



Quarterly Bulletin of the Calaveras County Historical Society

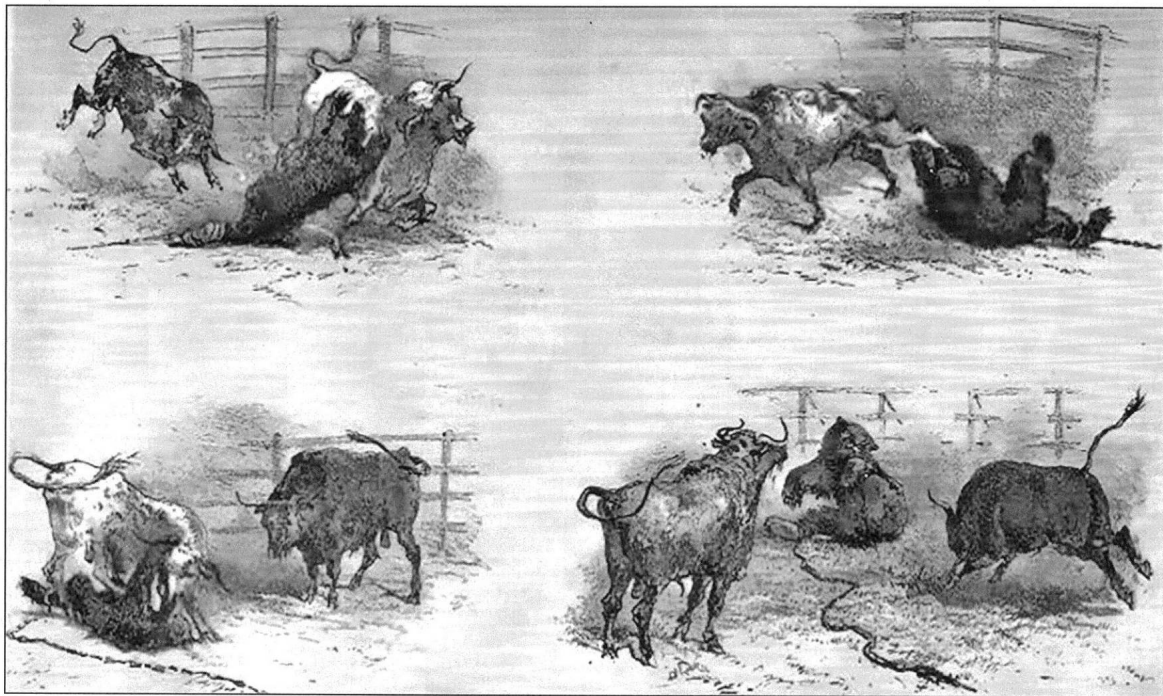
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A BULL-AND-BEAR FIGHT IN MOKELUMNE HILL

By Noah Berner



J.D. Borthwick drew these sketches after witnessing a bull-and-bear fight in Mokelumne Hill in 1852. (Courtesy image)

As J.D. Borthwick, a Scottish journalist and artist, walked the wagon road between Jackson and Mokelumne Hill in March of 1852, he came across numerous advertisements posted to rocks and trees.

“War! War!! War!!!,” they read. “The celebrated Bull-killing Bear, GENERAL SCOTT, will fight a Bull on Sunday the 15th inst., at 2 P.M., at Moquelumne Hill. The Bear will be chained with a twenty-foot chain in the middle of the arena. The

Bull will be perfectly wild, young, of the Spanish breed, and the best that can be found in the country. The Bull's horns will be of their natural length, and not 'sawed off to prevent accidents.' The Bull will be quite free in the arena, and not hampered in any way whatever."

Borthwick was well aware that there were grizzly bears in California. Passing through Jackson earlier that day, he had almost tripped over a grizzly cub that was chained to a stump in the middle of the street.

"He was the pet of the village," he wrote, "and was delighted when he could get anyone to play with, though he was rather beyond the age at which such a playmate is at all desirable."

But Borthwick had never seen a bull-and-bear fight, and on Sunday, curiosity getting the better of him, he made his way to the arena.

The arena was 40-feet-wide and enclosed with an iron fence. Surrounding this rose tiers of seats for the audience. The arena and bleachers were both enclosed by a 100-foot-wide wooden structure 10 feet in height.

