pioneer stock whose own father had homesteaded the ranch they lived on. Lecil's dad had told him to take the truck and the chainsaw and go on up to the north end of the ranch. The fact that Lecil was only thirteen at the time didn't matter much back then and Lecil (tall for his age at nearly six feet) was certainly up for the task.

It was in the early fall and they

would soon be bringing in a large herd of horses off their summer range and they needed a sizable area in which to pen them up before shipping. Lecil's job was to cut down a large number of lodge pole pines suitable for building a corral. Lecil said he jumped in the truck early the next morning and drove to an area near the creek that offered an abundance of just the right size trees, unloaded his chainsaw and began to cut.

Lecil went on to explain how he had cut down a considerable number of trees when halfway through one, his saw ran out of gas. Lecil turned in the direction of where the gas can lay and it was then he got the shock of his young life. There, standing fully erect in the nearby brush beyond the gas can

stood a massive eight foot grizzly bear!

Lecil said as their eyes locked onto one another his were filled with terror while he was certain the bear's cold black eyes were envisioning breakfast by the creek. As the huge carnivore began grunting, Lecil instinctively turned and began scrambling up the nearest tree. Unfortunately it just so happened the nearest tree was the one he had just cut nearly in half when his saw ran out of gas.

Leese knew that grizzlies aren't proficient climbers, but he also knew of their lightening speed. A little known fact is that the North American Grizzly bear is perhaps the fastest animal on earth at short distances less than thirty yards, faster than a quarter horse. Lecil estimated his distance from the bear was about twenty yards.

As the bear exploded towards Lecil, he began climbing as fast as was humanly possible. Lecil felt the animal crash into the tree and could feel his hot breath licking up his pant leg. Leese claimed that he "clum that stick of wood faster than a fat lady goin' through a buffet line." At any rate, there was our hero, perched about fifteen feet up in a lodge pole pine with a snarling grizzly pawing at his heels, just out of reach.

The bear stood on his hind legs and began pushing back and forth on the unstable tree in an attempt to shake his quarry loose. Lecil was certain it was only a matter of time until the tree would snap at the saw cut but he hung on for dear life as the agitated bruin kept on rocking the tree.

Then suddenly the bear stopped! He now turned his attention to the chainsaw resting at the base of the tree. Agitated, the massive mauler began pawing and swiping at the strange

mechanism. Lecil said at one point the bear even snagged on the pull rope and managed to get the saw's engine to turn over once. "Yeah, he was a smart bear I tell ya," Lecil exclaimed. "But he weren't smart enuff to fill 'er up with gas!"

Apparently feeling a sense of frustration, the bear turned once more to Lecil's precarious perch and began rocking the tree again, this time with a vengeance! Then, after a considerable



amount of time, the bear again aborted his unproductive rocking, turned and began to walk away. The bear took a few swaggering steps, stopped, turned his head and glared at Lecil with those piercing black eyes. The bear then disappeared into the thick brush in the direction of the creek.

Lecil said he waited in that tree for a good forty-five minutes before making the decision to sneak down and make a beeline for the truck. Quietly Lecil began descending the safety of his aerial home for the last hour and a half.

Just as Lecil reached the ground he could hear the bear returning through the thick brush in the direction of the creek. Quickly, Lecil scampered back up to the safety of his perch, turned and looked.

As Lecil so eloquently stated, "Har come thet dang bar again, walkin' on his hind legs a carryin' two beavers, one under each arm! That bar looked up at me and so help me Hanna, he says, Leese, you're a comin' outta that tree one way or ta other!"

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(931) 670-6482
Artist Joe Vick

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