SHOOTING AS A SAFE SPORT

by

Irene Finley
Kodachromes by William L. Finley

We were after moose, a big bull moose, and no lesser trophy would suffice. So far we had come off with chipmunk sized game. It was mid-summer and we were in that green valley of the Snake hung up under the towering Tetons, which reminded one of over-sized tooth-picks trying to prick the sky. Under our feet smothered in lush grass, deep blue gentians showed their fringed faces. A clear young streamlet wriggled its way from somewhere down a precipitous bank to the ever ominous green river. We steppe d gingerly along trying to be as noiseless as the wood folk. But no one could hope to tread with such ghostly silence as the moose. I felt moose, I almost saw moose.

Watching closely, I caught a slight movement in the trees and underbrush across the river. We stood still behind a thin screen. There was surely a stirring over there. Minutes went by, and then the tip of a black antler pushed through. It was seen, then gone. Moose are so slow and make one wait so long. The big head finally emerged, the round snout raised high to snip off willow leaves. At last! Would he be a big one?

A half hour later the chunky black form descended on a steep slant, head down and unfinished, tailless rump above. He walked liesurely into the water, took a deep drink, and for some minutes stood stock still as if saturating himself with the coolness and quiet. And he was big! He would do.

A little later he loitered aimlessly down stream, swimming through the deeper pools and slanting across to our side, stopping frequently to shove his muzzle under for water plants. No worries or war on his dull mind. He was some distance below us now, and his back was to us. Keeping behind the bushes and almost crawling, we edged down toward him. Sometimes we saw him, sometimes he was under the bank. It seemed an eternity of waiting. Which way would he go? He was big enough for a sign post, but he was an elusive uncertainty.

By this time it was middle afternoon and we were anxious about pictures. Why couldn't he be more considerate? All at once without the rattle of a pebble as he climbed the rocky bank, he lifted himself over the rim and stood like a somber silhouette against the green of the trees, not fifty feet ahead of us. We flattened and lay breathless. I felt as if I had no covering and must surely be discovered. It soon became unbearable not to know what he was doing, so I raised my head and squinted through the grass.

"He's gone!" I said in surprise. "We must follow him."

It took some scuttling to move along, and I was a little shaky. But we saw him at last. He was plodding deliberately, but as if he had some place to go. He seemed quite oblivious that human beings were dogging him. For an hour and a half we trailed him. The river bank had flattened out and we were walking almost at the water's edge. He visited little brushy pools and fed as he wandered. Once we glimpsed him among the water lilies with his head clear under. Stalking and sneaking, we kept up with him, but out of sight -- so we thought. At last he struck off across a grassy field, and then he quickened his pace. Going up a little rise, he vanished in the thick timber.

He was harder to follow now, for there was no brush. But he never looked back. And somehow he gained on us till we were going blindly. We found him in a hidden little lake surrounded by a fringe of trees. He was standing in the middle of the clear, shallow water that caught the green about it. His shadow wobbled grotesquely on the surface. As we came up, he turned calmly and looked at us with an expression that seemed to say, "I wanted to be alone." And we had thought he didn't know.

Ignoring us, he went on with his evening meal. Thrusting his long, bulbous nose down, and opening his pear-shaped nostrils, he gave a resounding blubber that sent circles of ripples around his sturdy legs. It was a picture of supreme content.

Dropping our camera packs, we sized up the chance of a picture, and the slant of the sun. The light meter registered much too low. But it was

harrowing not to get this. We walked around the edge for different views, the old moose glancing up at us from time to time, indifferent, unseeing, as if we were mere nuisances to be tolerated. Yes, we were very close to him, and the lake seemed to grow smaller. Once or twice I met his eyes. They were small, dark eyes. I moved away and went out on a little point behind him and saw his wide antlers against the evening light. They seemed immense. He turned, lowered his head and bent toward me. For a suspended minute we looked at each other. I noticed that his eyes were not dark now. They were red, and seemed to burn brighter as he stared. I whispered, "Bill, we had better go." And we did. We never saw him again.

Most people consider camera hunting a tender-foot's sport, safe and full of mild thrills -- no hair-raising escapes of the big game hunter out to bag a glorified trophy. The only disasters in picture hunting that could possibly happen would come when the films ~~were~~ are developed. These are sometimes agonizing enough.