The bear sat in a wooden cage, reinforced with iron, at the end of a 20-foot chain that was pinned to the center of the arena. A bar was located under the bleachers, as well as pens containing two bulls.

"The scene was gay and brilliant," wrote Borthwick, "and was one which would have made a crowded opera-house gloomy and dull by comparison. The shelving bank of human beings which encircled the place was like a mass of bright flowers. The most conspicuous objects were the shirts of the miners, red, white and blue being the fashionable colors, among which appeared bronzed and bearded faces under hats of every hue."

"(R)evolvers and silver-handled bowie-knives glanced in the bright sunshine, and among the crowd were a number of gay Mexican blankets, and red and blue French bonnets, while here and there the fair sex was represented by a few Mexican women in snowy-white dresses, puffing their cigaritas in anticipation of the exciting scene which was to be enacted."

"Over the heads of the highest circle of spectators was seen mountain upon mountain fading away into the distance, and on the green turf of the arena lay the great center of attraction, the hero of the day, General Scott."

While the bull seemed to be the favorite of the crowd, betting was mostly in favor of the bear. A

man sitting next to Borthwick remarked, "nary bull in Calaforny as could whip that bar."

Borthwick estimated the bear's weight at 1,200 pounds, and thought he was probably worth \$1,500.

To get the bear to leave his cage, it was rolled backwards on a small track until the length of his chain forced him into the open.

At this point, the bull was also driven from its pen. "The bull was a very beautiful animal," Borthwick observed, "of a dark purple color marked with white. His horns were regular and sharp, and his coat was as smooth and glossy as a racer's."

After surveying his surroundings for a moment, the bull made a mad dash back for his pen, breaking through the gate "with as much ease as the man in the circus leaps through a hoop of brown paper."

A stronger barricade was quickly erected, and the bull was forced back into the arena.

"By this time he had made up his mind to fight," wrote Borthwick, "and after looking steadily at the bear for a few minutes as if taking aim at him, he put down his head and charged furiously at him across the arena."

"The bear received him crouching down as low as he could, and though one could hear the bump of the bull's head and horns upon his ribs, he was quick enough to seize the bull by the nose before he could retreat."

The beginning of the fight was greeted with uproarious applause.

"In the meantime, the bear, lying on his back, held the bull's nose firmly between his teeth, and embraced him around the neck with his fore-paws, while the bull made the most of his opportunities in stamping on the bear with his hind-feet."

"At last, the General became exasperated with such treatment, and shook the bull savagely by the nose, when a promiscuous scuffle ensued, which resulted in the bear throwing his antagonist to the ground with his fore-paws."

This was met with another round of enthusiastic applause. The bull eventually struggled to his feet and retreated to the side of the arena.

After resting for a few minutes, the bull charged again. "Again poor bruin's ribs resounded, but again he took the bull's nose into chancery, having seized him just as before," Borthwick wrote. "The bull, however, quickly disengaged himself, and was making off, when the General, not wishing to part

with him so soon, seized his hind-foot between his teeth, and, holding on by his paws as well, was thus dragged round the ring before he quitted his hold.”

Afterwards, the bull’s “nose and lips were a mass of bloody shreds, and he lay down to recover himself.”

The bull “showed no inclination to renew the combat; but by goading him, and waving a red flag over the bear, he was eventually worked up to such a state of fury as to make another charge.”

After charging two more times, the bull “seemed to be quite used up, and to have lost all chance of victory.”

At this point, the master of ceremonies climbed the barrier and addressed the crowd. He asked if the bull had been given a fair chance, and the crowd agreed that he had. He went on to say that for \$200 he would let in the other bull, and “the three should fight it out till one or all were killed.”

The funds were quickly secured, and the second round of the fight commenced. Upon entering the arena, the second bull immediately charged the bear.

“The bear, as usual, pinned him by the nose,” wrote Borthwick, “but this bull did not take such treatment so quietly as the other: struggling violently, he soon freed himself, and, wheeling around as he did so, he caught the bear on the hind-quarters and knocked him over.”

The other bull, seeing his opportunity, quickly charged the bear from the side before he could recover.

