

12-20-2009

The Rise and Fall of the Louisiana Muskrat, 1890-1960: An Environmental and Social History

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The Rise and Fall of the Louisiana Muskrat, 1890-1960:
An Environmental and Social History

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History

by

Jared Michael Boscarenno

B.S. Louisiana State University, 2003

December, 2009

Acknowledgment

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge those people who have supported me throughout the construction of this thesis project. I must first thank the faculty, staff, and students of West Jefferson High School for all of their patience and encouragement. I am also truly grateful for the guidance and honest criticism provided by the faculty and staff of the UNO History Department during my time as a graduate student, especially the advice garnered from the members of my thesis committee: Mary Mitchell, Michael Mizell-Nelson, and Jeffrey Wilson. Without their combined efforts, this paper would not have come together in such a unified fashion. Thank you all for believing that a thesis constructed around a rodent could be an interesting and insightful subject for historical study. Furthermore, I would like to offer special thanks to Edward McIlhenny Simmons for granting me access to the E. A. McIlhenny Collection on Avery Island as well as to Shane Bernard for his eagerness as curator in orienting me with the collection and providing ideas on how to obtain additional information. Moreover, my thesis could not have been completed without contributions from the following sources: Laura Westbrook (Director of the Louisiana Regional Folklife Program at UNO), Florence Jumonville (Chair of Louisiana and Special Collections of Earl K. Long Library at UNO), the Library of Congress, the State Library of Louisiana, the Louisiana State Archives, East Bank Regional Library in Jefferson Parish, Jefferson Historical Society of Louisiana, America's Wetland Research Center/Loyola University of New Orleans, and Middleton Library at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. Finally, my most sincere gratitude is reserved for my family, who were pressed into service reading the various iterations of this paper and listening to me ramble on about muskrats and the fur industry for hours at a time. To my brother-in-law, Gary, to my grandparents, Rose and Lenny, to my sisters, Angela and Jennifer, and last but not least, to my parents, John and Pam---I could never express in words how much each of you has contributed to the completion of this paper. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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Abstract

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, people living in coastal Louisiana noticed that local rodents called muskrats were rapidly increasing and quickly becoming pests by digging up crops and into levees. Property owners soon demanded their elimination, but to the ire of many, Louisiana officials chose to develop a market for muskrat fur and protect its supply through management laws. The state sought the cooperation of trappers in order to maintain global demand, but when nutria were released alongside the muskrat, the ecological balance of the marsh was permanently altered. Muskrats shrank back into obscurity, and trappers struggled to embrace the nutria as a substitute. This thesis will trace the Louisiana muskrat industry's development starting with its rise in the 1890s, continuing through its years as a leading fur-bearer, and ending with its replacement by the nutria in the 1960s.

Keywords: Muskrat, Louisiana Fur Industry, Louisiana Trapping, Fur-Bearing Animals, Alligator, Nutria, and Edward Avery McIlhenny

Introduction

The Louisiana muskrat might, at first, seem to be a strange subject upon which to base a historical study. To all outward appearances, the muskrat possesses few characteristics that would indicate an ability to shape the course of human events; indeed, the only notable activities that these rodents seem to engage in are eating, breeding, and maintenance of their homes. However, it would be a fundamental mistake to misjudge the significance of the muskrat based solely upon appearances. Such short-sighted notions of value negate the role of human agency in determining the impact that the natural world has on the daily lives of societies across the globe. The mundane activities attributed to the muskrat would never have garnered any notoriety if people had not entered the marsh domain with the goal of settlement and found themselves directly affected by the presence of these animals. As a result of environmental decisions made by trappers beginning in the late 1800s and continued by state wildlife management in the early 1900s, the muskrat became transformed from a marginal marsh resident to a registered outlaw, sought only for elimination, and then, to a prominent fur-bearing animal, deserving protection. The transitions undergone by the muskrat during the first half of the new century owed much to the manipulation of circumstances by humans seeking monetary gain, and even though trappers and conservation authorities were the central players, a whole host of ancillary interests, such as landowners, equipment salesmen, shipping firms, fur buyers/dealers, and fur designers/manufacturers, became dependent on the state's ability to maintain large harvests. Therefore, the success of the muskrat trade foreshadowed further alterations to the marsh landscape and to the lives of its residents in order to ensure a steady supply of pelts.

While this history of the Louisiana muskrat industry focuses primarily on regional interactions involving one rodent species, the implications of decisions made on behalf of the muskrat extend far beyond the borders of Louisiana and its coastal marshes. Since significant quantities of muskrat pelts made up for the deficits of other major fur-producing regions, foreign and domestic fur centers owed much to consistency of the Louisiana market for their ability to supply consumers with fur products during periods of high demand. However, the muskrat also stands as an important example of how the conservation policies of the early twentieth century were often more harmful than beneficial. Not only were conservation officials selective about which animals were considered worthy of protection, but without taking the time to properly assess the potential consequences, these authorities encouraged the transportation of non-native species to areas of the world where they had no natural enemies. Nutria were raised and released in Louisiana with the support of the Department of Conservation. The goal of the endeavor was to enhance the existing fur stocks, creating a larger, more versatile industry; unfortunately, the move produced unintended competition between the muskrat and the nutria at a time when the muskrat was already suffering from an unconnected decline. Consequently, the nutria became the dominant species, and as was the case with other species which were relocated across the globe, when their usefulness ceased, the nutria became invasive, a hazard to overall vitality of their new home, speeding up the effects of coastal erosion.

