

NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

Issued Monthly By The Clinton County Historical Association

No. 253 President: John L. Myers Editor: Helen W. Allan April, 1989

APRIL PROGRAM

The wildlife heritage of Clinton County is the topic of CCHA's next program, scheduled on Monday, April 3, 1989 at 7:30 p.m. Mark Gretch, a naturalist of local repute and guest curator of the County Museum's upcoming exhibition, will present a slide/lecture in the community meeting room of the Clinton County Government Center, Plattsburgh. This program is a must for everyone who is interested in the natural world around us and wants to know about the history of animals, birds and fish in our region. In addition to writing the script of "Fur & Feathers: The Wildlife Heritage of Clinton County", Mark has compiled a local history manual on the subject for Grade 5-7 students which is expected to become available later in the spring. Don't miss this colorful and revealing program about our wildlife heritage - you'll hear about bats and beavers, salmon and snakes, warblers and wolves, and many other species. Bring a few humans with you - we'd like everyone to have a chance to enjoy the talk.

NEW EXHIBITION AT THE MUSEUM

"FUR & FEATHERS: THE WILDLIFE HERITAGE OF CLINTON COUNTY" opens on Friday, April 7 with a reception from 4 to 6 p.m. It will be on view through October 31. The exhibition is a wonderful assemblage of bird specimens, animal pelts, photographs reminding us of the beauty of our Adirondack and Champlain Valley backyard, and an incredible amount of diligently researched information about the introduction, extirpation or survival of the wild creatures which cohabit our environment. "Wildlife" is a show that everyone will enjoy, especially at this time of year when the cardinal wakes us up in the morning, rivers are released from their ice bonds, and the first snowdrop and crocus are about to appear. It's a wonderful season, worthy of being celebrated in our own programs. Mark Gretch will offer a gallery talk on a Sunday afternoon in early June, the date to be announced later. We hope to see you at the Museum!

CCHA PUBLISHES A NEW LOCAL HISTORY MANUAL

About to be added to our list of four manuals written by Julie Robinson and Joann Perry is a brand new one entitled "Fur & Feathers: The Wildlife Heritage Of Clinton County." This time Mark Gretch is the author and illustrator, in addition to his work on the museum exhibition. The book is currently being typeset at Wiki Publications by PSUC journalism major Susan Abel. Many thanks also to Rene Dufort who is supervising the project. Priced at \$20.00, the manual is expected to be available in May. Area teachers and other interested people will receive an brochure in the near future and can order the manual immediately.

THE COMEBACK KID

By the late 19th century no beavers remained in Clinton County. For years the streams went undammed. The explosive slap of the beaver tail on water, warning of danger, was heard no more. Even a change in fashion from beaver hats to silk hats in the mid-19th century could not save the beaver from near extinction. These dark days were difficult times for other wildlife as well. The wolf, lynx, mountain lion and moose were gone.

As the years passed, however, better times returned. By the 1920s North America's largest rodent, the beaver, was again multiplying rapidly. The beaver was moving back into its ancient homeland. Now man and Nature were working closer together. Laws were passed to protect the beaver from trapping. The Forest, Fish and Game Commission, later to become the Department of Environmental Conservation, was helping. It released the beaver into new locations. This is one way new colonies got started. When a colony becomes too large for its food supply, it must find new territory to settle. The young stay with their parents until their second year and then must find a new area where they will raise a family. In this way, slowly the beaver returned home.

There were many large forest fires in the early 1900s. Many acres of forest were destroyed. However, for the beaver, forest fires were helpful. Shortly after forest fires, thick groves of aspen trees cover the charred land. These softwood aspens are easily worked by the beaver into its dams and lodges. Aspens are the beaver's favorite tree to feed on as well.

Today there may be as many as 70,000 to 100,000 beaver in New York State. No wild animal has played a more important role in the state's history. For this reason, in 1975 the people of New York State chose the beaver as their state animal. The beaver is one of our best allies in the wild, helping to create wetlands for waterfowl. It is part of our wildlife heritage. It is our job to protect the beaver.

* Excerpted from Local History Manual No. 5, written and illustrated for Grades 5-7.

The museum exhibition "Wildlife" is full of little-known facts and amusing anecdotes such as the Mooers incident quoted below. Whereas bats and rattlesnakes may not be creatures some of us wish to know intimately, taking a closer look at them in the gallery is recommended.

