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THE OLD-TIME TRAPPER.

TACITUS HUSSEY.

The creeping on of civilization during the last seventy years has wrought many marvelous changes. The man with the buckskin suit, the long rifle, the double-barreled shot gun, with the sheath knife and the hand axe dangling at his belt, silent during his busy hours, except when spoken to; yet garrulous enough over an evening pipe lighted at the camp-fire, has passed away from the Middle West. If he exists at all, it is in the land of the setting sun, or on the borders of the frozen lakes of the almost limitless Northwest.

It was from the lips of an old trapper, Landon Hamilton—who seemed like an unbended bow, relaxed from its strain—that I gained my information for this article, including the modes of trapping game in the months containing the "R's" now usually associated with the "oyster season."

Iowa was originally part of the territory which formed a grand hunting and trapping ground for the Red Man, with his primitive weapons and traps, and later, for the pale face with the more modern weapons with which to kill and capture without thought of the morrow, all food and fur-bearing animals coming within range of the deadly rifle and the lure of the concealed steel trap.

The fur and food animals, in those early days, were the deer, wild turkey, pheasant, squirrel, wild goose, brant, duck, otter, beaver, wolf, mink, muskrat, raccoon, with an occasional black bear. Trappers usually had from forty to fifty steel

traps of different sizes. To these were added the "medicine" used to put on the bait to lure the animal to the trap. This "medicine" was a mixture of aniseed oil, asafetida and musk, mixed with fish-oil; a highly perfumed concoction, as the writer can testify. A drop or two of this mixture placed on the bait, or sprinkled near it, generally attracted a victim. Sometimes, in order to form a "trail," a small quantity of this mixture would be placed in a small sack, perforated with a few fine holes and dragged on the ground by the trapper when he visited his traps, and it always yielded good results.

The mink has a passion for rummaging in the leaves and fine grass, and is often taken by a steel trap, artfully concealed under a light covering of fallen leaves, which must be scattered in the most natural way, to disarm suspicion. Should his instinct instruct him that any other hand than Nature's had placed the thin covering over the trap he will carefully avoid it. For otter, a steel trap well smeared with aniseed oil is a very taking bait, the oil being a perfume they cannot resist. Otters are fond of sliding down hill, and a trap half buried on one of their slides during the winter, or at the foot of it, under the surface of the water, near the entrance to their burrow, will very often enrich the trapper by two or three catches before the season is over.

The muskrat is fond of a plant called "stinkwort," and a trap baited with a frog or mussel, with a drop or two of the decoction made from this plant, is a sure decoy. Sometimes the trap is set below the surface of the water, and on a twig or stick just above it is placed a dead frog or mussel. Climbing up or down for the coveted morsel, the muskrat is apt to get one of his feet upon the pan of the trap and fall a victim to his appetite. The muskrat is very fond of the fresh water shellfish. He has not the power to open one; but realizing that "all things come to him who waits," lays it on a log or stump, or on the shore until it opens of its own accord, letting "patience have its perfect work." Sometimes traps are concealed under water near their burrows, with chain of sufficient length to allow the animal to reach deep

water and drown; otherwise he will gnaw his imprisoned leg off and escape.

Foxes are the slyest and most suspicious of all animals on the list, and the hardest to trap. The utmost care must be taken to cover up all signs of a man's presence, or his work will all be for naught. A trapper who can boast of capturing a dozen foxes during a single trapping season by the steel trap method is considered a very skillful trapper.

Central Iowa used to be famous for beaver lodges, dams and trapping, hence Polk county has a Beaver creek and a Beaver township. The "beaver lodges" here, consisted of families of from ten to twenty members and afforded good catches in those earlier days. They seemed to be reasoning animals. If the wiser ones of the family detected too many absentees at roll call they would sound the alarm and the entire family would desert its lodge and dam and depart to a safer locality. Traps were generally set close to the banks near the dams, covered carefully with moss. A small portion of "castoreum" was placed on the bank just above the trap, and the search for this often caused a beaver to place his foot on the concealed pan which springs the trap. Then there was a rush for deep water; but the chain attached to the trap and fastened to a weight or a pole, allowed sufficient length to the tortured animal to reach the deep water and drown. There have been many beaver dams on the various streams of Iowa.