Gathering information to discuss the historical ramifications of managing a single animal proved to be a significant challenge. A state agency devoted to the statistical study and regulation of wildlife did not exist in Louisiana until 1910, and even then,

wildlife was just one aspect of a larger department devoted to conservation.¹ Consequently, much of the information in this paper relating to the late 1800s and early 1900s will be drawn from a variety of newspaper resources, including New Orleans's *The Times Picayune*. As the years passed and the conservation department took on a significant role in Louisiana politics, regular bulletins were produced to provide the general public with reports on general operations and activities of the department as well as division-specific topics like fur-bearing animals. Due to their importance in showing the intentions of state officials in regard to the muskrat, several of these publications will be heavily cited in the pages that follow. Similarly, a monthly/semi-monthly magazine developed by the department, known today as the *Louisiana Conservationist*, will be used to develop the later portions of this thesis, which focus on the peak of the muskrat trade as well as the transition to nutria.² As a result of the generosity shown by the McIlhenny Simmons family, access was granted to the personal records of Edward Avery McIlhenny, an early conservation advocate in Louisiana. Letters addressed to and from McIlhenny illustrate his direct involvement in the decision-making process surrounding the muskrat, and later, the nutria. These documents are contained within the E. A. McIlhenny Collection, which is administered by the Tabasco Company and Avery Island, Inc. from Avery Island, Louisiana. Additionally, the Henry Conrad Brote Collection,

¹ For much of this paper, I will refer to the Louisiana Department of Conservation, which was originally established in 1910. It was briefly renamed the Louisiana Conservation Commission in 1912 before reclaiming its original name in 1918. However, in 1944, the job of protecting the state's wildlife resources was transferred to a new agency called the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. Then, in 1952, it, too, was briefly renamed the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission, and finally, in 1975, the name was changed back to the current Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

"About the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries: Boards and Commission Members" (2005) http://www.wlf.louisiana.gov/aboutldwf/boards_commissionmembers/ (accessed 19 April 2009).

² The *Louisiana Conservationist* was originally published as the *Louisiana Conservation News* (late 1920s), but as the years passed and the Department of Conservation changed, the name of the magazine became the *Louisiana Conservation Review* (1930-1941), *Louisiana Conservationist* (1942-45), *Louisiana Game, Fur, and Fish* (1946-47), and finally, again, *Louisiana Conservationist* (1948-Present).

which is housed as a part of Louisiana and Special Collections at the University of New Orleans's Earl K. Long Library, contains the records of Brote's various voyages on merchant vessels traveling between several South American countries and ports in the United States. The specific documents that will be used as a part of this discussion potentially explain the origin of nutria in Louisiana.

The historical approach taken to explore the rise and fall of the Louisiana muskrat is decidedly oriented toward the natural world, and consequently, the writings of several environmental historians were important in influencing the overall structure. Ted Steinberg defined the function of environmental history, stating that it "centers on the examination of...how natural forces shape history, how human kind affects nature, and how those ecological changes then turn around to influence human life once again in a reciprocating pattern."³ The subsequent case study of the Louisiana muskrat touches on each of the aspects listed in Steinberg's definition, but as this paper is also meant to be a social history, the concept of human choice is equally present. William Cronon explained, "Different peoples choose different ways of interacting with their surrounding environments, and their choices ramify through not only the human community but the larger ecosystem," drawing attention to "a cast of nonhuman characters which usually occupy the margins of historical analysis if they are present in it at all."⁴ Furthering this idea of choice, Donald Worster acknowledged that although it is sometimes imperceptible, the environment is in a state of constant change, and as a result, over time,

³ Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), xii.

⁴ William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), xv.

“what we want out of nature also changes.”⁵ According to Cronon, when people first interact with a place, the choices available are often dictated by the environment in which they find themselves, but as people become acclimated to a given set of circumstances, “then culture reshapes environment in responding to those choices.”⁶ Therefore, as Steinberg stated, “A fuller understanding of how change takes place, and of who wins and who loses as a result, requires that we knit together the concepts of nature and power.”⁷

In discussing the conservation movement of the early twentieth century, which coincided with the beginning of muskrat trapping, Ted Steinberg stated, “Conserving some species, however, meant killing others.” Steinberg made this statement in reference to the activities of the U. S. Bureau of Biological Survey’s Predatory Animal and Rodent Control Service founded in 1915, which focused on eradicating species that the government considered a hindrance to the development of the western states. At the time, open range across the country, especially out west, was no longer preserved for “common,” or community usage; instead, land was parceled and sold without consideration for who was already using it. Conflict often arose among settlers over conflicting claims over property rights, but since the land now had monetary rather than intrinsic value, animals like cattle and horses were fenced in to protect the investments of those who owned the land. On the other hand, coyotes, which ate cattle, and rodents, which increased in the absence of predators and consumed crops, were both labeled as

⁵ Donald Worster, “Nature and the Disorder of History,” *Environmental History Review*, 18, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 2.

⁶ Cronon, 13.

⁷ Ted Steinberg, ““Down to Earth: Nature, Agency, and Power in History,” *American Historical Review*. (June 2002): 800.

pests and destroyed. In the same way, coastal marshes would be divided and drained for farmland and pastureland in Louisiana. At varying times during the early twentieth century, the muskrats inhabiting the marshland were considered both destructive pests and valued commodities; consequently, the value of the land itself changed with the status of the muskrat, leading to disputes over land once trapped in common.⁸ In *Mao's War Against Nature*, historian Judith Shapiro identified a central theme shared by other environmental historians studying various regions and societies: "We human beings are far more effective than other species in altering our environments in an effort to satisfy our needs, and our very success often makes us a danger to others and ourselves."⁹

⁸ Ted Steinberg, *Slide Mountain: Or The Folly of Owning Nature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

Steinberg, *Down to Earth*, 144-145.

⁹ Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and Environment in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.

Clearing the Path

Before delving into the development of the muskrat as a commodity, a brief description of the animal and its origin into the historical sphere would prove beneficial to the reader. The muskrat is a nocturnal rodent that is native only to North America. While established populations are found throughout the United States and Canada, this semi-aquatic species prefers to make its home in marshy areas along lakes, streams, and rivers where it forages for the roots of grasses. Generally, its fur is a variation of brown, and in Louisiana, the general size is about a foot in length with a ten inch rounded tail.¹⁰ However, due to the numerous climate types found across the continent, muskrat communities have developed a range of sizes and colors based upon their territorial reach, yielding fourteen recognized varieties.¹¹ The name “muskrat” is believed to have been derived originally from the Cree Indian word “musquash,” which probably described the odor secreted by the animal’s two musk glands. In 1612, English Captain John Smith may have referred to these creatures by stating, “Mussacus is a beast of the forme and nature of our water Rat, but many of them smell exceeding strong of muske.” Nevertheless, a French Jesuit priest from Quebec named Father LeJeune provided the earliest known use of “muskrat” in a diary entry from 1635 in which he described attending a “rat musqué” hunt held by local natives. Then, in 1701, Father Jacques Gravier, another Jesuit, became the first person to connect the muskrat with Louisiana. In a letter written to Jacques de Lamberville about traveling down the Mississippi River,

¹⁰ Stanley C. Arthur, *The Fur Animals of Louisiana*, Bulletin 18, Louisiana Department of Conservation (Baton Rouge: Ramires-Jones Ptg. Co., 1931), 187.

