

## LOOKING BACK

*continued from page 138*

slow down the bears very much. Always looking to be more efficient, Zentner mounted an M-1 semi-automatic rifle on top of his plane. The rifle fired a mere four inches above his propeller and as soon as it was secured, he took off in search of his old adversary.

Until 1963, the flying bear hunters (by now there were at least three) continued their bear strafing runs pretty much unabated. By now, Alaska was a state and when the residents of Kodiak saw the planes equipped with guns, the news got out and Alaska's Governor Egan ordered an immediate halt to the flying killing machines. Although Zentner still made an occasional sortie over the ranch, it all ended when the August, 1964 Outdoor Life Magazine hit the stands with a story called "The Kodiak Bear Wars," complete with cover art depicting a plane blazing away at a giant Kodiak Bear standing on its hind legs raging at the plane.

The next great idea was the proposal for a 9' steel fence to be installed around the ranching areas. The fence would run for miles and miles and the cost would be astronomical. Since the demise of the flying "Bear Force," the bears were on the increase and, like always, they still held the upper hand. After kicking around the fence idea with all the ranchers, state and federal officials, the concept died a natural death. The cattle industry finally realized that when it came to the cattle, the bears would always win out.

For nearly two hundred years the battle was fought by every means at hand, and by the middle of the 1960s, hostilities of the Great Alaskan Bear Wars had all but ended, with the bears showing the humans just who was toughest kid on the block. The records show that in 1927, there were about 1,000 cattle, both beef and dairy combined, on the Kodiak and Aleutian Islands. Estimates from the mid-1960s only added up to about 1,300 head total. There are still a few ranches left in the traditional bear areas, run by people nearly as tough as the bears.

Today, the livestock industry in Alaska is a modest, but steady business. It now includes reindeer, Yak,

sheep and hogs as well as cattle. On some of the old ranches, Bison have replaced cattle and are generally considered to be better in the harsh environment and less vulnerable to the bears.

As for their southern counterparts, they like to point out that at least they are never too hot and they don't have rattlesnakes up there. They're right of course - they just have 1,500 pound eating machines always looking to poach a free meal. **WR**



A Kodiak bear near the Karluk River, Kodiak Island.

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## Welcome To Kodiak

*Original inhabitants thrilled at the arrival of beef cattle to Alaska*



Cattle graze the open grasslands on a ranch about 30 miles from Kodiak on Kodiak Island, Alaska. (Photo circa early-mid 1900's courtesy Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks, UAF 1970-28-1308)

**To listen to the cowboys of the lower 48, raising and caring for their cattle can be a miserable and often dangerous proposition. Heat, cold, drought, flood and rattlesnakes are some of the common complaints heard throughout history. Stories of knot-headed horses that blow up at exactly the wrong moment fill page after page of the legends and stories about cowboys. Musicians and poets have made a living for more than a century telling the world of their trials and tribulations. Of course the cowboys are right - it has always been a tough and dangerous way to make a living. However, there may be a few cowboys that have it even tougher than the southern hands – and a whole lot scarier.**

By comparison, the beef cattle industry in Alaska has never been large, and what there is of it is scattered all around our largest state, with a lot of it taking place on the southern coastal islands. Kodiak Island was first settled in 1763 as part of Russia; shortly after that it saw its first bovines. As luck would have it, the island's natives also had a taste for fresh beef. From the start, the ranchers had to fight to keep the local poachers away from their stock.

Poachers anywhere can be a problem, but the poachers we're talking about on Kodiak Island happened to be 10' tall, 1500 pound Kodiak bears – possibly one of the meanest critters on the planet. After Russia turned Alaska

over to the U.S. in the sale of 1867, entrepreneurs from everywhere came to Kodiak Island and other areas of the huge territory to stake their claim on a future in Alaska. The more people that arrived looking for their fortune, the greater the need for fresh beef.

The giant bears greatly appreciated the efforts of the early settlers to raise livestock and quickly became the rancher's best customers. As the battle between the bears and the ranchers heated up, the early settlers tried everything they could to keep the giant carnivorous bears, (actually omnivores) at bay. They shot every bear they could find, and it appeared to make little difference in their numbers. They brought in large aggressive

dogs in an attempt to scare the bears off, but most ended up as a snack for the ever-hungry cattle poachers.

At one time, there were more than a dozen ranches doing business on the rolling, well-watered hills south of the town of Kodiak. The ranches averaged about 22,000 acres and were the result of the 1887 Hatch Act that set in motion the opening of federal lands for the use of agriculture.

By the 1950s, one of the legendary Kodiak ranchers of the time, a man named Joe Zentner, decided to step up his game and buy his first airplane, a Piper Cub, purchased from a dealer in Kansas. Zentner paid \$3,800 for the plane and \$1,200 to have it delivered to the island. When he finally got it home he still had to learn to fly it, and another Kodiak rancher and pilot, Dave Henley, taught him the basics of flying. After a few flights with Henley, Zentner, impatient to find some bears, took off by himself. He flew the rest of his life without the benefit of any more lessons or a pilot's license.

Alaska was still a territory, and hunting bears from an airplane was a gray area in the law at that time, but it didn't deter Zentner and his friends from the mission at hand – it also didn't

*continued on page 137*