

# Mamie Eisenhower and the Beaver Coat

On October 31 of 1957, Mrs. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Mamie, received a beaver coat from the Maine Trappers Association. The coat was the brain child of the "Flying Trapper", more commonly known as Jasper Haynes. Before the coat was delivered, Mamie first turned it down, but reconsidered based on a response letter from Jasper. Once she accepted the coat, the acceptance was scrutinized by the press. Before all was said and done, fifteen letters were sent between the White House, Congress, Jasper and other interested parties along with numerous newspaper articles being written. So hold on, the story was bumpier than a flight Jasper took out of his trapline during the same year and find out how rhinestones, a man with a dream and an axe handle made it happen.

Jasper got the idea for the coat right after Dwight's inauguration in 1953. Jack Walsh, a friend of Jasper's, was both a trapper and a jeweler. Mamie's inauguration dress was covered with shimmering pink rhinestones. After the inauguration, Jack sold all his rhinestones quickly. He ordered more and sold them all as well. Then Jasper asked Jack "Why couldn't we get her to wear beaver?"

The beaver market kept getting worse and worse, so in the fall of 1956, Jasper approached two State of Maine agencies about making a beaver coat for the First Lady. They said they liked the idea, but did not want to take any action in carrying it out. In December of 1956, Jasper sent an inquiry through Senator Margaret

Chase Smith of Maine to Mamie. Mamie declined the coat. Then in March, Jasper had a dream where Mamie said "I have reversed my decision. I will accept the coat." Jasper did not tell Mamie about the dream until he gave her the coat.

Jasper sent her a second inquiry letter written on birch bark telling her how hard the Maine trappers had it. He told her that if a small beaver was caught through the ice, it is just dropped back through the hole because the pelt is only worth a dollar. Mamie wrote back immediately and said "Your most recent letter changes my understanding of the purpose for which the Maine furriers offered me a beaver coat, which I felt it necessary to decline. I assure you that I would do anything feasible to help out such a group. Whether or not my wearing a beaver coat can possibly

help your sales, I do not know. But so long as you believe so, I would like to have the coat - but on the condition that I pay the actual cost of its production."

Although Jasper wanted to present the beaver coat in the spring of 1957, Mamie preferred having the presentation in the fall. She thought women were more conscious of furs at that time of year and it would be more beneficial to the trappers to have the ceremony take place then.



Jasper did not want the gift to cause any trouble because of news stories about other Government officials receiving gifts and being removed from their positions. Right before the beaver coat was delivered, there was disclosure of an incident where King Saud of Saudi Arabia had given an Oldsmobile convertible valued at \$3,000 to the wife of Victor Purse, then Deputy Chief of Protocol of the State Department, who managed the King's trip to the United States. Mr. Purse was transferred to another State Department post.

John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State, said the acceptance of the automobile was "bad judgement". The State Department wrestled with other gifts from King Saud including gold watches, daggers and other items. Sec-

retary Dulles received a gold watch, a robe and a suitcase as well. The gifts from foreign nations to officials accumulated in a State Department warehouse for years. Government officials are forbidden by law to accept foreign gifts unless authorized by Congress. One problem with the law was that there were no penalties prescribed for violating it.

Luckily, Congress was not in session when the coat was delivered, or there would have been much more debate about it. In the last session, Senator Wayne Morse, of Oregon, had assailed Dwight for "the acceptance of a \$4,000 tractor with cigarette lighter attached; the acceptance of a \$1,000 bull or one of even greater value; the acceptance of a large part of the rest of the livestock and the machinery for a farm." Morse called the acceptance out of line with the conflict-of-interest policy and added "It is my view that the acceptance of such gifts by the President or any other Government official is politically immoral."

Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the longest serving First Lady, wrote an article for the Boston Dailey Globe supporting Mamie and her acceptance of the beaver coat. She wrote "Mrs. Eisenhower has conducted herself with dignity and grace in the White House. She has fulfilled the duties expected of her, and this type of criticism seems to be petty and small and not worthy of the American press or the American people."

