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»A man quite as much of a show as his beasts«:
James Capen »Grizzly« Adams
and the Making of Grizzly Bears

The American fascination with the grizzly bear (Ursus arctos horribilis) has its origins in nineteenth-century Westward expansion, which brought explorers and settlers into contact and conflict with these animals. The ferocity and tenaciously of grizzly bears was first brought to broader public attention by accounts of the exploration of the Corps of Discovery, which, under the leadership of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, traveled to the Pacific Ocean and back between 1804 and 1806. Their terrifying encounters with grizzly bears, which Lewis described as »being so hard to die rather intimidates us all«, provided Americans with their own charismatic megafauna1 and established the terms on which Americans would understand these animals: as a challenging obstacle to and worthy sport during the process of national expansion.2

From this point forward, the grizzly played a crucial role in American culture, taking on »a potent symbolic characterization, becoming all that was terrifying and ferocious on the frontier, all that must be overcome in the realization of Manifest Destiny«.3 Stories of violent and deadly encounters in the west, along with exhibitions in eastern cities (a history which began in 1807, when Thomas Jefferson gave the Philadelphia museum-keeper Charles Willson Peale »two cubs of the Grisly bear« captured by the explorer Zebulon Pike that were becoming »too dangerous and troublesome« for him to keep at Monticello), helped make the grizzly bear America’s totemic animal in the nineteenth century.

By the start of the twentieth century, however, most grizzlies in the United States had been wiped out. Where once early settlers described an abundance of grizzly bears »upon the plains, in the valleys, and on the mountains«, so many, in fact, that »it was not unusual to see 50 to 60 within the 24 hours« in some areas, in 1893 Theodore Roosevelt lamented that »the grisly is now chiefly a beast of the high hills and heavy timber… he has learned that he must rely on cover to guard him from man.«4 Most western states saw their last grizzly killed in the first three decades of the twentieth century. In California, the »Bear Flag Republic«,

1 The grizzly bear is an excellent example of charismatic megafauna: large animal species with widespread popular appeal. The fact that Adams exhibited a wide range of animals reminds us that humans have relationships with specific species, not just with generic »animals.« For a call for more species-specific studies, see Jonathan Burt, »An Obsession with Boundaries: Animal Studies in Its Own Right«, unpublished paper in author’s possession.

2 The Lewis and Clark Journals: An American Epic of Discovery, ed. Gary E. Moulton, Lincoln/London 2003, 129 [11 May 1805]. Lewis added, »I must confess that I do not like the gentlemen and had rather fight two Indians than one bear.« Both Indians and bears, of course, had to be subdued (or eliminated) in the pursuit of America’s manifest destiny.


a rancher killed the last grizzly in 1922. Today the only grizzly bear most Californians are familiar with is the one on the state flag, an image of a bear taken from Charles Nahl’s illustration of the giant grizzly named Samson that belonged to the famed mountaineer and hunter Grizzly Adams.

Although largely forgotten today, Grizzly Adams came to prominence in the late 1850s and early 1860s, famed for his ability to hunt, trap, tame, and train wild animals. Theodore Hittell’s writings about Adams in San Francisco, along with Phineas T. Barnum’s marketing of Adams and his menagerie in the eastern United States, turned him into a cultural icon. Thousands of Americans were drawn to his exhibitions in California, New York City and the northeast, while countless others vicariously participated in Grizzly Adams’ exploits through accounts in the press, his ghost-written autobiographies, and scores of popular anecdotes and images.

This essay takes a fresh look at the life and legacy of Grizzly Adams and his complicated relationship with non-human animals, especially grizzly bears. Adams killed countless grizzly bears and other animals in California and the west, yet he also made several grizzly bears his companions and friends and helped generate new knowledge about their habits and habitat. In the texts about and exhibitions featuring Adams and his animals, Adams and his interlocutors gave living animals cultural meaning, enabling Americans to slowly begin to see the grizzly bear in a new light, as more than just a symbol of the terrors of the frontier in the era of manifest destiny. In Adams himself, they encountered a liminal figure who seemed to straddle human and animal worlds, a man who, in the words of P. T. Barnum, was «quite as much of a show as his beasts.» Living intimately with wild animals in a relationship marked by both dominance and affection, Adams shaped Americans’ understanding of grizzly bears and wilderness, although he ultimately and ironically bears part of the responsibility for the destruction of both.

The Making of Grizzly Adams

Some readers, including this author, grew up knowing of a man called Grizzly Adams thanks to the 1974 film The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams and subsequent (1977–78) NBC television show starring Dan Haggerty. However, in what comes as a surprise to many people, Grizzly Adams was a real person, and it is to his life that I now turn. Most of what we know about Adams comes from Theodore H. Hittell’s 1860 book The Adventures of James Capen Adams, Mountaineer and Grizzly Bear Hunter of California, which presents Adams’ story in the first person. Hittell, a reporter for the San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin, met Adams in October 1856 when he was drawn by an advertisement for Adams’ Mountaineer Museum.

5 For accounts of the California Grizzly, which include chapters on Grizzly Adams, see Tracy I. Storer/Lloyd P. Tevis, Jr., California Grizzly, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1955 and Susan Snyder, Bear in Mind: The California Grizzly, Berkeley 2003.


