Old Job, New World

The fur industry continues to be a source of profit, recreation and furbearer management for Missouri trappers and traders in the 21st century.

Story by Christine Tew, Photos by Noppadol Paolthong

The pages of most American history texts hold stories of trade between American Indians and European settlers. Trinkets and furs were the common currency of a rapidly evolving culture. In time, the use of coins and bills replaced this system, but fur trading retained a small population of trappers and buyers through centuries of modernization, continuing to fill urban need with a rural product.

Early trappers handled every aspect of fur trading, from capturing the wild animal to selling the finished pelt. The path of a pelt has grown more complex with each generation of traders. Furs are now likely to pass through the hands of a trapper, fur house, buyer and broker before reaching consumers.

STATE AND FAMILY TRADITIONS

Fur trading in Missouri can be traced back to the earliest settlers. Donald Veirs of Unionville follows his ancestry back to French fur traders that settled near the Brunswick area in 1754. Veirs is an 11th generation fur trader with more than 45 years of experience.

The weathered wooden sign above his fur house in Unionville is simple. A hand-painted raccoon on the left and a fox on the right guard the phone number stenciled across the center of a board once painted white. The low-slung building attracts little attention, even on a corner in residential Unionville. Driving up to the building in a red Ford flatbed, Veirs straightens his cap, which advertises a local veterinary clinic, before unlocking the front door.

Fur trading is the family business. “We traded trinkets with Native Americans for furs,” said Veirs’ sister, Charlotte Cox. “Every generation has bought furs.” Veirs’ son Mark is a buyer in Fairfield, Iowa, and sells to the house in Unionville. Another son, Danny, bought furs in Missouri for eight years before moving to Nashville, Tenn. Veirs’ father bought furs for 76 years in Fayette.

As a child, Veirs scraped raccoon hides for spending money. He earned 10 cents for each cleaned hide in 1940. Joining the family business might be a difficult decision for some people, but Veirs did not hesitate. “My ancestors bought furs, back to the French fur traders,” he said. “My dad started out buying furs on horseback when he was 12.”
At 16, Veirs established his first trade route, driving from the family home in Fayette to Versailles. “I had a 1952 Plymouth with the backseat out,” he said. “I’d go around to people’s houses.” After years of selling to the family house in Fayette, Veirs began construction on his own fur house in Unionville in 1966.

Business has changed quite a bit in the past 50 years. In 1954, Veirs piled pelts into his Plymouth to sell to his father. Opossum hides were worth about 10 cents, and raccoons only 50 cents, he said. “Muskrats were worth about 60 or 70 cents.” Veirs now invests $1 in an opossum pelt, $7 to $8 in a raccoon and $4 to $5 for a muskrat pelt.

After nearly 50 years trading furs, Veirs has considerably more than an old car invested. “There are a lot more dollars involved today,” he said. “I spend $100,000 before I sell anything, just for processing.” The raccoon hides he scraped for 10 cents in the 1940s now cost a dollar or more for cleaning. “I’ve got about $700,000 tied up in furs,” he said. However, his investment isn’t the only change. “One of the biggest differences in the industry today is the difference between really high-quality pieces and the lower-grade furs,” he said.

While the stakes have grown higher for Veirs financially, he is reaping the benefits of his place in Unionville. “My dad, he always lived at his fur house. They’d work until midnight,” he said. “I’ve told my help to come in at 7 a.m., and we will all be out by 5 p.m.” Veirs hires young men from nearby Amish communities to work with furs during peak times. Other youth aren’t interested in that dirty, greasy work, he said. “If it weren’t for the Amish, I’d be out of business.”

Veirs even chose to test his marriage with a few furs. After the wedding in Springfield, the couple spent their first night in Branson. Then the honeymoon plans changed dramatically. “We went over to Poplar Bluff and bought a few furs,” he said. “We put those in the trunk of the car, and, yes, there were some skunks involved.”

His wife, Mary Lou, a retired speech therapist, now grows flowers within arm’s reach of the fur house and goes with him on the trade routes. “I just wouldn’t have time to buy the furs without her,” he said. “She keeps up the record books while I handle the furs.” Veirs has expanded his trade route far beyond the initial drive between Fayette and Versailles. He now covers ground from Albany west to St. Joseph and south to Arkansas.
TRAPPING AS A TOOL

Trapping is more than an enjoyable and profitable outdoor activity—it is also an important wildlife management tool.

Trapping in Missouri is carefully regulated by the Department of Conservation. Regulations are established by considering population levels, harvest pressure and market demands. Wildlife laws only allow people to trap mammals that are common or abundant, which helps attain desired furbearer population levels.

If you are interested in learning more about trapping for fun, profit, management or to remove nuisance animals from your property, contact your local conservation office (find regional phone numbers on page 3), visit the Department’s trapping page at www.missouriconservation.org/7616, or check out our Calendar of Events at www.missouriconservation.org/4163 for upcoming training and educational activities.

A CHANGING BUSINESS

The entire fur industry continues to change as well. Trapping is losing ground to ranches that raise some furbearers in captivity. “The wild fur business is such a small part,” Veirs said. “Nine hundred out of 1,000 mink coats are made from ranch-raised minks.”

As a Missouri fur dealer, Veirs can buy, sell, possess, process, transport and ship pelts and carcasses of furbearers throughout the year, according to The Wildlife Code. “Fur dealers and buyers were required to purchase permits clear back in 1936 when the Department of Conservation came into existence,” said Dave Hamilton, a Department resource scientist.

The merchants and consumers that hand-selected their furs are also dwindling. “Dad and Granddad, most of their fur trading was done out of garages and homes,” Veirs said. “Grandpa never sold anything in the big markets.” Veirs sends all of his furs through a broker and an auction house. “I’d rather go through a broker,” he said. “The companies have confidence in the broker and the brokers know what they are looking for in the pelts.”

The inconspicuous building in Unionville is a stopping point for thousands of pelts each year. Veirs limits deer hides to one tractor-trailer load, usually buying 3,500 to 4,000 for $5 each. Deer hides are often used for shoes and gloves according to Veirs. As many as 35,000 of the more desirable raccoon pelts pass through the house before reaching destinations in Russia, China and the Middle East.

Those large numbers do little to offset the long hours and low pay Veirs associates with fur trading. “Back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the fur business supported the farm. Now it is the other way around,” he said. “About one out of every three years we make money.”

The Department of Conservation issued 95 permits to Missouri fur traders in 1970, according to Hamilton. “The fur traders increased with the increasing fur values during the 1970s and 1980s when over 300 traders were involved.” Those numbers reflect the fluctuations that plague the fur industry. “We issued a high of 2,220 [permits] in 1938,” Hamilton said. However, in the late 1940s and 1950s fewer than 200 permits were issued per year.

The Missouri fur industry dipped much lower than any of those numbers in the last decade. “Today, we have only 23 fur dealers and 23 fur buyers, a total of 38 individual companies,” Hamilton said. However, the financial impact remains large. In the 1980s the fur value reached a high of $9 million for just the Missouri harvest.

Veirs also maintains a 150-head crossbred cow-calf operation outside Unionville and bales hay during the summer season. His father and grandfather cut timber to round out the family finances during their years in the fur business. “I couldn’t buy fur if I didn’t do something else,” Veirs said.

While Veirs has no intention of giving up his fur trading or cattle, he admits to letting a bit of relaxation slip into his routine. He now spends a little more time supervising hired help and at home with his wife. Veirs hopes his family will stay in the fur industry, but due to the unpredictable nature of the business, he leaves that decision to his sons. ▲

Stretched raccoon furs hang to dry in the drying room.