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Old Ephraim Booklet: The Legendary Grizzly of the Bear River Range

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— OLD — EPHRAIM

The Legendary Grizzly
of the Bear River Range

BEYOND THE LEGEND

THE STORY OF OLD EPHRAIM has circulated since the early twentieth century, when the legendary grizzly preyed upon sheep grazing in the Bear River Range. Frustrated herders, hoping to limit losses to their flocks, pursued the elusive bear, but he remained largely unseen and unheard for many years. The only trace of Old Ephraim was his distinctive tracks, which exhibited only three toes on one foot—hence the nickname, “Old Three Toes.” In August 1922, after attempting for more than nine years, sheepherder Frank Clark finally trapped and killed Old Ephraim.

Nearly a century later, the story of Old Ephraim has been told and retold. While many aspects of the story remain the same, parts have become exaggerated to the point that some believe the legend is only a fantastical campfire story. But Old Ephraim was real, and his skull, on display in Utah State University’s (USU) Special Collections & Archives, is a tangible connection to the legend. This overview traces the legend from its roots, examining the era when Old Ephraim roamed, the stories of his death, and the saga of his skull, separating fact from fiction as we remember the legendary grizzly of the Bear River Range.

*“He could see without being seen,
hear without being heard,
and kill without being killed.”*

from “The Story of Old Ephraim”
by Orson Ryan



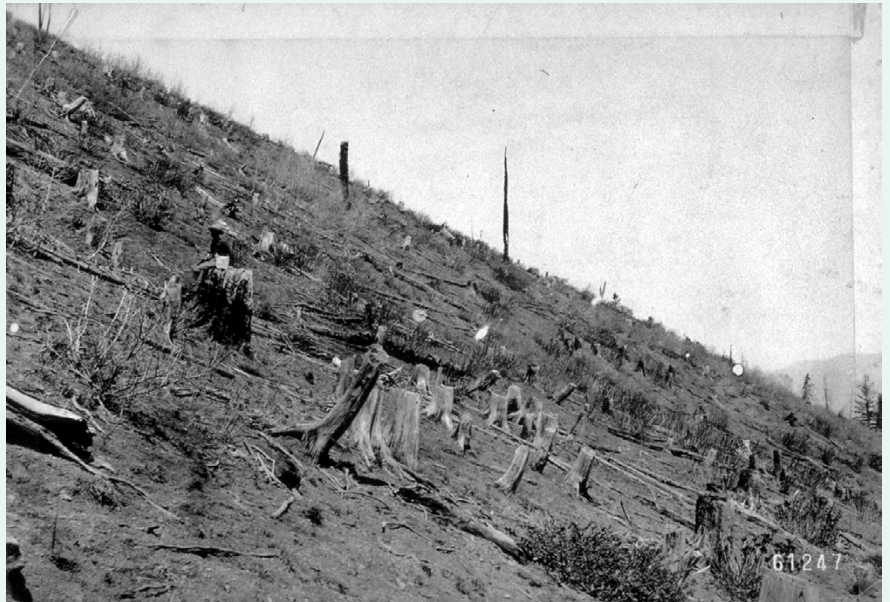
THE ERA OF OLD EPHRAIM AND FRANK CLARK

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, many residents of Cache Valley depended on cattle and sheep for their livelihood. Herders moved livestock to the lush grasses of the Bear River Range during the summer months, where a lack of restrictions on sheep grazing in particular, caused problems for Cache Valley residents, herders, and wildlife alike. From 1870 to 1900, herd size in Cache County increased from 3,167 to 85,817 and in Rich County from 503 to 390,771. Many of these sheep grazed along the Logan River and its tributaries, fouling Logan's primary source of water. At the same time, the sheep decimated native grasses and shrubs, creating barren areas that could not recover. This left less vegetation for livestock and wildlife as the years went on.

Such overgrazing, combined with other environmental problems like deforestation and wildfires, prompted local demands for environmental protection of the Bear River Range. In 1903, a presidential decree created the Logan Forest Reserve, which became the Cache National Forest in 1908. This allowed the forest to be managed in a way that balanced the needs of both residents and herders.

