'Fun' With Grizzlies Brings Close Squeaks

By W. R. BANDY

This past summer's reports of people being attacked by ferocious bears remind me of an encounter my survey crew had with two grizzly bears in 1931. We were surveying the east boundary of Yellowstone National Park and were working along the crest of the Absaroka Mountains at the time.

On this particular day the crew had suspended the regular survey work to open up a new pack trail to a temporary campsite on the east side of Mt. Schurz at the head of Eagle Creek. We were 19 miles from the nearest road and the bears in this remote area were in their wild state and much different from the lazy beggars found along the roads in the park.

About mid-morning two monstrous grizzlies were spotted high up on the rock slope above us, above the timber line. They had not seen us and were methodically working among the rocks looking for worms and roots. Although they were close to half a mile away, we could tell they were grizzlies by the high humps at the shoulders and the way they traveled.

My party was made up of young fellows who were naturally itching for excitement. They could see that these two old bears were having too good a time up there all by themselves, so they began to speculate on how much fun it would be to just slip around on top of the ridge above them and roll some rocks down to scare them and watch them run.

When they suggested the scheme to me I offered no objection, for I was thinking of some of the raids the bears had made on our cook tent on numerous occasions. We had vivid recollections of how they had swiped our meat, stuck their dirty paws in our lard cans and messed up things in general, so I figured this would be a good opportunity to sort of even up the score. Then, too, scaring them away from the area where we were going to set up a camp would reduce the danger of more raids, I thought.

Two of the boys, Frank Montibeller and Jack Morris, struck out, accompanied by our half-grown shepherd pup. They went away around, keeping well out of sight of the bears. The rest of us continued our trail work but kept an eye on the bears.

Soon the boys were seen on top of the ridge and we watched as they made their way along the rocky ridge to get above the grizzlies.

However, before the boys reached the desired spot the grizzlies had disappeared among some huge rocks, evidently to take a siesta. The boys did not know of this turn of events and they were too far away for us to tell them. They would have to find this out for themselves, a situation that added greatly to the suspense. They had no idea where the bears might be, but we knew they were getting closer and closer to them all the time. The boys were not sure they had selected the right place to descend, for the ridge looked different from above. No bears could be seen and they were confused.

However, they concluded they were at the proper spot and started down cautiously over the steep rocky slope. The surface at this point is covered with loose round boulders, ideal ammunition for bombarding the bears. They kicked off a few small boulders to test out the country but no bears showed up. They continued to descend cautiously, wondering all the while just where the bears were.

From our vantage point we could see they were heading directly for the bears' den, drawing ever closer and closer. This was a situation we had not thought of when the boys left us. We should have agreed upon some signals whereby we could communicate with them, but we thought the bears would not disappear from sight and the boys could keep a safe distance.

But now we were helpless to warn them and we could see they were likely to meet the bears face to face. Perhaps I, more than anyone else, realized the danger that lay ahead. We had a grandstand seat, so to speak, and all we could do was wait and let things happen.

