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Emma George: Hello and welcome to voices from the Bear River. I'm your host, Emma George.

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Andrew Wills: What it was like to live back then or to, you know, have some, some bear who's like, destroying your, your herds of sheep, and you, you never even get to see him. He's like, almost like a ghost. You know, it's, it sounds like a movie, and it's, but it's real.

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Andrew Wills singing his song "Old Ephraim": Where the grizz lives you keep your eyes open
Your blade on hand and your long gun loaded,
Cause he don't care if you're a son of Adam,
Old Ephraim think he's on the top of the mountain

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Today we're talking about the legend of Old Ephraim. The name "Old Ephraim" was often used in 19th century America to describe grizzly bears in general. Both Theodore Roosevelt and P.T. Barnum referred to a grizzly bear in their writings as "Old Ephraim." But the most legendary grizzly to bear this name made his home in northern Utah and southeastern Idaho in the early 20th century.

Our story begins in Logan Canyon. At the time, Logan Canyon was overrun with sheep, and bears were the main predators. The most notorious and prodigious bear was called Old Ephraim. Local farmers and sheep herders rarely saw the beast, but he left destruction in his wake. The sheepherders could tell it was the same bear responsible for the killings based on his paw print; Old Ephraim left distinctive tracks as he only had three toes on one paw, leading to his alternate nick name, old three toes. Old Ephraim was said to stand at nine feet, 11 inches tall, and weighed half a ton.

Now it's time to introduce the other major figure of our story, Frank Clark. Frank was a sheep herder, who came to Logan from Malad, Idaho, around 1911. As a sheep herder, he was well acquainted with bears.

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Daniel Bishop: All the other herders out there told him, Frank, this is bear country.

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Emma George: This is Daniel Bishop, a storyteller from Montpelier, Idaho. In August 2023, he retold the legend of Old Ephraim on the 100 year anniversary.

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Daniel Bishop: He said, as he always said, that's all right. The Clark family and the bear family get along just fine. Well, in one day, he went out to check on his sheep and found 23 of them

killed by bears in one day. So while Frank was not a hunter,

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at that moment, he started hunting bear,

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and the bear they all warned him about was old Ephraim.

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Emma George: Clark tried many different ways to catch old Ephraim, but was unsuccessful until a warm August night in 1923. Clark set out a giant bear trap with a huge, heavy chain and waited with his horse and hunting dog, and sometime in the dark hours of the night, old Ephraim stepped into the trap. What followed was a violent, echoing struggle that reportedly carried through the canyon. The bear roaring, the chain thrashing, the tree shaking from the sheer power of the animal.

A year after his battle with old Ephraim, Frank recounted his story to two men, one of which was Ryan Orson. Ryan later told the story and was recorded on phonograph by Reed Bullen at KV NU Radio in 1950. For the next part of our story, Ryan describes the battle as it was told to him. The recording is not the best quality, so it may be a bit difficult to understand.

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Ryan Orson: I stood there as if one petrified.

4:02

Old Ephraim, instead of going on or flying or trying to get away, just came steadily on towards me. He took a step towards me, then another. As he came, I gained my equilibrium and decided that there was a chance to fire point blank at his heart, and so I did fire. It must have gone through yet, the moment I didn't know whether I'd hit him or not. He neither winced nor whined, but just came steadily on, one step nearer to me. Then another. Again, I fired point blank at his heart, hoping to hit it or break a backbone. Again, he neither winced nor whined. A third shot I fired quickly and then a fourth. He still gained steadily on towards me. As I remember it now. I looked into his eyes, burning against that huge head silhouetted against the sky, and yet they didn't have the look of fierceness or his name. But as if someone coming for something he wanted.

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I had only one shell left in the gun. Should I fire?

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Emma George: Frank had one bullet left in his gun, and despite firing at him several times, Old Ephraim was still advancing.

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Daniel Bishop: Frank raised that rifle, took careful aim. And fired.

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Emma George: Again, storyteller, Daniel Bishop.

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Daniel Bishop: The bear totter leaned

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then with a big breath, he fell.

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Three more breaths, then Old Ephraim turned his head, made eye contact with Frank one more time,

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and Frank saw the life leave the bear.

6:09

Frank later told several people

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I hated to do it.

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I knew it needed to be done, but I hated that I was the one that did it. He told a Mr. Hill a year later,

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he said, I miss old Ephraim.

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The hills seem empty without him.

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Emma George: After 10 long years of hunting, old Ephraim was dead.