Sheep herd in Box Elder County, c. 1910. Herds this size were common in the mountains of northern Utah, including the Bear River Range, in the early 1900s.

Compton Photograph Studio archive collection, P0313, Box 1, Item C-0334, USU Special Collections and Archives.



Overgrazed and deforested area in the Bear River Range, 1925.

Photograph courtesy United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service Intermountain Regional Office.



GRIZZLY FACTS

DIET

Grizzly bears will eat almost anything: wild fruits and berries, roots, grasses, green vegetation, nuts, bulbs, insects, fish, rodents, and carrion of big game animals such as elk and deer. Bears do not typically hunt big game, but they will prey on elk and moose calves. Grizzly bears are also fond of human garbage and will sometimes prey on livestock.

HABITAT

Mountainous regions with a mixture of meadows, grasslands, and forests.

RANGE

Female grizzly bears travel 50 to 300 square miles in search of food while males will travel from 200 to 500 square miles.

SIZE

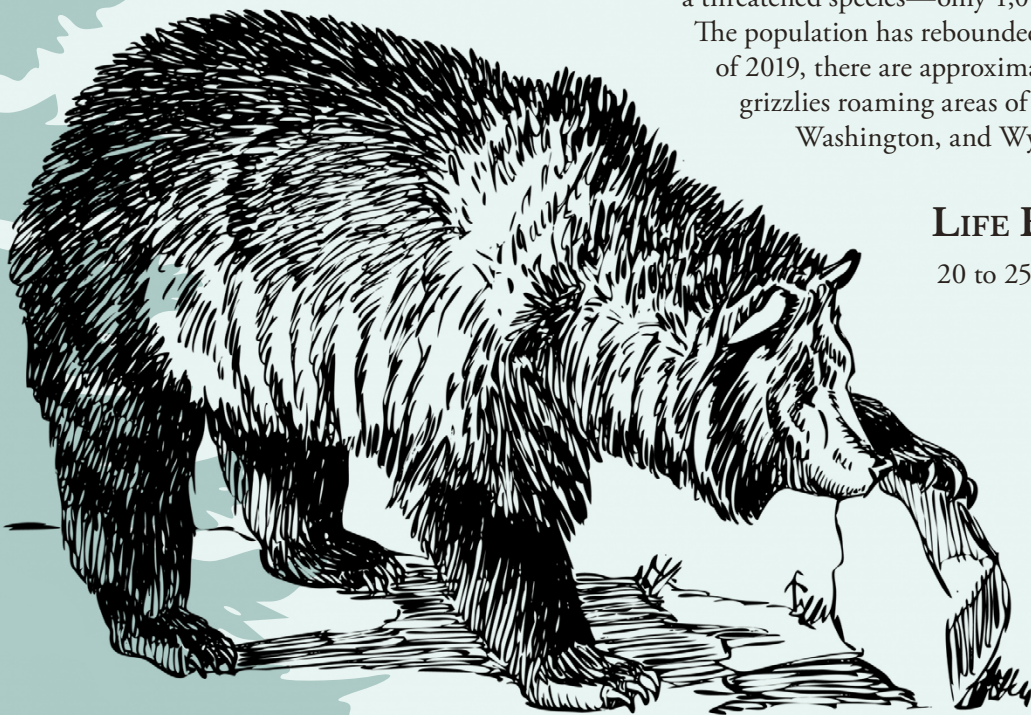
When standing on their hind legs, male grizzly bears are approximately 7 feet tall and generally weigh from 300 to 700 pounds. Female grizzly bears range between 200 and 400 pounds.

POPULATION

Scientists estimate that in the early 1800s there were over 50,000 grizzly bears in the lower 48 states. By 1975—the year the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the grizzly bear as a threatened species—only 1,000 remained. The population has rebounded slightly: as of 2019, there are approximately 1,850 grizzlies roaming areas of Idaho, Montana, Washington, and Wyoming.

LIFE EXPECTANCY

20 to 25 years.