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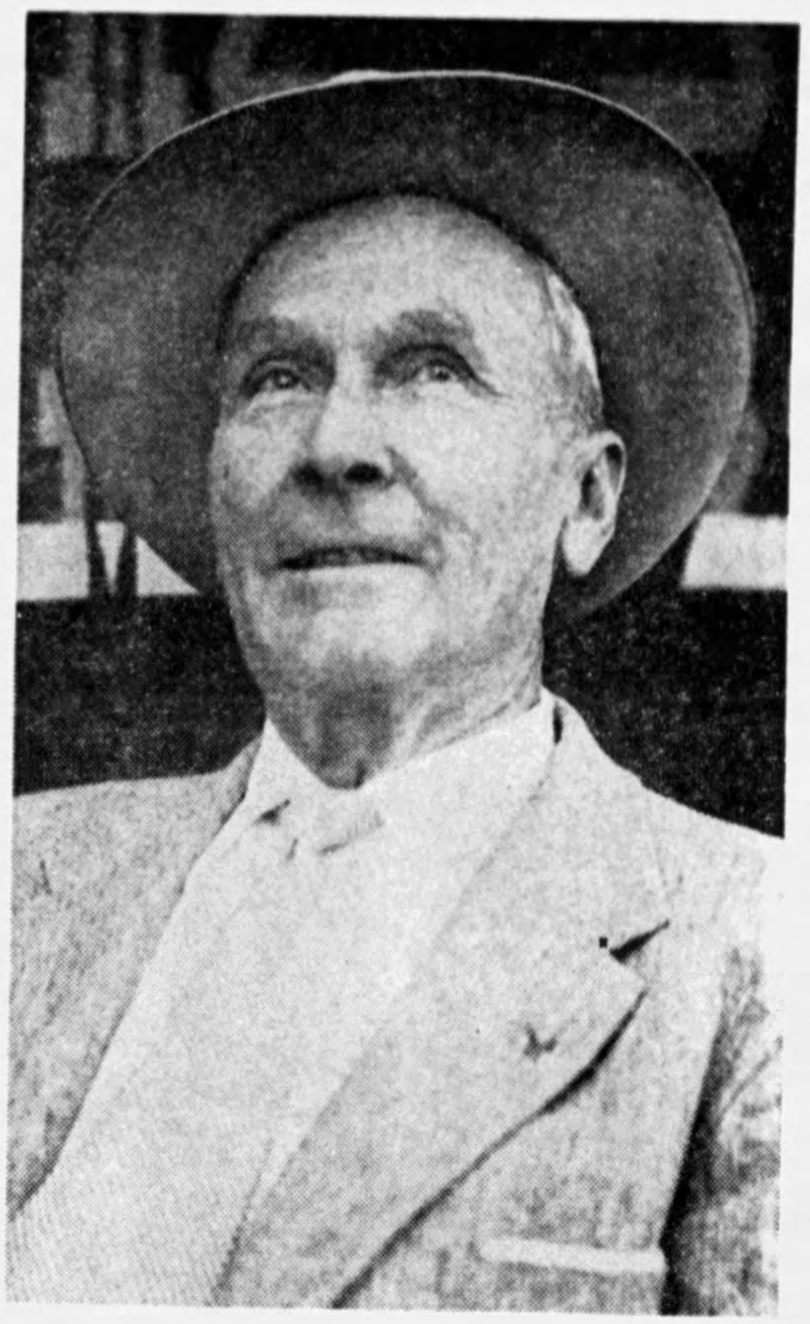


