

An Account of Fred Myers and the Bear

This is a fictionalized account of a true story. All the facts are facts, and there are a lot of them, but scattered throughout is a plethora of opinions, observations and embellishments. Our story takes place on the streets of Lamar, Colorado about midnight on a brisk late September evening in 1915. Names would be changed to protect the innocent, but most of them were never recorded for posterity in the first place, possibly to protect the not-so-innocent.

Ye author uses 'darn' several times during this account, fully expecting that the historical figures probably used bigger and badder words to describe these situations. I know I would have, if I had been there.

Lamar in 1915 offered a grand mix of the traditional west and modern times. The town had stores and services, it had an excellent high school, it had innovative citizens convinced of the town's bright future. The wild west may have faded, but there were still cowboys, ranches, and land to be had with the expanded Homestead program. As the biggest town in the county, it was where everyone came to do business, shop, talk, and be entertained. The New York Store had just opened and it offered "Everything for Everybody." It could have been Lamar's motto, too.

There were plays, silent movies, and music programs at Fred Lee's Opera House and at the Lyric movie house. The high school offered plays, orchestra concerts, four choirs and a huge annual program called the Salmagundi. The service clubs and organizations, of which there were dozens, each offered one or two programs a year.

Entertainment came from outside the town, too. Traveling revivals and tent shows, and the occasional circus were available, and for the more educationally inclined, the Chautauqua out of Denver made Lamar a regular stop.

There were bars and saloons, and, uh, other entertainment venues, although not nearly as many as there had been when the town was first started. Lamar folks had taken to the new-fangled horseless carriages at once, and the numbers of them on the streets were increasing almost daily. There were livery stables where one could rent a horse and carriage, but Sunday's Garage rented out Ford cars, complete with a driver, 15 cents a mile.

Good old-fashioned entertainments were still popular, including what they called in that day, the hay-rack ride. Taken in the fall, or sometimes in spring, (but generally not in the summer when the mosquitoes were vicious) the hay rides were a staple for the high school crowd. They were not school sponsored, but were sometimes school associated. All you needed were some young people, usually boys and girls together, a horse-pulled wagon filled with hay, and a responsible older person to drive and chaperone, and you were good to go. Although apparently the older person was optional and sometimes one of the students drove. If possible, one chose an evening where there was just a little bit of a nip in the air. Often hay rides were part of a picnic out to Four-Mile, or down along the river. At times, the event included a 'wienie roast' such as the Junior boys gave the Junior girls in April of 1914. That

one lasted from 7:30 p.m. until 2:00 a.m. and included a bonfire after the food.

The appeal of the hay-rack ride was broad. The hay was supposedly in the wagon to make a soft surface to sit on, but a boy and girl sitting side by side could hold hands under the hay without it being obvious. Or play footsie with the person seated opposite. A farm wagon, jolting along on dirt lanes, caused many a shoulder touch, involuntary nudge, or hand-to-the-elbow-to-keep-from-bumping moment. The boys horsed around, the girls, mindful of their long skirts, still managed to have as much fun. There's not a shred of evidence, but it may be that Fred Myers kissed one of the girls. It would explain a bit of showing off he was possibly inclined to later. Or not. So I am totally inventing it, but I bet Fred kissed a girl. Or at least held her hand. Everybody else was doing it, after all.

The youngsters sang as they rode to the event, they sang around the fire, and they sang on the way back. It isn't known what they sang, but probably newer songs such as 'By the Beautiful Sea,' 'Gilbert the Filbert,' and 'When You Wore a Tulip and I Wore a Red Red Rose,' as well as all the songs of the previous generation. Added to those learned in Glee Club, it meant there was a huge variety to choose from. So part of our story begins as a load of high school students are arriving back in Lamar after their hay-ride, about ten o'clock at night. Possibly singing.

The next element of the tale concerns another recreational element of Lamar, the saloons. They sang in the saloons, too, by the way, but mostly the men gambled and drank. The addition of booze to the cowboy idea of humor is elemental to this tale.

Things had settled down by 1915, but there were still cowboys and they still had the cowboy sense of humor. Cowboy humor can be illustrated by two instances from when Lamar was first founded. A pair of cowboys thought it very funny one night in 1887 to brand all the calves in the pen of "Big Sal," whom you might say was also in the entertainment business, with the brand of a very important local man. The pen was on Main Street where everyone could see it the next morning. Apparently the wife of this very important merchant saw the branded calves while driving past in her carriage the next day. History does not record the marital discord this probably caused, but at the very least, verbal fireworks may have blistered his ears off. I bet she said more than 'darn.' Or maybe she just laughed her head off—those were tough old ladies back then. One wonders what happened to the calves. Would the merchant have to buy them to get them off Main Street? Or help pay have them re-branded? Branding other people's cattle is a crime, after all, so was there an investigation? Why didn't someone notice bawling calves in the middle of the night?

Another fun thing for cowboys in the early days was getting on your horse and lassoing the planks off the sidewalks in front of the stores. Then, with the plank bouncing on the end of your rope, you took off for the camping spot where a lot of the cowboys bedded down when they visited Lamar. This was a watering hole just about where the bridge is on the south side of Willow Creek Park. Careering boards at the end of the rope sometimes caused the horses to act up, and so bucking horses added some excitement to the evening. It was a group activity, and perhaps there was a competition to see who could collect the most boards, but the end result was the businessmen of Lamar had to send their sons and store boys to fetch back their sidewalks the next morning. The law said those planks should be 12 feet long and so it must have been quite a chore, darn it. The merchants started taking up the sidewalks and putting the planks inside the store before locking up for the night. At some point they

might have just started nailing them down better.