7 The film was based on a 1972 novel by Charles E. Sellier Jr. called ‘The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams. This Grizzly Adams fled to the mountains after being wrongly accused of murder. He had an uncanny link to wild animals, including the orphaned grizzly bear cub he raised and named Ben. The film and television program was tremendously successful in the late 1970s, spawning a wide variety of merchandise, including ViewMaster reels, action figures, lunchboxes and stuffed bears. The film and show reflected the development of popular environmentalism in the 1970s.
on Clay Street. Hittell wrote about the exhibition and Adams’ interesting life in the west, attracting further publicity for the museum, which later moved to better quarters. From July 1857 to December 1859, Adams narrated his adventures to Hittell, who wrote the text in the winter of 1859–1860 and had it published in both Boston and San Francisco. Although Hittell recalled that Adams’ »memory seemed remarkably good«, one must use Adventures and other texts supposedly by Adams with some caution, because they were designed to promote Adams’ exhibitions in San Francisco and New York and because there are several discrepancies in these narratives, starting with the question of Adams’ name and birthdate.8

According to the Adventures, James Capen Adams was born in Medway, Massachusetts in 1807 and spent his early life in New England.9 He was trained as a shoemaker, but, as he recalled, »being of a roving and adventurous disposition, I no sooner attained my majority than I threw aside the pegging awl, and hired myself to a company of showmen as a collector of wild beasts.«10 Adams hunted wild animals in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont for the Zoological Institute, a pioneering menagerie corporation that merged the nine extant menagerie companies in the United States.11 Adams’ early career as a professional hunter ended abruptly, as he was nearly killed trying to break an unruly Bengal tiger. Adams claimed that he had entered the animal’s cage »a number of times« (a feat made famous by Adams’ contemporary Isaac Van Amburgh, who first entered a cage of wild animals on stage in 1833) until at last »the magnificent but treacherous beast struck me to the floor and buried his teeth and claws in my flesh.« This incident, one Adams later attributed to his own »rashness«, left him disabled, temporarily ending his hunting career.12

Adams returned to shoemaking to avoid becoming a burden to his family. By his own account he was quite successful, so much so that he invested thousands of dollars in a cargo of boots and shoes destined for California in the wake of the discovery of gold in 1848. Unfortunately, he lost all of his investment in a warehouse fire in St. Louis, so Adams joined the throngs rushing to California. He arrived in »the Golden State« via Mexico in 1849 and


11 The Zoological Institute was formed »for profit«, but with the belief that »the knowledge of natural history be more generally diffused and promoted, and rational curiosity gratified.« The Zoological Institute collapsed with the Panic of 1837. See Richard Flint, American Showmen and European Dealers: Commerce in Wild Animals in Nineteenth-Century America, in: Robert J. Hoage/William A. Deiss (eds.), New Worlds, New Animals: From Menagerie to Zoological Park in the Nineteenth Century, Baltimore 1996, pp. 98–99.

spent the next three or four years mining, raising livestock, and trading. In one of his other autobiographical texts, he spoke of making and losing three fortunes in this brief period, the latter taken away from him in California by «lawyers and judges», leading Adams to remark that he «would rather live among savages and wild beasts than with such a thieving, rascally set of scoundrels as this so-called civilized community.» Ultimately, «disgusted with the world and dissatisfied with myself», Adams chose wilderness over the improvements of civilization, heading into the Sierra Nevada «to make the wilderness my home and wild beasts my companions» in 1852.13

*The Adventures of James Capen Adams, Mountaineer and Grizzly Bear Hunter of California*, chronicles Adams’ rejection of bourgeois respectability and his experiences in the wilderness from 1849, when Adams arrived in California, through 1855, when he started exhibiting his grizzlies and other animals in San Jose. In the narrative, Adams claims he had no intention of going into the wilderness to hunt bears: «I went to live in peace, not to levy war upon the natives of the forest any more than might be necessary for my support or recreation.»14 His renewed career as a hunter and trapper, however, began with a visit from his brother William in 1853, with whom he established a partnership to collect wild animals and ship them to exhibitors in the east. Much of the book describes these hunting and trapping trips, providing both «how to» information about capturing wild animals and describing Adams’ close calls when hunting bears and other animals, including an elk that attacked him after only being wounded by his shot.15 Although part of the appeal of *Adventures* lies in these «mishaps» with wolves, panthers, bison, elk, deer, and bears, Adams only recounts one human fatality, when his hunting companion William Foster was mauled to death by a grizzly. Although Adams understood that the best way to escape a grizzly bear was «to lie perfectly still and show no signs of life, however severely scratched and bitten they might be», Foster, once wounded, disregarded this «simple but valuable rule» by shrieking for help and trying to crawl away, which led the grizzly to rip him apart.16

This description of how to handle an encounter with a grizzly, the first time this now widely-accepted protocol for handling human-grizzly interactions appeared in print, was one of Adams’ many insights about bears, born from his extensive experience in hunting, killing, and catching the California grizzly. Adams was aware of the different grizzlies of the American west and the ways in which their range was «much circumscribed» thanks to hunting and development.17 Although he had a difficult time trying to kill a Rocky Mountain grizzly, whose «imperturbability appeared terrible,—like the consciousness and carelessness of immense power», once Adams was «victorious» over this bear, he provided a detailed comparison of it with the California grizzly, which he saw as the noblest and fiercest of all bears, noting the former’s lighter eyes, coat, and smaller size.18 He also knew that growth rings are added to bears teeth’ each year, a technique used now to determine a bear’s age. But Adams’ natural history recollections involved more than just grizzly bears. Adams was

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15 Ibid, pp. 63–64.
highly attuned to the habitats of different animals, noting that he often established camp «where different ranges of animals merged into each other.» He observed that a panther that he shot was «called by naturalists the cougar or concolor, which is common to the whole country.» Adams later described the mating habits of jaguars, animals that he was surprised to see «beyond the usual range» further south. Thankfully, these were some of the few animals in the text that he ultimately failed to trap or kill.\(^{19}\)