¹¹ In addition to the Louisiana muskrat, the varieties include: Common, Virginia, Labrador, Newfoundland, Hudson’s Bay, Northwestern, Alaska Peninsula, Rocky Mountain, Oregon Coast, Nevada, Arizona, Pecos, and Great Plains.

Harold McCracken and Harry Van Cleve, *Trapping the Craft and Science of Catching Fur-Bearing Animals* (South Brunswick and New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1947), 23-27.

Gravier indicated that the skins worn by the Tunicas and the Houmas, two Native American groups he encountered, were that of the “rat musqué.”¹²

From the beginning of settlement in the Americas, colonial trappers viewed the “New World” as a nearly limitless supply of resources, and a vibrant trade in the skins of native fur-bearers arose with “Mother Europe.” Historian William Cronon offered a probable explanation of why the fur trade developed in North America: “What was a merchantable commodity in America was what was scarce in Europe.” He continued by stating, “Only if this were true would it make sense to pay the cost of transporting it across the ocean.”¹³ As European monarchs discovered the wealth of fur-bearing species, they instructed the colonists in New France (Canada) and New England to develop friendly relationships with the Indians, offering them Wampanoag, or European goods, in exchange for furs. According to Cronon, “the fur trade could not have existed without Indians: in order to exploit beavers and other furbearers, it was essential that they have willing cooperation of Indian partners.” As time passed, English and French trappers were granted monopolies by their respective monarchs. In spite of the increasing costs associated with settlement, trading posts like Quebec (1608) and Montreal (1611) became extremely profitable for both French and native traders alike; however, as a consequence, New France began to face substantial competition from the British fur monopoly, the Hudson Bay Company (1670), causing skirmishes in which the Europeans fought for access to Native American traders.¹⁴ Cronon also recalled historian Calvin Martin’s assertion that the natives unwittingly undermined their own survival: “By so willingly

¹² Arthur, 200-204.

¹³ Cronon, 20.

¹⁴ Arthur, 15.

overhunting the beaver and other game animals, Indians across North America were responsible for attacking one the major bases of their own subsistence.”¹⁵

When the French founded the colony of Louisiana in 1682 along the Gulf of Mexico in North America, establishing a fur market which utilized domestic stock was never seriously considered. Although based in Biloxi (1699) and Mobile (1702), Louisiana stretched from the Rocky Mountains to the Appalachian Mountains and included a major navigable river, the Mississippi, and while the southern portions of the territory teemed with wildlife of all varieties, Louisiana founder Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville looked beyond local fur stocks in an attempt to redirect north-central beaver and bison pelts to the lower Mississippi Valley. Iberville suspected that native traders in the upper valley could be convinced to forgo dangerous, overland travel to trade with the English by offering comparably priced French goods at convenient stations upriver. Once purchased, these furs were to be swiftly floated to the Gulf Coast on “bateaux plats” (flatboats) and transferred to ocean-going vessels for shipment to France.¹⁶ Unfortunately for Iberville, by 1701, New France, already seething from the British incursion, complained to the home government about Quebec and Montreal merchants being “financially ruined” by the advances of its upstart, sister colony. Soon after, Iberville was recalled and died of yellow fever in Havana, but his original idea would eventually come to fruition with the establishment of “Nouvelle Orleans,” or New Orleans, in 1718 near the mouth of the Mississippi River by his brother, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville. With this new port available for Trans-Atlantic shipping, “so long as beaver pelts could be sold more profitably in New Orleans than in Montreal to New

¹⁵ Ibid, 91.

¹⁶ Ibid, 23.

Orleans they would be taken.”¹⁷ Although the territory of Louisiana would change hands several times before it became a territory of the United States in 1803, a pattern was begun by which New Orleans served as a shipper of pelts acquired from northern traders. However, changes were on the horizon as the 1800s approached. “The joint efforts of Indians and colonists had decimated many of the animals whose abundance had most astonished early European visitors to New England,” and for Louisiana, the dawn of the east-west railroad signaled the beginning of the end for river traffic, including shipments of furs.¹⁸

Yet, as some species began to dwindle in numbers, others were given the opportunity to flourish. During the early years of the nineteenth century, the common and eastern muskrat varieties, which inhabited much of the Northeastern United States and Canada, joined the lofty ranks of the beaver, mink, otter, seal, and raccoon as respected fur-bearing animals. In the late eighteenth century, trappers brought in around 100,000 muskrat pelts a year for use as hats and gloves, but increasingly, the muskrat became sought for trimmings and as a cheap substitution for beaver. By 1820, the London market, the most prominent fur outlet of the period, reported receiving a record shipment of one million raw pelts. In the years that followed, the number transferred to London grew dramatically, and by 1871, four million raw pelts made their way to British furriers. Elsewhere, Leipzig was handling one and half million raw pelts, and between the United States and Canada, another five hundred thousand were traded. Finished muskrat fur products like cloaks were more likely to be consumed in places like England, France, Russia, and Germany than the primarily rural, less densely populated region of

¹⁷ Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1974), 119-120.

¹⁸ Cronon, 107.

