



FROM THE FLATHEAD BEACON

## Documentary Revisits Glacier's 'Night of the Grizzlies'

*The frightful "Night of the Grizzlies" story gets turned into a documentary -- a documentary that brings new information about that infamous event in the '60s when two women died from bear attacks in one night.*

By Courtney Lowery, 5-12-10

Aug. 13, 1967, marked one of the most tragic and important events in the history of Glacier National Park. Two women, in campsites miles apart from one another, were mauled and killed by grizzly bears, the first bear-related fatalities since the park's inaugural year.

It is known as "Night of the Grizzlies," a story with enough gravity to grab national headlines and cause the national park system to re-examine wildlife policies. It was also an incident forever burned into the hearts and minds of those involved, as well as the park's widespread community.

MontanaPBS is revisiting the story with the documentary, "Glacier Park's Night of the Grizzlies," set to debut on May 17. While the story may be familiar to many Montanans, some of the voices in the film have never been publicly heard before, said co-producer Gus Chambers.

"When we started it, we kind of realized it took 40 years for a lot of the people to want to speak about it," Chambers said.

The documentary chronicles the series of events leading up to the deaths of Julie Helgeson and Michele Koons, two young park employees out for overnight camping trips with their friends.

Helgeson and her friend Roy Ducat hiked to the Granite Park Chalet on Aug. 12, 1967, and were both mauled early in the morning on Aug. 13. Ducat survived his injuries; Helgeson did not.

That same night, a grizzly attacked Koons and her friends at Trout Lake. Her friends, including Paul Dunn, survived by climbing trees. Koons did not make it out of her sleeping bag, according to witnesses.

Both Ducat and Dunn share their memories of that night on the documentary, along with family members, other witnesses, biologists, journalists, park rangers and others. Missoula-native and actor J.K. Simmons provides the narration.

Chambers, who has worked in the park and for the U.S. Park Service and is based in Missoula, said it was only fitting for Montana filmmakers to take on this subject. He and his co-producer writer Paul Zalis, who also wrote the script, approached the project sensitively, not wanting to sensationalize the deaths of two young women.

"We wanted to keep this as respectful for the survivors, for the families and for bears as possible," Chambers said. "Who better than a local to try to take it on?"

Much of the documentary focuses on the state of wildlife policy in the park in the 1960s and 1970s. It was regular to feed the bears garbage or to give them food to attract them to cars or tourist-centric destinations in the park.

Hikers and campers also did not have the pack-it-in, pack-it-out mentality they do today. This meant trash at campgrounds to draw in the hungry bears, which were becoming increasingly unafraid of humans, according to biologists.

The filmmakers mixed old footage, still-frame re-enactments and old photographs to create a seamless storyline, Chambers said. This meant shooting film at Granite Park Chalet and other locales.

Glacier Park spokesperson Amy Vanderbilt said the park felt comfortable with the documentary because of the respectful nature of the script. "The Night of the Grizzlies" was a deafening alarm telling national parks that humans and wildlife need to be separated, Vanderbilt said.

"That was a bellwether event in bear management in national parks, not just here in Glacier," Vanderbilt said. "It changed careers, it changed policy within the park as well as within the park service, seemingly overnight."

Work on the film began three years ago, and Chambers hoped it would be completed by 2007, in time for the 40th anniversary of the event. The story expanded, however, in ways the filmmakers did not initially expect, Chambers said, and they decided to take the extra time – three summers – to tell the entire story.

The fact that the documentary is debuting during Glacier's centennial celebration this year is a coincidence, Chambers said.

The park is also performing its annual evaluation of grizzly policies, Vanderbilt said, which have drawn more attention than usual this year after a sow grizzly and her cubs were removed from the park last August.

"Glacier National Park is vigilant about trying to educate and communicate to park visitors that they must stringently keep their food and garbage and utensils out of the path of bears and animals," Vanderbilt said.

For his part, Chambers believes the documentary accomplished what it set out to do by telling the story of the people involved in that terrifying night, as well as the story of the animals and the conditions that led to a tragic conclusion.

"This story is sort of Glacier's awkward adolescence," Chambers said. "A coming-of-life event that (the park) learned from and grew from."

"Glacier Park's Night of the Grizzlies" airs May 17 at 8 p.m. on MontanaPBS.

**This story first appeared on the Flathead Beacon.**

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