

## Nuggets from the Past

By Norman McLeod

### The man who refused to die

His name is not familiar to most of us. In 1963, one author honored him this way: "He strides through the annals of the Old West, a man of truly heroic proportions, yet a strangely elusive one."

He was Hugh Glass, Mountain Man.

He is said to have hailed from Pennsylvania as a young man. He next sailed on the Gulf of Mexico as skipper of a merchant vessel. He was initiated into the adventurous life by none other than the pirate, Jean Lafitte, who captured Glass's ship on the high seas. At this time, it is estimated Glass was in his mid-30s.

Glass was taken as a prisoner to Lafitte's headquarters at what is today the city of Galveston, Texas. There he was offered a choice: become a freebooter, or die. Glass chose to live.

The length of time he lived as a pirate is estimated as slightly over a year. His chance for escape came in 1818 when he and a companion dropped over the side of their ship and at night swam the two miles to the Texas mainland.

At that time, Texas was a pathless wilderness. In trying to avoid hostile cannibalistic Indians, the two escapees cut away from the coastal jungles into the plains where, a thousand miles later, they were captured by the Pawnee in what is now Kansas.

Here Glass's companion was burned to death. But, he was saved. On his person was found a package of cinnabar, highly-prized by redmen in the making of brilliant red war paint. Hailing this find as a miracle, the grateful chieftain adopted him as a son.

During the next four years, Glass lived and fought as an Indian. Much of what he learned as an Indian proved useful to him in later life as a primal Mountain Man.

The opportunity for escape from the Pawnee was presented to Glass in 1822, when various tribes were invited to St. Louis to meet William Clark, U.S. Superintendent of Indian Affairs.

Here the Pawnee chief lost a foster son, who simply walked away from his adopted Indian family to once again face life as a paleface.

Glass next volunteered to join William Ashley's force of 100 men in the spring of 1823 - a force of would-be fur trappers to ascend the Missouri River as far as the

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Rocky Mountains.

In his new role as beaver trapper, Glass became a survivor, favored with an uncanny knack of being at the right place at the right time.

He was recognized as a loner, refusing to blend with the rest of his group. He liked the job of advanced hunter, when he could thread his way alone through brush and chapparal.

On one expedition with a party of 13 under Major Andrew Henry, Glass was enjoying his role as solitary hunter when he approached a thicket in which a giantess among grizzlies rested in company with her young.

Raising herself to a towering standing position, the bear roared and attacked. Glass was able to get off one shot from his rifle, then broke and tried to flee. Caught from behind by the monster, he was crushed to the ground by the bear's huge forepaws.

With two blows, Glass's adversary inflicted ghastly wounds on the trapper's torso, baring the flesh to the bone. He fought back at close quarters, stabbing and slashing with his knife ... but not for long.

Raked above and below by the beast's three-inch talons and ripped by teeth just as terrible, he was soon forced to scream for help. Other members of the party rushed to his aid. They found him lying prostrate on the crimsoned ground ... apparently insensible.

Squarely on top of him lay the dead grizzly. Glass's solo bullet obviously had performed its intended job.

According to one description, "Glass had not less than 15 wounds, any one of which would have been considered mortal." One wound was a tear in his throat that spurted a red bubble when he breathed. There were other severe lacerations all over his torn body. He'd been "tore nearly to peases (sic)," and their wonder was - as they examined his body - that he retained sufficient blood inside him to hold onto life.

Without medical supplies, "his wounds were bound up, though it was thought by all that he could not possibly survive." They awaited the following day, when they fully expected to find him dead.

It didn't happen. He held on grimly to his life, labored breath after labored breath.

Major Henry was anxious to move on. Their destination, Fort Kiowa, was still 350 miles away. They were in hostile Indian territory. They must move on.

A crude litter was fashioned, and Glass was carried "as a corpse upon a bier." His two bearers had to pick their way through thickets of brush and dwarf plum trees. Their rough, uneven movements must have caused him untold agony with every step.

Because the party's progress was too slow, Major Henry found two volunteers to remain behind with Glass until he died - a conclusion no one doubted. They were John Fitzgerald and Jim Bridger. At the time, Bridger was only 17-years-old.

They stayed four days with the dying man. Then, in an act defying compassion, they stripped Glass of his possessions, including his prized rifle, and abandoned him. During this time, Glass listened to their conversation and swore to himself he would avenge their thievery. Perhaps this is what kept him alive.

During the next four or five days of solitary restriction, he was delirious. Luckily, his erstwhile companions had moved his pallet next to a spring. That and the

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buffalo berries he was able to reach saved him from starvation.

On another lucky day, he killed a sleeping rattlesnake near him and that gave him the strength to leave his litter, not by walking away from it, but by crawling.

What followed was a miracle of physical endurance. Where an ordinary man might walk 20 miles in a day, Glass's daily progress was measured in yards. He propelled himself in a prone position by one arm and a leg. Forcing himself, he gradually extended his daily progress, at the same time digging from the soil the nourishing roots that sustained him.

One day, as if by an act of God, a wolf pack chased a buffalo calf to within a few yards of Glass, where they killed it. He chased the pack away by shouting and waving his arms. He then literally tore hunks of red, raw meat from the calf and stuffed them into his stomach.

After this feast of dripping gore, he regained much of his vanished strength, to the point where he was able to stand again. Along with this, his wounds were healing.

He was soon walking 20 miles a day. His destination was Fort Kiowa on the Missouri, reaching it on Oct. 11, 1823. He had crawled and walked 350 miles.

By this time, the West's population of whites had long considered Glass to be dead. So, when he appeared at the fort very much alive, his personal stock soared. He quickly became the most highly-respected Mountain Man in the western expansion.

Glass eventually caught up separately with the two men he swore to kill on sight. Bridger was the first, but Glass found himself unable to "kill the boy."

When he finally stood face-to-face with Fitzgerald, the man had joined the U.S. Army. The camp commander prevented Glass from killing anyone under his protection. He did, however, recover from Fitzgerald his prized rifle.

Until the moment Glass accosted Fitzgerald, it is estimated he had crawled and walked at least 2,000 miles.

Hugh Glass spent the remainder of his life west of the Mississippi. He became known to his cronies as "Old Glass."

He was shot and killed with two companions in the spring of 1833 while crossing the Yellowstone River. A band of hostile Arikara Indians slew them from ambush.