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## THE FUN OF FEEDING THE BEARS

by

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Photographs by William L. Finley

The sunlight of a summer morning in Yellowstone Park slanted through the firs on the mountain side and lighted up the dewy meadows that border the winding highways. A small stream talked softly on its way. The scene was fresh, quiet, peaceful, typical of this wilderness area. But, no! Excitement bobbed up around the next curve. The road was blocked with cars. Rolling up cautiously behind a trailer, there was a commotion, people moving about, the hysterical shrieks of a woman. It must be a bad one.

Not exactly. It was the opening scene of the daily drama in the Park. An old black bear stood with her paws on the window sill of a car extorting a hand-out. The cubs, a black and a brown one, assiduously ambled about passing the hat and trumping up business. It was the well known game that the bruins practice on the willing public. But it looked like a scene set for trouble. Any little thing might touch it off.

Not one traveler in a hundred can fathom the poker face of a wild bear when he is hungry and folks get familiar. Few have read the history of this furry tribe that for hundreds of years dodged arrows and bullets in their forest homes. More have met him neatly wrapped around a wood or wire skeleton in some museum group, or serving time behind the iron bars of a city zoo.

During the past summer from early June to mid-September,

visitors from north, east, south, and west, especially trailer travelers and campers, rolled in, all bent on having the time of their lives. Nearly 500,000 tourists were registered. Where to put them each morning from dawn till dark was a nightmare to the throng of operators. About mid-afternoon, drop into the office of a room clerk of any one of the lodges or camps with literally hundreds of cabins and tents stacked in rows. Hear the cheerful dismissal, "No, our cabins were all filled by noon. Better register now for tomorrow."

Stand on a high point and gaze at the grades that wind along the sides of the great canyon with its brilliantly colored cliffs and thundering falls. The army crawls on, threading these high lanes as far as the eye can see, hour by hour, day by day. Look at a night scene of campers in a large bare space under the trees. Campfires light up the limbs and faces under them, the supper tables, little air-tight stoves, oil burners, and even kettles over cranes. Hundreds of cars are parked hit-or-miss, pup tents and mastiff size tucked sociably together, lines of washing, kitchen kits, mirrors, shaving sets gayly decorating the trees; baby buggies, bird cages, pet parrots, and parked dogs filling the air with a soft pendemonium.

Old Mother Bear was ready for them. She had set up her stand on the highway to sell a song and dance for bread and butter, and she pandered to her patrons as adroitly as the soda-pop slinger and souvenir peddler, who also saw a good thing in the influx of the masses. What else could she do when the Park Service stopped feeding the black bears at the hotel garbage dumps, a gentleman's agreement between them for years? She wasn't

standing behind the counter like an inexperienced clerk, but stalked recklessly out to head off cars swishing by. Years ago she would have had the jitters at such daring. But today the possibility of being tossed into the air didn't give her the slightest jar. She didn't hesitate or dodge back.

By some uncanny intuition, she was positive that not one of these cars wanted to hit her. She was right. Traveling usually at fifty miles an hour, they didn't race up, throw the occupants on their noses trying to step of avoid a crash. They slid up easily, knowingly. They were looking for bears. Mother Bear knew it as well as if she saw in their eyes a picture of herself, round, black, entrancing. The right-of-way was hers by a regulation that no park had made, or seemed powerful enough to unmake.

The performance was in full swing. How casually she sized up the customers as she shuffled smoothly about, never grazing a wheel, never letting one pass by without toll, always polite when stretching a paw inside, always careful when lifting her lip for a morsel. And how the fun-hungry people ate it up! She literally ingratiated herself into the bosom of the family. They must take home a picture of Buddy and Rosy standing by this big Teddy bear come to life.

The season progressed. The bears still put on their dances by the roadside, and they and the cubs fared fat. All the King's horsemen and all the King's men couldn't stop the tourists from snatching up anything edible to toss out to the bears. This inspite of big signs, "Don't Feed the Bears," hanging over their heads.