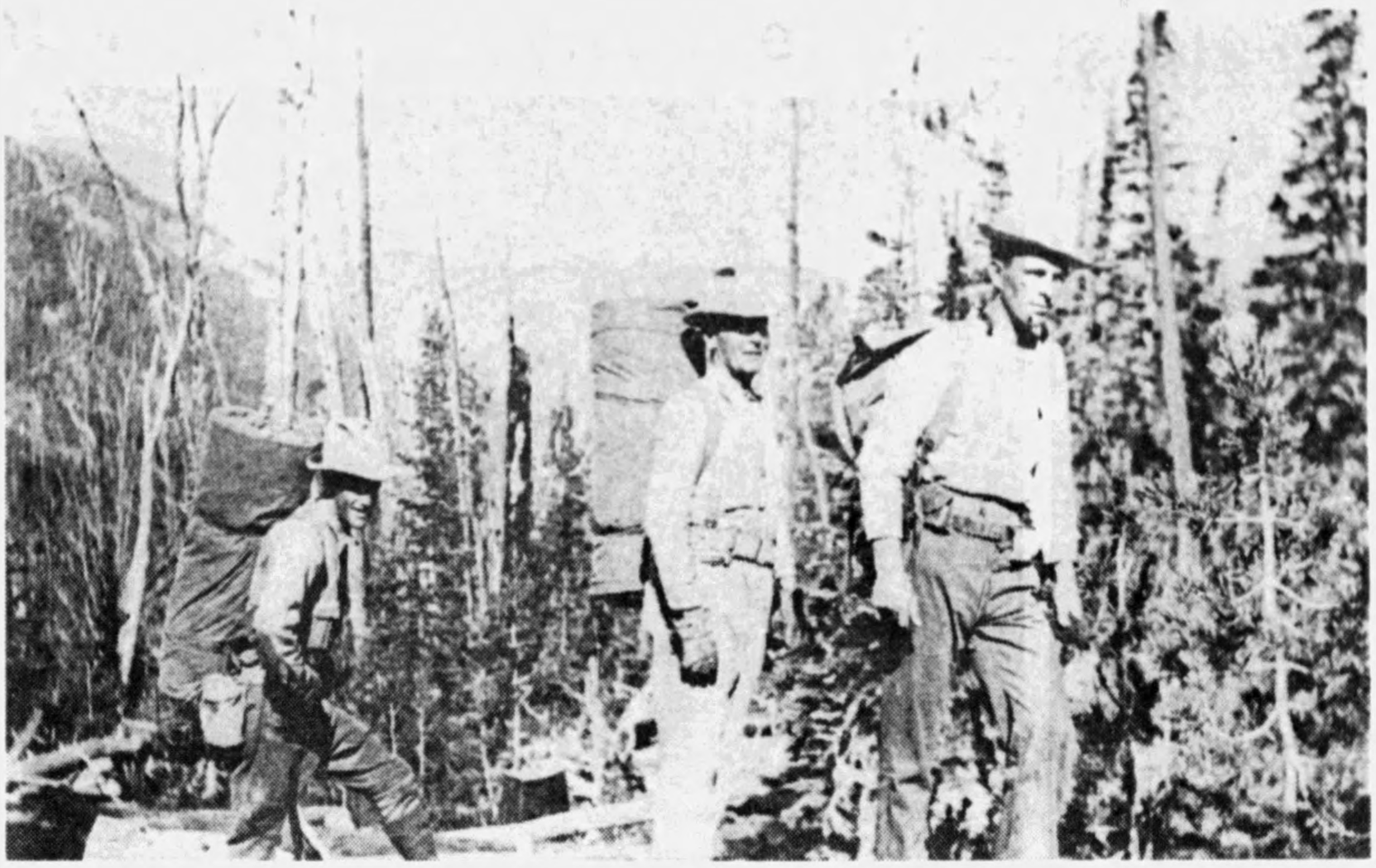
RECALLS EXPERIENCE WITH GRIZZLIES—W. R. Bandy, author of the accompanying article on an encounter with grizzly bears, spent 45 years as a surveyor for the U.S. General Land Office in the Montana and Wyoming mountains. He now lives in Helena. When he retired, he was area cadastral engineer for the Bureau of Land Management.

GRIZZLIES—This photo of a trio of Yellowstone National Park grizzly bears should prove that a grizzly is a formidable foe if he's stirred to anger. (National Park Service photo)