While *Adventures* is marked by countless animal deaths, the most pointless being the shooting of a California condor, the «king of the vultures», for sport, Adams could also see the beauty of animals and nature. In fact, some of the landscape descriptions, undoubtedly embellished by Hittell, approach those of the more famous and influential naturalist John Muir.\(^{20}\) Adams, for example, describes how «the mountain air was in my nostrils, the evergreens above, and the eternal rocks around; and I seemed to be a part of the vast landscape, a kind of demigod in the glorious and magnificent creation.» Although here he gives himself god-like powers over nature, elsewhere the «sublime scenery» of the Yosemite Valley, encountered on a hunting trip in 1854, left Adams «spellbound» and lamenting the failure of language «to convey the impressions produced upon the mind by such an enchanting sight.»\(^{21}\)

The works of nature contrasted positively to the ills of civilization for Adams, who argued that «the long list of ailments which plague the human family are nearly all of its own making; in other words, they are adjuncts of the abuses of civilization.»\(^{22}\) Unlike the majority of California settlers, Adams spoke kindly of Indians, with whom he traded game for assistance in curing skins and hired as laborers and assistants, although he did assert that «it is the decree of an overruling Providence that the red man shall die out.» Adams described his «mountain career» as «driven by a sort of misanthropy» directed at his «own color» that made him sympathetic toward American Indians. In fact, his «contemplation of these lowest specimens of the human family, and the pity which their extreme wretchedness drew from me, reawakened the feelings of humanity in my breast, and prepared my mind for a complete reconciliation with my fellows» upon his permanent return to civilization in 1855.\(^{23}\)

Adams’ new-found tolerance was perhaps most notable in Salt Lake City, where he was so impressed with the achievements of the Mormon settlers that he wrote that he could «hardly

\(^{19}\) Ibid, pp. 158, 259, 366–369.

\(^{20}\) Ibid, pp. 244. John Muir read Hittell’s «Bear book» and found it «interesting», if full of a «great deal of vagueness.» In an 1899 letter to Hittell, Muir thought that «with so much genuine and wonderful adventure it should be the most interesting wild book of its time», and added in a postscript that «My wife says she saw Adams and his grand bears in Martinez. You should be able to find a great many to corroborate his story and make it lively and real.» John Muir to Theodore Hittell, manuscript letter, April 7, 1899, cited in Snyder, *Bear in Mind*, p. 153. Adams might be productively considered as a creator of a laboring class understanding of wilderness and animals, one that stands in contrast with the more elite efforts later in the century to preserve nature.


\(^{23}\) Hittell, *Adventures*, 1860, pp. 44, 224–225. This attitude was far from mainstream, for «every time a bear was blasted into oblivion, the wilderness became slightly more tame. Bears, like Indians, were only good when dead.» Gelo, *The Bear*, p. 144.
look upon the Mormons with what is generally considered orthodox contempt.”

Adams’ true friends and companions, however, were the two grizzly bears, Lady Washington and Ben Franklin, that accompanied him on his travels. Although Adams quickly tamed several black bear cubs that he let run loose around his campground, his young grizzlies, captured after he had killed their mother (standard practice in obtaining wild animals for exhibition), were both older and possessed greater “natural ferocity”, so he beat them into submission and docility. Adams acknowledged that “it is beyond question, a cruel spectacle to see a man thus taking an animal and whipping it into subjection; but when a bear has once grown up, untutored, as large as the Lady [Washington] was, this is the only way to lay the foundation of an education”. Noting that he had “changed savage and ferocious natures to affection and gentleness“, Adams suggested that “the grizzly bear possesses a nature which, if taken in time and carefully improved, may be made the perfection of animal goodness” and, if “managed with a firm, but at the same time, gentle hand”, may become “a devoted friend.”

Adams’ saw his bears as equal to, if not better than, human companions. Lady Washington, for example, “stood side by side with me in the hour of danger and dire alarm; and from that time, I felt for her an affection which I have seldom given to any human being.” Adams later noted that Lady Washington was “a constant companion of all my little excursions. She accompanied me to the scenes of my labors, stayed by me while I worked, and followed me when I hunted. The kind and gentle disposition she had begun to exhibit in Washington Territory improved with time and care, and she was now as faithful and devoted […] as it was possible for any animal to be.” Only Ben Franklin, captured as a week old cub in 1854, surpassed Lady Washington in Adams’ love and esteem (Image 1).

Ben Franklin, “the flower of his race, my firmest friend, the boon companion of my after-years”, was captured along the Mariposa River near Yosemite in the spring after Adams’ final major trapping expedition. Its success can be measured in Adams’ description of the “strange assemblage” he led to Portland, Oregon in the fall of 1853, which consisted of “five horses packed with buffalo robes, of which we had about thirty-five; next, four horses packed with bear skins and several large bear skulls; then, two packed with deer skins; two with antelope skins; one with fox and other small skins; seven with dried meat for the use of the animals on the journey, and, in part, on their intended voyage; one with boxes containing the young bear

26 Ibid, pp. 115, 189.
27 Ibid, pp. 198–199.
cubs last caught; two with boxes containing wolves, untamed; a mule with foxes and fishers in baskets; and a mule with tools, blankets, and camp luggage… But the most remarkable portion of the train consisted of the animals which we drove along in a small herd; these were six bears, four wolves, four deer, four antelopes, two elks, and the Indian dog.\textsuperscript{28}

