

O'NEAL'S LONG JOHNS

BY LOUIS LAVOIE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MIKE MORAN

Many suspect stories have been written about the Old Saloon in Emigrant, but I swear this yarn is true—at least some of it.

Phil and his graduate students were dead sick of the month-long drudgery of mapping the geology of the Absaroka Range up behind Mineral Mountain. Worse still, they'd been out of beer for a week. When the boss mentioned going to town, they were headed down the mountain to the truck before he could finish the sentence. The nearest beer was in the hamlet of Emigrant, where, in less than an hour, they were walking through the doors of the Old Saloon. They took a table between the elk head on the south wall and the jury of five buck heads lined up neatly near the back on the north wall. Phil called for burgers and a round of beers, put his feet up on the iron railing surrounding the wood stove, and struck up a conversation with a local ranch hand.

Dwayne "Smitty" Smith was the oldest person to frequent the place. He'd been drinking there for more than 50 years, and his dad, Old Man Smith, went back another 40 before that. The Old Saloon was called Armstrong's back then. Abe Armstrong opened it in 1902 on the ashes of a previous saloon. The Smith family tradition started in 1919 after the Great War, when the old man claimed a stool at the end of the bar. It was almost like a vacation home whenever he could get off the ranch. Worked fine 'til 1921, when Prohibition forced

Abe to close. That is, "forced to close" as far as the feds knew. In fact, after a judicious interval, Armstrong's discreetly reopened and operated "informally" for 41 years. Then, with Prohibition long gone, the feds, the state, the county, and just about every level of government imaginable began sniffing around for tax revenue. So the place "reopened" all legal like in 1962. Old Man Smith didn't even change stools. When he died a few years later, his oldest—who'd been a regular at the tavern ever since Truman beat Dewey—took over the spot and has been there ever since.

Smitty was anxious to talk. When Phil asked about the elk head, Smitty allowed as how he'd shot it behind the saloon 30 years ago and that it had knocked down the back door and run right through the place before collapsing where its head now graced the wall. Andy came round the bar, delivered another clutch of beers, and laughed. "Smitty, you never shot an elk in your life."

"Did so, an thar he is."

"Smitty, that elk died before you were born."

"Well, maybe it wasn't that elk, but there's an elk head around here somewhere that's mine."

Andy rolled his eyes and returned to the bar as Smitty



continued, "Use to be a lotta elk around here, but traffic's driven 'em away."

Phil was in heaven. With the glow of a second beer relaxing everyone, he leaned back and saw a set of red long johns nailed spread-eagle to the ceiling near the back of the saloon. "What's the story behind those long johns up there?"

Slightly moving his head, Smitty looked upward for a moment, sighed, rubbed his eyes, and began.

It was 1946, and the weather that autumn in Paradise Valley was downright balmy. The cattle were safely pastured, and the ranch hands had little to do. Smitty was sitting in front of the bunkhouse enjoying the soft sun and idly wondering about hunting; pretty soon elk would be coming down out of Yellowstone National Park. Maybe he and Bobby O'Neal should think about shooting one. Bobby snorted that there wasn't much sport in that, "Might as well go out an' rope 'em." Cowboy scorn inspired Smitty.

"Wal, we might go after that griz that's been seen over behind Chico. Don't s'pose he's denned up yet."

Bobby agreed, "They say he's a big un, too."

For a few minutes neither said anything more. Then they got up together, fetched some rifles from the bunkhouse, had the cook bundle up three day's food, tied their blanket rolls and grub on a pack horse, and lazily rode out of sight down the valley.

A word here about their firearms. Contrary to what you saw in old Hollywood westerns, they carried no pistols. Smitty packed a Winchester .30-.30 saddle gun that Bobby rightly scoffed at for grizzly hunting. A large grizzly bear would only be irritated by such light stings, he said, and no one in his right mind would go out and knowingly irritate a griz. Bobby was more conservative, borrowing from the ranch a .325 WSM moose gun someone had brought down from Alaska a few months previous. He believed that serious hunting called for serious firepower.

In a few hours they came to a spring and decided to make camp. The sun was just below the ridge of the Gallatins on the west side of the valley, and it was cooling fast enough to hurry their fire building. Supper and camp were spartan and casual as they speculated on the bear they hoped to take. An hour passed, and the pair sat and watched the fire burn down into intense embers that shimmered among the tangle of surviving ash-white logs. The conversation slowly died, and each retreated into his thoughts. Another spell of silence, then the chill broke the trance.

"Cold! I'm turning in."

"Me too."

Bobby stripped to his underwear, rolled his shirt and trousers into a pillow, and disappeared into his blankets. Smitty slept in

Louis Lavoie, a retired physicist, lives in Minnesota and frequently visits Montana's Paradise Valley. New Jersey illustrator Mike Moran's artwork has appeared in national publications including the New York Times and Harvard Business Review.



his clothes, remarking on Bobby's fortitude.

Bobby responded, "Hell, don't need no stiff jeans and jacket to stay warm under the blankets as long as I've got on these here long johns. Keep yer socks on and it's as good as being in the fire. Horses all set?"