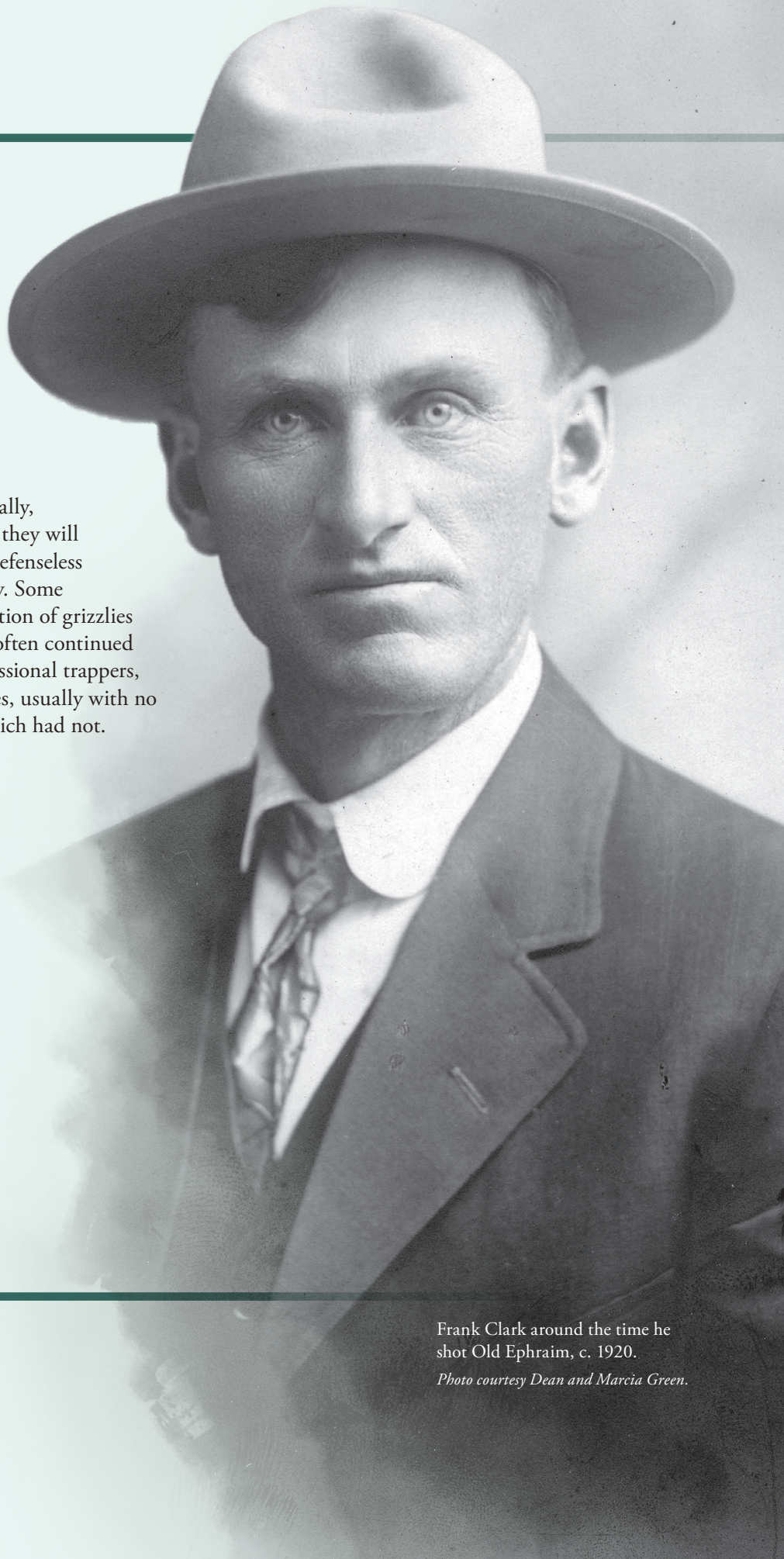


GRIZZLY BEARS IN THE BEAR RIVER RANGE

The dramatic influx of sheep in the Bear River Range caused much of the grizzly bear's habitat to become overgrazed and simultaneously offered a tantalizing new source of food. Because they are omnivores, plant sources are an important part of grizzly diets, and this resource suddenly became scarcer. Additionally, grizzlies are opportunistic feeders, meaning they will feed on whatever food is available. Mostly defenseless sheep were an easy and alluring opportunity. Some combination of these factors led a small portion of grizzlies to attack flocks, and those that killed once often continued to do so. Herders responded by hiring professional trappers, or, like Frank Clark, killing bears themselves, usually with no regard to which had killed livestock and which had not.