Unsurprisingly, this wagon train «attracted much attention, as may well be imagined. The people who saw us gazed with wonder, for such a caravan was never seen before or since in those regions.» Once in Portland, Adams loaded «all the animals, skins, oils and curiosities», save for his favorite grizzly bear, Lady Washington, aboard the \textit{Mary Ann}, bound for Boston. These were «disposed of to advantage» by his brother William, «some placed in museums, others carried about the country – all contributing, more or less, to spread a knowledge of the natural history of the Pacific Coast of the United States.»\textsuperscript{29}

In 1854 Adams remained in California, killing grizzlies and other game for the market in meat, hides and tallow and hiring himself out to ranchers beset by predatory animals. He also captured and sold grizzlies for animal combats in California and elsewhere, fulfilling «a contract [his brother William] had made to send two large and one small grizzly bear to Lima, in South America.»\textsuperscript{30} In California, these popular animal combats often pitted bears, allegorized as the United States, against a wild bull associated with Mexico or other wild animals such as panthers. The English writer Frank Marryat met Adams during this period, describing him as «professionally a bear-hunter, bear-trapper, and bear-fighter; who, in fact, dealt generally in grizzly bears. When he shot bears – and it appeared he lived in the mountains – he sold the meat and cured the skins; but when he was fortunate enough to trap a fine grizzly alive, a rich harvest generally awaited him. The grizzly was immediately transferrred, bound head and foot, to a large and strong cage; and this being mounted on the bed of a wagon, the animal was dispatched to some large mining town in the vicinity, where notice was given, by means of handbills and posters, that 'on the Sunday following, the famous grizzly bear, ›America‹, would fight a wild bull, etc. etc. Admission, five dollars.»\textsuperscript{31}

While returning to his mountain camp from delivering the bears destined for Peru to the port of Stockton, California, Adams saw giant grizzly paw prints and became determined to capture the bear later known as Samson. Adams trapped this full-grown, wild grizzly and spent weeks trying to get the bear to become «reconciled to his fate.» Adams estimated that Samson weighed over fifteen hundred pounds and became, through his subsequent exhibition, the subject of «admiration of all who have seen him.»\textsuperscript{32}

As he traveled with various animals, including his grizzlies Lady Washington and Ben Franklin, which he could fit with saddles, «the people all expressed great curiosity to see my

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, pp. 169–170.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid, pp. 183–185. This symbolic taming of the American West through exhibitionary culture can also be found in efforts to preserve a supposedly vanishing Native American culture. See for example, George Gurney/Therese Thau Heyman (eds.), George Catlin and His Indian Gallery, Washington D.C. 2002 and Joy S. Kasson, Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History, New York 2000.
\textsuperscript{30} Hittell, Adventures, 1860, p. 297. This arrangement highlights the ways in which grizzly bears and other animals were international commodities in the nineteenth century.
\textsuperscript{31} Frank Marryat, Mountains and Molehills, or, Recollections of a Burnt Journal, New York 1855, p. 251.
\textsuperscript{32} Hittell, Adventures, 1860, p. 303. Adams never fully tamed Samson, although he did add that «the only effect of confinement and good living has been to make him lazy and imperious, like a pampered monarch, and to change his shaggy, course hair from gray to brown.»
This led him to the realization that he could profitably exhibit his animals in California, rather than shipping them to the east coast, so Adams proceeded to San Jose, at which place I began to give exhibitions, ultimately leading him to establish the Mountaineer Museum in San Francisco. Here Adams’ Adventures came to an end as he began a six-year career as an animal exhibitor which would propel him and his bears to widespread fame.

The Exhibitions of Grizzly Adams

An 1856 advertisement in the San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin attracted audiences to the »Great Show of Animals« at the Mountaineer Museum, located in a basement at 143 Clay Street. This collection included SAMPSON – The largest Grizzly Bear ever caught, weighing 1,500 pounds, Lady Washington, Benjamin Franklin, two young white bears from the Rocky Mountains, and an elk, panther, deer, and other animals. As noted earlier, one visitor was Theodore Hittell, who provided this description of Adams’s first museum:

Descending the stairway, I found a remarkable spectacle. The basement was a large one but with a low ceiling, and dark and dingy in appearance. In the middle, chained to the floor, were two large grizzly bears, which proved to be Benjamin Franklin and Lady Washington. They were pacing restlessly in circles some ten feet in diameter, their chains being about five feet long, and occasionally rearing up, rattling their irons, and reversing their direction. Not far off on one side, likewise fastened with chains, were seven other bears, several of them young grizzlies, three or four black bears, and one a cinnamon. Near the front of the apartment was an open stall, in which were haltered two large elks. Further back was a row of cages, containing cougars and other California animals. There were also a few eagles and other birds. At the rear, in a very large iron cage, was the monster grizzly Samson. He was an immense creature weighing some three-quarters of a ton; and from his look and actions, as well as from the care taken to rail him off from spectators, it was evident that he was not to be approached too closely.

