

Catching Fur

I wrote the following lines in a poem: "War in Israel made me a trapper ... / hunting season over, I had muzzleloaders / to build, but the gas shortage left customers / sitting in two-hour lines, two / & a half hours away. I had to catch fur / if we were to stay off welfare." The lines are true. Words, though, are the reader's reality. They validate the experience of one reader, inform another, and offend a third.

After Dad died (I was 11 and the oldest of five children), Mom thought she would go to college, so she moved us from Boring, Oregon, to Monmouth, where she purchased an older two story house without a square corner in it anywhere. Her intentions, however, ran counter to reality. After two months, she sold that place and bought a cabin on Lincoln County's Salmon River. And she took a job as a waitress at Rapid Inn, where she met Lyle Squier, a widower twenty-three years her senior.

Lyle never had children, and taking on a ready-made family of six was more than he anticipated. He thought he wanted the challenge, but he was a Seventh Day Adventist. We weren't. That alone would have been enough to undo a marriage: in addition to all of the other tensions, simple things like cooking eggs in bacon grease became a big deal. So the next five years were constant turmoil as simple expectations formed volcanic eruptions.

Lyle moved the now seven of us to Grande Ronde where he had a house and a heavy equipment shop beside Longbell's pond. A hundred loads of old-growth logs a day, hauled on private road on trucks with oversize bunks and no weight restrictions were dumped into Longbell's pond that winter of 1959-60. Many of those trucks hauled three log loads; a few hauled just a single log.

I started high school that fall as a twelve-year-old freshman (I did sixth, seventh, and eighth grades in one year). I was physically large: six feet, two hundred five pounds. I was big enough to actually be of some help in Lyle's shop—and in his shop, I listened to loggers talk about how the woods were changing. Their laments developed in me a sense of historicity that would eventually lead to me building muzzleloading rifles as a vocation. So while I didn't know that Longbell's pond would close during the coming summer due in part to Georgia-Pacific depressing the log market, I sensed that each load of logs dumped into the pond was the last of something. The heelboom that lifted logs of two, four, six, ten thousand boardfeet from the pond and loaded them onto rail cars was too large to handle secondgrowth. Even the old loggers, the ones who had handfallen timber before the War, knew they were seeing the end of an era. They talked about when the mills went from twenty-four inch tops to sixteen, meaning mills wouldn't previously buy logs with top diameters below two feet. But that sixteen inch standard was dropped to a foot, and would go to eight inches before I graduated from high school.

Within a few months of when the pond closed, Lyle was out of business as was

about everyone else in Grande Ronde. We still had that cabin on the Salmon River; so we returned to the Coast. But now, the \$251 Mom collected in Social Security had to support all seven of us. Money became as tight as before Mom and Lyle had married, if not tighter, thereby adding one more strain to an explosive situation.

Lyle picked up a little extra money working here and there, but those dollars went into remodeling the old Adventist church building on Slick Rock Creek that he and Mom bought. Plus, Mom still had the house in Boring, and money was needed to finish remodeling it so it could be sold.

As I began my sophomore year of high school, I knew that if I wanted spending money I had to earn it. One of the few ways open to me was trapping: over the years, Lyle had acquired a few leghold traps, enough that I could set a short line on Lincoln County's Salmon River.

Thanks to America's relatively strong economy, fur prices were already depressed, but to me a dollar was more money than I had. I didn't know better times, nor better prices; so I set Mom's canning kettle over an outside fire, filled the kettle with hemlock boughs and water, and boiled a half dozen traps, mostly double spring #2s. I had read a couple of books about trapping, knew a little about predator behavior, and I had a sharp knife.

I caught my first raccoon by floating an apple over the trap pan: the stream was shallow and was really just storm runoff. It dried up a few days later. I don't believe I could again catch another animal on a similar set. But at the time I was pretty proud of myself.

A second raccoon came on a cubby set baited with apples. My third was an accidental catch: the coon, while wading along the shore, had stepped in my beaver drown set. The coon hadn't dived into deep water thus drowning itself as a beaver would have so it was waiting for me when I checked the trap.

Not expecting to find a live animal in the set, I hadn't brought along a gun or even an axe to chop down a sapling for a club. I didn't have anything with which I could kill the raccoon, and I didn't want to chance having the coon wring off its leg while I went to get a rifle. The trap was a #4 and had broken the coon's leg—I wanted to dispatch that coon as quickly as possible.

