

Kid's KOrner

Big Ben The Bear Pays Final Tribute To His Owner

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EAST WATERFORD (Juniata Co.) — It has been said that dog is man's best friend, but Mid Kistler feels this is not true for all men. In the case of her husband, Bob, it was a bear, Big Ben, that was her husband's best friend. In fact, Mid said that Bob used to say he had two loves in his life — Mid and Big Ben — but he would tease her and say he wasn't sure which should be named first!

Years ago, Bob started to raise bear cubs. At the request of the owner of a small ice cream place, Bob placed the cubs in an area back of Dairy Dine to help draw customers. Eventually Bob placed many animals there, and Bob also started to have his animals in the East Waterford parades.

Bob and Mid have lived on the present farm for 12 years, but they raised animals before that. They bought bear cubs and fawn and fed them from the bottle. Once they had three fawn on a bottle at one time and had to keep them in a corncrib divided into three sections so they could be fed separately as each one demanded attention at the same time. Since there were so many of them, they lost track of the number of deer they raised, but they had as many as 12 to 14 at one time in various sizes. They would sell and get more, sell and get more, until Mid says it was like they were "wheelin' and dealin'." It is not hard to see, though, that Bob and Mid were more interested in raising the animals because they loved them than they were in any profit they may have received.

Of course, they had to be inspected by the state and have permits and license before they could keep wildlife in captivity. Many safety measures had to be enforced to meet state requirements. After awhile, the Department of Agriculture also required them to have a license.

Although bear cubs and deer seemed to be the favorites of Bob and Mid, they also enjoyed raising and displaying rams, goats, Fallow deer (German), Maufflan sheep, "de-frosted" skunks, pygmy goats, foxes, wallaby (little kangaroos), pheasants, exotic pigeons, and doves. They certainly were "farmers" in their own right, and they had a living "crop" of animals which they loved and which loved them.

The highlight, though, was in

1975 when Bob bought Ben and his little mate, Jennie, then only six months old. Jennie was taken to New York state, but Ben stayed with Bob Kistler. As Mid describes it, those two had a very special relationship from the start.

Next Bob bought a female bear, Smokey. She and Ben had 15 cubs together. Most of them were sold, but two special ones were kept and were also often in local parades. One of the cubs, Herbie, was a "bad boy" on a number of occasions, often getting into mischief. As Mid laughingly described it, you can't correct or discipline a bear with a spank on the butt because they are too well-padded. They soon learn that the only place that will hurt from being corrected is the nose which can be tweaked or hit lightly with a switch when necessary. So, when Herbie had been naughty, he would run to stick his nose in a corner, letting his well-padded behind stick out without fear.

One time Herbie got in their water spring, rolled around in it and became covered with mud. Then he went to the house and got into the washer. Needless to say, when he was taken from the washer, he headed for a corner!

There was sadness in Mid's voice, though, when she told that Herbie had to be put to death when he became older. A boy came to their place and, without permission, went to Herbie's cage and stood with his arm right up against the bars. Herbie grabbed this stranger's arm, pulled it into the cage bars and broke it quite badly. The state made them have Herbie put to death so he could be inspected for Rabies, which, of course, was not found. The Kistlers knew that Herbie had not been out of his cage where other animals could have bitten him, but they were told that a bat with Rabies could have bitten him, and so there was no choice but to have Herbie put to death. It was devastating for Bob and Mid.

Another cute trick that Mid recalled about Herbie, when he was small, was when he got into the truck and stood at the steering wheel like a kid. This provided laughs for many people (and happy/sad memories for the Kistlers).

In the meantime, Ben and Bob played together and pulled tricks on each other. Ben especially loved peanuts in the shell. One of his favorite tricks was to pull one from Bob's mouth or ear by taking

it in his big mouth ever so gently. Ben also loved to get in the cage in his bear trailer to be taken to parades. He was always content as long as Bob was near.

When raising the bear cubs, the Kistlers started with goat milk, then baby cereal such as Pablum, then puppy chow and, finally, adult dog food. There are dog bears and hog bears. Big Ben and offspring are the dog bear type, and as adults they like day-old bread and dog food. The only meat they get is what is in the dog food, which must be high in protein. They also like ear corn, apples, pears and donuts (but they are given only limited sweets).

Ben still loves to eat grass, but it must be pulled or weed-whacked; no mower clippings for him! After all, a fella has to have something to chew on to make it worthwhile. It is quite a picture to see Big Ben sitting on his butt and holding ear corn as he eats it. Of course peanuts are still his favorite, perhaps because they make him think of Bob.

About eight years ago, a new friend came into the life of Big Ben and the Kistlers. Pennsylvania State Trooper Cliff Stitely started to raise deer and went to visit Bob Kistler for advice. Bob reminded Cliff of his grandfather, and they became the best of friends. Cliff also became quite attached to Big Ben who now weighs 841 pounds and is 19 years old. This might sound old, but his father lived to be 35! Ben is the last of the large animal collection once owned by the Kistlers, although Mid still has Sparky the Schnauzer for a pet.

Some months ago, Bob Kistler found that he had cancer. In addition to his pain, perhaps the most difficult thing for him to face was leaving Big Ben because he knew how much Ben loved him and would miss his care. At first, Bob asked Cliff to have Big Ben put to death after Bob died, but later he withdrew this request when he realized it would be impossible for Cliff to carry out that request.

Another request, however, was one that Cliff definitely planned to fulfill. While in the final stages of cancer in the hospital where he was too ill to be released, Bob told Cliff that his last wish was to pet Big Ben just one more time. Cliff received permission from the hospital to take Big Ben in his cage on the trailer to outside the hospital where nurses would wheel Bob so he could give Ben that one final pet.

However, Cliff found the melted snow had made such soggy ground that the truck could not get into the area where Big Ben could be transferred from his enclosure to the cage on the trailer. Before it was possible to take Big Ben to answer Bob's final wish, Bob died in the hospital at age 77.

Guess who led the funeral procession? Big Ben in his cage on the trailer pulled by a pickup just as he so often had been taken by Bob. A short time before the funeral, the wind had come up and dried out the ground enough for the truck to get in to load Big Ben, and Cliff Stitely was able to take

care of a final act of love for his dear friend. Cliff took Big Ben to his home two nights before the funeral to get him ready for the procession.

To the people of this little town and rural area in Tuscarora Valley, it was most appropriate that Big Ben was where he belonged one last time — in a parade with his beloved Bob, although this time it was a private procession and not a public parade.

UPDATED NOTE: We are happy to report that Big Ben is alive and well, though perhaps somewhat homesick for Bob, Mid, and Cliff. A man in Maryland had heard that Ben was available and, about three days after this writer interviewed Mid Kistler and took pictures of Big Ben (which was about ten days after Bob's funeral), the new owner came to get Ben. He took Ben to live in one of his private menageries where he keeps exotic animals and birds.

Perhaps Big Ben will not grieve as much for his friend away from the old, familiar surroundings; but we suspect that, back in the recesses of his mind, when he

smells fresh peanuts he will sense that some one is missing. Good-bye, old friend, many people will miss you and remember you. May you live to be even older than 35.



A trooper's hat gives Big Ben an authoritative bearing.



Big Ben takes a peanut from the mouth of his former master, Ben Kistler.



Mid Kistler said it would be too much for her to keep Big Ben. The cost of an insurance liability policy is far beyond what she can afford. Although it is like losing a member of the family, she knows that Big Ben will be cared for properly.



Big Ben yawns contentedly.