Although the variety of living animals and the tamed black and brown bears were appealing, Samson seems to have been the main attraction of Adams’ menagerie (Image 2). As a notice in the Bulletin put it, «the grizzly bear stories, which appear from day to day in the newspapers, naturally create some curiosity among reasonable beings to see what sort of

33 Ibid, pp. 373, 377.
34 San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin, October 10, 1856.
35 Hittell, Adventures, 1911, pp. ix-x.
animal a grizzly is. The creature can be seen to perfection at the Pacific Museum... Adams has one weighing 1,500 pounds.« 36 Because bears symbolized the dangers of westward expansion and played important roles in American folklore 37, it is no surprise that Samson was, in the words of James Madison Grover, »the big wonder, even in the land where grizzly bears were common.« 38 While Samson was kept secure in his cage, Adams wrestled and performed with many of the other bears, which, according to one later illustration, were sometimes dressed in human clothing (Image 3). 39 According to John S. Newberry, visiting San Francisco in 1857 on a government-sponsored expedition to survey a possible transcontinental railroad route, »these grizzlies were under perfect control, and were knocked about entirely without ceremony by the showman, yet unresistingly, and he would even go so far as to ride upon their backs. He used to give interest to each day’s entertainment by getting up a wrestling match between the bears, when they would tumble one another about with considerable spirit, yet usually very good-naturedly. The reward which more than any other

37 See T. B. Thorpe’s 1841 story »The Big Bear of Arkansas« for example.
38 James Madison Grover, Recollections, Manuscript, 1905, cited in Snyder, Bear in Mind, p. 145. He added: »It weighed twenty-two hundred pounds, mark the figures, dear reader, for it is very probable that you will never see, and also likely never hear of a bear of this enormous weight. While of course it was fat, its frame was extremely large.«
39 See: Grizzly Adams and His Family, from Phineas Taylor Barnum, Struggle and Triumphs, Buffalo, New York 1871. I have not seen any evidence that these animals were clothed while Adams was exhibiting in San Francisco, so this image likely reflects the tradition of clothing bears to enhance their resemblance to humans in animal acts.
stimulated them to effort was tobacco, of which they seemed very fond. If undisturbed, however, they were very lethargic, lying the whole day through, each rolled up into a huge ball of fur, nearly as high as the animal when standing.«

Other residents of and visitors to San Francisco commented on Grizzly Adams and his menagerie, which was called, at various times, the Mountaineer Museum, California Museum, and Pacific Museum. Adams moved his collection periodically and also performed with his animals in other public venues, including Tom Maguire’s Opera House and the Lyceum Theater. During one of these moves, Samson, «his wild bear weighing 1,600 pounds or more» that «had not before been allowed beyond its cage», managed to slip out of its collar, causing panic among the onlookers. But, as Hiram C. Clark recalled, «the bear was as panicky as the audience, or even more so, and ran at speed to escape the crowd […] Adams on foot had no hesitation in walking up to the animal when caught and leading it quietly back to its cage. The bear acted as if it had found a friend.»

While grizzly bears remained the central attraction of Adams’ various museums, he constantly added to his collection of animals, exhibiting a group of monkeys, a sea lion, a road-runner, and several snakes, and, with his partners (of which little is known), branched out into other attractions, such as waxworks and «a fine brass band» that played every evening. By the late 1850s Adams was a local celebrity, frequently seen «passing through the streets of [San Francisco] followed by his troupe of monstrous grizzly bears, which paid not the least attention to the yelping dogs and the crowds of children which closely followed them, giving the most conclusive proof of the docility of the animals.» These parades of Adams and his grizzlies, along with their appearance at civic celebrations, further marketed Adams’ museum, which was «an interesting exhibition and one of value both in terms of instruction and amusement.»

Unfortunately, like many entrepreneurs in gold rush-era San Francisco, Adams eventually overextended himself, as he was sued by his landlords for nonpayment of rent in 1859, with liens placed on «the bears, sea lions, elks, panthers, nondescript and other wonders.» These financial troubles certainly played a role in driving Adams from San Francisco, although they may not have been the only concerns, as Adams’ health was also poor, due to

41 Hiram C. Clark, Reminiscences of Life and Adventure on the Pacific Coast Twenty-Five Years Ago, in: Union City (Indiana) Times 1875, cited in Snyder, Bear in Mind, p. 149.
42 Storer and Tevis, California Grizzly, p. 223.
44 See, for example, «The Celebration in San Francisco in Commemoration of the Successful Laying of the Atlantic Telegraph Cable, Monday, September 27th, 1858», (San Francisco: Sterett & Butler, 1858) [Wood engraving, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley]. In an «instant city» comprised largely of emigrants, Adams was billed as appearing «with his family of Native Californians.» Richard Dillon, The Legend of Grizzly Adams, California’s Greatest Mountain Man, New York 1966, p. 208. According to one news item, «Adams is a public benefactor, and his bears are the tools by which he works. It is pleasure to praise the chap.» San Francisco Bulletin, October 9, 1857.
45 Storer and Tevis, California Grizzly, p. 227.
injuries he had suffered at the hands of his bears and other animals in both the wild and in San Francisco.

Adams also had to deal with the loss of his beloved grizzly Ben Franklin, whose death on January 17, 1858 was commemorated by an obituary (likely written by Hittell) in the Bulletin that read in part:

»Ben Franklin, the grizzly bear, the favorite of the museum man Adams, the companion for his last three or four years of his various expeditions in the mountains and his sojourns in the cities and towns of California, departed from this mortal existence on Sunday evening. [...] He accompanied his master on hunting expeditions to the Rocky Mountains and through various portions of California, and on two occasions saved his life in long and desperate struggles with savage animals in the wilds. He frequently carried his master’s pack, provisions and weapons; frequently shared his blanket and fed from the same loaf. [...] During the last two years, Ben was the ›star‹ animal in Adams’ wonderful collection in this city and has spent his time in exhibiting his frame, rearing upon his colossal legs and shaking his immense chains, for the amusement and edification of spectators and the profit of his master. […] As might be supposed, his loss has been severely felt by Adams. The old hunter would willingly have lost all the balance of his collection to have saved Ben.«

While we will never know the specific reason why Adams took his leave from San Francisco, in January 1860, he headed for New York aboard the clipper Golden Fleece and established a partnership with P.T. Barnum. According to Barnum’s recollections of their brief partnership, he had purchased one-half interest in the California Menagerie from a man who claimed to hold an equal interest with Adams in the show. Although Adams told Barnum that the man had only loaned him some money, Barnum pointed out that he possessed a bill of sale signed by Adams, which led the frontiersman to accept Barnum as his partner.