North America. In the 1870s and 1880s, new techniques in plucking and dying were developed by European furriers, allowing the muskrat to continue its career as an imitator of increasing rare, higher priced furs like seal and mink. In 1902, an article in *The New York Times* proclaimed a bold headline: “The Muskrat: Principal Fur Producer in America.” Yet, the article went on to state that these animals were “most abundant in the Chesapeake region, and in Missouri, Minnesota, and Manitoba;” there was no mention of the southern variety.¹⁹

The absence of the Louisiana muskrat in *The New York Times* article is not surprising given the fact that serious trapping efforts were just getting underway around 1900. The new trade had not gained enough momentum to be taken seriously in prominent fur markets like St. Louis and New York. Indeed, according to reports in both state publications and newspapers, muskrats were not seen in large quantities in Louisiana until the 1880s. Seemingly all of a sudden, people began to notice muskrat communities popping up across the coastal parishes of the state, and then, once established, these colonies could not be ignored because of an unintentionally destructive activity, digging. Based on the available evidence, there appears to be two interdependent factors involved in causing the conditions necessary for the muskrat to propagate. The first was the decline in concentration of a key predatory species, the alligator, and the second was the burning of the marsh to locate alligators.

The Louisiana variety of muskrat has had its share of enemies, including alligator gar, water moccasins, owls, hawks, mink, and raccoons; however, beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, one of its foes, the alligator, was trapped to the

¹⁹ Charles H. Stevenson, “The Muskrat: Principal Fur Producer in America,” *The New York Times*, 30 March 1902.

brink of extinction to obtain its hide.²⁰ Initially, early encounters between French colonists and alligators were met with fear and awe. However, upon hearing about this aquatic “oddity,” the scientific academies of Europe became interested in studying the animal; therefore, they actively sought to procure preserved specimens for their private collections. As the recognition of the alligator began to spread, entertainers first capitalized upon Europe and America’s fascination with this creature by collecting live specimens that the public could pay to view in zoological menageries and circus sideshows. Yet, Native Americans, African slaves, and the French knew from living in close proximity to these animals that their body parts were useful in a variety of applications. The alligator’s tail provided meat that could be consumed as food or rendered into lamp oil. Also, alligator teeth were used in jewelry or ground up to make powder charges for muskets. The alligator’s musk gland was even harvested to brew perfume.²¹

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, tanners first experimented with alligator hide to produce leather. Unfortunately, these initial attempts resulted in porous leather that had limited utility, but despite these failures, tanners continued to believe that alligator leather had promise. During the American Civil War, the Union Army’s blockade of Confederate ports created a shortage of traditional leather products in the South. In order to meet wartime demand, southern tanners were forced to reevaluate their approach in regard to the alligator, which led to improved production techniques. The resulting leather was durable and waterproof and helped ease strained supplies, but more importantly, following the cessation of combat, European markets began to take

²⁰ Arthur, 266-270.

²¹ Vaughn Glasgow, *A Social History of the American Alligator: The Earth Trembles with His Thunder* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 63-67.

notice of the new alligator leather. Manufacturers in places like New York produced boots, bags, trunks, portfolios, gun cases, belts, and wallets, which were then largely exported to consumers in Italy, France, and Russia.²²

As alligator products became fashionable at home and abroad, Louisiana trappers sought to make an easy profit by hunting the largest, most visible alligators. The method primarily used to track the animals called “shinning” was conducted at night with the aid of a lamp. While positioned in a boat along a known alligator run, trappers slowly waved the lamp around in the darkness, using the light to spot the reflection of an alligator’s eyes on the surface of the water.²³ According to Edward Avery McIlhenny, conservationist and Tabasco Company heir, when trappers finally arrived near his home on “Avery Island in 1883,...only skins of eight feet and larger were taken,” but by “about 1898 the large alligators inhabiting streams became scarce, and as the price for skins was good, the hunters began going into their lairs or dens.”²⁴

Once obtained, the reptiles had to be prepared for sale at local markets. To prevent rapid decomposition, which was common due to the state’s subtropical climate, the animals were immediately skinned and de-fleshed. Despite the need for haste, trappers took care when harvesting the “bellyskin,” the area “below the horny portion of the back,” not to make stray cuts as these would become noticeable during the tanning process and devalue the hide. To prepare the hide for shipment to market, salt would be generously applied to the inner flesh, and the hide would be “rolled up with the salted

²² Ibid, 63-67.

²³ *Biennial Report of the Department of Conservation: From April 1, 1916 to April 1, 1918* (New Orleans: Palfrey-Rodd-Pursell Co. Ltd., 1918), 96.

²⁴ E. A. McIlhenny, *The Alligator’s Life History* (Berkley: Ten Speed Press, 1987), 77-81.

side inside.”²⁵ Trappers then traveled to “the principal towns in which alligator skins were sold...Lake Charles, Abbeville, New Iberia, Morgan City, Houma, and New Orleans” to find a buyer.²⁶ Upon reaching these market towns, the alligators’ skins were priced by length “from tip of under jaw to tip of tail,” and while premiums were paid for skins of four to eight feet, trappers received no additional compensation for hides measuring longer than eight feet. Between 1917 and 1926, the price for a four foot hide rose from \$.45 to \$1.75, and an eight foot hide rose from \$1.35 to \$4.00.²⁷

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, increasingly, alligators of any size became difficult to obtain. Despite the relative scarcity, hide buyers remained hesitant about purchasing the skins of juvenile animals, which were “practically useless.” Unfortunately, trappers often forced a single buyer to purchase an entire lot and whatever sizes it contained, refusing to parcel out their catch to numerous buyers. No official records exist containing the number of alligator hides collected from the peak of alligator trapping in the late nineteenth century since the Louisiana Department of Conservation had not yet been established. As an illustration of the volume taken, an unnamed New Orleans fur dealer reported figures to the Department of Conservation for a single season, summer 1917. The statistics were broken down by length with 1,539 skins four to seven feet and 897 skins two or three feet. In total, this one business purchased 2,436 hides.²⁸ Based upon his own observations, McIlhenny estimated that the take between 1880 and 1933 must have been “at least three to three and one-half million.”²⁹

²⁵ *Biennial Report*, 95

²⁶ McIlhenny, *The Alligator*, 78-81.

²⁷ Arthur, 184-185.