One woman was all excited the minute her car stopped, and she got out a paper bag. The bear was acquainted with a bag. When a shaggy head was poked in the woman's face, she dropped back in consternation and threw the bag at the bear. This was just the ticket. A big paw scattered the contents on the ground, crackers, a life-saver, and two exposed camera rolls. After lapping up the crackers and sweet stuff, she stuck a toe into one of the packages. It might be sweet, too.

"Oh!" cried the woman, "There go my pictures. Scare her off!"

A truck slowed down in their midst. A uniformed man stepped out.

"Get out of here! Get out!"

The chastisement certainly didn't apply to the spectators. In the Park, which is owned by the people and kept for their enjoyment, it is a rare ranger who has the nerve to crack the people. But his authority did reach to the bears for whom he had little love or respect. He grabbed a stick and chased Old Mother Bear and the cubs into the woods. They didn't go far but sat behind the trees waiting for the ranger to depart.

But listen. "You people ought to know better than to feed these bears. They are liable to tear you to pieces. Can't you read that sign?"

They looked now and saw it nailed to a tree. It meant nothing but a kill-joy. In silent chagrin they gazed at the officer. Then one car after another slid off down the road with grumblings coming from the windows.

"Why not feed the bears? What's that fellow for- just

to spoil the fun? What do they keep these bears for? Is there anything more human than dividing your lunch with a hungry bear?"

"You're right," said another. "I thought this Park wanted you to be kind to the animals in here. They won't let you have a gun. Anyway, these bears on the road are good pals."

A mile further on, two black beggars were playing on the sympathies of another bunch. Cameras were clicking. Out of a car stopped a school teacher with a box of candy. When she tossed out a chocolate cream, bruin licked his lips. He reared up and stood as calm as a kitten while she put several more into his mouth.

"Now, Blackie, that's enough. Too much is not good for you," said the lady when the sixth chocolate slipped out of sight. She replaced the cover and tucked the box under her arm. Blackie didn't agree with her, but said nothing, hoping for more. Then he meekly touched the box with his fingers. He laid a paw gently on her arm. With a begging expression he looked her in the eye, but saw nothing. He fidgeted. Suddenly he swung a paw and sent the box spinning. A side swipe with the other caught her in the breast. The limp form of a woman, the sight of blood, and the bear bolting guiltily for the woods ended the scene. The death penalty was demanded for the bear. Was he the only guilty one?

These accidents along the highways are too numerous in the Park, but not all end in tragedy, thanks to the bear. One day a bus full of people stopped as an old mother and cubs held it up. As the driver put on the brakes, the big bear reared up with her paws on the side of the car. The occupants clambered out on the opposite side and came crowding around. Soon she was surrounded. But she was an amiable creature and being plentifully

rewarded-- just the way she liked it.

Outside the ring, a by-stander couldn't resist picking up one of the fuzzy balls. The cub let out a howl. Mother Bear's head went up. There were legs all around her. Instead of knocking them right and left, she pushed between a man and a woman and made for the offender with her cub in his arms. As she increased to a run, he threw the Teddy bear in her face and backed off in a hurry. Even at this insult, she didn't lose her temper, but stopped with a jolt to fondle the cub and see if he was all right.

This was just the good luck of a thoughtless cub who monkeys with an old mother's cub. Nine out of ten old bears would have been on top of him before he knew what it was all about. There are bad bears and good bears. It is asking a lot of any bears to be "good", and if the discretion and authority of preserving or destroying certain ones rests with the Park rangers, only men who are interested and careful should be appointed to such positions. People have been accustomed to seeing the "tame" black bears along the highways, and they are going to want to see them again. When the report gets out that a wise and gentle old bear like the Appolinaris mother has been destroyed, there are a good many who are going to ask, "Who did it, and why?"

Which brings us back to the signs here and there in the Yellowstone Park, "Don't Feed the Bears." The Park's anxiety in this matter seems to be a little belated, since they surely abetted the situation in the handling of the case and exploiting bears as one of the big attractions of the Park. The sour ball has been thrown back to the public: "Don't Feed the Bears," If you do, the wise old mothers and cute cubs that have drawn you to the Park

more than anything else, will be almost sure to land in the big incinerator- or worse yet, lie as bloated and ghastly forms on a garbage dump for ghoulish ravens to feed on. When this happens, will there be any fun in feeding the bears?