FRANK CLARK (1879–1960)

Frank Clark was a shepherd from Cherry Creek near Malad City, Idaho. He was co-owner of the Ward Clark Sheep Company, and his sheep grazed on the Cache National Forest during the summer months. Frank Clark was fond of nature, but he killed bears and other predators when they preyed on his sheep. Stories say that Frank Clark killed 43 bears in 34 years on the range.



Frank Clark around the time he shot Old Ephraim, c. 1920.

Photo courtesy Dean and Marcia Green.



An illustration of Old Ephraim by Marianna L. Israelsen, 1959. The bear trap and chain are depicted on the bear's right paw.

*General Book Collection, 979.2524 C882, USU
Special Collections and Archives.*

THE STO

The legend of Old Ephraim began with Frank Clark's own account:

"And now for the greatest thrill of my life, Ephraim raised up on his hind legs with his back to me and a 14 foot log chain wound around his arm as carefully as a man would have done it and a 23 pound bear trap on his foot and standing 9 feet 11 inches high.

He could have gone that way and have gotten away but he turned around and I saw the most magnificent sight that any man could ever see. I was paralyzed with fear and couldn't raise my gun and he was coming, still on his hind legs, holding that cussed trap above his head. He had a four foot bank to surmount before he could reach me. I was rooted to the earth and let him come within six feet of me before I stuck the gun out and pulled the trigger.

He fell back but came again and received five of the remaining six bullets. He had now reached the trail, still on his hind legs. I only had one cartridge left in the gun and still that bear wouldn't go down so I started for Logan, 20 miles down hill. I went about 20 yards and turned, Eph was coming, still standing up, but my dog was snapping at his heels so he turned on the dog. I, then, turned back and as I got close he turned again on me, waddling along on his hind legs. I could see that he was badly hurt as at each breath the blood would spout out from his nostrils so I gave him the last bullet in the brain.

I think I felt sorry I had to do it."

from "True Bear Story" by Frank Clark



RIES

Besides Clark's accounts, there are more than a dozen other versions of the Old Ephraim legend as it was told and retold over the decades. The general themes in the stories are very similar: Old Ephraim was a smart bear because he was able to evade Clark's traps for almost 10 years, and Clark was indeed the one who killed him. However, the details of each account can vary considerably. Here are some of the facts on which the stories disagree:

- Old Ephraim's name: Some versions say he was named after a bear from a story written by P.T. Barnum while others say that he was named after Ephraim from the Bible.
- Old Ephraim's height: Some accounts say that he was 9 feet, 11 inches tall while other stories will say that he was 13 feet tall.
- The year Old Ephraim died: Early evidence suggest the bear was killed in 1922, but most versions of the story, including Clark's own, indicate he was killed in 1923.

- Old Ephraim's missing toes: Some stories explain that he lost two toes in a bear trap while others say that he was simply born that way.
- The size of the bear trap: Many of the accounts disagree on the size of the trap. Some say it was 80 pounds, some say it was 50, others say it was 23.

Illustration from "A Wasatch Grizzly: Wherin Is Told the Epic Story of Ephraim, a Great Bear" in *Nature Magazine*, March 1928. This article represents the first published account of the Old Ephraim story.



