

World War I, the US Fur Market and the Skunk

By Scot H. Dahms

Before World War I, London and Leipzig, Germany were the center of the world fur market and most US furs were shipped to London for sale and Leipzig for processing. American buyers went to London to purchase American furs. With the beginning of World War I, the European market was no longer accessible. Because of this, sales were organized in St Louis and New York in 1915 and 1916 respectively. American firms were then able to purchase American furs in American markets.

In the fall of 1914, fur prices fell drastically due to the beginning of World War I. The March 1915 London sale was handicapped by the absence of foreign buyers. The fur sales at London in March 1915 dropped dramatically from 1914. There were only 1,700,000 muskrat sold compared to 4,500,000, only 600,000 skunk sold compared to 1,900,000, and only 19,000 mink sold compared to 160,000.

The fur auctions in St. Louis and New York were very important to the American fur trade. There was some concern that large fur auctions would fail in the US, but the sales went well and continued to increase in sales values. The first auction in St Louis totaled less than \$1,000,000 in sales. The 1919 winter sale was just shy of \$8,000,000 and the winter sale of 1921 was at \$11,000,000. The first New York sale was valued at \$250,000, the winter sale of 1919 totaled \$6,000,000 and the winter sale of 1921 netted \$2,000,000.

In early 1918, an arrangement between the Alien Property Custodian and the Fur Merchants Credit Association of New York allowed American merchants to purchase several millions of dollars representing the interests of Germany and the money paid turned over to the US Treasury. As a firm Americanizes its holdings, the company makes fair and substantial payments for the enemy interests it holds. This rooted out every German dollar invested in the US fur business and cut any control that Germany had over the US fur industry.

Even after the end of the war, the American fur trade continued to increase. Imports of undressed fur were valued at \$32,000,000 in 1918,

\$69,000,000 in 1919 and \$84,000,000 in 1920. Imports of dressed furs were valued at \$2,500,000 in 1918, \$7,500,000 in 1919 and \$9,000,000 in 1920. Exports of dressed furs were valued at \$11,000,000 in 1918, \$24,000,000 in 1919 and \$33,000,000 in 1920. The overall value of the fur industry in the US in 1918 was \$233,000,000, 1919 was \$342,000,000 and 1920 was \$353,000,000.

The skunk was very important during this time. The skunk was second in overall value to the fur market with muskrat being first. As the number of skunks going to London for sale decreased, the numbers sold at New York and St. Louis increased. In 1918, the number of skunks sold in these two markets combined was 600,000, in 1919 it was 1,300,000, in 1920 it was 1,200,000 and in 1921 it was 900,000.

Before World War I, Europe absorbed the entire US skunk output for manufacture. These furs would then be sold back to the US citizens as "American sable", "Alaskan sable" or "black marten". The scarcity of Russian sable and other dark furs from abroad favored the market for skunk. Once the sales in St. Louis and New York were established, the number of skunks purchased and made into clothing in the US increased.

This period of great demand for skunk led to an awakening in the need for protection. Laws were passed to provide protection due to the scarcity of the furs with the purpose of conserving a commercial resource. As of 1922, most states had seasons and several states prohibited digging skunks out of their dens or driving them out with smoke or chemicals.

The first protection for skunks grew out of appeals from hop growers in New York because of the value the services of the skunk provided in combating the hop grub. In 1893, the New York legislature delegated the right to enact local game laws to counties. In 1894, four New York counties provided protection to the skunk.

The final undoing in the popularity of the skunk in the fur market came via the US Federal Trade Commission. In 1938, the true identity of the furbearer had to be given. The skunk was then called a "sable-dyed skunk". In 1952, the Com-

mission went further with the passing of Fur Products Labeling Act which required labeling utilizing the true English names for animals so the animal could be identified in the United States.

Although legislature to protect the skunk had started in the 1890s, World War I brought attention for the need to protect the skunk because of the high demand for the fur during the war. Americans became aware of the need to protect all furbearers so that the fur market would continue to be supplied with quality furs. The US fur industry grew from a neglected, unimportant industry to one of the largest and most important in existence. After World War I, the US was the largest fur market and fur consuming country in the world.

I encourage anyone who has information contrary to what I have written in this article to contact me via email, mail, phone or in the magazine.

References

The London Sales. Hunter Trader Trapper. May 1915.

Effect of War on Prices. Fur News. September 1916.

Recovery in the Fur Business. Fur News. May 1917.

The Fur Industry and the War. Hunter Trader Trapper. June 1918.

The Fur Trade and the Fur Supply. Journal of Mammalogy. F. G. Ashbrook. February 1922.

Economic Value of North American Skunks. US Department of Agriculture. Farmers Bulletin No. 587. 1923.