Barnum set up a show tent and opened the California Menagerie at 13th Street and Fourth Avenue in April 1860 with a parade down Broadway and up the Bowery with »Old Adams, dressed in his hunting costume, heading the line, with a platform-waggon on which were placed three immense grizzly bears, two of which he held by chains, while he was mounted on the back of the largest grizzly.«

Unfortunately, the partnership between Barnum and Adams was not destined to last very long. As Barnum later wrote of his first meeting with Adams:

»During our conversation, Grizzly Adams took off his cap and showed me the top of his head. His skull was literally broken in. It had on various occasions been struck by the fearful paws of his grizzly students; and the last blow, from the bear called »General Fremont«, had laid open his brain, so that its workings were plainly visible. I remarked that I thought that was a dangerous wound, and might possibly prove fatal.« »Yes«, replied Adams, »that will fix me out. … I’m a used up man. However, I reckon I may live six months or a year yet.« This was spoken as coolly as if he had been talking about the life of a dog.«

With Barnum handling the publicity and promotion, Adams’ popularity grew in the east. Barnum’s advertisements emphasized the risks »Old Grizzly«, the »Wild Yankee Hunter«,

46 »Death of a Distinguished Native Californian«, San Francisco Evening Bulletin, January 19, 1858.
47 Phineas Taylor Barnum, Struggles and Triumphs, or, Forty-years Recollections of P.T. Barnum, 1865, p. 531.
49 Ibid, p. 23.
and »Old Adams« took to capture and train these »wild animals of the Pacific and the far west.« They also celebrated his acumen as a hunter, trainer and performer in this »animal act«, one depicted in a pencil and ink drawing by Theodore Hittell’s son Charles (Image 4). While Hittell’s book was being published in Boston, other »autobiographies« and articles by Grizzly Adams, all of them apparently ghostwritten, appeared in New York City. One pamphlet, The Hair-Breadth Escapes and Adventures of »Grizzly Adams«, in Catching and Conquering the Wild Animals Included in his California Menagerie (1860), was full of hunting and trapping tales of a much »taller« variety than those in Hittell’s Adventures.50 Simultaneously, the New York Weekly began a series of fifteen »genuine, matter-of-fact sketches« of Adams’ »experiences and adventures in the forest during the period he was engaged in getting up his California menagerie.«51

Riding this wave of Barnum-initiated publicity, and traveling with his animals despite his rapidly declining health, Adams exhibited his bears and other animals in New York in the spring. By this point, Barnum described Adams as »but a wreck of his former self«, and later quoted Grizzly Adams as saying »Mr. Barnum, I am not the man I was five years ago. Then I felt able to stand the hug of any grizzly living, and was always glad to encounter, single handed, any sort of an animal that dared present himself. But I have been beaten to a jelly, torn almost limb from limb, and nearly chawed up and spit out by these treacherous grizzly bears. However, I am good for a few months yet, and by that time I hope we shall gain enough to make my old woman comfortable, for I have been absent from her some years.«52

Although Barnum wrote that Adams’ doctor insisted that he sell out his share of the animals and settle his affairs, for he had just weeks to live, Adams insisted that he could complete a ten-week itinerant exhibition in Connecticut and Massachusetts during the summer of 1860, getting Barnum to promise him $500.00 if he made it. Adams somehow completed this tour, earning the bonus in addition to the $60.00 per week plus expenses. In his last dealing with Barnum, Grizzly Adams humbugged the great showman out of a

50 The Hair-Breadth Escapes and Adventures of »Grizzly Adams«, in Catching and Conquering the Wild Animals Included in his California Menagerie. Written by Himself, New York 1860. See also: Life of J. C. Adams, Known as Old Adams, Old Grizzly Adams, Containing a Truthful Account of his Bear Hunts, Fights with Grizzly Bears, Hairbreadth Escapes, in the Rocky and Nevada Mountains, and the Wilds of the Pacific Coast, New York 1860.
52 Barnum, Struggles and Triumphs, 187.
hunting outfit worth $150.00 that was intended for Herr Driesbach, who Barnum had hired as Adams’ successor. Adams died on October 25th, 1860 and was buried in this new costume below a headstone decorated with a carving of a tame bear and a hunter.53 Adams’ obituary in Harper’s Weekly noted that »his tastes led him to cultivate the society of bears, which he did at great personal risk, but with remarkable success, using them as pack horses by day, as blankets by night, as companions at all times.«54

Legacies

Introducing Grizzly Adams’ series of hunting adventure essays, the editor of the New York Weekly observed that »there are few who do not feel interested in … a good bear story«, although he added that »the taste for narratives of this kind has often led to the manufacture of bogus incidents.«55 He argued, of course, that Grizzly Adams was the genuine article, the man with real experience hunting and trapping in the west and living with grizzly bears. Adams’ reputation as an American original continued after his death, as he was celebrated in a wide range of cultural forms, including melodramas, music and dime novels, well into the twentieth century. This concluding section of this essay seeks to explain what accounted for Grizzly Adams’ popularity and what his story might tell us about American cultural history, the relationships between humans and animals in the past, and the challenges and implications of efforts to incorporate non-human animals into history.