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Frank burned and buried the body of the massive bear in Logan Canyon, and the story of his epic battle became a local legend told over and over again.

7:02

Kelly Rovegno: So he was buried up in the canyon. There's a grave marker that was erected there in the 1960s you can still go up and see.

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Emma George: We're talking with Kelly Rovegno, the Utah State University Archivist and Reference Coordinator.

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Kelly Rovegno: But the local boy scouts troop number five, wanted to go, kind of see where he had died and been buried. And so they went up there, they actually, and they dug him up and brought him back. I've heard some legends of them bringing back various pieces, including, like a femur that got turned into a pipe. But I've never, I've never actually seen any of this. So who knows? There might be someone in Logan who has a grizzly bear pipe in their garage. But as far as we know, the skull is the only remaining piece of him that at least we have.

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Emma George: They sent the skull to the Smithsonian, where it was on display for a few years before being moved to their archives. In 1978 a different troupe of Boy Scouts went to see the skull at the Smithsonian and were surprised to discover that it was not on display. In response, U.S. Senator Orrin Hatch contacted the Smithsonian who agreed to loan the skull to Utah State University.

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Kelly Rovegno: So Orrin Hatch, who was a long sitting senator, he was an early, like he had just become the junior senator then, he kind of wanted, you know, to make some goodwill. And so he got the Smithsonian to loan it to us, originally for a year. So he returned. It was very, quite, the, quite the event. He landed on the quad with a helicopter, and then returned the skull. And, you know, USU was very excited to have the skull, but they were like, you know, eventually, where, where do you, where are we going to, you know, house the skull? Because we want it on display, which was the original issue. So it ended up it, it was on display in the spectrum. It was like in a parade, but it quickly, soon ended up with us,

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and so it's been on display in Special Collections ever since.

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Emma George: Do you know anything about, like, the process of how it was stored?

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Kelly Rovegno: So I'm certainly not an expert on how it was stored, but if we kind of stand up close to the skull, you'll kind of see he's a little waxy. I usually tell grade schoolers that he was glazed like a doughnut, but you can imagine he had been buried and burned and then kind of dried out in a, you know, Scout leader's garage in the '20s. So when he was at the Smithsonian,

we're not quite sure what was done to him, but we assume, a kind of wax resin was put on the skull to keep it in place and kind of from flaking apart. I have not touched the skull, but I've been told it's a little slimy because of that. When you work in kind of historical preservation we're trying not to, you know, change anything too much. And so we just kind of have him on display, protect him. If you see the skull, you'll see like tags and numbers. Those are by the Smithsonian. And technically, they still own it. It's on permanent loan to us. They call every few years and ask if we still have the skull. We still do, but because it was coated in kind of that protective layer, and is an acrylic, away from any harsh lighting, he's, for a bear that was burned and buried and then shipped across the country, he's in pretty good shape.

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Emma George: And since you've been here, like, you obviously know the story really well. Is it one of those items that everybody asks about, or what's kind of been your experience with housing that?

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Kelly Rovegno: Oh, yeah, it's certainly one of our most popular items, right? Because even if people aren't familiar with it all, you know, we have a lot of other material about northern Utah. But people usually, if they're from around here, they know about Old Ephraim, even if they're not, um, and I've heard people say, Oh, they're from California, and they've heard reenactors tell the story. So he's pretty well known, I think, at least in the West. And certainly, if you walk into our reading room, you know, people wonder like, "why is there a partial bear skull on display? What happened?" You know, the question, "What happened to the rest of him?" is certainly one I get often. So he's certainly, I'd say, our most well known item. And we've tried to, you know, put him on display so that, we're only open certain hours. But you can see him any time the library is open, even if you don't have access to our reading room. And we certainly do a lot, because people from anywhere from like young children, grade schoolers to adults, kind of want to hear the story of Old Ephraim and see the original skull.

11:16

Emma George: Even though the battle between Frank Clark and Old Ephraim took place over a decade ago, the story continues to fascinate and inspire people from all over the country. In 2022, Nashville musician Andrew Wills released a song called "Old Ephraim" as part of his project, Hawken Horse. His voice and music is what you heard at the start of this podcast.