"How could that have happened? The old bear was so close that he filled the picture, and the light was fine. My hand was as steady as a rock. I never took this muddy, shimmying thing! There must be something wrong with that camera."

It sounds just like the fisherman. His big fish got away, or he muffed his landing because of buck fever. The cameraman can lose his big fish, too. He forgot to open the shutter, forgot to pull out the slide in the pack, forgot to set his aperture for lighting, or worst of all, got jittery until there were two bears in front of his eyes, neither of which would stand still enough for him to focus.

Of course, photographing in the national parks, those de luxe outdoor museums, ought to be duck soup. They are the camera hunting grounds for the whole country, grandpa, grandma, and all the kids -- and do they enjoy it. The moose, the elk, the black bears, and even the grizzlies, all of whom used to be wild and fierce, are more than cooperative with their infatuated ad-

mirers today, and, of course so reasonable about having their pictures taken -- if you fill up their tin cups.

With all the carpet-bagging of the beasts, most of the films taken out of the parks are pin-heads or blank cartridges. No wild animal, within or without the parks, is going to walk up and shake hands with one and ask to be shot. The one that does is more dangerous than a grizzly bear in the deep woods that has never seen a human being. To get good kodachromes, a photographer has to get close enough to an animal to count his whiskers. And it is not easy to mesmerize him into a plaster statue long enough to get a clean-cut, bright-eyed, live being on the celluloid, what with all the gadgets on the modern cameras to manipulate. But there is a way, with sometimes doubtful compensations.

Aside from being well grounded in the technicalities of photography and supplied with an over-stuffed bag of complex equipment, there is something else just as important. That is a post graduate course in natural history and animal behavior, including your own. Dispel your subject's suspicions of your intentions and don't hold anything out on him. Work openly and quietly, especially when you stoop down to peek through the bulls-eye, and your nose is not more than four feet from his. There is one very ticklish thing, and that is looking eye into eye. It becomes discovery for both you and him. It's too intimate an uncovering. You will see his pupils dilate, grow dark, the hair on his head begin to rise, the innocent curiosity on his face change slowly to a Joe Lewis scowl, and his body take on a taut readiness. The bell is going to toll.

It is time to be nonchalant, turn your back slowly and become interested in a non-existent beetle on a leaf. If it's an old bear and you are inviting a good clawing, turn tail and light out for Timbuktu. There is nothing an animal enjoys more than to do a double-quick after a fellow who shows the white feather and bolts. It gives him the courage the Jack-rabbit lacks. And what's the use of running? Any wild animal can catch you. Hooey

ant works better, and almost every time.

I recall our first meeting with a Kodiak bear, said to be one of the most brutal killers. We considered it dangerous to carry a gun, since we were inexperienced with firearms, so we never have. We were stalking caribou on Unimak Island, one of the Aleutian Chain. These islands are carpeted with typical tundra, tough dwarfed willows and other wiry shrubs, which in the summer are matted with purple violets, bluebells, waxy orchids, and various wild flowers. They all make a springy bed to sleep on, but it is hard to travel over it. We used our own two feet for locomotion and our backs for a pack horse. A herd of caribou had been sighted with field-glasses before we left camp. After covering about six miles, ~~going~~ mostly on hands and knees, dodging behind grassy hummocks, we saw the sun light up their tawny coats. We knew that if they got our wind, they would take to their heels and be out of sight.

We were working down a ridge toward a cut-bank that dropped off to a little lake near where the caribou were grazing, when we spied a big brown bear directly opposite us on another ridge that sloped down from volcanic Shishaldin, that snow-capped peak with a candle at its tip at night. He was busy digging out a squirrel and the dirt flew out in big scoops behind him. He was too absorbed in his job to imagine a human being on this lonely island. The squirrel out-foxed him or the burrow was empty, for he soon ambled on down his trail to the lake where he was accustomed to drink. Crawling flat, we shuffled down our ridge, too. The two trails met at the bottom.