Raccoon river had many of these dams. "Gray's Lake," within the corporate limits of Des Moines, where now stands the Great Western car office, was once the bed of Raccoon river; but the beavers built a dam at the lower end of it, and in time, turned the channel in another direction. Fifty years ago there were still traces of the dam to be seen, as also stumps and logs of cottonwood trees cut down by these industrious little animals, whose chisel-shaped teeth grow as fast as worn off by contact with the wood.

Mr. George C. Duffield, of Keosauqua, Iowa, who visited this region in 1838-40, says that five miles from the "Raccoon Forks," on the Raccoon river, he found a very scientifically

constructed beaver dam, so wide and compactly built that it might have been possible to have ridden a horse across it. Having seen many of these dams during his pioneer life in Iowa, he pronounced the "beaver dam," a few miles above the spot where the future capitol of a great State was to stand, the finest he had ever seen. These dams may account, to some extent, for the crookedness of the Raccoon river.

As has been mentioned, Beaver creek, which empties into the Des Moines river a few miles above the city of Des Moines, was famous for its beaver dams in the earlier days, and afforded the pioneer trapper profitable work for the winter months. The mounted beavers in the Historical Department Museum, were caught on this creek. At a point where Twelfth street would cross the Des Moines river, if extended in a northerly direction, there was a famous beaver dam, the remains of which could have been seen fifty years ago, and it is known even to this day by the old boatmen, as the "old beaver dam." As described by an old pioneer who saw it fifty-three years ago: "The dam seemed to have been formed by felling two trees, on opposite sides of the river. These trees falling into the river and not being entirely severed at the stumps, made the foundation. Then there was a long row of stakes, or pieces of wood about four inches in diameter, sunk in the mud and standing upright, very close together, reaching entirely across the river. These stakes seemed to have been settled in the mud in some way only known to the little dam builders. Fine brush was then woven in between the stakes, with soil on the upper side to make it compact and solid, which rendered it almost water-tight. The apex of the structure was up stream, the better to resist the pressure. It was deserted at the time I saw it, but was in a fair state of preservation. I have often regretted since, that I did not preserve a stick or two showing the cuttings of these industrious little animals."

There were many of these dams on the smaller streams, constructed when the water was low. When the "break up" came in the spring they formed obstructions, and being strong enough in many cases, to resist ice and flood wood, caused

new channels to be made. This will account, in some degree, for the crookedness and the many deserted channels of some of the smaller streams.

The raccoon was trapped in large numbers, sometimes by steel traps, sometimes by the "dead fall," set and operated by the figure-4 triggers, baited with a frog, bird or part of a quail, with a drop of "medicine." These traps were set along the small streams which abound in crayfish and frogs. The raccoon is a nocturnal ranger, and frequents the smaller streams. He examines everything closely, sticking his paw down a crayfish hole, in the hope of finding his victim asleep. When a frog is captured he rolls it on the ground with both forefeet, very leisurely, as a woman kneads dough for baking. After having sufficiently elongated, or "tendered" the tidbit, it is devoured with much gusto.

There are few boys or men living in a timbered country who have not spent an occasional night, during the fall of the year, in hunting the wary 'coon with a pack of well-trained dogs. A couple of axes, a gun, and good running qualities are the only requisites. When the nocturnal prowler comes out of his hole in a hollow tree during the night, in search of food, the dogs run across his trail, and after a chase of a few miles he takes to a tree and is either shot by moonlight or the tree is cut down and the pack is upon him at once. He makes a brave fight for his life, but yields to superior force. The hunters are richer by one pelt, and hie the dogs on in search of another victim. A well regulated "coon hunt" covers a distance of eight or ten miles, through bush and brake, over streams and through dense thickets, to the damage of clothing and shoe leather. Would it be any wonder if the father, sons, hired man and pack, were troubled with "that tired feeling" for a day or two? And would a sensible wife grumble if all hands were a little late to breakfast for a morning or two following the "hunt?" But the man of the house can point to four or five "coon skins" stretched and drying on the end of the barn; so "honors are easy!"