“The poor General between the two did not know what to do, but struck out blindly with his fore-paws with such a suppliant and pitiable look that I thought this the most disgusting part of the whole exhibition,” wrote Borthwick.

Several charges later, the crowd agreed that the bear was the victor, and the fighting finally came to an end. Both wounded bulls were put down with rifles.

Borthwick, along with many of his contemporaries, was somewhat repulsed by the spectacle, writing, “so long as the animals fought with spirit, they might have been supposed to be following their natural instincts; but when the bull had to be urged and goaded on to return to the charge, the cruelty of the whole proceeding was too apparent; and when the two bulls at once were let in upon the bear, all idea of sport or fair play was at an end, and it became a scene which one would rather have prevented than witnessed.”

Bull-and-bear fights were held in Spain for centuries before the practice was brought to California.

Held on Sundays, fiesta days and feast days, the battles were likely staged in every Spanish settlement in the state.

During the American period, the fights degenerated into garish spectacles held mostly to make money, and public opposition led to the banning of the practice across the state in the latter years of the Gold Rush.

Bibliography:

Borthwick, John David. *The Gold Hunters: a First-Hand Picture of Life in California Mining Camps in the Early Fifties*. Outing Publishing Company, 1917.

Snyder, Susan. *Bear in Mind: the California Grizzly*. Heyday Books, 2003.

A NOTE FROM YOUR INCOMING PRESIDENT...

On July 1st, 2021, the Historical Society began a new fiscal year, and with a new year, an election to select and elect the new members of the Board of Directors. The list on the following page reflects the newly elected Board for fiscal year July, 2021 through June, 2022. Some of the Board Members you will recognize, the new members, Erich Sender, Donna Queirolo and Tad Folendorf we welcome wholeheartedly! We are looking forward to turning the page to the new year and putting the difficult past year behind us. The museum has remained closed for visitors since March of 2020, but we have resumed member meetings beginning this past May, June and July with Society business, elections and an interesting program in July at the Red Barn & Annex where we burned our brands onto the wall!

The new board and office staff bring a depth of knowledge about Calaveras County which will provide ideas and energy to the Historical Society in its efforts to preserve and develop our museums and displays to inform the public about the rich and interesting heritage found in our county. We anticipate opening the doors on September 1st and we look forward to seeing you in the museums and at the meetings we have planned for the coming year.

—With best regards,
Jennifer Brock

Calaveras County Historical Society

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Jim Respass—Historic photograph reproduction

Las Calaveras is published quarterly by the Calaveras County Historical Society. A subscription to *Las Calaveras* comes with membership in the Calaveras County Historical Society for \$25.00 per year. Non-members may obtain copies from the Historical Society office. The original historical material presented in *Las Calaveras* is not copyrighted and anyone is invited to use it. Mention of the source would be appreciated. Contributions of articles about Calaveras County are appreciated and may be submitted to the Historical Society for consideration.

The Calaveras County Historical Society is a nonprofit corporation. It meets on the fourth Thursday of each month in various communities throughout the County. Locations and scheduled programs are announced in advance. Some meetings include a dinner program, and visitors are always welcome.

The Society operates the Calaveras County Museum which is open daily from 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM in the historic County courthouse located at 30 Main Street in San Andreas; and the historic Red Barn Museum at 891 Mountain Ranch Road, also in San Andreas, which is open Thursday to Sunday, 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM—Spring & Summer Hours. Saturday & Sunday 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM—Winter Hours.

The Society's office is located in historic San Andreas, the Calaveras County seat. Visitors are always welcome to stop by the office for assistance with research, and are encouraged to visit the museums while in the area. The office is open Monday through Friday from 9:00 AM to 4:00 PM, and the telephone number is (209) 754-1058, or contact us at: CCHS@goldrush.com; Red Barn Museum (209) 754-0800.

April–May–June 2021

Recent Donations:

Historical books and documents from the Harleigh Winkler estate

NOTE: The Historical Society is grateful for donations of artifacts and documents relating to the history of Calaveras County. However, we will not be able to accept any donations until November due to a large backlog of documents and items still being processed. Thank you!

Membership Meeting Schedule for 2021:

August, no meeting

Thursday, September 23

Thursday, October 28

Thursday, November 18

If you have a suggestion for a venue and/or subject of interest for a meeting, let us know!