

# Fur for the Future

by Scot H. Dahms

In 1948, the Idaho Fish and Game Department dropped beavers out of a plane and parachuted them into the state's backcountry. People had started building homes around McCall and Payette Lake where beavers had existed before the development began. Unfortunately, the beavers became a problem.

Elmo Heter worked for the Idaho Fish and Game in the McCall area. Elmo had experience with beavers and he was assigned the task of finding a solution. Elmo knew that the Chamberlain Basin was the perfect place for the beavers. They would be away from people and their dam building activity would be beneficial to the habitat there. The problem was that the Chamberlain Basin is in what is now the Frank Church River of the No Return Wilderness Area. Even today, there are not any roads into the area.

Elmo thought about packing the beavers into the wilderness, but he found that beavers and mules do not mix. Horses and mules became spooky and quarrelsome when loaded with a struggling pair of beavers. This increased the amount of handling needed and, too frequently, resulted in the loss of a beaver.

Elmo knew there was a surplus of parachutes at the end of World War II and he had the idea of dropping the beavers from a plane. The parachutes were purchased from the Forest Service. The cost for dropping four beavers from a plane was around \$30 in 1948.

Elmo now had to figure out how to drop the beavers in safely. His first idea was a box with woven willow ends so the beaver could chew out when on the ground. Unfortunately, the beavers started chewing the willows as soon as they were placed in the boxes. It was feared that the beavers would chew out while dropping from the plane or in the plane causing a problem either way.

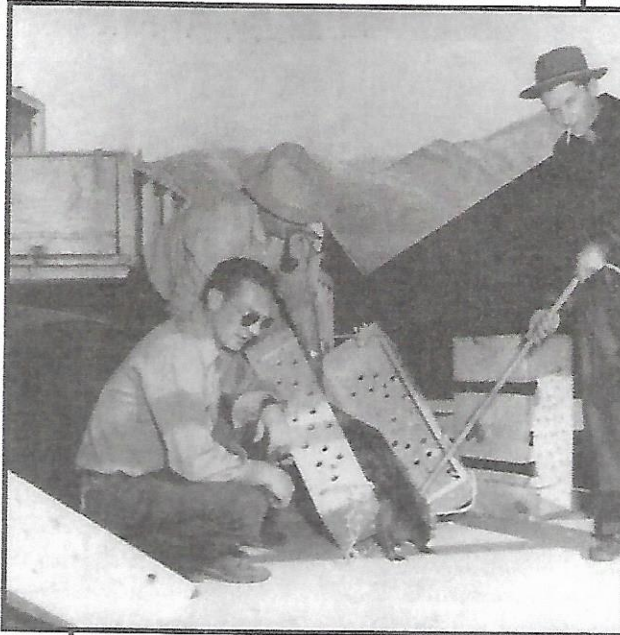
Elmo came up with a specially designed wooden box that would open upon impact. He tested it with some dummy weights. Then he found an older male beaver who became the test pilot.

Elmo named the beaver "Geronimo". Elmo dropped Geronimo on a landing field several times. Each time, Geronimo popped out of the box and was caught by handlers. Then, he was put back in the box for another flight. Ge-

ronimo became resigned to his task and, as soon as the handlers approached him, he would crawl back into his box.

Elmo was satisfied with the testing and put his plan into action. Geronimo's reward for being the test pilot was to be the first to be dropped. Three female beavers were dropped in with him. There were two beavers per box. Geronimo took a little while to figure out his parachuting days were over but soon created a colony.

Seventy six beavers were dropped



into the basin. All but one survived the drop. The one that did not survive pushed his way out through a hole on top of a box while dropping. If it would have stayed on top of the box until it reached the ground, the beaver would have been just fine. Unfortunately at 75 feet, the beaver jumped or fell off the box. The surviving beavers created some amazing habitat which is part of what is now the largest protected roadless forest in the lower 48 states.