The career of Grizzly Adams provides us with a relatively well-documented story of popular culture entrepreneurship in antebellum America, showing how one man attempted to make a living as an animal exhibitor. Adams’ life illuminates many significant developments in antebellum American culture. His constant search for the »main chance« was typical of many men of his generation, for example, even if his ultimate career as a hunter, animal trainer, and cultural entrepreneur was not. His partnerships with Hittell and Barnum also testify to the centrality of popular print and visual culture in the creation of modern celebrity.

Grizzly Adams’ celebrity reflected and produced interest in the frontier and the west. Adams thus features in the larger history of the frontier character and the role of the frontiersman and mountain man in the American imagination. Public exhibitions of and texts about Adams furthered this development. As his friend Theodore Hittell described him, Adams was »quite as strange as any of his animals. He was a man a little over medium size, muscular and wiry, with sharp features and penetrating eyes. He was about fifty years of age; but his hair was very gray and his beard very white. He was dressed in a coat and pantaloons of buckskin, fringed at the edges and along the seams of arms and legs. On his head he wore a cap of deerskin, ornamented with fox-tail, and on his feet buckskin moccasins.«56

This self-presentation recalled both iconic frontiersmen like Davy Crockett and the emergent cultural figure of the mountain man, who trapped animals and explored the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Coast, and helped to define both the newly acquired American west and Americans’ understandings of wilderness.

54 Harper’s Weekly, November 10, 1860.
56 Hittel, Adventures, 1911, p.X.
Adams was not alone, of course, in exploiting his experiences in California and in bringing the wilderness to civilization in both texts and exhibitions of his California Menagerie. One man Grizzly Adams once hired to transport Samson to the port in Stockton, S. E. Hollister, was so taken with Adams that he emulated his style and commissioned a portrait of himself in hand-to-hand combat with a grizzly. Another Gold-Rush era emigrant, Seth Kinman, also capitalized on his life as a hunter and trapper, appearing throughout the east in the 1850s and 1860s as a mountain man dressed in skins, selling both *cartes de visite* of himself and literally wild-looking chairs made out of horns and skins.

In addition to his significance in American cultural history, the story of Grizzly Adams has legacies for human-animal relationships as well, ones that reflect the many contradictions in the human relationship with bears. As Bernd Brunner has observed, Adams «sought both physical contact and conflict with these animals» as he killed, trapped, and tamed grizzlies. While some accounts of Grizzly Adams romanticize his relationship with non-human nature, eliding the imbalance of power in favor of the human hunter and showman, I hope to temper this image of the benevolent mountain man with an accounting of the very real costs and implications of his actions.

After Grizzly Adams departed San Francisco for New York, some Californians lamented a lost opportunity to establish a permanent natural history collection or zoological park. One noted that «if he had been patronized, California possessed in him the very best zoological collector the Pacific coast had ever had. But we were all of us too busy in those days to gather in the Almighty Dollar, while Barnum captured Adams and made a respectable fortune out of him. Thus San Francisco lost the most attractive show that any city of its size could boast.» In New York, an 1860 article Headlined «Shall We Have Zoological Gardens?» described Adams' substantial collection of bears, before wondering «what might be done with means and science.» Working with his brother William, Adams helped spread knowledge of western fauna throughout the United States through the shipment of living animals, skulls, and skins for display elsewhere. Although Adams only had his own exhibitions for just over five years, he can be seen as a harbinger of the larger and more permanent scientific collections of American animals to come.

57 Snyder, Bear in Mind, p. 144. See the hand-colored lithograph on paper by Henry C. Eno, S. E. Hollister, the Great American Hunter and Trapper: His famous encounter with the enormous She Bear while capturing her cubs in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, between the American and Mocosume Rivers, California, in March 1853, ca. 1860.
58 Kinman presented a chair made from two grizzly bears to President Andrew Johnson in 1865. It was designed so that by pulling a cord, the bear’s head darted out from below the seat, snapping its jaws and gnashing its teeth. Marshall R. Auspach, The Lost History of Seth Kinman, 1947, cited in: Snyder, Bear in Mind, p. 177.
Ironically, because of Grizzly Adams' killing and exploitation of animals, people learned more about grizzly bears, an animal that, perhaps more than any other, symbolized the terrors of the frontier in the era of Manifest Destiny. Adams enhanced knowledge about the grizzly bear by providing valuable information about the habits and habitats of California grizzlies. As Susan Snyder has argued, he also «contributed a new portrayal of the grizzly: an animal other than the ferocious, slavering predator, eyes green with rage, that had been the common portrait heretofore», one marked in the scientific subspecies name — *horribilis* — assigned the grizzly.62

Although most Americans never saw a grizzly bear, the sporadic displays of captive grizzlies proved the most spectacular of exhibitions of western fauna in the nineteenth century, benefiting from the reciprocal relationship between print culture and exhibitionary culture as stories of the west were published in the east. Although by celebrating hunting and conflict with grizzlies, Adams undoubtedly played a role in the destruction of the species in California, he also helped complicate this image of the grizzly by demonstrating how what had exclusively been seen as a ferocious predator could be tamed, made in the words of one commentator, «susceptible of domestication.»63

This close, familial relationship with grizzlies that, we often forget, were sometimes beaten into submission after being forcibly removed from their natural environment, explains much of the enduring popularity of Grizzly Adams. By turning wild animals into supposedly «devoted friends», Adams projected a fantasy of human contact with non-human animals, one with enduring appeal. Indeed, the desire for an intimate relationship with some non-human animals remains significant in American culture, seen most powerfully in petkeeping but also in popular interest in circuses and zoos, nature documentaries, and in individuals like Timothy Treadwell, the subject of Werner Herzog's film *Grizzly Man* (2005), who ultimately failed to see that bears were bears, radically other to us.64