In the autumn, Mr. Landon Hamilton would begin to grow restless, "homesick," he used to call the feeling which was

really an intense hunger for the solitude of the woods. Early in October he would begin to get his steel traps in order, overhaul his long rifle and double-barreled shot gun, buy his ammunition, place his powder, especially, in water-proof tin cans, buy such provisions as he thought would be needed for his five months' exile, and hiring a teamster, would depart for a place he had selected by hearsay, or an actual visit, and bid adieu to civilization.

Long before his destination was reached the trapper was all eyes and ears for "signs." Many times he would make detours to examine the bed of a small stream for mink and raccoon tracks. He would search among the leaves for the "droppings" of fur-bearing animals, or notice the trunks of smooth-barked trees for "bear-scratchings." All these forest signs were as familiar to the trapper as if they were a printed page. When the sought-for place, which was generally on the shore of some good-sized stream was reached, the implements and supplies were unloaded and the trapper began at once to construct his winter lodge. A bluff was usually selected, and an excavation made in the side of the hill. Then four or six forked posts were set in the ground, with cross poles to support the roof. The fireplace was made of stones with a perpendicular opening to serve as a chimney, which was sometimes built up part of the way of stones, sticks and mud. The roof was generally of linden, or oak bark. The sides of the lodge not protected by the bank, had wooden stakes driven in the ground two feet apart, into which were woven or "wattled" very firmly, small branches of the pliant willow, which, when well done, made a very compact wall. These walls were extended across the front, leaving a narrow opening which served as a doorway. This opening was covered with a blanket or water-proof canvas. A hole was dug in the side of the hill in which the potatoes were placed beyond the reach of the frost, two forked posts were driven near the door with a cross piece, upon which the camp kettle was hung, to serve on days when a "boiled dinner" was desired, and the trapper felt very much at home.

With the completion of the lodge, came the beginning of the winter's work. A tour of inspection was made, after which forty or more steel traps were baited and placed. These were visited morning and evening. When an animal was caught it was killed as soon as possible and the trap rebaited and reset. During the day the trapper spent his time in skinning his prizes and stretching the pelts in a way to make them most valuable in the market. It was necessary to mark the spots where the traps had been set so that the trapper could find them in case of a fall of snow, which changes the woods and landscape in the most bewildering manner. This was done sometimes by "blazing" a tree near the trap, or breaking a branch or two on some tree which pointed in the direction of the trap.

His evenings were spent by the fire with pipe, in study. or listening to the voices of the night. Sometimes the whispering of the winds among the branches formed words and sentences as they sent down their dead and dry leaves in showers on the bark roof of the lodge. Sometimes an inquisitive owl on a tall tree not far away would ask, "Who-who-whoah?" And getting no answer, would laugh, in owl fashion: "Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-h-a-h-a-h!" Or perhaps a belated flock of geese on their way to the southland, repeated their good-by honks, to the land which was soon to be in the reign of the "Frost King!" Then there was the ceaseless plash of the stream singing its soothing song to the dreamer in the lodge, knowing well that in a few days its voice would be hushed in an icy sleep only to be awakened by the kiss of the spring sun and melting showers.

Tobacco is a solace and a soother of nerves in these solitudes, and woe be to the man, who, by any mishap lost his supply during those months of solitude. On one occasion the trapper found on returning to his lodge, that a venturesome cow had pushed aside the door covering, and stood on the outside chewing, without a grimace, a goodly stock of his smoking tobacco. He recognized it at once by the strings on the tobacco bag, which she had not the presence of mind to conceal in her mouth. A sharp chase followed and the

pursuit was so warm that the tobacco was recovered, but in a moist condition. However, it was dried by the fire and served its purpose very well; for trappers as a general thing are not very particular in regard to what they eat, drink or smoke. A hungry fox or wolf might forage on his stock of frozen pheasants or quails and not a kick would be made; but his tobacco—that was as precious as gold.