"THE MOOERS WOLF SCANDLE"

A colorful episode happened in Clinton County in 1821. It was recorded in a local newspaper as "The Mooers Wolf Scandle."

'In the winter of 1821 a hunter slogged into the warm kitchen of a justice of the peace somewhere near Mooers, carrying 3 wolf skins. He collected a bounty of \$40 per skin. In 1821 this was about 3 months' pay for the average breadwinner. This was the start of a masterful boondoggle. Had the county witnessed a wolf invasion for that year? Streams of hunters began to show up at the county's J.P. offices, demanding bounties for wolves. In 1821 Clinton County paid out nearly \$11,000 in bounties for wolves. Prior to 1821 bounties never topped \$1,000 in any year. Wolf country payments were becoming the biggest expense in the county budget. In 1822 the bounty grew to \$20,000.

'There was one puzzling fact. No one saw more wolves prowling. Farmers were not losing more sheep. An investigation ensued from Albany. What had happened was that folks were importing skins from Canada for a couple of dollars and making a huge profit in N.Y. bounties. Rural Clinton County was suspicious of city folks. No big city law was going to march into their town and start going through their records. Town fathers and J.P.s would catch selective amnesia and would not remember just who it was that brought in the skins. It was suggested that these big city investigators go back to Albany and mind their own business. There is no record of any convictions in this raid on the county treasury.'

RATTLERS OF THE FLAT ROCK

Rattlesnakes are awe-inspiring members of our natural world. Unfortunately, like the wolf they have been hunted down and killed because they are thought to be a threat to humans. In fact, they are timid creatures. There is a greater possibility of a person being killed by a bee or wasp sting, or being struck by lightning, than dying from a rattle snake bite.

Rattlesnakes have been heavily exploited for their oil, for bounty and for the live animal trade. In 1971 New York State eliminated rattlesnake bounties. Today, the Timber Rattlesnake is an endangered species, protected by law.

Before 1900 there was a solid population of rattlers at Flat Rock near Altona. They even lent their name to a locale on Flat Rock, known as Rattlesnake Den. School District No. 23 at Altona as known as the Rattlesnake District in 1843.

In the second half of the 19th century the blueberry business began to thrive on Flat Rock. It seems likely that human disturbance led to the demise of the rattler population. The last reported sighting at Flat Rock was in 1900. Although there were large numbers of blueberry pickers at Flat Rock, there is no record of anyone ever being bitten. There are still occasional reports of rattlesnakes in Clinton County, but they are rare.

A BOUNTIFUL HARVEST

Early settlers in Clinton County relied on catching fish to supplement their food supply. Atlantic salmon were so numerous in Lake Champlain that the pioneers speared and netted them by the wagon load wherever rivers flowed into the lake. Then they were dried and salted for future use. So common and monotonous was this diet of salmon that some Plattsburgh workers had special clauses prohibiting their employers from feeding them salmon every day.

By 1848, however, the salmon were gone. There were many reasons for their disappearance. Dams that powered the mills blocked the salmon's return to its spawning grounds. Forests were denuded, causing siltation and ruining the clear, shallow riffles that salmon favored as nurseries. In 1974 the New York State Department of Conservation initiated a salmon restoration program for Lake Champlain. Today the Saranac River has a sizable spring run of salmon that provides good fishing at the mouth of the river in downtown Plattsburgh.

Impressive runs of fish were not limited to salmon. As late as the 1940s runs of walleye pike were so heavy in the Great Chazy River that legend says the river could be crossed by walking on their backs. Walleye pike numbers have plummeted recently. Netting, both legal and illegal, has caused their sharp decline. Returning from their spawning in the Great Chazy, walleye would rest and clean off in King's Bay. But waiting for them were the nets that had been prepared during the winter. Walleye were taken in King's Bay by the truck load. Game Protectors would wait in ambush for these fish pirates. It is also believed that legal netting of this species in the Canadian waters of Missisquoi Bay is the major cause of the decline.

Netting fish in Lake Champlain has been illegal for most of the 20th century except for a short period during World War II. During that time beef was rationed and regulated netting was briefly allowed to compensate for the shortage of beef.

* Excerpted from "The Wildlife Heritage Of Clinton County", a museum exhibition.

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