

Written by Texas Outdoors
Tuesday, 06 August 2013 16:41

This is part 4 of 4 of another masterpiece of storytelling by Bear Claw. Be sure to check back soon for more Bear Claw stories!!

PILGRIM'S PROGRESS:

OR HOW THE TENDERFEET SURVIVED THEIR ELK HUNT

JOHN A. HUDSPETH

Day four dawned coldest of all. The temperature in town was in the low teens, hoar frost covered ice everywhere, and the roads were treacherous, even in town. We met Gary as usual, and he remained enthusiastic. Since there had been few elk at the elevations at which we had ridden, this would be the day we rode into the high country, above the timberline.

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Gary took us even further past the ranger station this time, driving as far as we could into the valley. We saddled up and rode in silence a half mile along the valley floor, before turning up what Gary claimed was a trail into the high country. This trip was different than the others. We rode far up into the mountains, where we found tracks of elk gathering in larger and larger groups, crossing over into big, bowl shaped meadows, always seeming to be just a little ahead of us.

Gary led us across the slope of one mountain, where the snow had completely hidden the narrow trail along the mountainside. We had to dismount to lead the horses under some overhanging branches, with the mountain plummeting below, to the right of the horses. If we had needed to stop and go back down the mountains, we would have had to make the horses back up. After we got past the overhangs, I led Tim over to a handy rock to reach the stirrup.

Just as I placed my full weight in motion, my boot slid out of the stirrup, due to the slick, frozen sole of my boot. I caught myself across the saddle, and managed to slide around behind the pommel. Gary was worried that both Tim and I might go sliding down the mountain. I wasn't sure whether he was more worried about losing the horse, or having to quarter a hunter to get back down into town, since I was so heavy, and we were so far out. Instead of jumping down as I should have, I was able to lift myself over the saddle, and get back into position.

We made our day camp at the edge of one of these mountain bowls, at nearly 13,000 feet. I walked to a point where I could watch a large area, and spent two hours being amazed that I had been able to see the beauty of the mountains in winter. I searched the pine forest all along the edge of the high meadow, looking for some patch of elk hair, for a glint of sunlight on antler, or a puff of snow turned up from a pair of hooves.

Gale and Gary returned early in the afternoon, with stories of enormous numbers of elk hoofprints leading from one meadow to the next, with no signs of the makers. We all warmed up by the fire, then mounted back up. We took a round about route back into the valley, checking points along the timberline for signs of elk herds. After we had ridden about half way back down to the valley, Gary and Gale rode off toward a canyon where Gary thought they might get a shot, while I dismounted and found another beaver pond meadow to watch. The sun was warm and I was content to soak in the warmth and enjoy the day. I was so intent on studying the edges and forest that I was surprised when Gary walked up and said it was time to go.

I found what appeared to be a sharp rock to get up into the saddle, planted my left foot firmly on

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it (not going to let my icy boots catch me this time), and slid directly under Tim. That was no sharp rock, that was moss! Gary was getting insistent that I not lay under his horse. In fact, I had noticed a serious change from the rather polite manner of his speech from our first meeting. I was not happy about it either, but a little concerned about flailing about, however. As soon as I could find a muddy patch below my heels in which I could anchor my boots, I kicked myself out from underneath Tim.

The remainder of the ride down the mountain was uneventful. By this time, the roads in the National Forest had become incredibly slick, and we stopped and helped a couple of hunting parties back onto the pavement. On reflection, I owe most of the fact that I got out of the whole experience to a really good natured horse. I really ought to start sending Tim Christmas cards.

We decided to take one more day of hunting on our own on Thursday. We drove the slick roads west of Pagosa to the trailhead near the Weminuche wilderness. The valley was in full daylight by the time we got to the area we wanted to hunt, and the air was deep frozen, near zero. We worked carefully up the trail to a small drainage area where it appeared that animals might be crossing. Gale went on up the trail, to the lake at the top of the hill.

As I watched the mountainside, soaking in the last day of my hunt, a pair of hunters spotted me, and started calling out and waving on the trail below, breaking the stillness. I didn't want to be unfriendly, but I had been enjoying the quiet. Rather than have them disturb my area, I walked to meet them on the trail. When we were about 50 yards apart, they suddenly realized that I was not the other member of their party, apologized, and headed off down toward the parking area. Shrugging off the interruption, I returned to the crest overlooking the drainage. The rest of the morning was quiet, except for the sound of hooves on ice that I had assumed was another party of horseback hunters, since I couldn't see anything.

After about two hours, Gale came back down the trail. "How many were there. I didn't hear your shot." "There were only two other hunters, and I only thought about shooting at them, but thought that it would be too much trouble to explain. What are you talking about?"

"It looks like there were about 100 elk that crossed the trail just over this rise. They went right across the tracks I had made on the way up." A fitting end to great adventure.

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While we did not bring home meat, neither of us felt that our trip had been a failure. We had experienced an aspect of the outdoors which for us had been out of reach in the past. Both of

us plan to return at some future time, when work and personal conflicts allow it. I expect at some point in the future to prepare myself for more of a mountain man adventure, now that have been privilege to see the mountain.

One reason that we enjoyed a trip that might have been disappointing to others was that both of us, while not candidates for a rigorous pack in trip, were aware of our limitations and we had each spent time in the Rocky Mountains each summer. Our hope was to experience the trip, and to view the killing of an elk or deer as a potential part of that experience, not the singular focus of this trip. On our first contact with our guide, we let him know what we expected, and found out what he expected of us.

The main reason we considered our trip a success was that our guide was willing to work with us in line with that expectation. His horses and equipment were well suited to the task, and he set about providing us with the hunt we expected. The experience of a first elk hunt, while not a traditional success, was well worth the price in its rich experience.