11:38

Andrew Wills: My name is Andrew Wills, and I have a music project called Hawken Horse, where I sing about frontier lore, and I put old stories to music. And I'm a professional songwriter in Nashville, Tennessee, and a lover of the West. As a history nerd, I call myself lovingly, I, you know, in the 1800s for some, I think it was the romanticism period. But writers really love giving names to animals. They love like, Moby Dick comes to mind, the Great Whale. They loved names, giving an identity to a specific animal. And I think the grizzly bear is like *the* animal in North America that you think of when you think of a big animal. And so there's just this

mysterious love story with, you know, North America, and the grizzly bear. And so that name “Old Ephraim” is so endearing and mysterious because it's, it's giving a personality to the bear. So the song, I was writing more generally about all the Old Ephraims, you know, that came into contact, but I'd had *the* Old Ephraim in mind, you know, because a lot of the tales that I write about are from the mountain man era, or even before then, like in the early 1800s. And you know, the Old Ephraim was like into the 1800s early 1900s when Frank had his run in with, what did they call him? Old three toe, I think they called him. But sounds like he was a massive bear. But when I was writing, I was definitely considering that story and just how mischievous that bear was. I tried to, in the verses, I tried to talk about how you know every step, when you're walking next to a river and you can't hear you need to keep your eyes open, because you know this could be the valley of the shadow of death. So it's a, it's a very somber song, but it's also it's taken on a life of its own, and has a big, big cult following of people who love to think about that, or just love bears.

14:10

Emma George: What sort of inspired you to write the song, especially in you know, 2022 right? Is when that came out, and that was almost like the 100 year anniversary of Frank Clark fighting the bear. So what sort of inspired you to write that?

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I had just finished my debut project, a self titled debut Hawken Horse record, and it covers a lot of the mountain man era, Rocky Mountains. And it talks about the trappers and some of the natives, and it talks about a lot of that stuff. But I never really like dove into a lot of the animals. It was a massive part of that, that era, and being a, you know, a trapper during that time, there were so many bear attacks, famous ones. Probably the most famous of recent years is the Hugh Glass story and how he was mauled. It was just recently a movie with the *Revenant*, with Leonardo DiCaprio, but he was attacked by a bear, and it was like a revenge story, because he got left for dead. Well, there's, there's countless other bear attack stories where, like, you know, Jim Bridger was attacked and he ran up a tree, and there was a Jedediah Smith literally had his scalp ripped off of his head and his ear. And Jim climbing another mountain man sewed it back together right there in the field, sewed his head back together. And those kind of stories really influenced me to write the song. And there was no better title for me than Old Ephraim, because, you know, it's being a history guy, I wanted to talk in that 19th century lingo. Anyway, that's, that's what prompted me to do, is just bear attacks were a big part of daily life back then, just something you had to be constantly aware of. Like, it's kind of funny if you know, in 2025, you're driving to the grocery and you if you had to, like, think about that the whole time. You know, I could be attacked by a grizzly bear. It's just, it's something we don't have to, like, think about on a daily basis, but that was their life like, oh, we gotta stay awake. Stay awake. Keep your eyes clear.

16:53

Andrew Wills singing “Old Ephraim”: I've never lost sleep on account of no cougar of the Bitterroot,

But sure as the devil roams the night God made a critter that do,
Where the grizz lives you keep your eyes open
Your blade on hand and your long gun loaded,
Cause he don't care if you're a son of Adam,
Old Ephraim think he's on the top of the mountain

17:26

Emma George: As part of each interview, I asked Andrew, Kelly, and Daniel why they think the legend of Old Ephraim still resonates with people today. Here are their responses.

Why do you think, like, the story of old Ephraim? Or yeah, I guess kind of the Western frontier legends, why do you think that still has an impact on people today?

17:52

Andrew Wills: I think it's kind of exciting. It's mysterious. We really, honestly, in the mid 1800s we had a bunch of books that kind of romanticized the frontier, even before the West was, I mean, it was still the Wild West back then, and we had Europeans who were fascinated with with Daniel Boone and fascinated with the thought of the wilds and the unknown. And I think today it's the same thing. We work in cubicles, and we sit on the highway, you know, in rush hour traffic. And we like to think about a more, you know, exciting time. Maybe we, we want to we, you know, there's something exciting about the wildness that we're kind of lack...you know, I don't want to say lacking, because in some regards, it's like a good thing, but we can't, we don't experience that today. And I think it's kind of, we wistfully think about, wonder what that would be like to experience that. And so there's a lure to it. I think it's a romanticism of, you know, what it would be like to, what it was like to live back then, or to, you know, have some, some bear who's destroying your herds of sheep, and you, you never even get to see him. He's like, almost like a ghost. You know, it's, it sounds like a movie, and it's, but it's real, and I think that's why you, it still today, it kind of holds on.

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Emma George: Maybe this is a bit of a difficult question, but why do you think, like, the story still resonates with people?