²⁸ *Biennial Report*, 97

²⁹ McIlhenny, *The Alligator*, 79.

Almost as soon as large alligators began disappearing, newspapers began commenting on a disturbing trend taking place among the muskrat population. In 1890, *The New York Times* reported that the Police Jury in Plaquemines Parish decided to impose a fine of \$25 and a month-long incarceration upon those found to have killed an alligator. According to the article, there was a major reason that they needed to act: “It seems that alligators feed largely on muskrats, and since the lessening of the number of the former the rats have increased enormously.”³⁰ In 1893, a story from the New Orleans *Times-Democrat* cited in *The Daily Inter Ocean* argued that before they were in demand to make “valises, satchels, pocketbooks, etc,” alligators “did no particular damage except in catching a stray pig or cur dog, but otherwise they were not supposed to be of any value at all.” However, “with the disappearance of the alligator it was noticed that there was a marked increase in the number of other mischievous animals.”³¹ Then, in 1903, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* explained, “Inventors with substitutes for alligators or any other kind of muskrat destroyer will find something to their advantage by calling at New Orleans.”³²

The newspapers were not alone in expressing their opinions about the connection between the alligator and the muskrat. In 1908, a magazine called *The Louisiana Planter and Sugar Manufacturer* discussed the topic in a piece entitled “Alligator Versus Muskrat.” The article explained that since the pair occupied “the same habitat of some eight or ten thousand square miles,” the rise in the muskrat’s population “betokens that these rodents of the marshes must have always formed an important part of the Saurian’s

³⁰ “Alligators To Be Protected,” *The New York Times*, 27 April 1890.

³¹ “The Indispensable Alligator,” *The Daily Inter Ocean*, 17 Dec. 1893, America’s Historical Newspaper Database.

³² “Louisiana was in a hurry...,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 16 Jan. 1903, America’s Historical Newspaper Database.

bill of fair.” Citing the fact that elevated prices “resulted in the trapping of many thousands,” the magazine proposed that “mink-reduction may also account for the increase of the muskrat species.” According to the article, alligators targeted the “fat and juicy young muskrats,” while mink were “more destructive to muskrats in their maturity than are alligators.” The mink would stalk the muskrat, “running him down, murdering him and sucking his blood.”³³ Additional comments about the muskrat came from biologist Albert Reese in his 1915 book *The Alligator and Its Allies*. Reese stated, “It has been claimed that the destruction of the alligator has allowed the cane rat and muskrat to increase to a serious extent, the former doing great damage to crops, the latter often injuring the levees to a dangerous extent.”³⁴ In his 1935 book *The Alligator’s Life History*, Edward Avery McIlhenny reflected on the consequences of sustained alligator trapping. He declared, “I think, also that the large increase of dusky-ducks, rails, and muskrats in Louisiana marshes is due to the extermination of the alligator.”³⁵

While many observers perceived that the alligator was either partially or solely responsible for keeping the muskrat population in check, the results of several biological studies tend to favor the supposition that the mere act of hunting for alligators by burning the marsh also had an indirect, but substantial impact in creating conditions favorable for muskrat propagation. In 1949, Ted O’ Neil, a biologist and future Director of the Fur and Game Division of the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission, published a book called *The Muskrat in Louisiana Coastal Marshes*. While looking back on the rise of the muskrat trade, O’Neil explained that an alligator trapping technique called pole-hunting

³³ “Alligator Versus Muskrat,” *The Louisiana Planter and Sugar Manufacturer* 40, no. 26 (27 June 1908): 412.

³⁴ Albert M. Reese, *The Alligator and Its Allies* (New York and London: The Knickerbocker Press, 1915), 28.

³⁵ McIlhenny, *The Alligator*, 44.

was increasingly utilized by trappers as the reptiles became scarcer and more dispersed.³⁶ In an effort to find the entrances to their underwater dens, a seven to eight foot long, wooden pole was thrust into the murky water where an alligator was believed to live. Trappers would use the pole to prod the bottom, using the attached iron hook, and once an alligator was found, they tried luring the animal to the surface by using a distinctive call. Upon its surfacing, the animal would be dispatched with an axe or shotgun, but if the reptile managed to retreat to its den, trappers would have to dig into domain and use the pole's hook to draw out the animal.³⁷ As a result, trappers sought to make alligator dens more visible from the surface, so they decided to clear away excess vegetation through burning. This action inadvertently "increased the sub-dominant vegetation, three-cornered grass," which O'Neil declared to be "80% to 90% of the Gulf Coast muskrats' food supply."³⁸

Intentionally setting fire to a given marsh was an activity that required planning in order to arrive at the desired outcome. According to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service study performed by researcher John Lynch in 1941, lightening-induced fires could cause a natural restocking of three-cornered grass, but more likely, such fires would often rage out of control on unchecked marsh growth, especially during times of drought, and had the potential to kill wildlife caught in their path. However, if properly executed, yearly burns had the potential to keep marsh grass from becoming unwieldy and also stimulated fresh growth of three-cornered grass, which offered sustenance to a variety of wildlife

³⁶ Ted O'Neil, *The Muskrat in Louisiana Coastal Marshes: A Study of the Ecological, Geological, Biological, Tidal, and Climatic Factors Governing the Production and Managing of the Muskrat in Industry in Louisiana*, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Fur and Game Division (New Orleans, 1949), 46.

³⁷ Arthur, 184.