THE REALITY

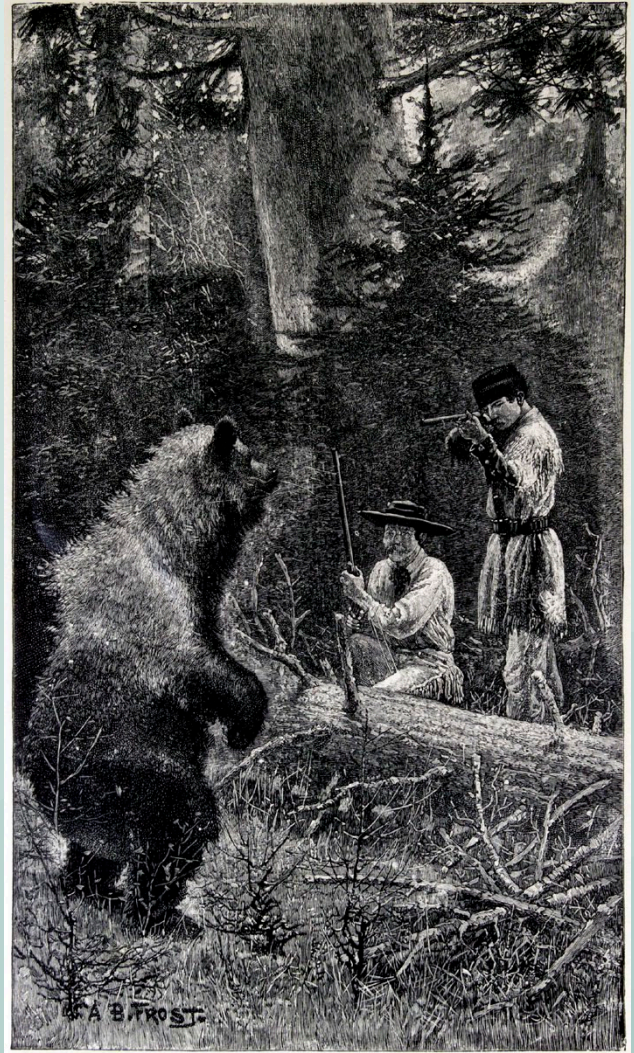
Like any great legend, the Old Ephraim story is a mix of danger, excitement, and a little exaggeration. The earliest published account, a 1928 *Nature Magazine* interview with Frank Clark entitled “A Wasatch Grizzly,” is the closest we have to a contemporary retelling of the event, but we now know even some of these claims were likely clouded by the intensity of the moment and the fogginess of time. Subsequent retellings have further blurred the line between fact and fiction.

For example, there is some confusion surrounding the bear’s name. “Old Ephraim” was not in fact a name unique to the Utah bear; it was a general term for grizzlies used in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American West. In his 1885 book, *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*, Teddy Roosevelt used the name to identify a different bear that roamed Wyoming’s Bighorn Mountains, though Clark claimed the Utah grizzly was named for a bear in a P. T. Barnum story. Either way, it was probably derived from Ephraim, a figure in the Bible’s book of Genesis.

It is also unlikely that Old Ephraim stood 9 feet, 11 inches tall and weighed over half a ton. Judging by the size of his skull, experts at the United States Fish and Wildlife Service Grizzly Bear Recovery Program estimate that Old Ephraim was 7 feet, 6.5 inches tall and around 550 pounds. He was still a larger than average grizzly, just not as big as the stories suggest.

Even the year Clark killed the bear is uncertain. Most versions of the story, including Clark’s later accounts, say that Old Ephraim died in August 1923, a claim repeated on the monument and signage at the gravesite. However, in a letter to the Forest Service in November 1922, Clark said he killed a bear “that gave [him]... trouble for 9 years” in August of that year. Clark makes a similar claim in the 1928 *Nature Magazine* article. That retelling places the event in July 1922, a date supported by the Smithsonian tag on Old Ephraim’s skull.

Finally, later accounts suggest that Old Ephraim was the last grizzly bear in Utah. The evidence suggests that he was probably not the very last, but he was certainly one of the last. In 1925, the United States Forest Service estimated that there were still ten grizzly bears in Cache National Forest, but by 1930, there were none. Clark’s own account suggests he saw evidence of grizzlies in the Bear River Range as late as 1941.



