

When San Jose Was Young

A Series of Interesting Articles of An Historical Nature
Prepared Especially for The News by a Well Known
Author and Journalist.

NO. 54 THE BIG BEAR HUNTERS

In the thirties and forties there were several celebrated bear hunters in the Santa Clara Valley. Among the most conspicuous were Don Secundino Robles, Don Antonio Bernal, Don Juan Pinto, Don Julio Valencia, Don Pedro Chaboya and Captain or Alferz Juan Prado Mesa, the Commandant at the Presidio. Mesa was paid by Gov. Sells to ride from the Presidio to San Jose and back to kill bears. Mesa was the first white settler at Mountain View. Today his son, Itamon Mesa, lives near that town.

Mesa was also a famous Indian hunter. He captured Yoscolo, the Indian rebel, near Los Gatos and brought back his black, shaggy head to the Mission. Mrs. Espinosa, daughter of Secundino Robles, tells me that even after Mesa cut off Yoscolo's head, it moved and jumped on the ground. Finally it was placed on a pole near the Mission. Mesa died of a wound given him later by an Indian.

Often Don Antonio Bernal and Don Pedro Chaboya, who were related by marriage, hunted together. Once Bernal became separated from his companion. He fought in a rough canyon with a bear nearly all night, but he had the bear tangled in his riata and he held him at bay.

Don Antonio Bernal never shot a bear except at close range. For a man to shoot a bear at a distance was recklessly to throw away life. To kill at the first shot required courage, a steady hand and experience. In those times there were no repeating rifles. Hunters used the old fashioned ramrod. There could be no second shot. Don Antonio Bernal never shot a bear until the animal was seated on his haunches ready to spring. Then Bernal looked him in the eye and shot him in the heart.

Mesa found many bears near Mountain View because Black Mountain was also ever green. Bears like green food. After a matanza, the great slaughtering time, the bears used to come down into the valley and give a roar that froze the blood of cattle. During the matanza more bears were killed. Forty met their death one night near Mountain View when they were encountered by one of the Estudillos and some soldiers from the Presidio.

At times the bear was killed by a trap which consisted of a hole in the

ground covered with heavy timber. The bait was some raw meat placed on the timbers. The hunter hid in a hole beneath the timber. When the bear came to eat the hunter shot him from beneath.

This method did not appeal to daring sportsmen like Don Pedro Chaboya, Don Antonio Bernal and Don Secundino Robles, who were what the Spanish call "men of heart." Today they would be designated as "men of nerve." These sportsmen liked to face Mr. Bear and worst him. They were all strong, powerful, with the sportsman's instinct to give his victim a chance.

Always these bear hunters captured the bear on horseback and with a riata greased six feet with tallow. A bear uses his hands like a man. He can climb a rope, and with one blow of his great hook-like claws he kills his victim. The most savage bear are tan colored. These the Bernals and Chaboya often captured for their famous bear and full fights.

Usually it took three or four men to capture a bear weighing fourteen hundred pounds. Chaboya and Bernal frequently hunted together. They hid with them their vaqueros. They used only their best trained horses, horses that could pull great weight with their backs and saddles after the bear had been bound.

Bernal and Chaboya always opened wide their riatas as they flung them for the bear. Bernal could throw a riata seventy-five feet. They used riatas made of tested, twisted, given sawhide. This bound the neck of the bear and another man caught the animal's foot with his riata. The bear was choked until his tongue hung out. Although apparently dead, he lived. After the bear was helpless the problem was how to get his great body back to the ranch alive. The hunters cut a huge limb from an oak tree.

Half unconscious, the bear was tied by the neck and all four feet were bound to the limb. Then horses were attached to the limb and the great bear was dragged miles down hill and across creeks till finally he reached the oak corral at the ranch for a second death.

At the Bernal ranch is a huge, white, scarred oak to which more than seven hundred bears were tied. After the bear was fastened with log chains to

the great oak tree four or five of the wildest bulls were brought down from the mountains. Then came great crowds to see the bear and bulls tied together foot by foot to fight it out. Several bulls on each occasion met death trying to gore the bear. Finally the bear's strength weakened. The horns of a bull severed the artery in his throat.

The fiesta was ended.