³⁸ O'Neil, *The Muskrat*, 46.

and cattle. Once the muskrat became established in a particular area, it was essential for people like Lynch to educate the public about the consequences of improper burning because “cattlemen, trappers, and operators of hunting clubs burn their marshes regularly.” If these economic stakeholders were going to produce a successful burn, water was needed to cover a given plant’s base, protecting its root system. In such situations, “fur animals are protected by water and by lodges in the case of muskrats.” Improper burns would occur when drought caused the waterline to drop below that of the base of the grass. As a result, the roots were singed, and animals in the vicinity were left exposed. While these fires removed dense sawgrass, which hindered a trapper’s ability to maneuver around the marsh, the vegetation that returned, usually spikerush and waterlily, was favored more by waterfowl like ducks. Thus, adding to the immediate potential for muskrat loss, improper burns changed the landscape of the marsh, forcing muskrats to migrate in search of three-cornered grass.³⁹

Outlaw to Commodity

In the early to mid-nineteenth century, when communities were still small and scattered, human populations rarely came in contact with the muskrat, yielding ignorance to the animal’s basic, instinctive functions: eating, breeding, and maintenance of their homes. However, the combined impact of alligator trapping and marsh burning in the late nineteenth century changed the delicate balance of the marsh habitat, and the muskrat inherited an environment with fewer predators and an abundant food supply. Having been provided with all the components needed for its survival, muskrats multiplied until their population surged into the millions. While reproduction statistics varied among the

³⁹ John T. Lynch, “The Place of Burning in Management of the Gulf Coast Wildlife Refuges,” *The Journal of Wildlife Management* 5, no. 4 (Oct. 1941): 454-57.

scientific studies conducted during of the period, generally, a female muskrat was able to breed between three and five times per year, producing a litter of four to six kits that were sexually mature within about six months. In order to accommodate their bulging numbers, muskrats began to branch outward from their traditional range, but eventually, their territorial expansion led to a more permanent encroachment on the human domain.

The first rivalry born between man and the muskrat came from the farming community. Even while alligators were still being heavily trapped in the 1880s and 1890s, muskrats were already being blamed for “destroying valuable cattle range, uprooting sugar cane and turning levees into Swiss cheese with their burrows.”⁴⁰ Cattle ranchers came to despise the muskrat because their livestock had to compete with the hairy vermin for access to marsh grass, and farmers had to worry about muskrats uprooting and chewing the base of their crops. Once muskrats established themselves on a piece of property, farmers and ranchers would consistently lose plowing and grazing acreage to muskrat feeding grounds. According to a 1947 study into geese and muskrat damage in coastal marshes, if given the opportunity, muskrats systematically removed stalks of vegetation in order to prepare a given site for the construction of a nest and a network of interconnected, underwater tunnels. After completing their domiciles, the rodents proceeded to dig up and eat a majority of the roots from favorable plants within their immediate vicinity, using the tunnels connected to their den as highways for gaining access to new feeding sites. Sooner or later, the entire area surrounding a nest was stripped of vegetation, which became known as an eat-out. The daily activities of a community of muskrats with access to open range had the potential to affect the habitability of that area for years. In their wake, hardier grasses took root throughout the

⁴⁰ Robert Fritchley, “Fur Ever Trapping,” *Louisiana Life* (Autumn 1993): 55.

region, or the area became partially or fully flooded with saltwater, killing much of the remaining vegetation.⁴¹

While eat-outs plagued many farmers and ranchers, rice growers had to be wary of an additional set of problems associated with muskrat infestation. In order to properly irrigate their grain crop at the appropriate time during the growing season, rice farmers built mounds of earth around their fields called levees to retain water on their property. However, muskrats were enterprising animals, and while they occasionally harvested tender, rice shoots to feast upon or to use as construction material, muskrats seemed to view levees as pre-fabricated housing. Instead of having to create a pile of vegetable matter high enough to rise above the water line, a muskrat only needed to perforate a levee and dig its tunnels outward. Of course, remodeling the interior of a levee to suit the needs of the muskrat had the added effect of weakening the entire structure. As an 1893 newspaper article explained, “the damage caused by the rats burrowing through the embankments necessitated constant watchfulness and entailed much hard labor, either in rebuilding them entire[ly] or digging out the burrows and tilling in with solid earth.”⁴² By and large, public perception of the levee problem held that the muskrat alone was responsible for the ever increasing network of holes, but according to an article in *The Daily Picayune*, muskrats were “great labor-savers,” “usually choosing the habitation of some crawfish.”⁴³ The *Biennial Report of the Department of Conservation* published in

⁴¹ John T. Lynch, Ted O’Neil, and Daniel W. Lay, “Management Significance of Damage by Geese and Muskrats to Gulf Coast Marshes,” *The Journal of Wildlife Management* 11, no. 1 (January, 1947): 50-76.

⁴² “The Indispensable Alligator,” *The Daily Inter Ocean*, 17 Dec. 1893, America’s Historical Newspapers Database.

⁴³ “True Stories of the City’s Strenuous Life: Major Strong Says Alligators Are the Only Destroyers of Muskrats Which Destroy the Levees,” *The Daily Picayune*, 5 April 1903. America’s Historical Newspaper Database.

1918 went further by stating that “in all fairness it must be admitted that the muskrat is frequently blamed for breaks actually started by crayfish, gophers, and moles.”⁴⁴

Unfortunately, the damage caused to levees by muskrats was not limited to the farming community. While rice farmers constructed what were called back levees to contain water for irrigation, the real danger resulted from muskrats “honeycombing” parish or community-funded front levees, which required “constant attention to avert the disastrous consequences resulting from a crevasse.”⁴⁵ In times of high water, usually during the spring melt, front levees prevented large-scale flooding by confining the flow of water from streams and rivers to their channels, but if muskrat holes and tunnels went undetected, the mound of earth could deteriorate, allowing water to seep through the levee. As water passed through the gap, or crevasse, the erosive effect of the flow would cause the break to continue to widen until work crews had the opportunity to plug the gap with sandbags. While newspapers from the period documented numerous levee failures, the state discovered how truly devastating a crevasse could be when, in an effort to relieve the pressure on levees protecting New Orleans during the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, the decision was made to intentionally blow open the Caernarvon levee in St. Bernard. This choice cost could have cost the City of New Orleans nearly \$35 million, resulting from claims detailing property damage, ruined harvests, and livestock replacement. Unfortunately, for those trappers and farmers most affected by the crevasse, promises of reparation for their losses remained largely unfulfilled. Only 2,809 claimants were given any sort of consideration, amounting to \$3,897,276. After deducting “nearly \$1,000,000 from these settlements for feeding and housing the

⁴⁴ *Biennial Report*, 89.