“Close Quarters with Old Ephraim,” an illustration from Theodore Roosevelt’s *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman* (1885). Old Ephraim was a general term used for grizzly bears in the late 19th century.

Book Collection 16, R-67, USU Special Collections and Archives.

OLD EPHRAIM'S SKULL

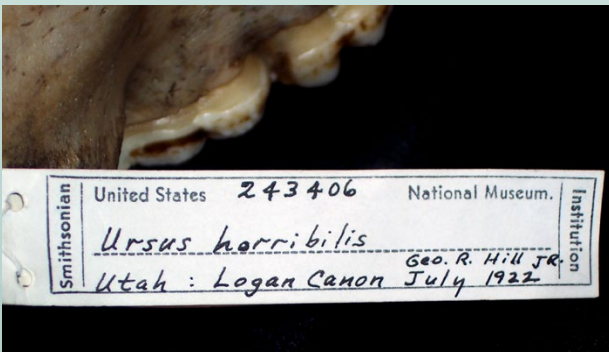
Old Ephraim's skull, or what's left of it, completed a long and complicated journey to reach USU's Special Collections & Archives. Portions of the upper skull are missing, perhaps because, as the legend claims, Frank Clark fired the last shot into the bear's head, shattering the bone. He also burned the carcass before burying it, further damaging the skull. A few months after the bear's demise Clark told the story to Logan

Boy Scout troop #5. Afterward, the Scouts decided to dig up Old Ephraim's remains and retrieve his skull. They sent it to the Smithsonian, which confirmed the skull was that of a grizzly and sent the Scouts a check for \$25. In 1966, Cache Valley Boy Scouts erected a granite monument at the old gravesite to commemorate Old Ephraim's death.



The Boy Scouts who retrieved Old Ephraim's head, c. 1922. Pictured are Ezra Cardon, Alma Burgoyne, Harold Rosengreen, Lester Dunford, Fred Hodgson, Henry Daines, Herbert May, and Horace Bunce.

Logan Boy Scout Troop 5 photograph album, P0364, Box 1, Sheet 15, USU Special Collections and Archives.



The Smithsonian inventory tag on Old Ephraim's skull. The tag places Old Ephraim's death in July 1922.

Photograph by Becky Skeen, USU Special Collections and Archives.



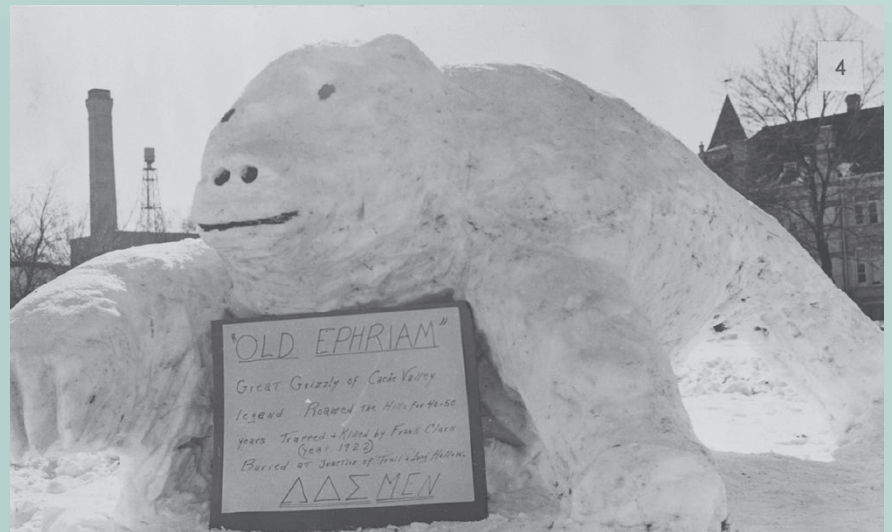
EPHRAIM'S RETURN

The Smithsonian housed Old Ephraim's skull from 1923 until 1978. It returned to Utah after a group of Cache Valley Boy Scouts visited the Smithsonian in 1977 only to find out that the skull was no longer on display. At the request of Utah Senator Orrin Hatch, the museum agreed to loan the skull to USU.