He got there before we did and was leaning over drinking. Bill slid over the bank and set up the camera, a 35 mm. Eyemo, not fifty yards behind the oblivious bruin. He was ready to shoot. Some little noise reached the bear. He lurched up, whirled about, his long arms hanging limp at his sides, his face a hideous visage, mouth wide, great, broken teeth showing.

Looking around, I didn't see even a hole to crawl into. I heard the camera still buzzing, and couldn't take my eyes off that big figure rolling

up the hill upon us. I almost thought out loud, "Stand still and make no noise." What else did they think you were going to do about it, anyway? It was all over in a minute, the shapeless fur thing swishing past so fast he was only a blur. And I think he was more scared than I was. Bill only grunted, "I forgot to open the shutter."

Most old-time bear hunters concur in the verdict that the black bear is a tricky coward, but the grizzly is an intelligent, reasonable animal, for whom they had a lot of respect. I remember my impressions of going through the Park in 1914 in one of the pioneer horse-drawn carry-alls. It was the year that they were changing to motor buses, or at least there were only a few of them in there. I didn't keep watch for a furious, raging grizzly coming out to snatch us, but for one of these humming elephants coming suddenly around a turn. Every time it did, our horses went loco, whirled around in their tracks and we reeled along on two wheels dangerously near the edge. It almost disrupted a photographic season.

The silver-tip at that time kept himself in the woods in the day time, and with all of our campings and wanderings, we never met him. He saw us first. And I doubt if he is changed much -- yet. They used to come down in the dusk of the evenings to the hotel garbage dumps, and the black bears scratched dirt to get up the trees, snoofing with excitement and fear. We heard a thrashing and breaking of limbs as they descended. Planted at different posts in the thick grass and brush, we waited for them with flash cameras. They came in one's and two's, their eyes wild, their nostrils sniffing. And sniffing, they caught our scent. Away they went back to their dark woods without their supper. It didn't look as if the grizzly was hunting trouble with man. That isn't to say that he wasn't then, and isn't now, a dangerous, deadly animal to meet suddenly or to run onto an old mother with cubs. And also, like the elephant who doesn't forget, so the wounded grizzly.

Even today, old silver-tip mama may be a belligerent bundle of rage at the feeding station. Swaying calmly down the green slope out of the woods,

they come in broad daylight for the feast. Their coming is clocked, the arrival of the truck load of food is clocked, every thing is exactly the same each day, even the expressions on the faces of the attendants. One afternoon one of the helpers on the truck was sitting too close up front, or made some suspicious move that riled an old mother with cubs. Instantly she raced over to the truck and started to climb up and grab him. Such a small thing aroused her fury. Unlike the black bear, she was no pan-handling bluffer, but meant business. However, these small fracuses seem to happen very seldom.

All wild animals have a big bump of curiosity and will hold themselves waiting for the answer, or skittish, will return to find out. Then some slight occurrence will either send them bolting for the horizon, or release all the animal reflex energy and ferocity to protect themselves against the unknown. With man's supposed greater intelligence --for the lower animal is not supposed to have the power of reason -- it is lamentable that his gauche methods of arbitration with his fellow creatures on the earth end in disaster and the lessening of their numbers. We need them. It looks as if these less favored ones, like the Indian, may fall before our synthetic civilization.

An instance of rescuing one early American animal from extermination is that of the buffalo, the battering ram of the big game group. And this was not through any adaptability of his own in meeting modern changes and conditions. He was and still is an enormity of acid temper and defiance. We came on him at the Montana Bison Range near a little town by the Indian name of Moiese. Approaching the strong, barricaded fence , we beheld a phenomenon that widened our eyes, a massive cream-white buffalo holding his fort on a dusty hill-top, while below grazed a bunch of his normally colored dark fellows. As a cordial greeting, he made a sudden rush down and charged "bang" against the fence. Then I saw his swollen, pink-rimmed eyes which seemed difficult for him to open wide, and I glimpsed the pinkish-blue eye-balls. Albino, I thought.

But Big Medicine, as he is called, is not a true albino for across his forehead he wears a dead-black band, reaching from horn to horn. He was born

on the Bison Range in 1933, and under the careful supervision of Superintendent Mushbach, has lived well if not happily, for the companionship of the stampeding black herd will never be his. By breeding Big Medicine with his own mother, a second white calf was born in 1937. This calf is a true albino and as a result of the absence of pigment in the eyes is totally blind.

