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MISSISSIPPI'S TEDDY BEAR



Among the trees and river cane, hunters were moving. It was 1902 in Mississippi. The way was tough along the Little Sunflower River. The soil was damp and soft. The air was still. The men were watchful.

Some had journeyed far from home to find the quiet predator. The hunters' prey was bigger than they were. It could weigh 200 to 350 pounds. Its fur was black, so it was hard to see it.

The horses and riders followed the hunting dogs deeper into the forest.

Before 1902, many forests and swamps were in Mississippi. They were home to wild animals. There was habitat for black bears, rabbits, turkeys, and song birds. Animals like bears ate acorns, berries, grasses, and leaves. The trees and cane were shelter. The river and swamps gave water. Native Americans came here to hunt animals to feed their families.

Later, many people from the East, North, and South moved to Mississippi. Men used the trees to make houses and barns. Farmers cut trees to make places for corn and other crops. Swamp water was drained to make space for more people. Wild animals were hunted to feed hungry families. Some animals were killed because people were afraid of them.

By 1902, there were few wild animals near the Little Sunflower River. There was not much habitat left for them. Many animals had been taken for food. Black bears, red wolves and mountain lions had been killed or scared away.

The hunters moving near the Little Sunflower River saw only their hunting dogs. There was no sign of their prey.

President Theodore Roosevelt was one of the men near the river. He loved hunting and being outdoors. Wild animals avoided people, and Roosevelt enjoyed trying to find them. He did not want a hunted animal to suffer, so he shot his gun carefully. Now President Roosevelt was on an exciting trip. He was in Mississippi to hunt a big animal -- the black bear!

Teddy Roosevelt had come from Washington, D.C. to a camp along the river. He and the men told campfire stories of past hunting trips. They laughed and told jokes. Everyone was excited about the adventure.

After three days of hunting, the men were unhappy. There used to be many black bears in Mississippi. By 1902, bears were rare. President Roosevelt had not seen any. What if none were found on his hunting trip? What would the President do?

Name: _____

Suddenly, the dogs howled loudly. They had found the scent of a bear! Holt Collier, a famous bear hunter, called out. "Follow me!" Men on horses fought through the brush to follow the dogs.

Time went by. The hunting party had ridden many miles. No bear was found. Maybe the dogs had lost the scent? Tired and hungry, Teddy and his friends went back to the camp to eat. But Holt Collier followed the dogs and the bear into the swampy forest.

Finally, the dogs saw the bear. It was old and hurt. Holt Collier blew his bugle to call the men. While he waited, he caught the bear with his rope. He tied the bear to a tree so it could not run away.

When Theodore Roosevelt arrived, he and his men looked around. The dogs were barking. The bear was tied. Holt Collier was waiting. The men shouted, "Let the President shoot the bear." President Roosevelt stepped forward.

Reading Comprehension: Answer these questions about the story on a separate piece of paper.

1. *Where does the story take place?*
2. *Why are bears rare in 1902?*
3. *Who found the bear? What evidence from the text supports your answer?*
4. *Pretend you are President Roosevelt, what would you do next? How do you feel?*
5. *What would YOU have done?*

Continue reading the story.

President Roosevelt looked again at the old, hurt bear. He shook his head. "No. I refuse to shoot. End its pain." The men obeyed his order.

Teddy Roosevelt did not think it was right to shoot this bear. It was not fair. The bear could not hide or get away. President Roosevelt liked adventure and hunting. He also wanted to be fair to the animals he hunted.

News of the Mississippi bear hunt quickly spread. Newspaper writers wrote stories about it. One person drew a cartoon about the story. People were proud of the choice made by their President.

One day in New York, Mr. Michtom saw the cartoon about Teddy Roosevelt and the bear. He had some stuffed bears in his toy store. They looked like the bear in the cartoon. This gave him an idea! Mr. Michtom wrote a letter to President Roosevelt. He asked, "May I name my toy bears after you? May I call them Teddy's bears?" Theodore Roosevelt agreed.

Since this time, stuffed toy bears have been known as Teddy bears. It all started with a hunting trip along the river in Mississippi in 1902.

Name: _____

Additional Comprehension questions:

1. Why were the dogs there? Make an inference.
2. What is the main idea of the story?

Other potential discussion questions for teachers to lead:

1. Are the factors that caused black bears to become rare in 1902 still an issue in the 21st century?
2. What are the components of wildlife habitat?

Vocabulary words

1. *predator*
2. *rare*
3. *habitat*
4. *journey*
5. *refuse*
6. *capture*
7. *shout*
8. *avoid*