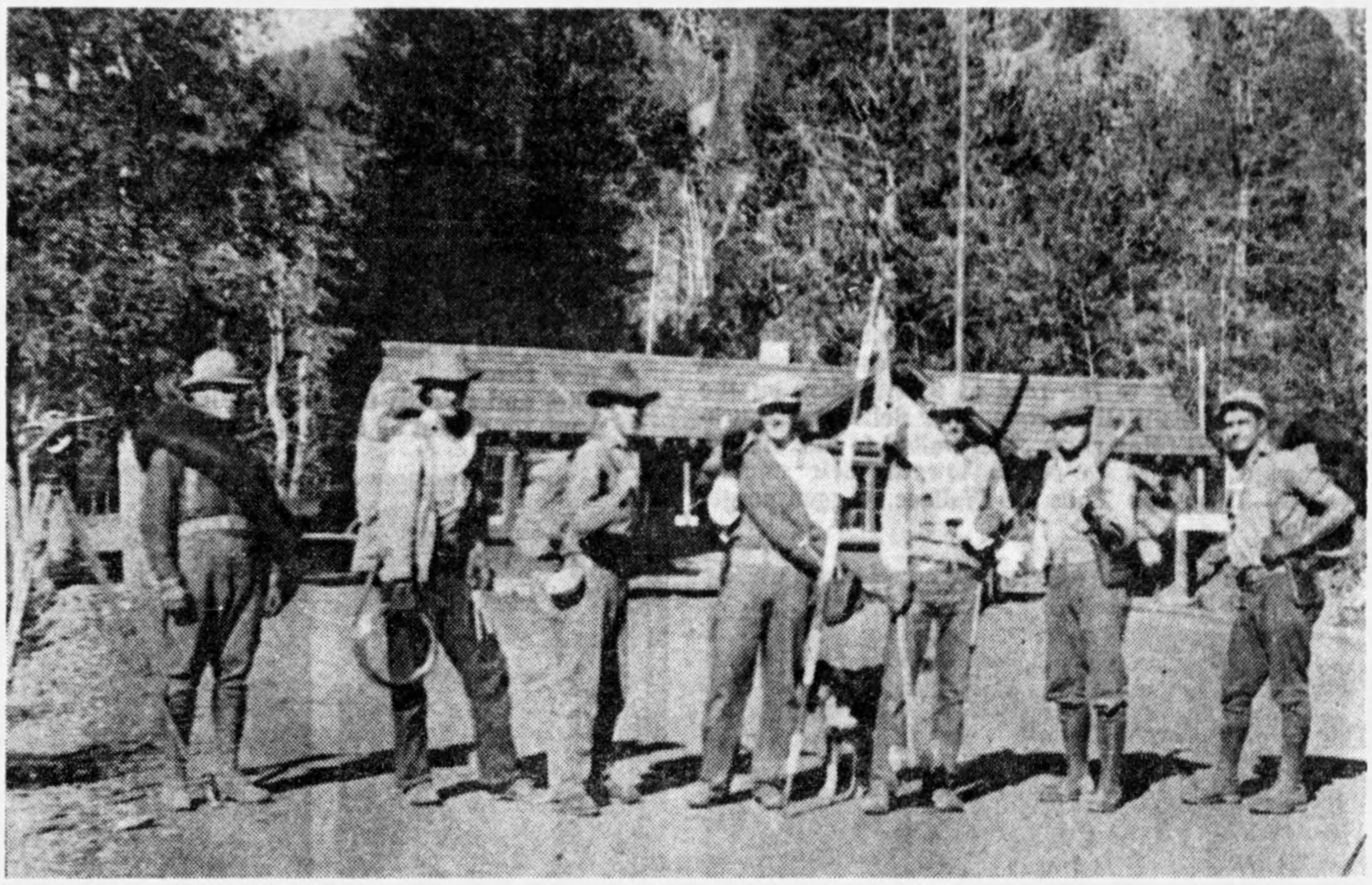
WHERE GRIZZLIES FOUND—This is Mt. Schurz on the eastern boundary of Yellowstone National Park where the survey party headed by Bandy had the experience with a pair of grizzly bears in 1931. The arrow at left indicates where the bears were seen. Just below the arrow at right are the two men who went up the slope to put the run on the bears. Elevation of this peak is 10,500 feet. The park boundary follows the top of this divide. (Bandy photo)

HIGH COUNTRY—This photo was taken by W. R. Bandy in 1931 during the Yellowstone Park survey in which the grizzlies were encountered. This rugged country is near Eagle Peak. Three men are visible —two atop the peak, one on an outcropping below the top two.

CREW DESCENDS—In another photo taken during the Yellowstone Park boundary survey, Bandy pictures part of his crew descending the eastern slope of Mt. Schurz.



HUNT CAMPSITE — Bandy and two of his crew are shown as they went ahead of the survey party to search for a new campsite along the Yellowstone Park eastern boundary. From left are Ariel Barney, Bandy and Ed Wilson.



DAY'S WORK STARTS —The survey crew, ready to leave Yellowstone's east entrance, carry equipment so they can camp out at the end of the day's work. From left are Bandy, Oliver Tingley, Jack Morris, Walt Duncan, Marv Thompson and Frank Montibeller. The crew's shepherd pup also got in the picture.