The white calf was taken away from its mother and raised by a domestic cow along with a normal orphan calf. When the calves were about six months old, they were shipped to the National Zoo in Washington, and are there now. These two white buffaloes are the only ones in existence of which we have any knowledge. White buffaloes have always been extremely rare. It has been estimated that a white buffalo occurs only about once in four to five million, and it has been stated that not more than ten or eleven white buffalo skins have ever been recorded.

We were on our way again still searching for the one big moose, up at dawn stalking the trails, back to any wayside cabin at night, dog-tired. The weather was still playing tricks. It was superlatively bad for a week at a stretch. The blue-black clouds rumbled, thunder crashed and knife-blades of lightening crackled and cut across the sky -- and subsided as suddenly with a painted rainbow against the green hills. The sun broke through to lie soft and mellow, glinting the raindrops to irridescence on grass and leaves. But it didn't last.

Many a day found no game bagged, not even a chipmunk under the doorstep. One morning going to the Superintendent's office in the Park for mail, we parked the car at the curb, and there lying unconcernedly on the lawn was a big buck antelope taking in the city sights. We shot him then and there and named him Nebuchadnezzar, Neb for short. A few days later we met him in a sparse pasture above the north entrance. It was getting near the rutting season and he was rounding up his harem. He was monarch of the main meadow and watched every doe. Up the hills and little draws we watched other bucks and their does, some still followed by the year's fawns, all keyed-up and watchful. The air was electrical. The summer clan was broken up and it was every fellow

for himself.

Neb was pining for a contest. If he spotted another buck on a little rise and there were any does in tow, he went to meet him and sound him out. They began by effecting jaunty indifference, nibbling a bite of brush side by side, perhaps giving a nudge in the ribs, then facing each other, standing stiff waiting. Some sign passed between them. Usually the newcomer turned uninterested-- or chicken -- and pretended to eat brush again. Soon both sidled off and meandered back to their stands, and forgot all about it. Neb lazied back to the middle of the meadow and was more stiff-necked than ever. The other fellow wouldn't fight. He was still boss.

This performance was common over the hillsides, the prelude to the bouts of the heated season. Once we saw a pitched battle some distance away. It was announced by several does bounding down the slope stiff-legged as if frightened to death. And soon there arose such a dust that it hid the arena. We could dimly make out the two rivals pitching head-on at each other, the clash of horns, the pushing and straining. They backed off to lunge at each other time and again. And so it went on till both were exhausted. Then they looked off in the distance and saw something interesting. Finally one moved cautiously away, side wise like a pig at war, and the other rounded up what does were handy. Some does escaped over the hills for a respite until another pair of strong-horns fought over them. Neb seemed to have a goodly number of wives intimidated in his meadow. If a timorous one tried to evade his eagle eye and give him the slip, he started running her in circles until she was winded and willing to submit.

The bucks were cocky and arrogant at this season. We approached Neb one morning to get a close-up of his face. He took no notice of us nor let on that he knew we wanted him to pose for a picture. When we pressed him too close, he faced the camera, lifted his lips in a pout, showing his teeth, and shook his horns at us. Then he turned his head away, his eye bent on nothing like a wooden Indian. He was only bluffing.

This was small fry for those who had moose on their minds. The weather turning a little more amiable, we took up the old hunting. Speeding a across Fishing Bridge that cuts in two a long, wet willow marsh, we saw two moose, a young bull and a cow, come thrashing up the steep bank and cross the road into the lodge-pole timber. Once the bull looked back at the meadow, ears pricked up, eyes scared. We turned off hastily, locked the car, and were after them. Bill took one path and I another. We wanted them down near the lake shore instead of up in the dark woods. A sound of chopping could be heard ahead, and we came upon a wood cutter. He had neither heard nor seen the moose.

From here we followed a single trail and had given up finding them. I happened to glance off in the trees, and there not fifty feet away were the two black ghosts. Their long heads and the bull's horns were lost in the branches and their black legs lined up with the tree trunks. It was perfect obscurity. They knew it.