July and August are the ideal months for transplanting beavers. Earlier in the year they tend to migrate and later, especially at high altitudes, they do not have enough time to build a lodge, dam and food pile before winter sets in. When two beavers land at the same time, there is less tendency for either to migrate immediately.

The Travelair airplane used was large enough to carry a pilot, Conservation Officer and ten crates of beavers. The

targets were usually small, open meadows where the selected streams ran. The best altitude for dropping was 500 to 800 feet. This height assured sufficient time for the parachute to set the box down gently. Yet, it was low enough for accuracy in placing the box in the selected meadow. It was also low enough to avoid trees or other obstacles in which the parachute and box might become entangled.

Around 1950, a film was made showing the different methods that were used by the Idaho Fish and Game to capture and relocate furbearers around the state. Part of the film included footage of the beavers being dropped out of the plane. The film had long been lost though.

Fish and Game historian, Sharon Clark, uncovered the fragile film in 2015. It had been mislabeled and stored in the wrong file. The film, titled "Fur for the Future" was digitized and released on YouTube by the Idaho Fish and Game and the Idaho Historical Society.

The YouTube video can be watched in its entirety at the following site:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snbTtuDCT6w>

I encourage those who have information contrary to what is printed here to respond via email, mail, phone or through the magazine.

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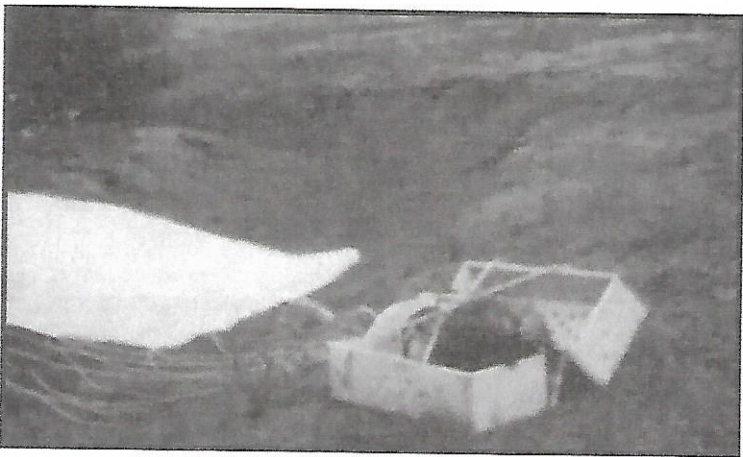
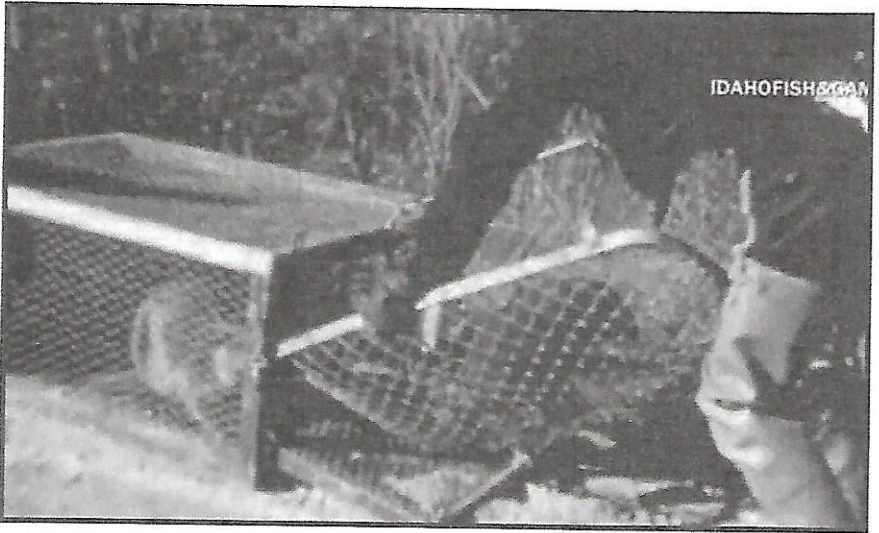
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