For this and other reasons, the post of night marshal was established. He kept the peace after dark and did the rounds of Main Street and the business houses to keep an eye on things. In general it was a pretty quiet job, which got a bit livelier on the weekends. The tradition was that, upon hiring, the new night marshal was dunked in the town horse tank. That was at the corner of Olive and Main. Guess they were giving the poor guys a taste of the nonsense they were going to be putting up with.

That weekend there was a trained bear act in town. Some trained bears were taught to dance to music, or do tricks. Others wore special boxing gloves and a muzzle and were pitted against volunteers from the audience. Half wrestling, half boxing, it was one of those unpredictable shows very popular in the macho west. They were usually young bears. The older the bear, the more unpredictable, smarter, and stronger it got. Our bear was described as a "big performing bear" in the Lamar Sparks article the next day.

That night, some time before midnight, a couple of inebriated cowboys thought it would be absolutely hilarious to free the trained bear. See drunk cowboy humor, above. It might have been just one guy, but this sort of activity needs one person to think of the idea and another one to fail to talk them out of it. One presumes they stayed around awhile to see what happened, but no one knows who these men were. Or if anyone knew, they sure didn't write it down for the history books. Possibly, with good reason. The guys were probably afraid of getting their tailbones sued off. Or, perhaps, just afraid of being lynched. A bear loose on Main Street, what did they think would happen? I am using artistic license and assuming this all took place on Main Street. Some of it did, but reporters back in the day did not always think of adding in all the pesky details people would want to know a hundred years later.

The bear had been freed from a lot where he had been tethered, on North Main Street, and immediately began ambling down the street, investigating this and that, causing dogs to bark and lights to come on. It went up onto the front porch of a house, thumping about, scratching on the door, and generally scaring the heck out of Mrs. Church inside. Her son Donald chased him off and then Donald or someone else went for the night marshal.

So the night marshal, Mr. Herkig, and his friend Will Kennedy, are riding towards the bear and just at that moment, the wagon-load of teenagers arrive as they are coming back from their hay-rack ride, and they are there to see Will Kennedy lasso the bear. Soon, the bear is being pulled down the street with the group of young folks surrounding them and moving too.

Of course, these are people in their teens and folks haven't changed all that much through the years. So, do they respectfully step back and let the night marshal do his work? Heck, no. Well, maybe the girls did, but I am afraid the boys did not. Yes, I fear there was a strong scent of testosterone in the air as the group surrounded the bear. It was night, and although Lamar had gotten street lights as early as 1889, it was probably still pretty dim and yellow, as the Inter-Mountain Railway, Light and Power Company was extremely dedicated to producing the least light for the most money. Well, until 1919, when Lamar rebelled, but that is another story.

Now, the newspaper accounts do not mention that the night marshal was on a horse. I am just assuming it, because he could have driven up in an automobile, but I doubt it, and who

goes bear hunting on foot with a lasso? So I may be making up the horses, but really, the horses should be there.

Jostling, the boys surrounded the bear, while the night marshal on his trusty horse, tried to drag the struggling animal away. No doubt he yelled at them to get back, and perhaps they did, but an enraged, flopping about bear is a hard thing to control. So the bear, which must have had at least one front paw free of the lasso, lurched towards the closest young man, "throwing him to the ground." Now, the newspaper account says Will roped the bear, but I am assuming he passed the rope to the marshal or the rest of the story means poor Will was doing everything and the marshal was just giving orders right and left.

The young man was Fred Myers. His picture is in the 1915 Harbinger, the yearbook of Lamar Union High School, as a senior. Handsome lad. If he was related to I.H. Myers then he was related to one of the first settlers in Lamar, but it is not clear who his parents were. Whoever they were, it can be assumed Fred got an earful from them later. He was pretty old for corporal punishment, but you never know, they could have blistered his behind, too.

Either the bear pulled Fred into a bear-hug while going down onto all fours, or it was standing over him, clawing him. After screams, shouts and a few moments of utter chaos, the night marshal orders Will to shoot the darn thing, and Will shoots the bear in the back. The bullet goes through the bear, killing him. It continues on through the bear and into Fred's back. Frantically the kids pull the dying bear off Fred. Maybe the lasso and the horse were used to get the bear off. Again, the newspaper accounts leave out many intriguing details. I like the image of the kids doing it, but hey, would you pull a dying bear off of a good friend? They were, as I said before, young men of a certain age. So. Maybe.

They took Fred to the hospital, probably Dr. Friend's, which was two blocks off of Main at the railroad tracks, a building still in use a hundred years later, although not as a hospital. The bullet had not gone far into Fred's back and it was taken out. He probably had more pain from his shoulders, which were described as "severely clawed." Fred also was very sore all over, they reported, from the bear hug. No doubt.

The next day he was reported to be doing well. He does not seem to feature in later town history and he may have left town after graduation. Possibly his memories of the good old home town were not as fond as they might have been. A lot of young men joined up two years later for WWI and never returned, but he's not on the WWI war memorial at the courthouse as having died in the war. At any rate, he made the papers the next day and had his fifteen minutes of fame. They spelled his name wrong in the headline but got it right in the article. Fifteen minutes of fame was about all it was, too, as he did not make it into any of the local history books. Darn shame, that.

Lamar was founded on entrepreneurs, on folks who came west to take advantage of natural resources and luck. So on the following day, Charlie McCall's meat market, on the north side, had a sale on bear meat. They sold out before noon.