

By
Judge Walter Fry

Before the policies of the National Park Service and Department of the Interior were well formulated, attempts were made to introduce exotic species of animals or birds into the Sequoia National Park. The policy now is to prevent alike the destruction of existing species, or the introduction of species not native to the locality.

One of the most disastrous efforts to introduce animals into the park was made in 1904 and 1905, when Californian Elk were brought from Button Willow, in Kern County, and such as survived the journey were released in the park.

Two consignments of elk were brought from Kern County. The first consisted of two old bulls brought in during October, 1904: both of them died soon after their arrival, from injuries sustained during capture. The second consignment of 20 head arrived during October, 1905: four of them died soon after arrival. Of the 16 that lived, 11 were old bulls, 2 adult cows, and 3 small heifer calves.

The elk were placed in a large fenced pasture along the Middle Fork River, where they remained until July, 1910, during which time young had been born. Most of the old bulls had died off, and one was killed in combat; but there remained 18 fine animals. Unfortunately, on the 13th of July of that year, a disastrous fire swept the region, burning out the fences and thus liberating the elk, which scattered out over the country a radius of some 50 square miles and into settlements, where they injured crops and particularly orchards. Some of the animals were killed by dogs, others were shot in an effort to drive them from fields and orchards, while others got tangled up in barb-wire fences and died. One bull was killed by a boy who mistook the animal for a buck deer. No person could kill them intentionally, as the California law made it a felony to kill an elk. So the number dwindled down from year to year, until finally all were gone. None of the animals have been seen since the spring of 1926, when one lone cow was observed in Washburn Cove just west of the park, so it is safe to presume that none of the elk survive.

A strange thing happened on January 13, 1907, when two of the large bull elk fought, and one killed the other by a thrust of one prong of his antler through the other's chest. The animal killed was a fine specimen, and we skinned it so that it might be mounted. On March 5th, I sold the skin at public auction at Three Rivers, California, for \$165 and turned the money in to the Department of the Interior. Mr. George Birkenhaur, of Visalia, the purchaser, had the head mounted and later turned it over to Fresno Lodge B. P. O. E. 439, where it is still displayed.

Stencil #67-a

While in Visalia one day, I saw the beautiful mounted specimen, and as I looked at it I thought of the many horrible experiences the animal had passed through during his life. He was born and raised on the free open plains of Kern County, where he was lassoed by expert cow boys "thrown and hog tied", antlers sawed off down to the quick, then in this condition hauled in a wagon 12 miles and tossed into a stock car, to be followed with another wagon ride 15 miles to place of liberation. Then, on three different occasions thereafter it became necessary for the park rangers to lasso and tie the animal down in order to doctor the many wounds he had sustained while in captivity and that became infested with screw worms. Notwithstanding all this rough treatment, owing to the extra care given him, the animal came through the winter in excellent condition and put out a fine pair of antlers the next spring, which he used in defense in his last life struggle with an adversary of his own kind.

The elk were brought to the park upon the request of members of the California Academy of Sciences, and under supervision of Dr. C. Hart Merriam, Chief of the U. S. Biological Survey; all of whom were anxious to save the remnants of a vanishing species. The animals were taken by lassoing from the wild herd that roamed over the vast Miller and Lux estate in Kern County. Employees of Miller and Lux captured them and loaded them on railroad cars at Button Willow station free of charge. Transportation costs were borne to Lemon Cove by the U. S. Biological Survey, and from Lemon Cove they were hauled into the park by public spirited citizens of Three Rivers. The Tulare County Board of Trade purchased hay to feed the elk over the first winter.

I feel certain that had it been possible to hold the elk within the park, we would have with us today a large herd of these splendid natives of California. Fortunately, however, within the past few months there has been created a state game preserve in Kern County, which it is hoped will forever preserve these noble animals.