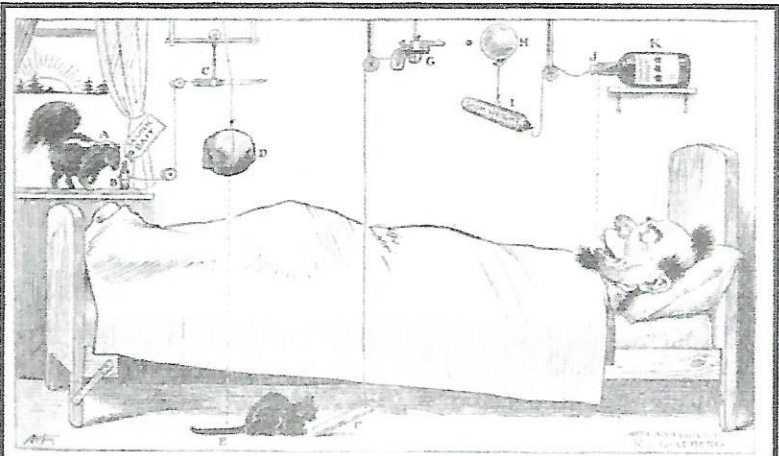
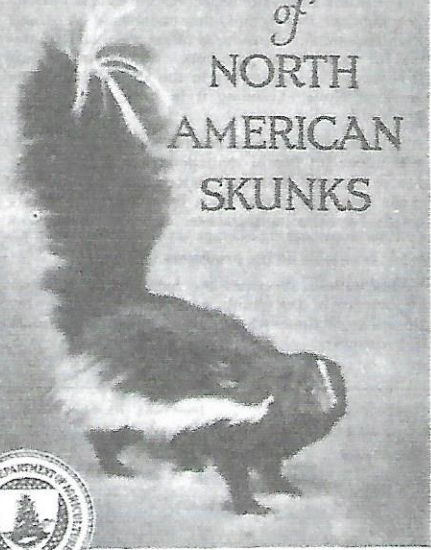
<http://www.truthaboutfur.com/blog/skunk-fur-forsaken/>

More on next page →

Scot H. Dahms
2270 W Willow Lane
Peru, Indiana 46970
765-327-1531
ranger1971@comcast.net

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
 FARMERS' BULLETIN No. 587 Revised
U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE 1923

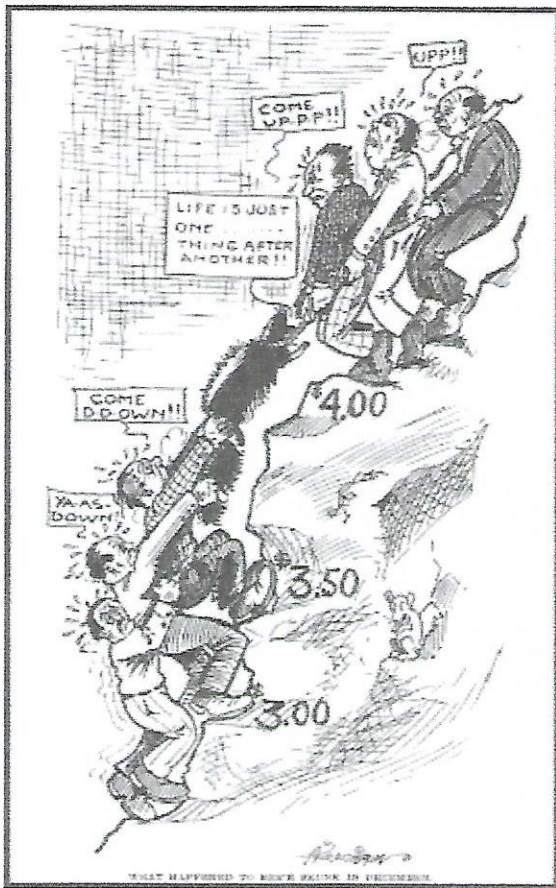
ECONOMIC VALUE
 of
 NORTH
 AMERICAN
 SKUNKS



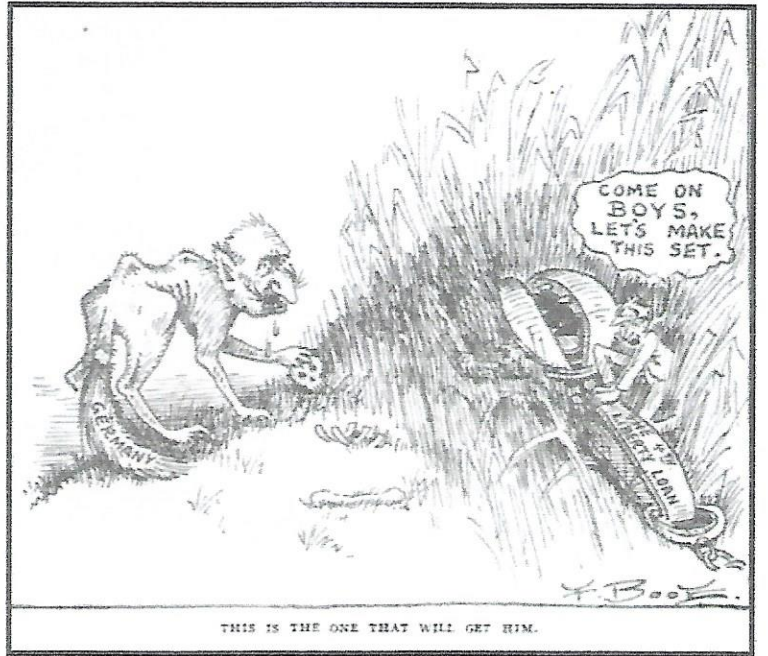
PETER UNPRIME'S SKUNK ALARM
 Skunk (A) is attracted to window by bottle of soap (B), and in trying to open bottle draws knife (C) to left, putting string which supports (D) (E) in fall upon Peter's tail (F). Cat jumps upon bottle (G), discharging gas (H), poisoning skunk (I); counterpoise which (J) is to keep (K) and (L) from hitting (M) allowing an ex-opher of skunk's to draw (N) into Peter's mouth. Peter immediately awakes, looks to the window and captures skunk.



A MOVE IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION.



WHAT HAPPENED TO NEW'S RATE IN DECEMBER



THIS IS THE ONE THAT WILL GET HIM.