We agreed to separate and go around them, slowly urging them toward the lake. But they had different ideas. The minute they knew they were discovered, the bull broke into a dead run, slanting off in the wrong direction. Bill took after him as fast as he could follow, but he didn't have long legs to lope over logs. They disappeared from sight.

I was left alone. The cow still stood frozen under the trees, head up amd eyes alert. She seemed undecided what to do. She wasn't paying any attention to me, I thought. Walking slowly, I started to circle above her, moving in plain sight through the fairly open timber. About thirty feet was between us. All at once she turned slowly and faced me. I stopped, surprised at her attitude and the way she was looking at me. As we stared, something was dawning on me. I knew that the mind of a moose once made up, could not be changed.

The cow moose, even with a calf, had always been gentle and I had never been afraid of them in all of our picture escapades. But this had been done mostly in Willow Park on the west side where all the moose endure noisy serenades by the tourists. Thoughts came fast and past meetings, pictures in my mind--

wading out into the deep, watery marsh -- fording the river -- pushing into the willows -- stepping plop into old beaver runs where the moose lie low and hidden -- pushing the branches aside to find a black hulk lying before me -- urging him up and out for the waiting cameraman -- and that time when we were shooting a mother moose and calf almost in their faces near the road -- a brown bear came ambling down unmindful -- the cow lifting her head and big ears -- stepping around us and the cameras -- lunging at the old bear, chasing him up a tree -- coming back to her calf -- finishing the pictures -- and --and--

I stood rooted looking at the cow that now almost towered above me, for she was coming fast. The trees seemed to shrink away and grow transparent, too slim for shelter. She was going to lift a foot and cut me to pieces. But I couldn't move. I heard a piercing cry somewhere, but I didn't know that it was I who made it. There was the thud of hoofs on the needled floor, sudden honking of horns on the road above. She had gone. It still kept running in my mind, "She wouldn't do it."

During the summer months, the bull moose is a meek lamb in an uncouth body, over-built on the front and ludicrously cut short on the rear. Grotesque is the long, heavy head, topped with spreading, palmated antlers, a big swollen nose, pendulous bell on the neck, and very small black eyes. He seems all out of proportion and sensitive about his shape and his some twelve hundreds pounds of flesh. He could never compete in a beauty or symetry contest. Never-the-less, he is anything but a clumsy goof, for he threads the willows adroitly and silently, lies flat down in the river like a water baby, and generally lives and lets live.

But he has a dual character, one as foreign to the other as snow is to fire. In the mating season in the fall, he is belligerent and boisterous, plowing through the woods and streams like a tank on the warpath, bellowing a vibrant challenge to his competitors for a mate. If answering the urgent bleating of a cow, he gives a deep grunt, and almost breaks the house down to get to her. The spell is upon him for a few short weeks, during which time he has been known to charge men, striking slashing blows with his front feet as well as his horns.

In his nomenclature, the moose is all mixed up. He is a moose of a fellow, but not a moose at all, for he is the largest of the American deer, and a cousin of the elk of northern Europe and Siberia. The bull moose of the Kenai Peninsula and adjoining regions in Alaska is the largest of his kind in the world, the Shiras moose of the Yellowstone region being somewhat smaller.

It had rained and thundered all night. Never-the-less, we got up early as usual to search for two bull moose that we had sighted late the previous afternoon. One of them was a big one. Turned off the highway on a dirt road that wound through the woods and headed steeply for the bottom of the canyon. The road was muddy and slippery, and at every turn the car became more unmanageable. Finally, we steered it off into a grassy spot and went on down on foot. We descended deeper into the green gloom with our eyes on the watch for two lumbering figures that might be feeding in the fresh-wet grass, or standing motionless in a dark clump of trees.

But no luck. They had moved down to the bottom and gone off around the hill. It would be quicker to climb back to the car, drive along the highway and intercept them at the other end of the valley. Stopped at the ranger's station and the ranger told us, "Yes, they're right across the road in that clump of willows." We looked and saw nothing but some dry, silvery stubs sticking out of seared meadow grass. They were absolutely too pinched and decrepit to hide a coyote.

