

Look in the Journal Dec. 8, 1944
Foot 6 My. later

OLD SMOKEY AND HER CUBS

by
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Photographs by William L. Finley

Down in the dark cavern under the roots of a big forest tree,
^{a black bear}
Old Smokey, lethargic with winter sleep, stirred and rolled over, relieving herself of a lumpy burden on her chest. The mass of wool commenced to wiggle and muzzle in her thick fur. Partially awakening, she became aware of where she was and that she had acquired a family since she crawled into her winter bed in late November. In fact, it looked to be more of a family than she had expected, for although she couldn't count, she was aware of one or two extra - or was she seeing double? At least two were pushing and grunting to shove each other from the table, and something was snug under her neck half choking her. That was what had awakened her. She aroused herself and half sat up. It was true. She was the mother of triplets instead of a single or twins. The runt was the neck-piece under her chin with legs draped over her arm. She didn't know whether she was pleased or not. Oh, well, it wasn't time to wake up, so she floated back into a doze.

No one will know how she took her trials of birth, but at least it must have been softened by twilight sleep. She had a thick winter coat and was rolling in fat from feasting on late berries and roots when she entered her den. She herself was like a stove and with the entrance sealed up with heavy snow, she was soon asleep in a warm bedroom, and the roaring storms and creaking limbs above never reached her. In fact, they were the normal lullaby that lured her to sleep.

Sometime in that dim region of slumber, the cubs were born blind, helpless, and almost hairless, mites that weighed only about half a pound and were about the size of small chipmunks. They attached themselves to her teats and dreamily she furnished them sustenance without any replenishment of food or drink for herself. It was forty days after birth before the cubs opened their eyes and the slumber spell in the cave showed

life grew

signs of unlocking. In the silence of the forest den ^{life grew} space, and there were small stirrings. The days of destiny were approaching.

As circulation increased, warmth and limberness came to the big mother's body. She felt the movements of small forms and heard faintly the soft sniffings. In another day or two, she was aware of a breeze creeping in at the opening under the big roots. She aroused herself and sat up, untangling from the cubs. The next day she peered out and finally pushed herself out of the still snowy entrance. The world was white under the great limbs of the trees, but spring, cold spring, flured her to life and movement. Soon she was shuffling down the slope, every sense awake and alive to hunger. But it looked like slim pickings. No bird or animal seemed to be afield yet. She nibbled eagerly at the stiff limbs and scant leaves of brush, and finally struck the trampled, deep trail of the forestry wardens. All at once she saw the slim, snaky form of a weasel still in his white winter coat, humping along over the snow in his caterpillar gait. With one lunge she was upon him, and there was a shrill shriek of terror and pain. Unwise weasel.

When the cubs were three months old, sturdier and better clad, she led them out of the den. At first they were timid in the big whiteness, stumbled and skidded on the crusty snow banks, set up a bawling that resounded through the forest tunnels. But it didn't take long for them to get their snow legs, to feel the fitness of frame and muscle, to romp and play with limber abandon, to go wild in this big freedom. The runt was fearful and often left behind, and when she did make a break she skidded on her rump and went headlong into the deep snow, bawling loudly for her mother, who gave her little sympathy. She was a snivelly little brat always complaining as she tagged at her mother's heels. And she was dumb and always getting into trouble.

When Old Smokey sneaked around the back of the ranger's cabin to raid the garbage can, Runty tagged along announcing their coming to the world. Then she had to crawl up on a slanting board and pitch headlong

into the can, banging and bawling at the top of her lungs. There was a slam of the kitchen door and the cook stamped out and dumped the can over, spanking the runt roundly. All of which brought Old Smokey lumbering back red-eyed and ready to maul some one. She nuzzled the runt and finally led her brood back into the woods. But she forgot all about it the next morning and was back at the garbage can. She was ordinarily a peaceable soul, but she would almost commit murder for a good meal of kitchen leavings, especially meat scraps. One day at the smell of frying bacon, she forgot herself and lunged clean through the screen door of the kitchen. This brought the ranger with a gun, at sight of which she went out quicker than she went in.

Smokey's family lived around the fringe of civilization, playing and hunting food in the woods, learning to climb the big trees as nimbly as cats, often falling asleep astride the limbs, limp and oblivious. They soon learned that safety from all enemies was to be found in the tree-tops, and they were as agile as monkeys at getting around and perfectly at home at great heights. No one ever heard of a cub taking a tumble. And they were as nimble at going down as climbing up, hitching down tail backwards. When there was nothing else to do, they put on a sparring match under the trees, handling their mits as deftly as professionals.

All bears have trails into the woods for preferred places to dig roots, to turn up horse or cow flaps for bugs and worms. An old bear will reach out her flexible tongue and scoop berries off a bush at a wholesale rate. And how these bears did love to run into a swarm of bees. Smokey had a seventh sense of smell when there were bee or wasps' nests nearby. She could look at an innocent old hole in a tree and tell there was honey inside. A few bee stings meant nothing to her. She waded right in, scooping the comb out and licking off her paws, bees and all. And the hole was empty when she was through with it.

When a tame bear takes food from a hand, she is as gentle as a

dog, reaching her tongue out and taking the offering slowly and carefully. But beware of playing pranks on her. A man who handed a bear a lighted cigarette had the flesh of his arm stripped off by the lightning stroke of a bear's claws.

Smokey and her family, once out of the winter den, never returned to it, but made their home in the forest at large, sleeping wherever night found them. She knew that when the snow melted and exposed the hole under the big roots, she would be at a disadvantage to protect her cubs there. And old Father Bruin is very fond of bear meat, especially that of his own children. It is both a cannibal and a jealousy streak in his make-up. He knows he is not the head of the family, not even a family man.

Smokey often led her cubs down to a mud hole near a stream. She would step down into the goey soup and revel in it, turning and sloshing it all over her body, dipping her fingers in it, spitting them down on it sending showers up into her face and eyes. It was almost like a dog's mania for rolling in manure, an ecstasy for a queer perfume. The cubs would loiter around the edge, amusing themselves or trying new trees to climb. Finally she would lift herself out as if weighted down, looking like an over-sized mud puppy. How she got rid of the sticky stuff, no one knew. But when next seen, her dark coat was clean and sleek.

All in all, Smokey and her children were a happy-go-lucky lot, always with the attitude of having a lot of time to kill and they couldn't figure out just whether it was important. Even hunting a living was a casual job. But as wild animals, they played the game pretty squarely, almost human at some times. They were willing to live and let live, especially if you had something to give. If you didn't, they went on their way.