

## COVER STORY

# Tracking Yosemite's last grizzly

By Sam Whiting

The American soldier who gave Yosemite its name mistook it for the Miwok term for "grizzly," when a literal translation was "those who kill." Either one worked, because the big bear was the dominant animal in the valley until the Army got there.

Though long extinct, the grizzly subspecies also known as the California Golden Bear lives on on the state flag, so something dramatic was needed to represent it in the California Historical Society's exhibition "Yosemite: A Storied Landscape." Curator Kerry Tremain found the answer in a handwritten letter dated April 20, 1918.

"It described the killing of one of the last two bears in Yosemite," says Tremain, who has a tracker's name and decided to track that bear down.

He knew where to look because the letter was addressed to "Mr. Joseph Grinnell, Berkeley, California." Tremain, former editor of California Magazine, the UC Berkeley alumni journal, recognized Grinnell's name as "one of the most influential biologists of the 20th century."

Because the letter was an account of killing the bear, Tremain deduced

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that it probably accompanied a specimen and he followed those clues to the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, on the third floor of the Valley Life Sciences Building at UC Berkeley, a 13-minute walk from his home in North Berkeley.

The research museum is not open to the public, so in March Tremain arranged a meeting there with James Patton, retired director of the museum, and, as Tremain describes him, "the modern version of Grinnell." After Tremain spelled out his case, Patton "grumbled a bit" but agreed to look for the specimen in the museum's cold storage when he had the time.

## Really pushing

"I was pushing because I really wanted that bear," says Tremain, 62, who runs 36 Views, a San Francisco digital publishing house that created an e-book for the exhibition.

A week or two later, Patton finally called. He had found the bear in question by going through a rack of skins, hung like clothes in a store.

"Since I'd been tracking it down and looking



James Tensuan / The Chronicle

**Above:** Kerry Tremain with the bear skin he found for the California Historical Society's Yosemite show. **Below:** More bear skins are seen in a Yosemite Valley photo by George Fiske (1835-1918).



California Historical Society

for it all this time, I knew the history and I deduced that it had never been seen by the public," Tremain says.

On June 18 that skin, shrunken by time, arrived for its public debut. Killed in 1887, this bear was not the last grizzly to die in the park. A grizzly

specimen from 1895 is also in the University of California collection. But this newfound skin was from the only dead grizzly to come with its own crime report in the form of the original letter from the hunter, Robert Wellman.

Wellman had sold the

skin to Yosemite artist Thomas Hill, who passed it along to Grinnell of UC in 1918.

The document details how Wellman built a tree platform and used a dead cow as bait, as he lay in wait. When the animal, estimated at 10 feet tall, finally approached in the

dead of night, Wellman fired from above, wounding it behind the ear. The bear dragged itself into the bushes as Wellman climbed down from the platform. As the bear sat up and looked at Wellman, the hunter shot it again. The bear fell back and raised one giant paw as a final defense.

## The king is dead

"The king of the Sierra is dead," Wellman wrote. "It's both exciting and tragic," says Tremain, who became emotional when he finally saw the skin stretched out on a board in the California Historical Society gallery. "Yosemite would be quite different now if there were grizzly bears in it. They are magnificent beasts. We killed them all, and this is the story of the last one." ■

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gress, needing just the signature of the president, who was busy prosecuting the Civil War. As the story goes, Lincoln would study the gruesome battlefield images of bloated bodies made by photographers such as Mathew Brady. Then he would ease his eyes by switching to the Yosemite pictures by Watkins, handed to him by Conness.

The president may have owed California something in return for all the gold that financed the war effort. Or he may have owed Conness something for his loyal support. Viewing those pictures, Lincoln went back and forth, Brady to Watkins. Then he dipped his pen and signed the bill that set aside Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove “for public use, resort and recreation ... inalienable for all time.” It was June 30, 1864. Yosemite became a national park in 1890.

“We believe that it was the mammoth plate photographs by Carleton Watkins that were in part responsible for the grant even being signed by Lincoln,” says Hough, 43, who was promoted from consulting curator to director of exhibitions while organizing this show.

When she finally saw Yosemite, in April, Hough arrived in style, accompanied by her 9-month-old son, Ansel Werner.

“Knowing the photography — through Ansel Adams, through Eadweard Muybridge, through Watkins — you think you know Yosemite,” she says. “But then you get there and it is just ‘Oh, my God.’ It is not anything like seeing the images of Yosemite. It’s as spectacular as people say, which you can’t believe.” ■

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California Historical Society



Courtesy Jessica Hough

**Clockwise from top: WWII Soldiers at Tunnel View with Howitzers in 1941; climbing tools in the exhibition; California Historical Society Director of Exhibitions Jessica Hough and her son Ansel in April, during their first trip to Yosemite.**



James Tensuan / The Chronicle