Climbing a little rise, we looked down on the willows. They were as silent as a cemetary, and as empty. Then I saw them -- big horns mingling with the streaked gray brush, and as motionless. They were lying down, sunk deep in the grass. Both big heads were turned up to us. They weren't forty feet off the highway, and no one would have suspected their hiding place. However, our parked car at the roadside had given it away, and in no time at all seven inquisitive yellow buses and several cars had stopped to look at whatever was there.

Stop anywhere on the road and soon you will have plenty of company to "see the big moose, or elk, or bear." One day we were working and the camera

was set up not ten feet off the road. A car clanked to a stop, the driver got out and looked this way and that. Then he said, "What-ave-ye-got?" "Flowers," we answered. "Shaw!" he spit out, jumped into his rattle-trap and hurried off.

Bill went back for the cameras. I kept watch on the hill and was soon surrounded with slacks, sweaters, bandanas in all colors of the rainbow, and the inevitable little cameras. It was hard to tell the sex by what he or she wore, except for the high-pitched, jittery excitement of female voices. And that, at last, was what moved the big animals to their feet.

The old bull lifted himself heavily, and without a sound or touching a twig, stretched his great fanned antlers up and with indifference, began to pull off a willow leaf here and there. Gradually he turned and still pretended to nibble, edged off and was soon making his way with slow steps into the depths of the grass. The other bull got up liesurely and followed him.

Then began the long stalk. Bill started out first, plodding, plodding behind his quarry, noiselessly but always there. Their long legs and big steps gained on him. They lay down, not inviting him, just expecting him. After a while, it became a game. They moved further and further away, and at each stop they knew he would be coming along. As he came up to them, flattened out with eyes looking over the grass, he poked the camera closer until a big face filled the lens. It grew cloudy and no light for kodachromes. But come hell and high water in the skies, he couldn't have stopped shooting. The spell was on both pursuer and pursued. It was going on three hours since he took the trail.

I had been left behind to park the car under a tree and lock up. Then I shouldered my pack and started after them. They were almost out of sight in the deep meadow grass and approaching a shallow draw with more dead willows. There must have been some sub-moisture there for it looked a little green and moosey. I kept on the slightly higher ground in the open. But I had underestimated the height and toughness of that dry grass. It twined around my legs and hobbled my feet, till my pace was like a persistent snail. I was soon panting, and I was marooned in a sea of grass and had lost sight of everybody.

Here and there I came to large, round, hollowed-out places, moose beds. There would be two or three rather close together. I began to feel the silence and aloneness. What if I should run smack on to a big bull in his bed? Just beyond a batch of beds that seemed to be a communal resting place, I spied the top rail of a fence. I stretched up and saw a small, stoutly built corral. The heavy gate was closed. Pushing my way through a higher growth of grass, I dropped my pack to the ground, and began to climb the big logs that made its sides. There were strands of barbed-wire strung thickly about it also, and at one corner a taller log stuck up in the air. It had steps to climb -- and up I went. Up there I drew a long breath and looked around.

The whole yellow meadow with bunches of dead willows stretched all around. There wasn't a living thing in sight. Where could they be that I couldn't see them from this look-out? I lifted the field-glasses that hung around my neck and worked them slowly over the expanse. They picked up a gleam of something light colored, a khaki shirt among the brush. Then it was gone.

What could Bill be doing? I found out quickly -- so suddenly that I almost fell off my perch. Bill's light shirt was flickering about too rapidly for photography. Then I saw it all plainly. The bigger moose was swinging his great horns at a rapid pace across a dry, open spot, and Bill was just one jump ahead of him, sprinting for the shelter of a thin clump of willows, like a rabbit running for cover. He made it, but the bull followed him right up around the bushes. And I thought that was going to be the end of Bill. I expected to see the big beast dash right into the frail willows and trample and slash everything to a pulp. And I also expected to see Bill make a run for another bush and keep on dodging. But no, he sat tight. He was counting on a last trick. It worked. The peeved monster stood pawing the earth and swinging his horns threateningly at the bush, but he was careful not to let those horns, still in the last stages of velvet, so much as brush a limb. A couple of weeks later when they would be hard and smooth, Bill would have had no chance to say his prayers, except at his own funeral. As it was, he tested the old bull too close to the deadline. All Bill said later was, "I ran faster than the bull."

Oh yes, camera hunting is a safe, gentle sport. Who wants a safe, gentle sport?

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