⁴⁵ “The Indispensable Alligator”

claimants while they were homeless,” the city eventually paid out \$2.9 million, but large claimants like Acme Fur Company and Louisiana Southern Railroad received most of the money. The rest were forced to share the remaining \$800,000, amounting to about \$284 per claim.⁴⁶

Once word began to spread about the destructive habits of the muskrat, citizens and state officials began to wonder how to lessen the impact that these animals had on the economy. The easiest solution seemed to be extermination; consequently, in the late nineteenth century, “farmers fought back with dogs and pitchforks, rifles and shotguns, piling the carcasses in heaps and torching them.”⁴⁷ While the wholesale destruction of the muskrat certainly produced results, the state seemed more interested in a more long-term solution. Under Act 37 of 1908, the state legislature authorized “Police Juries of each parish to enact such laws and fix such penalties for the violation of same they deem necessary to prohibit the killing and destruction of alligators.”⁴⁸ While parishes like Plaquemines used the authority given to them to enact and enforce such laws, the legislature does not appear to have ever passed a law forcing trappers statewide to adhere to a single alligator protection policy. Bearing this in mind, *The Louisiana Planter and Sugar Manufacturer* suggested a series of solutions: “Perhaps in default of the replenished alligator supply, public trapping, wholesale poisoning of their villages, and the payment of bounties on their scalps might accomplish this result.”⁴⁹ Almost assuredly, conservation officials were considering all of these options, but trappers did not seem to recognize the state’s ultimate goal of protecting both the alligator and the

⁴⁶ John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 357-58.

⁴⁷ Fritchley, 55.

⁴⁸ Glasgow, 124.

⁴⁹ “Alligator Versus Muskrat,” 412.

muskrat. In 1909, an article from the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* explained, “It is hard for the trapper to understand why the state did not put a bounty on muskrat skins, instead of protecting the alligator in order that he might devour the muskrats.”⁵⁰ Independently, levee boards and Police Juries across the coastal parishes enacted bonuses for eliminating muskrat, but they were likely acting in conjunction with a state law that allowed “the killing of muskrats at any season when found tunneling in the levees or causing other damage in cultivated or pasture land.”⁵¹ Since alligators were still very valuable, the state wanted to see trapping of these reptiles continue in reduced numbers to preserve the stock, but conservation officials realized that trappers could no longer make a living off of alligator alone.

Even though the trappers were unable to envision the future value of the muskrat, the preexisting market for muskrat pelts in the northern fur centers and abroad provided an opportunity for trappers to retain their livelihood. Between 1900 and 1910, Louisiana trappers collected the first muskrat pelts for sale on the open market. At that time, a trapper who presented a muskrat skin to a pelt buyer would have received somewhere between five and ten cents for his trouble, but as much as twenty-five cents was possible.⁵² According to one article in *The Daily Picayune* from 1903, if a trapper could secure “five or six of them a day,” it was possible to “get along very nicely in the parishes, where living is not so high.”⁵³ There were some farmers who would set a few

⁵⁰ “Louisiana Fur Trade Largest in World,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 23 Dec. 1909, America’s Historical Newspapers Database.

⁵¹ “Muskrat License Stirs St. Bernard,” *The Daily Picayune*, *The Daily Picayune*, 4 April 1914. America’s Historical Newspaper Database. *The Daily Picayune*, 4 April 1914. America’s Historical Newspaper Database.

Wildlife Resources of Louisiana: Their Nature, Value, and Protection, Bulletin 10, Louisiana Department of Conservation (New Orleans: Louisiana Printing Company, 1921), 26.

⁵² O’Neil, *The Muskrat*, 46.

⁵³ “True Stories”

traps each year on their property just to see what might be caught, but the former alligator trappers were primarily responsible for the bulk of the early muskrat trade. These professionals had perfected the task of making a living off the marsh throughout the year; they were able to trap for furs in the winter and alligators in the summer. Once alligator populations diminished and certain parishes placed restrictions on taking the reptile, trappers supplemented their income by engaging in commercial fishing, crabbing, and “tonging for oysters.”⁵⁴ The truth is that these early trappers were not intentionally trying to capture muskrat; instead, they were really hoping to locate established fur-bearing animals like otter, mink, and raccoon.⁵⁵ More than likely, the muskrats that were caught had wandered into their traps and were skinned with the rest of the catch. By 1909, enough muskrats had managed to enter the marketplace for one newspaper, the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, to declare: “Louisiana Fur Trade Largest In World.” According to the article, nearly five thousand trappers that season had sold \$600,000 worth of pelts, and of those sold, a significant portion were muskrats valued between fifteen and twenty cents. “Very many of them are shipped to New York, to be manufactured and brought back, no doubt, by the New Orleans ladies within two hours’ run of the trappers’ cabins.” The remainder of the catch was sent to European cities like London, Paris, Berlin, Leipzig, Vienna, and Moscow with some additional pelts making their way to Japan.⁵⁶

As muskrat trapping in Louisiana began in earnest, the state had to battle a perception problem. Initially, the muskrat hides produced in Louisiana were considered inferior products in the eyes of most furriers. While coloration and proper stretching

⁵⁴ “Louisiana Fur Trade”

Carlton F. Pool, “Trapping in Louisiana: Collecting Furs For The Market Is A Large And Profitable Business In Louisiana,” *The Daily Picayune*, 5 October 1913, America’s Historical Newspaper Database.

⁵⁵ O’Neil, *The Muskrat*, 46.