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Kelly Rovegno: Certainly, I've been asked that I think it's, you know, it's, it's part of that kind of mystique of the of the West, you know, he was one of the last grizzly bears in Utah, maybe not the last, but one of the last. And so kind of that like, you know, turn from the wild west to kind of more modern times. I think he kind of represents an older age, maybe even if that, you know, historically, it was in the 20s, whether that was true or not. But I think the legend around him has been built up so much, especially his size, you know, in this kind of, this hunt that Frank Clark had with him for over 10 years, you know, kind of representing, like the conquering of the West, in a way. So I think it's just one of those stories that kind of sticks with people about, kind of the changing landscape in the early 1900s. I always encourage people, if they want to see the skull,

they can always come and see him, or you can see the skull anytime the library is open. But if you'd like to come into Special Collections and see the materials, we have 3D prints of the skull that you can pick up and kind of see too. So we're open 10 to 4, Monday through Friday. Love to have you.

20:44

Emma George: Why do you think people are still so interested? Or what do you think is the value of this, this kind of story?

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Daniel Bishop: It's important because this is a landmark in history, local history. I mean, everybody knows about Abraham Lincoln, everybody knows about World War Two, everybody knows about these big national things, but to know about your local history and have something this amazing in your local history, one, it teaches us how to take care of our environment around us. Having that many sheep up there that not only destroyed all the grass and the flowers, but also brought a large number of predators to the area could have actually permanently damaged the canyon, could have caused some serious problems, but they were able to figure it out. They were able to reduce and fix it, and now the canyon is beautiful again.

21:46

And these stories help people remember,

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because when we forget, that's when we do it again. So helping people remember the story. And if you've grown up in this area, if you camped in Logan Canyon or anywhere where old Ephraim wandered, to hear this story, now, you have a connection. You have something to say. Yeah, this is, this is part of me now, and that makes it important. I don't know if you noticed this group of people here. We had people everywhere, from lower Cache Valley to Star Valley, and as almost the whole Bear Lake Valley, some of the people were here from Salt Lake came up to see this. These people didn't know each other,

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but when they were sitting here listening, they were a community.

22:40

The story brought them together. They felt the same feelings. They heard the same words. They had the same emotions going on at the same time, it was a shared catharsis that took place here. And now, they share Old Ephraim together.

22:58

What more can you ask?

23:01

Emma George: A stone marker said to be the height of old Ephraim standing on his hind legs, was placed in Logan Canyon where he died. You can still visit the grave site today, and while you're there, read the poem written by Nephi J. Bott carved into the stone:

Old Ephraim, Old Ephraim, your deeds were so wrong,
Yet we build you this marker and sing you this song,
To the king of the forest so mighty and tall,
We salute you, Old Ephraim, the king of them all

23:31

Ryan Orson: Yes, Old Ephraim is gone.

23:35

I think I'll erect a monument there by his grave. Say, here lies Old Ephraim, a gentleman of the forest, who respected the rights of others. He had a right to live here. Old Ephraim, the last great grizzly of the Wasatch. Yes, I miss him.

24:06

As Mr. Clark paused, Mr. Young said, "Mr. Clark, have you hunted or trapped bear anymore, since you captured Old Ephraim?"

24:18

Mr. Clark said, No.

24:23

No gentlemen, since Old Ephraim went home, I ain't had no hankering for trapping or hunting bear. And it's more lonesome upon the range than it's ever been. I wish Old Ephraim was still here.

25:20

Emma George: Special thanks to Kelly Rovegno, the Utah State University Archivist and Reference Coordinator as well as the Merrill Cazier Library Special Collections and Archives for providing the Ryan Orson audio. If you would like to hear the full recording or learn more about Old Ephraim, you can check out the library's digital exhibit@exhibits.usu.edu

Thanks to Daniel Bishop. Daniel is a storyteller by trade, and he is available for hire for events big and small. To find more information on Daniel, you can visit his website danielbishopthestoryteller.com.

Also, thanks to Andrew Wills. Andrew is continuing the project Hawken Horse, merging history and music to tell the story of the American West. You can learn more about his music at hawkenhorse.com.

The Bear River Heritage Area is a program of the Bear River Association of Governments, an

extension of city and county governments in Box Elder, Cache, and Rich counties in Utah. You can learn more about our available services by visiting our website brag.utah.gov. If you want to learn more about the Bear River Heritage Area and our current projects, you can visit our website at bearriverheritage.com.

26:38

Thank you so much for listening, and we'll see you next time.