Sometimes a month or so would pass and a territory of three or four miles in diameter would be trapped over; but the catches, maybe, would grow smaller as the days passed by, and then the trapper would begin to consider moving farther up the stream. When this conclusion was reached he began to prospect for a new camp. When a location was found, if no teamster was to be had, he would have to carry his entire outfit to the place selected after the lodge was prepared, a load at a time. This was a slow and wearisome task, taking, while attending to his other duties, about eight days. As there was never a calendar in camp, Sundays did not count as days of rest. "Moving" might occur three times during a season, each move adding to his stock of pelts. And in some cases, when success did not crown his efforts on the stream he had chosen for his winter's work, he would return to civilization, and hiring a teamster make a new start in some other part of the territory. He did not fear to leave his camp alone for a few days; for it is an unwritten law of the woods never to molest a hunter's tent or a trapper's lodge. When the new territory was reached, business began as before.

Mr. Landon Hamilton, during his fifty years' trapping in Iowa territory, visited nearly every stream and locality in the present State of Iowa, which held out any prospect of a good catch of the fur-bearing animals. During this period he gathered many thousand dollars' worth of furs. His winter's catch would often amount to more than a thousand dollars, to say nothing of the hundreds of specimens found during his summer rambles among the hills and his winter sojourn along the streams of Iowa.

Skunk river was also a favorite trapping place, and several winters were spent there in hunting, trapping and fishing.

In company with an old-time friend, "Uncle Thomas French," a well-known character in the early days of Des Moines, he fell in with a tribe of Musquakies, now living on a reservation in Tama county, Iowa. This tribe of Indians was camped there and were engaged in their usual avocations. "Uncle Thomas French," as he often expressed it, "had no use for boys," and when an Indian boy offended him by his presence in camp, on a begging expedition, it may be, Mr. French gave him a violent shaking, and told him to "Puckachee!" (to git.) "Uncle French" was a large, grizzled, swarthy man, and generally wore a pair of spectacles about three sizes too big for him, which evidently struck terror to the heart of the boy, who ran with all possible speed to the Indian tepee. In order to explain the indignity visited upon him, he shook his father violently by the shoulder, exclaiming: "Big-Eye-Smoky-Face-Man say, 'Indian Puckachee'!" Mr. Hamilton explained the eccentricity of his guest, but the Indians were not satisfied and soon after left the vicinity, as they evidently believed the "Smoky-Face-Man" was one of the big chiefs of the territory. There was no retribution visited upon the two white trappers and they were left in full possession of the territory without further annoyance.

With the honk of the wild goose, seeking the northern lakes, the trapper began preparations for return to civilization. A teamster was procured and all the "duffle" which was to be brought back was piled into the wagon. The furs were carefully assorted and prepared for market, for the trapper well knew that the fur buyer would be on hand early in the spring to snap up the choicest of the catch and ship them to their eastern houses. The speculating fur buyer generally doubled his money; the manufacturer received a liberal slice; but the catcher, who had spent his winter in the woods, looked at the prices offered as being about "so much money found," and parted with his furs at low prices rather than run the risk of shipping them to St. Louis, Chicago or New York.

The last trip made by Mr. Hamilton, so far as known, was to some point down the Des Moines river, where he spent two or three months in examining some of the mounds from which

he took a choice assortment of prehistoric pottery and implements. A collection of these may be found in the Historical Department Museum as a part of the gift he made to the State during the last days of his life. At some point down the river he caught the "Lazy Ann," a nondescript steamboat, which landed him and his valuable finds at the "old steamboat landing," near the junction of the rivers. This was about 1884. Soon after that, the "Lazy Ann," in trying to pass under the C., R. I. & P. bridge at Vine street, struck one of the abutments and was hopelessly wrecked. Her hull lies there yet, well buried under the sand and drift of years.

With the fleeting decades come many changes. Game animals and birds are slowly but surely going the way of all the earth. Timber lands are being depleted and only recently have steps been taken to replenish them. Congressman Lacey, was one of the first to lift up his voice in Congress and ask for a stay of the hand of the destroyer, and that a portion of the wooded lands, lakes and streams be set apart for the preservation of the game and fur-bearing animals, birds and reptiles.

Let a stream be reserved where the beaver can build dams and cut food woods to his heart's content; where the buffalo may range, where the deer, the antelope, and the elk may herd, and where every animal known in former generations may find a safe refuge from the murderous hand of man. To carry a war of extermination on the four-footed and winged inhabitants of the earth is a crime, the effects of which will be felt in all coming generations; for surely, this blood wantonly shed, will be required at the hands of the people of America.