

MIDVALE CENTENNIAL - of bears and scares

by Kathy Carr

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Everyone I asked seemed to have no idea how many persons came to the Midvale Centennial Saturday, but by noon a large crowd had congregated in the Park for dinner, and groups of people were wandering about all over town, visiting and eating.

Campers started rolling in Friday for the celebration, visitors pinned on provided name tags, and spent the rest of the day searching around for old landmarks and old friends. It was a rare home that didn't have from one to 15 overnight guests in residence.

Saturday's morning parade went off well, wagonloads of "first families" riding behind prancing teams of well-groomed horses.

The museum, under the supervision of Daisy Widner and her many volunteer helpers, was a masterpiece. I found there the photographs of Alexander Towell, and the Keithleys, and so many more; early pictures that showed them as young persons, and later photos that portrayed their aging. I wish I could have talked to these people. What stories they could have told.

Alex Towell was one man who could have boasted about landing a punch on a grizzly bear's snout - living to tell about it, what's more. And you'll have to admit, folks like that are few and far between.

Bears there were, in Middle Valley,

But when more settlers began raising more porkers, they had to resort to lighting huge bonfires up and down the river at night in an effort to scare the hungry bears - and get a little sleep, while the night shift kept the fires going.

Not all bears scare, especially grizzlies. And I'm sure that more than one

when J.H. Reed settled his family and livestock in a clearing near what was later called Reed's Grove, close to the Weiser River, in 1868.

Letting his pigs run free, J.H. found that they were, for the most part, right in their element. The meadows of Middle Valley were crowded with acres of camas. The pigs soon learned to uproot the sweet camas roots and gobble them as only greedy pigs can. Cowas, or couse, another plant with edible roots, covered the hills. The pigs learned about cowas, too. They thrived, prospered and multiplied. The Keithley brothers who settled by the creek still bearing their name, and several other pioneer families, began raising swine.

Judge Frank Harris, of Weiser, says in his account that the Keithleys perfected a method of curing hams and sausages second to none.

Harris, by the way, is the man who takes credit for proposing that the new Middle Valley post office be changed to Midvale, and petitioning and obtaining approval from the Postal Department in favor of this change.

There's nothing a bear loves more than fresh pork, taken on the hoof. So when the Reed pigs began to circulate, word got around among the bear population that Hitt Mountain was never like this.

J.H. shot one grizzly, shopping for a fat pig, from the kitchen door.

family experienced more thrills than they wanted, fending off big bears with big appetites.

We don't have a date for this one, but it must have been a few years after 1881, when the Towells arrived. Alex Towell and his neighbor Robert Jackson were clearing a stretch of new road

through Reed's Grove. The two men had contracted to build a road from Midvale through to Reed's mill on Pine Creek. It was hot, sweaty work, and the men were tiring.

As Alex sank his honed ax into a sturdy poplar, blocking the road's route, he straightened up suddenly as he heard a loud, grunting "Whuff!" and discovered he was eyeball to eyeball with a grizzly bear who had been disturbed by all the commotion of falling trees and flying earth.

Alex yelled. What else do you do when confronted by a snarling mountain of hairy-armed grizzly with 2-inch claws at the ready?

Bob Jackson attacked from the rear. He let the bear have it with his sharp pick. But it must have been a glancing blow, for the bear whirled about and slapped the pick out of Bob's hands.

As the bear turned to slap at Bob, Alex let drive with the ax. Bruin let out a roar, stood up and swiped a 10-inch paw at Alex, with a suddenness that almost threw the embattled pioneer off balance. As the ax flew out of Alex's hand, and landed with a ka-thud in the underbrush, the bear tried to embrace Towell.

To his dying day, he'd remember the rank smell and the feeling of the bear's hot breath in his face.

Summoning all his strength, Alex hauled back (as best ye could, in such a warm embrace) and landed his fist on the bear's nose, getting bitten through the thumb for the trouble.

Meanwhile, Bob was scrambling for his pick, and again whacked the bear's back with that curved, pointed instrument.

Fortunately for Alex, Bob's blows with the pick gained the grizzly's attention. Releasing his grip, he turned raking off Alex's shirt and leaving long, trailing claw marks down the man's chest and abdomen.

As Bob flailed at the furious bear

with his pick, Alex took a deep breath and plunged into the underbrush to find his ax.

And thus the battle raged for some time with neither side giving ground nor winning, until suddenly the bear wheeled away and headed for the brush.

Panting for breath, Bob and Alex stood, weapons in hand, gazing after the retreating bear, who left a trickle of blood in his wake, from a very sore backside.

Then the men made tracks - in the opposite direction - for the settlement and assistance.

John and Levi Keithley listened to their breathless account of the encounter, and a whole flock of neighbors and big and little boys went trailing after the hunters, with Levi Keithley in the lead, clutching his rifle.

Pausing in a clearing under where the bear had last been seen, Levi Keithley yelled, "All you boys climb trees. We may have a fight, and we don't want you in danger!"

Big and little boys scurried for the trees.

Shortly the men flushed out the wounded angry bear, who came from the brush running.

Levi raised his single shot rifle in a swift motion and fired at the bear.

That's all it took, from a fellow who was a dead shot.

The bear bounded high into the

air and hit the ground with a terrifying roar.

Not realizing he was dead, everybody who had a gun, excitedly started shooting at the bear - even Levi, who discovered afterward that although he had two extra cartridges between the fingers of his left hand for quick reloading, he had been too excited to realize he hadn't reloaded, and was only clicking the hammer.

As the young boys started clambering down from their high perches, young Rass Wiggins who had been watching the proceedings, bug-eyed, from behind his tree, came out of his "trance" to find himself on the ground at the base of the tree, tightly hugging the trunk with both arms and legs. He'd been on the ground all the while.

"Twas said that the bear's skin had been so peppered with shot, ax and pick, that it was utterly worthless.

Next week I'll tell you how Middle Valley settlers coped with the Indian problems of the 1870's.