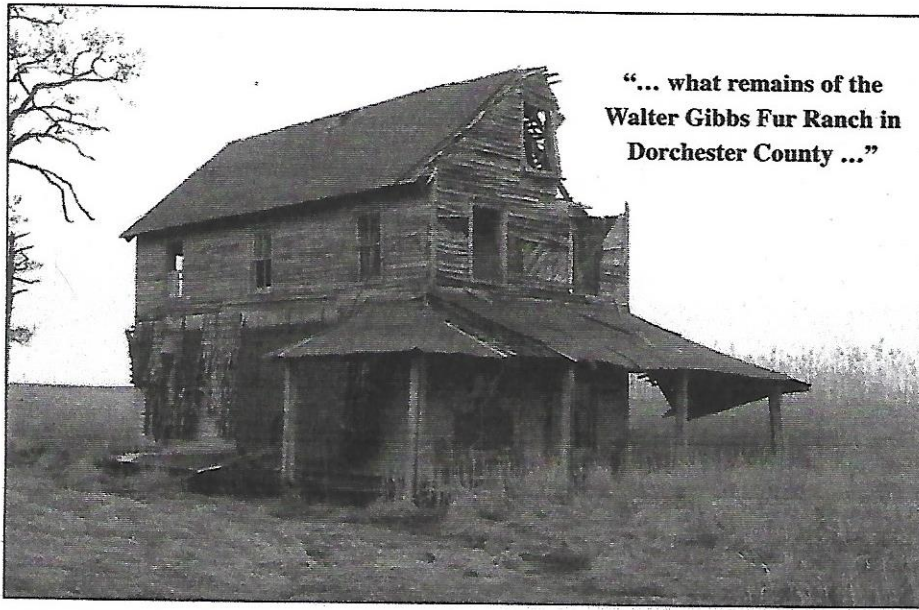


“... what remains of the
Walter Gibbs Fur Ranch in
Dorchester County ...”



Dorchester County, Maryland: Home of Gibbs & National Muskrat Skinning Contest

Two winters back I made a pilgrimage to what remains of the Walter Gibbs Fur Ranch in Dorchester County, Maryland. While driving over from the hotel, I thought about Dick Wood's first visit to the Ranch more than a century before. Wood was a nationally known trapper, outdoor writer and photographer. Gibbs was the preeminent trap inventor of the day, arguably of any day.

When Gibbs picked Wood up in town, he asked if he had brought waders. It was marsh country, ideal for someone who wanted to develop and test traps, especially muskrat traps, but not for knee boots. Wood assured him waders were in his bags, but, of course, Wood's wife had mistakenly packed the knee boots.

He got soaked to the waist the first morning and that night used resin to waterproof a pair of coveralls. The next morning, he put on the stiff garment, tied the legs closed and pulled rubber muck boots over top. He told Gibbs it kept his feet dry, but I don't know about that.

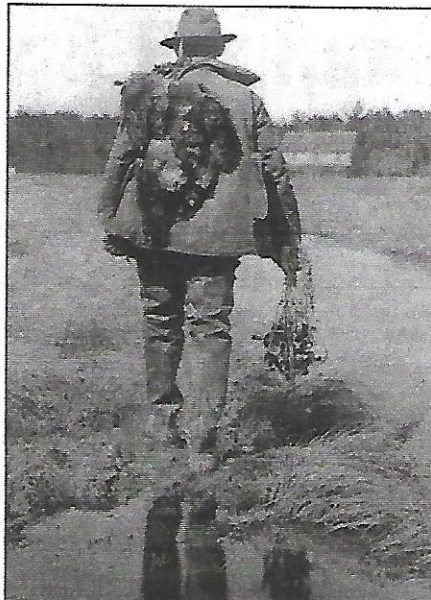
The host for my visit also advised me to bring boots, as I would have to walk a soggy lane to reach Gibbs' old house,

Look to the trapper's right and you can see the Gibbs house as it stood in 1917.

By Scott Dahms

which still stands near the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. Of course, I forgot and left my hip boots at home. I hoped the winter boots I had on would be enough, but I had my doubts.

The host had warned me to park in the driveway on the opposite side of the road from the lane to Gibbs' place. He said that drive was packed with oyster shells,



and I would not get stuck. The Gibbs side of the road would be a different story, a neglected two-track loosely held together by marsh grass. The wooden corduroy top had long since rotted away.

Where there were not enough grass roots to support my weight I sank, and water came in over top of my boots. The soggy walk took 40 minutes. But when I got there, I did not regret my decision to proceed in the least.

While the old house had seen better days it was still standing, offering mute testimony to the long-ago builders' skill.

My host had also provided some historical perspective on the place. He said the marsh was heavily tiled to drain tillable farm ground and pasture when the house was built. Gibbs reworked the drainage for muskrats and erected several outbuildings that had long since disappeared. There had been a large trap shop and holding cages for hundreds if not thousands of live muskrats.

Gibbs' hired hands harvested tens of thousands of pelts for the fur trade. But selling muskrats as livestock for fur farms was a more lucrative side line, and some of for Gibbs' most inventive traps were designed to catch and hold a muskrat without injury, including an incredibly clever if impractical trap known to collectors today as the Armadillo because of its oddly segmented outer shell.