Spooked Grizzlies Give Surveyors Good Scare

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Of course, our trail work was at a complete standstill for the moment. The air was charged with expectancy as the boys kept slipping down, stopping every few feet to listen. They kept watch on the pup's actions for any warning sign, but it evidently had not yet caught the scent.

Now they were right where we had last seen the bears and we felt something was bound to happen soon. It did, and fast! We saw the whole show from a distance but had to wait for the boys to give us these details later:

Montibeller and Morris had just noticed fresh bear sign as the dog bristled up and growled. Then they knew for sure this was the place and the time! They kneeled down and peered over the edge into a deep crevasse with dark caverns at the bottom, but no bear. Then they dropped a stone over the edge and jumped back.

That rock started things. A big, ferocious, gray-brown he-grizzly came bounding up onto the ledge directly in front of them, or rather where they had been. Montibeller and Morris were in a hasty retreat, falling over rocks but scrambling away as rapidly as they could. The startled grizzly reared up on his hind legs and let out a blood-curdling roar, then whirled and took off down the mountainside, making the rocks fly and kicking up a big dust.

Montibeller said he got a good enough look at the bear and the animal's head seemed two feet wide and his mouth looked like a cave as he reared up.

After this turn of events the tension eased and we all yelled and whooped while we watched the old bear kicking up the dust as he ran down the bare rocky slope. The bear did not come our way, so we were having a grand time.

But the worst was yet to come.

The old saying, "ignorance is bliss," certainly proved correct this time. At least we wouldn't have been having nearly as good a time if we had known what was in immediate store for us.

Glancing up the hill, we were just in time to see Montibeller and Morris running in different directions, with a bear after one of them. The bear quit the chase suddenly, whirled and ran off down the slope toward us.

This is what happened up there. The immediate flight of the first bear without giving battle gave the boys increased courage to break up the siesta of the second bear, if it was still there. To find out if she was still there they very cautiously pushed another rock into the crevasse.

Out came Mama with a roar, mad as a wet hen.

As she clambered onto the ledge she took in the situation at a glance. Spying the dog at Jack's heels, she bared her teeth, laid back her ears and made for them, bellowing as she ran. Jack was making the best headway he could over the rocks, at the same time trying desperately to wave the dog away from him. This was when Jack wished he had left the dog with us! The situation looked bad for Jack, for the dog was leading the bear directly to him.

Just as Jack dodged behind a big rock, he saw the brute had given up the chase. For some unknown reason, perhaps due to the instinctive fear of men, she turned suddenly and took off down the mountainside in our direction. This all happened in less time than it takes to tell it. When we saw the boys up on the hill were safe with the other bear on the run, we again set up our shouting and yelling, enjoying the fun to the utmost, but our fun was short-lived.

I realized all of a sudden that this old she-grizzly was heading directly for us. That fact took all the joy out of our situation. Shouting a warning to the other fellows, I looked for a tree to climb. There were no trees over 10 feet high. There was no use to run at this late hour, for a grizzly can run as fast as a horse. So the next best thing was to hide behind the nearest bush and hope for the best.

She was drawing closer, but had been looking back at the boys and had not seen us yet. I saw she was heading directly for me so I flattened down behind a bush to wait. My mouth was dry, and my blood was beating against my temples. I could see she was panting, with her tongue hanging out as she loped along. She would look back over her shoulders and stumble over rocks, then gather herself and gallop on, ever closer.

We flattened closer to the ground and held our breath. As she came abreast of me, I could almost reach out and touch the high humped withers, the great broad head. She was frothing at the mouth. At this point the great shaggy brute got our scent and stopped short. Rearing up and turning to face my direction she stuck up her nose and tested the air, head swaying nervously back and forth with a gurgling sound deep in her throat.

I was afraid she would hear my heart beating a tattoo! It seemed like an eternity she stood there.

Her great paws hung down with the sharp claws as long as a knife blade. With one swipe she could cut me in two.

I guess she did not like the smell of something, for thanks to my guardian angel she whirled and fled.

Quickly regaining our nerve, we jumped up and started to shout again at the top of our voices. This time we really had something to shout about.