Senator Hatch returned it to USU in grand fashion, arriving on the Quad by helicopter where the school's president, Glen L. Taggart, accepted a wooden box containing the skull. It has been housed in USU's Special Collections & Archives ever since.

United States Senator Orrin Hatch, carrying Old Ephraim's skull in a box, walks across the quad with USU President Glen L. Taggart, 1978.

Student Life, May 15, 1978, Archives 25.5/8, USU Special Collections and Archives.



A snow sculpture of Old Ephraim on USU's quad created by Lambda Delta Sigma fraternity, c. 1960. The sign reads: "Old Ephraim: Great Grizzly of Cache Valley Legend. Roamed the Hills for 40-50 years. Trapped and Killed by Frank Clark (year 1922). Buried at Junction of Trail & Long Hollow."

Orson Winso Israelsen irrigation photographs, P0358, Box 2, Folder 7, Item 3, USU Special Collections and Archives.

THE LEGEND LIVES ON

THOUGH THE DETAILS may have changed over the years, stories continue to revere Old Ephraim and reminisce about the days that once were, back when the old grizzly bear ruled the forest. To many, Old Ephraim represents a wilder time when life was simpler and people were tougher. His death marked the point when the wild was taken out of the wilderness and the forest became tamer. This longing for an earlier era also reminds us of the significant impact our activities have on the environment, and that the health of our mountains and its wildlife depend on our ability to restrain our most destructive impulses and balance our needs with those of the natural world.

If the story of Old Ephraim was not important to Cache Valley and the greater region, it would have long been forgotten. Instead, people wrote songs about the grizzly's death and local businesses constructed statues of the bear. Even some 100 years after his demise, Salt Lake City's Uinta Brewing Company named a beer after Old Ephraim, and the overall winners of the Bear 100, a local ultramarathon, are given the Old Ephraim Award. In his later years, Frank Clark admitted regret in killing Old Ephraim and said that if faced with the chance to do it again, he would decline. Perhaps Clark would find some consolation in the bear's enduring legacy.



A sculpture of Old Ephraim along Washington Street in Montpelier, Idaho.

Photograph by Clint Pumphrey, USU Special Collections and Archives.

OLD EPHRAIM, OLD EPHRAIM, YOUR DEEDS WERE SO WRONG
YET WE BUILD YOU THIS MARKER AND SING YOU THIS SONG.
TO THE KING OF THE FOREST SO MIGHTY AND TALL,
WE SALUTE YOU OLD EPHRAIM, THE KING OF THEM ALL.



IN MEMORIAM
THIS RUGGED FOUR AND ONE HALF TON NATIVE
STONE IS SYMBOLIC OF A GIANT GRIZZLY BEAR
CALLED OLD EPHRAIM WHO RANGED THIS AREA
FOR MANY YEARS KILLING SHEEP, CATTLE, AND
CAME, AND WAS TRAPPED, SHOT AND BURIED NEAR
HERE AUG. 1923 BY FARM CLARK OF MALDEN, IDAHO.
STANDING UPRIGHT HE EQUALLED THE HEIGHT OF
THIS MONUMENT (9 FT. 11 IN.) AND WEIGHED
ABOUT 100 LBS. SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTE,
WASHINGTON D. C. HAS HIS SKULL.
ERECTED BY LOCAL SCOUTS AND SCOUTERS
AUG. 22, 1966

OLD EPHRAIM, OLD EPHRAIM, YOUR DEEDS WERE SO WRONG
YET WE BUILD YOU THIS MARKER AND SING YOU THIS SONG.
TO THE KING OF THE FOREST SO MIGHTY AND TALL,
WE SALUTE YOU, OLD EPHRAIM, THE KING OF THEM ALL.
DEPT. J. BOTT

WANT MORE?

Check out the Old Ephraim
digital exhibit at exhibits.usu.edu

A boy posing at Old Ephraim's monument, c. 1970.
USU Photographic Services collection, P0376, Box 71,
Folder 16737D-006, USU Special Collections and Archives.