Prototypes for as many as 18 Gibbs patented traps were probably tested here, most notable being the million-selling Two Trigger muskrat trap. But looking in through the empty window frames, I couldn't help but imagine Gibbs in there working on the Armadillo.

As I walked around the house turkey vultures watched from a nearby tree. Gibbs often complained about the vultures and said that if one beat you to a muskrat, you might as well write it off. As I walked the lane back to the truck, I wondered what Gibbs would think if he knew vultures were still hanging around the place.

I suspect he would have set some of his Hawk Traps. At one time, he had more than 50 of them out on poles in the surrounding marsh, avian predator control that could get you arrested today.

When I got back to the truck I took off my wet boots and set them on the

Continued on page 56

Gibbs Fur Ranch

(Continued from page 52)

shell-covered driveway. Then I changed into dry socks and pants in the front seat of the truck, slipped on a pair of dress shoes and backed out onto the road.

I had another stop to make. I was going to see the National Outdoor Show and Muskrat Skinning Championship.

When a Cambridge, Maryland, feed and grain company held a picnic in 1938, they wanted some kind of entertainment for their Dorchester County customers. Someone suggested a muskrat skinning



contest, and the company put up \$5 prize money. What came to be known as the National Outdoor Show and Muskrat Skinning Championship was born, and it has been held in Dorchester County every year since with the exception of the war years 1942-1945. (I feared the coronavirus pandemic might have ended that run, but when I checked, I found photos from this year's event posted on their website.)

Eight trappers in hip boots, plaid shirts and hunting hats lined up for that first contest. They took turns skinning five muskrats apiece, which they had brought from home. George North, of Griffith's Neck, was the winner. It took him 3 minutes to skin five, and he told the crowd afterwards, "I am the granddaddy of all muskrat trappers, and yet I am the fastest skinner of the bunch. Why, I could beat you all blindfolded."

Then, to prove the point, he was led back on stage with a towel wrapped over his eyes and skinned another muskrat in 56 seconds, which was also his age at

the time. North would go on to win the contest another four times. Curtis Insley, of Seward, actually beat North's winning time, skinning five muskrats in 2 minutes and 39 seconds. But a small tear in one of the hides disqualified him. The judges took their job seriously, still do.

Over the years the unique event was featured in publications as diverse as *National Geographic Magazine*, *Sports Afield*, the Scripps-Howard Newspapers feature syndicate, and AP writer Hal Boyle's syndicated column, to name a few. In 1961, *Newsweek* gave the show and skinning contest the same amount of space as Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

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By that time, the event was being sponsored by the Cambridge Junior Chamber of Commerce and included the crowning of queens and assorted pageantry. The contest had been expanded to include trap setting along with muskrat skinning, and trappers from all over the East came to compete, some from as far south as Louisiana and as far north as New York State. Elimination rounds were added to winnow the field to a manageable six finalists, and by 1963, it was taking three evenings with the Sunday afternoon skinning finale held in an arena before an estimated 1,600 spectators.

Yet between 1938 and 1963, the same five locals from Dorchester County won every event. Nine states were represented at the 1963 contest, but after the first elimination, only one contestant from outside of Dorchester County remained. The skill gap between inside and outside the county was that wide. Elihu Abbott, of Robbins, won the event, his eighth championship. The year before, he had set a record by skinning five muskrats in 1 minute, 3 and 1/3 seconds.

In the same heat, his younger brother, Theodore, had skinned his muskrats in 1 minute, 3 seconds flat. But a pelt was ripped just enough to disqualify him.

Elihu was only 33 yet already looking

to Theodore to carry on the tradition. It seems speed skinning at the highest level had become a young man's game.

Two members of the original picnic committee were still involved, including local State Sen. Frederick Malkus, who, of course, was also a muskrat trapper. Dorchester may have been the only county whose representative checked a trapline on his way to the statehouse.

Dorchester domination ended the next year when Gary Schroeder of Dallastown, Pennsylvania, claimed the prize. Schroeder skinned muskrats for a living fall through spring. He estimated he skinned more than 10,000 muskrats a year and

could top 400 on a good day. He sold the dressed carcass meat at farmer markets in Philadelphia and Baltimore.

Schroeder had always used a four-cut method, believing that best preserved a pelt. But when he had attended the contest two years before as a spectator, the champion had used a quicker one-cut technique. When Schroeder got home, he started practicing the new way. He skinned five muskrats in 64.2 seconds, less than a second off Abbott's record time.

When I attended, the show was held at the South Dorchester grade school, a few short miles from Gibbs' old place. As I drove from the school back to my hotel, I passed men in waders checking traps alongside the road. Sets were marked with flagging on cane poles. Apparently, trap theft was not a problem, and I wondered what it would be like to trap in such a tradition-rich area.

As I passed the lane into Walter's place I saw my boots standing tall on the other side of the road in the driveway where I had forgotten them. As I pulled over to pick them up, I had to chuckle.

I wondered what the local trappers thought when they saw a pair of boots standing across the road from the old Gibbs place. I also wondered if Dick Wood had left his wet boots behind, too. ■