

A wild gift from the West: two grizzly cubs

From the Research File

By Gaye Wilson

BEARS LIKELY were not uppermost in President Jefferson's mind in late October 1807. There was the escalating war between England and France that had engulfed Europe and threatened the neutrality, commerce, and domestic security of the United States. There were the questions of coastal defense and whether the United States should attempt an invasion of Canada if negotiations with Great Britain broke down. But then a gift arrived for the president from the explorer Capt. Zebulon Montgomery Pike: two grizzly cubs.

The bears arrived at about the same time as Pike's letter explaining that he had acquired the male and female cubs in the southern region of the great Continental Divide. An expedition led by Pike had explored along the Arkansas River and then, either knowingly or by error, had crossed into Spanish territory. Pike and his men were arrested by Spanish authorities and taken first to Santa Fe, then Chihuahua. Pike was being escorted back to U.S. territory when he purchased the cubs from a local inhabitant. Pike recognized that the grizzly was a different species of bear from that found in the East and noted in his letter to Jefferson that they were "considered by the natives of that country as the most ferocious animals of the continent."

Jefferson must have been aware of that reputation, as he would have heard first-hand accounts of the western grizzly from Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, who had recently been in Washington following their expedition to the Pacific. Jefferson always was intrigued by any bit of knowledge



Explorer Zebulon Pike sent the "most ferocious animals" to Jefferson.

Library of Congress

about the vast and mysterious western territories, but apparently he made a speedy decision regarding the bears. In a letter to his granddaughter, Anne Cary Randolph, he mentioned the arrival of the grizzly cubs from Pike and stated flatly, "These are too dangerous and troublesome for me to keep. ... I shall therefore send them to Peale's Museum."

Charles Willson Peale, artist and devotee of the natural sciences, was a friend and correspondent of Jefferson's. In 1786 he had opened a museum in Philadelphia that displayed portraits he had painted of American notables (including Jefferson) along with a varied and growing collection of natural history objects. Peale had one brief experience with a live grizzly, which had been brought to Philadelphia by a French trader. In March 1804 Peale advertised that the "Famous Grisly Bear" would be on display at the museum for two weeks. But the grizzly, estimated to be two years old, proved too dangerous: It broke its chain and cage, and was put down.

In writing to ask Peale to if he would take the two bears, Jefferson stressed that they had been taken as cubs, were "perfectly gentle" and "appear quite good humored." Jefferson added that they didn't eat much, primarily "Indian bread," and could be of interest to visitors to the museum.

Peale wrote back: "This charge I will cheerfully undertake."

Jefferson must have greeted Peale's response with enthusiasm, but it took almost two months to get the cubs, one male and one female, on their way to Philadelphia. Meanwhile, the bears outgrew their cage and apparently spent some time in an enclosure on the lawn of the President's House. No doubt some passers-by enjoyed seeing the grizzlies, but this gave Jefferson's political opponents the opportunity to gleefully refer to his "bear-garden," a term going back to Elizabethan-era bear-baiting arenas that still carried a connotation of a rough, noisy area lacking any sort of decorum.

When the two grizzlies were delivered to Peale on Jan. 28, 1808, he immediately set about securing a large cage for them, and expressed hope that they would eventually breed. He knew from a bearskin given him by Lewis that grizzlies could grow to be quite large. "We hope to see them get their full

Continued on next page.

Thomas Jefferson
MONTICELLO

Monticello is a newsletter published twice each year by the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc. The Thomas Jefferson Foundation is the private, nonprofit corporation that has owned and operated Monticello since 1923. Its mission is preservation and education.

© Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., 2008

COMMENTS?
newsletter@monticello.org

Grizzly cubs

Continued, Page 2.

groath,” Peale wrote to Jefferson, “& also to ascertain what they may weigh when they acquire their full size.”

As these bears had been with humans almost from birth, the expectation seemed to be that they would adapt well to captivity. But this was not to be the case. As they matured, they became more threatening. It is not clear how long Peale had the bears before one of them broke out of its cage and, after terrorizing the Peale family, was shot in the basement kitchen. The other bear was put down as well, then both were mounted and placed on display in Peale’s museum. In this manner they fulfilled Peale’s goal of informing visitors to his museum about the great western bears.

Perhaps they provided another lesson as well. Though raised by humans, grizzlies could not be tamed and would live up to their reputation as “the most ferocious animals of the continent.”

Gaye Wilson is a research historian at Monticello’s Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies.



Titian Ramsay Peale based this 1822 book illustration on the bears that were mounted in his father’s Philadelphia museum, the same bears that Jefferson had presented to the museum as cubs in 1808.

American Philosophical Society