Finally, given the broader use of bestialization as a strategy to degrade or debase human others, Adams is also significant for being praised as a figure straddling human and animal worlds. Seen by contemporaries as «as much a curiosity as the forty bears he exhibited» (Hiram C. Clark) and «quite as much of a show as his beasts» (P. T. Barnum), this combination of going native and becoming animal accounts for much of Grizzly Adams’ appeal. As Hittell recalled, Adams’ immersion with his animals was so thorough that he «elved among his animals. He continued to wear buckskin, and when seen on the street, it was almost always in his mountaineer garb. He slept on a buffalo robe or bear-skin, in one corner of his exhibition room.»65 By living intimately with bears and other animals and being celebrated


for his liminal status between human and animal worlds, Grizzly Adams stands as the first American popular culture figure to positively take on traits of the animal. Unlike the lion tamer Isaac Van Amburgh, who dressed in a Roman toga as he entered the cage to express domination over lions and tigers, Adams shared his space and spent much of his later life with bears in a cross-species relationship, one marked by a respect for and companionship with bears that was as remarkable in the nineteenth century as it would be today.

The relationship between Adams and his bears, one marked by affection as well as dominance, can only be known, and then only partially, from the human side of the partnership. The eyewitness accounts, drawings and engravings, and printed texts, while not always trustworthy or complete, at least enable this effort to tell the story of Grizzly Adams and his bears. While a generation of scholarship has made the study of Adams and his career a legitimate way to explore American cultural history, this brief look at Adams and his bears highlights the difficulty of integrating non-human animals into history.66 Harriet Ritvo has recently noted that »animals can be seen as the latest beneficiaries of a democratizing tendency within historical studies«, one that reminds us of the centrality of non-human animals to human history while problematizing the traditional boundaries between nature and culture, wild and domestic, and human and animal. Yet such histories are limited by our sources: As Erica Fudge has written, »if our only access to animals in the past is through documents written by humans, then we are never looking at the animals, only ever at the representation of the animals by humans.«67

While scholars and activists will continue to argue about the benefits and disadvantages of representational and materialist approaches to the study of non-human animals, there are ways in which we can begin to escape the human perspective and foreground the animal side of human-animal relationships in history. Through close reading of the human-generated sources about Adams and his bears, for example, we get glimpses of their lived relation across species boundaries. While we have only a limited sense of Adams’ understanding of this relationship, one in which he sometimes seems to prefer an animal-like existence to a human one, we have, of course, no direct access to the animals’ perspective.68 However, we can see how this human and these non-human animals lived and worked together, sharing space and physical contact in both the wilderness and in public exhibitions in San Francisco and elsewhere. While Adams’ grizzlies provided him with his livelihood, with literal and symbolic power, these animals nonetheless lived and acted as bears. Their agency can be

66 The history of popular culture, including marginal figures such as James Capen Adams, has only recently become a central part of the historical profession. See James W. Cook/Lawrence B. Glickman/Michael O’Malley (eds.), The Cultural Turn in U. S. History: Past, Present, and Future, Chicago 2008.


68 For an imaginative effort to get into the mind of a grizzly bear, see Sid Marty, The Black Grizzly of Whiskey Creek, Toronto 2008, which deals with a series of bear attacks in Banff, Alberta, Canada in 1980.
seen in their unpredictability, occasional resistance to captivity, and in the marks left upon
Adams’ body. Adams’ death from wounds inflicted by his supposedly “docile” companions
reminds us that presumptions of human understanding of animals and mastery over the
natural world are premature, perhaps even wishful thinking.

These glimpses of Samson, Ben Franklin, and other named and anthropomorphized
bears as grizzlies highlight the ambiguity inherent in their relationship with Adams. Today
we know a lot more about living grizzlies, both in the wild and in captivity. The grizzly
bears of Adams’ time, however, saw their numbers and range, and their very embodied lives,
severely curtailed. Although Adams believed the grizzly bear was “the monarch of American
beasts” and “a fit companion for the monster trees and giant rocks of the Sierras”, by killing
and subjugating wild animals, he helped to conquer the wilderness he saw as an antidote to
civilization and to destroy the animals he professed to love.

The historical texts and images that made Grizzly Adams a celebrity and allow us to
find traces of California’s grizzlies also remind us, that humans made (and make) grizzly
bears. While grizzly bears were thankfully not completely exterminated in North America
(today grizzly bears can be found in Alaska and in parts of Canada and the northwestern
United States), they are always social and cultural animals when humans encounter and
think about them. Ideas about and practices toward non-human animals are historically
specific and rooted in lived relations, and the story of Grizzly Adams usefully illustrates this
human construction of non-human animals, one that had, and has, profound implications
for animals themselves.

69 See, for example, Adolph Murie, The Grizzlies of Mount McKinley, Seattle 1982 and Else Poul-
sen, Smiling Bears: A Zookeeper Explores the Behavior and Emotional Life of Bears, Vancouver
2009.
70 Hittell, Adventures, 1860, p. 17.
71 Garry Marvin, Guest Editor’s Introduction: Seeing, Looking, Watching, Observing Animals,
in: Society & Animals 13:1, 2005, pp. 6–7. See also: Garry Marvin, Wolves in Sheep’s (and
Others’) Clothing, in: Dorothee Brantz (ed.), Beastly Natures: Animals, Humans, and the Study