

SEQUOIA NATURE GUIDE SERVICE

TRAGIC DEATH OF THE OLANCHE FAMILY AND TIMBERTOES

It was on the evening of June 26, 1908, that one ranger and five United States troopers, on duty in the Sequoia National Park, made camp for the summer at Alta Meadow at an elevation of 9,200 feet.

Our camp bordered the lower snow line of the Great Western Divide of the High Sierras. Above us the snow-capped peaks lifted heavenward to the 13,000 foot level. Spring was just breaking. The warm sunshine had painted the meadows green; but above winter still raged with cold wintry blasts while storm clouds hovered over Mts. Silliman and Alta. Many wild animals and birds characteristic of the region were seeking higher altitudes in which to make their summer homes but were prevented from ascending by the extreme depth of snow; so they had established temporary residence in the meadow in which we were camped.

Around us there were feeding large herds of deer, numerous flocks of grouse and mountain quail, a great many ground hogs and chipmunks, five snowshoe rabbits, six pikas and three mountain beaver. From the tops of the tall pine and fir trees that stood nearby many song birds were rejoicing loudly at the approach of spring.

Just as we were assembling around our evening campfire our attention was attracted to a large lone porcupine, busily engaged in carrying mouth-fuls of dead grass and depositing them in a burrow some three feet deep under a shelving rock. The presence of this porcupine caused much comment and wonderment. It was the first animal of the species seen within the Sequoia National Park or reported living on the western slopes of the Great Western Divide. And for the reason that no porcupine up to that time had been reported nearer than the Olanche country, some forty miles to the southeast, the boys of our camp were quick to give the animal the name of "Olanche".

The following day Olanche made a visit to our camp and when given a few salted raisins she quickly became our friend. About daybreak on the third morning she was patiently awaiting her special breakfast of raisins, which she ate in generous quantities. On the morning of the fourth day when she failed to put in her regular appearance a search was made for the cause. By the use of a flashlight in looking down her burrow we discovered her with three beautiful baby porcupines by her side.

Olanche became a favored pet of the boys and each morning made regular trips to be fed. On the twenty-first day after the birth of her young she carried food to the hungry offspring. On the twenty-eight day, to our surprise and delight, she brought her entire family with her in order to help share our camp food.

The young porcupines thrived and grew very rapidly under the treatment accorded them and all went well with the family until the morning of August 8, when the animals did not appear at their usual hour. A search at the den revealed that, alas, the Olanche family had met with a sad ending. Signs and tracks showed that a voracious wolverine, largest of the weasels, had dug out and devoured the entire family.

It was old "Timbertoes", a large wolverine who had been living nearby in Buck Canyon for several years and was so named by the rangers because two of his toes on the left front foot had been injured so that he made tracks in the soil resembling the pressure of two blocks of wood.

Much sadness was expressed by the boys of the camp over the loss of their pets and many a threat was made against the life of the wolverine. But neither threats nor action were necessary for while patrolling in Buck Canyon some few miles away on the twelfth day after the tragedy old Timbertoes was found lying dead. When an incision was made in the carcass of the beast for the purpose of determining the cause of his death, it was found that a quantity of porcupine quills had punctured his stomach and intestines and that the Olanche family had furnished old Timbertoes his ample and last meal.

As we looked upon the remains of these animals we marveled that the porcupine, weakest and least combative of our North American animals, had in death destroyed a wolverine, one of the strongest and most ferocious fighters. For long our thoughts dwelt upon the drama of the tragic deaths of the Olanche family and Timbertoes.