I stared at it and it at me. I was big, strong (as strong or stronger than most men), and not afraid of much, so I decided to kill that raccoon with my bare hands ... I knew I had to be quick: I waved my left hand in front of the coon, and when it went for my hand, I pinned its neck with my right hand. I really was proud of my strength. I was stronger than Lyle, could benchpress nearly four hundred pounds, deadlift six hundred. A year later, I would fill out and weigh more than two-hundred. So I didn't expect the raccoon to put up much opposition.

I squeezed as hard as I could, driving my fingertips deep into the coon's neck muscles—

And the coon tightened its neck muscles, forcing my hand open.

I was also smart enough to know when I was in trouble, and I was now in trouble.

Because the raccoon was still held by the trap, I could control its movements, but I couldn't let go without getting bit.

What do you do when you can't let go?

Mom couldn't let go: in marrying Lyle she had taken a hold of a situation that now seemed to her hopeless. There wasn't any physical violence involved. Except for the one time Lyle came after me with a broom and I almost killed him with it, he did not attempt to physically discipline any of us, nor did he abuse Mom. But the issue of religion was the growing mountain, bulging with magma—that and Mom's mental instability. She miscarried one Saturday and Dad died unexpectedly the following Saturday; she had a nervous breakdown but had to keep everything together because of us kids.

I had a hold of what I could not let go, and not knowing what else to do, I shoved the raccoon's head underwater and held it under. I figured I would have to drown the coon.

Strong enough to be able to control the coon's head, I held the raccoon's head pinned to the river's gravel bottom for a minute, maybe longer, maybe a lot longer. The passage of time was hard to estimate. I knew I couldn't have held my breath for the length of time as had passed so I pulled its head up to see if it had expired.

The coon growled at me.

I shoved its head under as fast as I could.

Knowing it wasn't possible to turn loose of the raccoon without getting seriously hurt, I began to doubt my strength. The coon didn't weigh much over twenty pounds. It was one-tenth my size; yet, it was amazingly strong. And angry, real angry—the raccoon was in a life and death struggle and knew it. If it wouldn't have been in a trap, I wouldn't have been able to control it. Its muscles had a different quality to them than mine had.

Killing with a rifle, with any gun from feet or yards away is different from using hands to take "breath" from the living creature. Feeling the struggle with your fingers, the desperation, the determination to live, and knowing that if you let go you get hurt—this is what is required of every Christian: the old nature, old self must die if the new creature is to live. That old self that wanted eggs fried in bacon grease must lose its breath. The expression "Gentile Christian" is an oxymoron for the Apostle Peter taught Gentile converts to live as Jews, and Paul wrote in his epistle to the Romans that salvation had come to Gentiles to make natural Jews jealous ... no Gentile will make a natural Jew jealous by frying eggs in bacon grease, or by playing high school football on Friday nights, or by killing a large mule deer buck on Saturday morning, opening morning of Oregon's 1963 deer season (I don't know what happened to that rack). A Gentile can claim to be a Christian and still do these things, but in reality, this self-identified Christian will have to kill the new self that is a son of God if he or she is to continue in disobedience.

I waited until bubbles came from the raccoon before I again lifted its head ... I only thought it was angry before. Now, it knew its life was in danger and it wanted to kill me.

Again I shoved its head underwater. I didn't know how long it would take to drown that raccoon. My hand was quickly tiring. And for perhaps the first time ever, I truly felt limited in what I could do. Here I was, top of my class scholastically, perhaps the strongest fellow in school, and I was going to get hurt if I turned loose of this raccoon.

I needed to change tactics; so I felt around on the river bottom until I found a rock the size of my fist.

My first blow probably killed the coon, but I hit it several more times just to make sure.

My intention had been to keep the hide of that raccoon, tan it and make a hat out of it for myself—that coon had become special to me. Killing it was the first time I had to solve a problem that involved real danger to me, and the solution had been there beside me all during those minutes when I had trusted my strength. But my brother Ben used its hide to make a hat for himself. Actually, he cut chunks from three hides to make his hat. I was mad at him until May. I didn't plan on ever forgiving him. However, when I needed him to tell me where he caught a string of huge cutthroat trout, I swallowed my pride, humbled myself, and asked the location. He told me where.

