

The History Corner

Orcas Island Historical Museum in
Eastsound, Washington

The Great Orcas Island Bear Hunt

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“Higgy” was a cute little guy when he first arrived at Olga, on Orcas Island, in 1910. Brown, furry, and cuddly, “Higgy” was a Kodiak bear cub (*Ursus Arctus Middendorfi*) which had been given to Mrs. Rice, proprietress of the Olga Park Inn, by her good friend Ella Higginson, a famous eastern author. Kodiak bears are the largest bear species in the world, attaining a height of ten feet when standing on their hind legs — but little “Higgy”, at two months of age and weighing about one hundred pounds, quickly became the pet of the community. Everybody loved adorable little “Higgy” . . . until he got away.

When he slipped his collar and headed for the hills near Olga in October of 1910, “Higgy” was four months old and weighed about 150 pounds. The newspaper reported her loss, and requested anyone spotting him to notify Mrs. Rice so she could retrieve her pet bear. As time passed, and the bear grew, public sentiment about “Higgy” began to change, as evidenced by a newspaper article of September 1911 which reported a sighting of “the varmint” when he raided a crabapple orchard on the Norris place.

A mere month later, in October 1911, “Higgy” had become “a monster, with a gray face and an ornery disposition” with breathless newspaper articles reporting that he was now hundreds of pounds heavier than the year before, and that from now on it was “open season on bears, and anyone may go after the big bear on Orcas Island.” The article added the heartfelt plea “Mrs. Rice would like to have the bear’s pelt if it weren’t too mutilated by the rifle balls and bowie knives”.

Various hunting parties pursued “Higgy” for two years, with the reports of his sightings related in increasingly hysterical terms. The final report, on June 29th 1912, told of the slaying of the “huge 1100 pound Kadiak (sic) Grizzly which had terrorized the eastern side of Orcas Island for the past two years”. The article continued with “. . . great stories of the monster’s predations . . . tales of him carrying full-grown steers in his mouth across Doe Bay Mountain . . . he was said to pull up apple trees and hold them in one paw while he plucked the fruit with the other. Half a dozen sheep were nothing for one meal . . .”.

“Higgy” was, so far as is known, the only Kodiak bear ever to reside on Orcas Island until five shots from a .22 gauge rifle, fired by Sam Lighthouse, brought “this terrible monster” to an end, and along with it the only bear hunt Orcas Island has ever known.

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