Jasper and Archie Clark traveled to the White House to present the coat on behalf of the Maine Trappers Association. At the special White House session for photographers, they, along with the White House, made sure everyone knew that the gift part was only the 17 beaver pelts and Mamie had paid \$385 for making the coat. The coat was made by George Pooler of the Maine Fur Company in Bangor. Jasper said that George put twice as much effort into the coat as usual. The coat was a three-quarter sheered model with rolled cuff sleeves and thirteen stripes representing the original colonies. It was valued at \$1,800.

Mamie modeled the new coat on the grand staircase in the White House north entrance.

She did not talk to reporters about the gift. When reporters moved closer to hear her words with Jasper and Archie, the Secret Service stepped up and waived them off saying "This is a private conversation."

In 1957, Jasper was 60 years old with 45 years of experience as an aerial trapper and guide. He used his own plane to tend his trapline and as part of his sporting camp at Jo-Mary Lake. Jasper and Woodrow Craig, of Brookston, caught a hundred beaver along the St. John River in the 1956 to 1957 season. They also captured a bobcat alive. Jasper and Woodrow cornered the bobcat, dropped it in a bag and flew it out to Millinocket which is Jasper's home.

Toward the end of the trapping season, a brace for his landing gear was damaged when Jasper's plane hit the snow and ice on a frozen lake. Jasper always carried an extra axe handle with him in the plane. He used the axe handle as the brace so he could take off. It got him back to civilization safely.

After Mamie said she would accept the coat, Jasper sent a letter to the 350 members of the Maine Trappers Association asking for donations to offset his costs for the furs, his travel to Washington D.C. to present the coat and other miscellaneous expenses. Jasper received many donations including one from Walter Arnold, a famous trapper from Maine.

In January of 1958, Jasper wrote a letter to Mamie checking to see if she had any issues with the coat. Mamie's secretary, Mary Jane McCaffree, wrote back saying "You may be certain that Mr. Pooler did a fine job in lengthening it and that Mrs. Eisenhower is very pleased to have it. In fact, she wore it to Chicago when we went out there the other day for the United Republican Dinner." The pictures and clippings which Jasper had shared with Mamie were returned with the letter. Mary Jane thought Jasper would want them for his family scrapbook.

So maybe the story was not as bumpy as Jasper's flight out with the axe handle as a brace for his landing gear, but having a jeweler and an actual dream play a part in a story about trappers and trapping was unusual. Without the rhinestones, Jasper may not have had the idea for the beaver coat. Without the dream, Jasper may not have sent a second inquiry to Mamie. Without the axe handle, Jasper may not have reached civilization safely. That was how rhinestones, a man with a dream and an axe handle made it happen.

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

March 1, 1957

My dear Mr. Haynes,

Your most recent letter changes my understanding of the purposes for which the Maine furriers offered me a beaver coat, which I felt it necessary to decline.

I assure you that I would do anything feasible to help out such a group. Whether or not my wearing a beaver coat can possibly help your sales I do not know. But so long as you believe so, I would like to have the coat -- but on the condition that I may pay the actual cost of its production. If the furrier who would make it would therefore get in touch with me, I could give him the specifications that he would need and, I repeat, I would send to him a check for the actual cost of production.

Upon its receipt I would further be willing to have one of Maine's citizens here in Washington or any one of your designation bring the coat to me and have my picture taken at that time. A story that the Maine Fur Industry refused to make a profit on the transaction would be just as effective, I think, in promoting sales as would be the statement that they had made to me a present of it.

If this arrangement suits you, I will be glad to go forward with it immediately, just as soon as you can let me know details.

Mr. Jasper Haynes  
Millinocket, Me.

Submitted by:

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THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

January 24, 1957

Dear Mr. Haynes,

Thank you for your kind offer to give me a beaver coat made from Maine pelts. I am sure that the garment would be a beautiful one, and would illustrate the fact that fine coats are being produced by Maine's fur industry.

I feel that I must decline your lovely gift but you may be sure that your wonderful expression of friendship will be long remembered by me, and I shall always be grateful for the generosity of you and the other members of your group who thought of me.

With every good wish,

Mr. Jasper Haynes  
Millinocket  
Maine