

When Men Were Men!

The combination can and bottle opener is a relatively recent invention of this effete modern age. We understand that in the older, bolder pioneer days, when men were men, they simply bit the top off any bottle whose liquid contents they coveted. But casting aside all mythology and superstition, the early Iowan was evidently able to maintain himself with aplomb and assurance in any situation. This is evidenced by a story of one of the first settlers in Winnebago County, Thomas Bearce, who came to north Iowa early in 1855.

The hardships and privations of these early settlers are almost beyond comprehension today. There were no mills, no roads, no stores, in that northern outpost of frontier settlement, and more than once the settler, in the severest of cold weather and prairie blizzard, traversed the trackless wastes to Decorah, nearly a hundred miles away, and returned through drift and wind, drawing upon a handsled the provisions necessary to save his starving family huddled in a cabin in the willow underbrush somewhere along Lime Creek. Many of these hardy souls were of Scandinavian descent and these intrepid Vikings sometimes used

their inventive genius to build larger sleds, rigged out with sails and a rudder, so that they sailed away before the wintry blasts over the billowing snow like the phantom ships of their forebears.

Occasionally an encounter with a marauding band of Indians or a truculent bear broke the more prosaic routine of their trapping and tramping. At least, it lent exciting material for future historians. Probably as fierce an encounter as was ever known in this region is said to have occurred but a short distance above the present site of Forest City between the afore-mentioned Thos. Bearce and a big black bear. Our authority for this story is a history of Winnebago County, published in booklet form by William C. Hayward, editor of the *Winnebago Press*, in 1873.

Bearce had practically exhausted his supply of provisions; his larder, one frosty morning in 1856, showed but a peck of beans and ten pounds of flour. In the hope of replenishing his meager stores with some fresh game, he shouldered his double-barrelled gun and struck out in search of deer or smaller game.

When about a mile and a half from where the Winnebago County courthouse now stands he heard a rustling in some bushes. But now let us quote directly from the historian of 1873:

“He raised his gun in readiness for a shot at the

expected deer, when out stepped a bear, black as Satan, and large as a small elephant. Mr. B. levelled his gun and fired both barrels at once; but as luck would have it, just as he pulled the triggers, a small stick he was standing on, rolled, his foot slipped, and the gun was thrown out of range. The buckshot went rattling through the tree tops, while old bruin made a charge on Mr. B., who, throwing away his gun, seized a dirk knife which he happened to have fastened to his belt, and braced himself for the contest. The bear raising upon his hindlegs sprang upon him with open jaws, crushing him to the ground and rolling completely over him. As he fell Mr. B. plunged his knife to the hilt in old bruin's body, but reached no vital spot, and only enraged him the more; again and again the knife was plunged into the body; in the meantime however the beast had torn nearly all the flesh from Mr. B.'s face, had nearly crushed his left hand and lacerated him fearfully in many places. The snow for a rod around was literally soaked with blood that flowed from both; and still both fought on with all the desperation of rage on one side and despair on the other. They rolled over, groans and cries followed each additional wound, and still with maddening fierceness they fought on; but at last, by a lucky strike the knife reached old bruin's heart and he rolled over,

dead at last. Mr. B. with the last stroke of the knife had summoned all his entire strength, and as the knife went home he fainted. In a short time, however, he recovered sufficiently to crawl to the edge of the timber, where he was discovered by one of the neighbors and taken care of."

This is seemingly the best authenticated account of a story that has been repeated a thousand times and in almost as many versions. The *Forest City Republican* in its Diamond Jubilee issue of August 14, 1930, repeated the tale. It also gave the story as recalled by Duncan R. Clark, one of the remaining oldsters of that time.

Clark's account had Bearce trapping beaver and unarmed when attacked. In the wrestling match that followed, the trapper, according to this story, grasped the bear's tongue at its base and by forcing his clenched fist down the bear's throat eventually strangled the immense animal but only after he had sustained a broken collar bone, a dislocated shoulder, a useless left hand, sore ribs, and a badly torn face and body. His story concludes with assistance coming in the form of a group of friendly Winnebago Indians.

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