After that winter of 1960-61, I didn't trap again until the gas shortage following the Yom Kippur war left me as destitute as Mom and Lyle were after Longbell's pond shut down. I didn't know what to do. Unemployment benefits were denied to neighbors since their jobs were available to them if they could get to those jobs. I hadn't been making enough money in the gunshop to pay myself a wage so I wasn't even eligible for benefits. I wasn't interested in applying for welfare; I was able bodied. I had rifles to build, work to do for which I would eventually be paid. I just needed to get through a regional economic crisis, and I didn't have three months of financial reserve cached away.

What I had were many sets of deer antlers that I could sell to a downriver hippie commune.

The commune turned antlers into hash pipes which they sold mailorder. Normally I would have shunned commune members in the religious sense of the word. I certainly couldn't support their drug usage. Nor could I support their morality. But I had a commodity they needed, and they had the cash I needed to buy used traps (one of the secondhand stores had several dozen traps for under a dollar apiece).

After wrestling with my morality for a week, I realized I was faced with one of two undesirable options: I could either apply for welfare, or I could do business with the commune. If I had a third option, I didn't know what it was. So I had Frankie Hunt, who had no qualms about doing business with the commune, load the bed of his pickup with the antlers it had taken fifteen years of trophy hunting to collect.

Every so often, usually when I watch video of someone else's hunt, I remember this rack or that one that was included in the pickup load of antlers—those racks represented a lot of memories and a lot of pride. But as I watched them go down my driveway in the bed of Frankie's blue pickup, I wondered why we keep antlers longer than the bucks that grew them do.

When I had hold of that raccoon, through my fingers I felt a sense of *wildness* I recognized that I didn't physically possess. I felt more than fear and fright. I felt something that to this day I cannot adequately describe. For several years I worked as the dogcatcher for a small town, and I didn't feel that *wildness* in any of the dogs I caught and controlled barehanded—many times I felt the dog's fear and fright—but I have felt that *wildness* in some of those bucks whose throats I

cut before they were dead, a practice I don't necessarily recommend.

As I watched Frankie haul that load of racks away, I remembered the occasion on which I harvested a particular rack, remembered much more than the hunt or the kill. I remembered Longbell's pond and those loads of old-growth timber and the change that has occurred; remembered the stories told and the stories I have told; remembered building, usually, or trading for the gun I took hunting; remembered collecting the bounty on a coyote so I could buy gas to hunt elk in 1968. And it is this quality of memory that separates me from the bucks I harvested, or the predators I trapped ... can I be certain of this? Yes, I can be certain for I there is another sort of *wildness*, a spiritual *wildness* that I then possessed.

I don't know exactly how much Frankie received for those racks—he brought me all of the traps that secondhand store had, plus a few needed dollars. And for only the second full winter in my life, I became a trapper.

I set iron along Abby Creek and the Yaquina River just as Wayne Hodges' dad did when the Great Depression left him without flour and beans ... in his family photo album, Wayne showed me a photo of mink his dad took one winter, and I saw something of myself in the old black & white picture of his dad holding the fur string. I also saw something else: for one string of eight mink, his dad received enough to buy a used Model T, as well as enough to buy bacon, flour, and beans for all winter. For eight mink, I received enough to buy just the beans if they weren't all we ate.

I set a few traps on Alaska's Kenai Peninsula and a few on Kodiak Island, but I didn't seriously return to trapping once I left Oregon. I lost interest in harvesting an animal for its pelt; I was changing. I had a hold of myself, and I couldn't let go. I had to kill my old self, my old nature, and I remembered what it was like to lock down on that raccoon's neck and have my fingers pushed outward by its strength. I remembered the pride I had in my strength, and the humility that came as I felt my hand weakening while the raccoon still lived ... my old nature has been like that raccoon the second time I lifted its head; the beast is intent upon killing me, but is trapped by being crucified with Christ. It didn't die when held under at baptism, so I have to kill it with what's at hand.

What we don't see in ourselves on a day by day basis is the human *wildness* that exists as spiritual disobedience—we don't see this *wildness* until born of spirit as a son of God, for we are to this new creature no more than fur is to a trapper.

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