

Frogging In Iowa

BY WILLIAM BARRETT

Conservation laws have since put an end to market hunting, but 50 years ago there were a great many hunters and trappers who made their livings by selling game. These men would pursue whatever game proved to be most lucrative at the time. So . . . for two years or so, frogging was a big business around the Iowa lakes region.

The following is the story of William Barrett as he told it to the late Mr. F. O. Thompson, a Des Moines businessman. Barrett was a well-known market hunter during the turn of the century, and frogged for a short period in his career.

A fellow came to Spirit Lake in about 1901 or 1902 by the name of Lu Shumaker. He was the one who gave us the idea of frogging. He hired us to work for him and naturally, it wasn't long before we found out that we could do the work just as well for ourselves and make more money out of it. We frogged with him during the summer months, starting in the spring.

When the ice went out, the frogs would drift in with the waves and we would go out with hip boots on which didn't do much good when we were wading around with the waves washing in to us. As the frogs would drift in toward the shore, we would just pick them up. We would work all day and get so cold we couldn't stand in the water. In those days we used to get 10c or 12c a dozen for them.

The frogs would spread out through the country when the warm weather came and would stay under the rocks in the spring and under leaves in the summer for protection. In the summer we worked the fields and picked up one here and there, but got good prices for them because they were then scarce. We got around 20c a dozen in the summer months, but never found many of them because we had to walk continuously and scare them up. In those days a man earned wages of around \$1.25 a day and we were making from \$2.00 to \$3.00 a day frogging, so we made good salaries for those times and had easier work too because we didn't have to work every day.

In the latter part of the summer, the frogs would go to the fields and meadows. After the fall came on, they would work to the ravines and lowlands and go down the ravines towards the lake. When they started that, we would catch more frogs because they would be in bigger bunches and we would make more money.

We used to ship to commercial men in Chicago, Philadelphia, St. Louis and Minneapolis. Those were the only places where I shipped. Later in the fall I rode around to several of the big hotels, one in Davenport, the Chamberlain in Des Moines, etc., and also shipped to a hotel in Rochester. I would have standing orders of so many a week, say 40 to 75 dozen, and I got about 25c to 30c a dozen for those orders. I had about eight or nine hotels. One at Dubuque took 50 dozen a week.

One day Claude Farmer and I frogged out at Indian Lake about nine miles northwest of Spirit Lake with a horse and a light wagon. We got so many frogs that we had to walk in and lead the horses. We had no place to ride there were so many frogs. We had them stacked up in one sack on the horse's back. That catch made me \$37.50 that day and that was a lot of money in those days for young fellows.

As the days kept getting colder, these frogs went right up against the lake and lay under rocks on the shore so they would be ready to go in when it did freeze up. The day before it would freeze there would be a blanket of them going in. They like to be in a slough.

The frogs liked to be in sloughs. In Indian Lake there was a slough and a sand bar. One day, just before a blizzard came, there were so many frogs going over the sand bar you couldn't see the sand. It was just one mass of frogs. Just a blanket of them seemed to go out into the lake and the lake froze up that night.

After the lake froze up and before the ice got real thick we would chop holes in the ice to find frogs. We would throw a canvas over our heads so we could see down in the bottom. Every once in a while we would find frogs stacked up like a shock of grain or a bee hive. We had a fish pole and we would put fish hooks on it and make spears. We would

have probably 15 hooks and jam them down in the ice and shake them out. Just jab and shake—that was the way we got them. Then we would have to hunt again until we found another pile of thousands of them stacked on the bottom. The water was probably 4 feet deep where we caught them. The hooks usually pierced their legs, not killing them.

Trapping frogs was different. Trappers would make fences of chicken wire about 3 feet high which they would stretch along the shore on a sand bar. They would go back almost a quarter of a mile in a "V" shape. They used chicken wire covered with tar paper so that the frogs could not jump through it. Then the frogs would get down in the "V" shape and we could catch them and put them in sacks. They would keep jumping right down in the "V" and then you could scoop them up.

When I frogged we didn't take the small frogs. We had to take the ones of uniform size. Later they took everything. We had to clean our frogs and they had to be dressed. Back from the lake we dug pits—regular cellars—and put the frogs in there. It had to be fast work and after the lake froze up we had to take care of these frogs and transfer them to cellars, granaries, barns—anyplace we could find. We went right to work and dressed them for the market. Pits were quick storage so that we didn't have to monkey with them then and after the lake froze up we would cover up these pits so the frogs wouldn't freeze. Some of the boys left them in the pits and dressed them from there.

To dress a frog, you cut them off at the legs, skin the legs with a knife and pull the skin right off the legs like you would pull off a glove. The hind legs were the only parts used. In later years they sold the whole frog. We had live crates. One crate would have eight or ten shelves in it, but you couldn't put the frogs in too thick because they would smother if you did.

In frogging we never used fences. We did it a little differently. We dug pits and dumped the frogs into the pits. We dug a kind of ditch along the pit to keep them from getting in the lake. Later they improved on that method by getting

the fences. Our first idea was to dig pits for them to fall into.

We used to go to a lake where there was a spring. After the frogs went into the lake they found a place near a spring. It kept the ice open longer and there was more air in the water. You will always find frogs in the springy part of the lake. We went up to Lake Park. The west shore had springs and that was where we made our best catches with the spear after the water froze.

I sold one fall to a company in Minneapolis I had a contract with. I sold them from the first of July until the season was over at 8c a dozen. They bought my stuff straight through. I got more that way than I did otherwise because the price was steady. At times prices dropped to 3c or 4c a dozen, but after the water would be up to 30c a dozen.

Thousands of dollars of frog checks were cashed at the banks in Spirit Lake. The whole town was frogging in those days. Men went and even children because they could make such good money at it, but I don't believe the frogs will ever be back again in such large numbers. The sloughs have been drained and the ground broken up.

Corrections:

Errors in the Spring, 1964 issue which occurred during the process of publication and alter the meaning of the original text, we hereby (apologetically) correct.

Page 280. Line 31 should read: Again, *some* public documents . . .

Page 281. Line one should read: . . . to *steady* any efforts

. . .

Line 31 should read: *grave of generalizations* . . .

Footnote 6 should read: Papers Relating to the *Foreign Relations* of . . .

Page 282. Line one should read: may be *positively* harmful. A hasty *analysis* of the *causes* of . . .

Page 283. Line 31 should read: The more *conscious* thought

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