

Trappers Take Their Families to the Muskrat Marshes

In the 1920s, trapping was big business in Louisiana. During the Great Depression, it provided an income for many persons with out jobs. By the middle of each November, trappers were ready for the season to begin. They had transported their wives and children to the marshes, set up tiny shelters or converted rafts into houseboats. In the Terrebonne Parish, the well-to-do trapper leased 800 feet of bayou frontage, with trapping rights extending a mile back into the marsh. He paid a seasonal rental of \$800.

On November 20, the trapper wore his hip boots and sleeveless jacket with many spacious pockets. This was the beginning of the 75 day regimen. The day starts early with trappers leaving camp at first light. Traps were set around each muskrat hut. The law prohibited traps placed within ten feet of the hut. Usually no bait was used. The trapper depended on his skill in setting traps where the muskrat would pass on his way to and from its home.

The newly manufactured trap in the field was the Gibbs Two Trigger trap. It had a regular set of jaws like most other traps in use at the time. The unique part of the trap was the second set of jaws which gripped the animal higher on the limb or around the body eliminating any chance of escape once caught.

An older trapper, explained the trap "One morning, I found 26 feet in my traps instead of muskrats. If I had this new trap then, I would have caught 26 muskrats. There is a small fortune awaiting the inventor who devises a trap that catches muskrats alive so the babies and the kits (six to nine months old) can be turned loose to grow another year."

After checking his traps, the trapper returned to his hut or boathouse and flung his catch upon a table, his work for the day was done. His wife and children skinned and stretched the hides. The writer said that when the pelts had been peeled off, with the fur inside, they resembled pointed buckskin bags.

Boats and shelters lined each side of the bayou in a populous muskrat district and resembled a city main street.

Each evening, fur buyers traveled down the line of temporary residences. They brought news from the city and gossip picked up along other water main streets. Muskrats brought about one dollar per pelt.

Some houseboats were well equipped with a phonograph, radio, and steel safe for funds. These houseboats were luxuries and were uncommon except for a group of men trapping a large area in Cameron Parish which lies between Lake Sabine and Lake Calcasieu, southwest of the city of Lake Charles. This enormous area was controlled by one person and was being scientifically developed as a large muskrat ranch.

The muskrat ranch had ninety five

revenue. They were unwilling to jeopardize their value by granting permits indiscriminately to hunters whose activities could destroy muskrats and huts.

The muskrat was the conservationist's strongest ally. The health of the marshlands may have been neglected as petrochemical exploration and production grew in economic importance. The muskrat was the most effective single force assisting with the protection of all wildlife in Louisiana. The State needed the help of the muskrat to create more winter refuges for waterfowl.

The article listed four Federal and eight State wildlife reservations in place then. They had a total of more than 3,200 acres. The three largest were the Rockefeller Foundation, the Russell Sage (Marsh Island) and the Singer. One of the most important of the time was the Paul J. Rainey Refuge, administered by the National Association of Audubon Societies. The Rainey Refuge was a pioneer in wildlife preservation.

Today, the marshes have been devastated by salt water intrusion and invasive animals like the South American nutria. In 2006, a conservation program aimed at nutria paid \$5 per tail for evidence of their destruction. Their pelts sold for one dollar then. What a difference one hundred years made!



- HIDE CAPTION

This photograph of a trapper loaded with muskrat pelts stretched on drying frames illustrated a 1930 National Geographic article on Louisiana. The original caption identified neither the trapper nor the location of the marsh seen behind him.

miles of canals, dug sixteen feet wide and six feet deep, providing easy access by water to every part of the marsh. The marsh was twenty miles long and was fourteen miles wide with a frontage of five miles on the Gulf. Permanent camps were established. No women or children were allowed as the owner did not want to interrupt the children's school work in fall or winter. Each camp was equipped with a radio and a physician made regular rounds.

An energetic trapper operating on this privately owned, privately trapped and constantly patrolled march averaged a net income of one thousand dollars for his season of seventy five days. The owners of muskrat ranches learned that marshlands yield a large

References:

Trappers Take Their Families to the Muskrat Marches. National Geographic. Ralph A. Graves. April 1930.

If anyone has any information which conflicts with what is written in this article, I encourage them to respond via mail, email, phone or in the magazine.

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