"Yep."

"G'nite."

"Nite."

The two cowboys lay on their backs and stared into the silent night sky for a moment, then rolled on their sides and retreated turtlelike into their blanket rolls and slept. The night quickly passed to dawn, pulling them awake and hustling them to rekindle the fire among the still-warm ashes. Bobby scampered around the campsite picking up kindling to reignite the fire, looking like a scrawny devil in his crimson long johns, before quickly pulling on his jeans, boots, shirt, and jacket. Smitty checked the horses and pulled from the saddlebags some cold ham and biscuits for

breakfast. By eight they were well on their way again.

Approaching Emigrant Creek, they came upon a small ranch and asked about the bear. Sophie Bauer said sure enough there was a big fella that had been bothering the stock, even sniffed around their log home a couple of nights before, and like as near drove the dogs wild. Her husband got off a shot, but the bear just disappeared into the night. She thought it might be bedded down somewhere high up the stream. The cowboys thanked her and continued to the creek, turning their horses eastward upstream and gingerly picking their way. It quickly became tough going, so they dismounted and made an early camp, intending to search the area upstream for a couple of miles on foot. What they didn't know, but would soon enough find out, was that a mule deer lay dead and half-eaten less than a mile up Emigrant Creek. They had made camp near that ol' griz's lunch table.

The horses seemed a tad uneasy, but that was recognized only in looking back the next day. They agreed to ascend the creek on opposite sides, separated by a few hundred yards. It was steep and difficult going, and both worked up a sweat—especially Bobby, who was still wearing his wool long johns. After an hour he was so hot he stopped at an inviting pool, stripped, and settled into the icy water.

Unfortunately, where Bobby had stopped to cool down was just a few yards from where the griz had left its mule deer—and the bear was on its way back for a snack. The wind momentarily carried Bobby's fragrance right to the bruin's nose, and then all hell broke loose. With a snarling roar, it headed straight at Bobby. Without actually seeing the bear, he knew he only had time to jump out of the water and scramble up the nearest tree. The bear got to the cottonwood only seconds behind, but Bobby climbed with particular inspiration, and some brilliance as well. The bear would have gotten him had he not climbed squirrel-like, spiraling upward trying to keep the tree trunk between them. No Olympian ever performed better. The bear was furiously thrashing about the base, and even attempted a couple of climbs. This drove Bobby even higher. The bear, looking up at the interloper,



roared with rage and frustration. He backed down the tree and tore up the ground. Then he encountered Bobby's useless moose gun as well as his long johns and other clothes. The scent drove the griz crazy, and he grabbed the long johns in his jaws and violently shook them in the air.

Meanwhile, Smitty had heard the ruckus, and fearing the worst, dashed as fast as he could to save his friend. Coming through the trees, all he could see was the huge bear violently shaking poor Bobby, who apparently had been so ravaged by the griz that the only clothes left on him were the long johns. The single crack of the .30-.30 brought the bear about. How the angry griz could have been more irritated than before is hard to imagine, but it was, and the wound merely announced Smitty as a highly unwelcome additional insult to the dignity of his table.

"They say you can't outrun a grizzly," Smitty told his audience, who by this time had pulled their chairs up around his bar stool. "Wal, I can tell ya, yes you can! Course it was close there for a minute 'til I fell over a cliff into some tree tops, but I definitely left that ol' griz behind. By the time I got back to camp—without my rifle, and without poor old Bobby—I was darn sorry 'bout my friend's terrible fate.

"I rode back down the creek to the Bauers', where George loaned me a bigger gun, and he and I returned to get Bobby's remains. We shot the bear not far from our last camp, and he was still carrying Bobby's long johns in his mouth. We searched for Bobby, but found nothing. I figured the bear musta et 'im up. That ride down to Emigrant was the saddest march I ever made, especially with Bobby's only remains slung so red and lifelike over the saddle horn.

"I tied up at Armstrong's and took 'Bobby' in. After the necessary reports, we discussed how to memorialize him. Abe said why not tack him to the ceiling, kinda like he was on his way to heaven. So up he went. And there he is." Smitty glanced upward and went silent.

"But what really happened to Bobby?" Phil asked.

Andy finished the story from behind the bar: "Bobby sat up in that tree shivering all night. He heard Smitty's shot, heard the bear's snarl and charge, and then silence. Figured Smitty got eaten. A couple of hours later, he heard two more shots way down the creek and figured somebody musta got the bear. But he wasn't about to come down 'til he was dead sure the grizzly wasn't around. About dawn he eased himself to the ground, found his boots, and walked out, bear naked so to speak, to the Bauers' cabin where he scared the heck out of Mrs. Bauer when she opened the door to his knock. George threw a blanket around him and they worked all day to get him warmed up. For the rest of his life he was known as 'Bear' O'Neal. Funny thing though, he never entered Armstrong's after that. Said he was afraid to see his body tacked up overhead."

Well, if you go to the Old Saloon in Emigrant, Montana, you can see O'Neal's ghost tacked up there—or at least see his red long johns. I swear this is the truth—or at least some of it. 🐻