⁵⁶ “Louisiana Fur Trade”

were supplementary factors, in order to determine a fur's worth, consideration first had to be given to both the "pelt" (the interior skin) and the "pelage" (the fur).⁵⁷ Depending on the time frame of capture, inspection of the pelt and pelage ended in a grade distinction of "prime" or "unprime."⁵⁸ Throughout the history of trapping, quality furs had always been procured from healthy, youthful animals with thick coats that were gained from "combating the rigors of a long and freezing winter," so furs from subtropical areas were thought "strange, unnatural, or impossible."⁵⁹ While southern furs were apt to be more lightly colored than their northern counterparts, there was no additional indication that the overall product was of an inferior quality. Nevertheless, in order to ensure the viability of the local, muskrat trapping industry, Louisiana skins had to consistently achieve the grade of prime. Skins that were assigned as prime contained pelts with a "healthy, reddish flesh," and pelage that was "well furred with no rubbed spots, cuts or holes;" these fur-bearers had to have been taken "at the height of...mid-winter." In contrast, unprime hides were frequently collected too early or too late in the year, meaning they were "usually bluish" and "apt to shed hair freely." To prevent unprime grading, rendering the skin economically "unreasonable," seasons were established in Louisiana to coincide with the highest probability of receiving a prime grade.⁶⁰

Even though there were questions surrounding the quality of pelts procured from the state, according to 1968 trapping guide, the Louisiana muskrat had something that none of the other muskrat varieties could compete with on the open market: Louisiana

⁵⁷ Arthur, 390.

⁵⁸ While achieving the grades of prime or unprime was of foremost importance, there were additional degrees of utility that also affected the value of the pelt. Even if two separate pelts were considered prime, their physical condition might be different, which altered their price.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 61.

⁶⁰ Turner Wilcox, *The Mode in Furs: the History of Furred Costume of the World From the Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 222.

Arthur, 388, 390.

could always be counted upon to “make up the difference in the value of the skins in the number of muskrats caught.”⁶¹ In fact, so many muskrats were being caught that the newly formed Louisiana Conservation Commission recommended the initiation of a trapping season beginning on November 1 and ending on February 1. The state legislature approved formal trapping seasons under Louisiana Act 204 of 1912, and during the 1913-14 inaugural season, 5,002,640 pelts were obtained. Of those, 4,284,000 pelts were muskrat, 401,000 were raccoon, 105,000 were mink, 178,000 opossum, and 2,860 were otter. In the wake of the 1913-14 season, the number of muskrat’s caught signaled to trappers that this animal was the future of the industry, but in terms of overall value, muskrat pelts would remain second to that of the raccoon for several succeeding years.⁶²

Despite the extraordinary crop yields, trappers resented attempts by the Louisiana Conservation Commission to create additional trapping regulations. Along with the implementation of seasons in 1912, trappers were required to purchase a \$10 hunting license, and almost immediately, citizens began protesting the authority of the new commission. In one newspaper article from *The Daily Picayune*, a man from Barataria named Jules Fisher declared his intention to file suit against the Conservation Commission. While Mr. Fisher was a fisherman by trade, he like many others thought the license fee was unfair. He claimed that it did not take in account the small value of the average trapper’s catch, and by paying this “tax,” trappers would have seen their profits greatly diminished. He ultimately resorted to the old argument that trappers

⁶¹ Walter S. Chansler, *Successful Trapping Methods: A Guide to Good Trapping*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1968), 76.

⁶² Arthur, 51-56.
Biennial Report, 82.

should be “rewarded rather than taxed” for ridding the state of muskrats “as they are classed as varmints and are injurious to plantations.”⁶³ Unfortunately for Mr. Fisher and the trappers, the state had no intention of eliminating the fee; the Conservation Commission had designed both the seasons and the license to limit the number of muskrats caught so as to increase the number of those skins rated prime.

In 1914, the burgeoning muskrat industry in Louisiana was dealt a temporary blow by the onset of World War I in Europe, but ultimately, the crisis became a boon for local trappers by forcing American furriers to invest in domestic trading centers. Due to attacks by German U-boats, most shippers were unable to deliver their cargo of raw pelts to the European fur houses. London, the primary fur capital, was hit especially hard by the blockade, so the decision was made to shift the bulk of their production to Canada, a dominion of Great Britain. The disorganization of the European market became an advantage for American fur centers like St. Louis and New York, which were looking to exert influence in global markets by handling both the supply and manufacture of raw pelts. In 1913, St. Louis held its first fur auction, and thereafter, all Alaskan sealskin were sent there to be sold. In the years that followed, New York managed to secure the majority of other furs that were going to auction, and by 1916, the city could easily boast that it was the world’s greatest fur market.⁶⁴

Even though the European markets reopened during the inter-war years and some of the trade reverted to London, New York and St. Louis continued to hold auctions. The U.S. economy was on the rise, and advertisements attempted to attract those with disposable incomes. After being labeled luxuries during wartime, fashionable items like

⁶³ “Trappers’ License,” *The Daily Picayune*, 30 Oct. 1912, America’s Historical Newspapers Database.

⁶⁴ Wilcox, 223.

fur were again gaining in popularity. Fortunately for the Louisiana muskrat, Americans furriers had learned new production methods as a result of wartime scarcity, and therefore, they were easily able to meet the increased demand of American consumers during the Roaring Twenties. Their innovative shearing and dying techniques paved the way for an entire market of cheaper, imitation furs to arise within the United States, whereby the pelts of less-desired animals like muskrat were sought as substitutes for rarer, more expensive fur-bearing animals such as Alaskan seal. In 1911, “pelagic and land-sealing was suspended for a period of years” in an effort “to increase diminishing herds,” so American furriers introduced a new product made from muskrat that was meant to simulate the look and feel of seal fur. Sold under the pseudonym “Hudson Seal, the Louisiana muskrat continued its rise into the Depression years of the 1930s.”⁶⁵

Branching Out

During the years immediately following World War I, the Louisiana fur industry matured into a truly profitable enterprise, posting prices per pelt, at times, in excess of a dollar fifty. Therefore, it would be prudent at this point to discuss the daily lives of the army of people whose efforts made the business of catching muskrat such a success: the trappers. As previously explained, the original muskrat trappers were former alligator hunters and farmers who recreationally trapped, and most of these people were from either a French or Spanish background. Those of Spanish descent, known as Isleños, resided primarily in Southeast Louisiana, whereas those of French descent, known as Cajuns, were mainly located in South Central and Southwest Louisiana. Although they consisted of fewer individuals, other early trappers included Native Americans groups

⁶⁵ Wilcox, 156, 223.

like the Choctaw, Crapelles, Blios, and Dardares.⁶⁶ As the transition to muskrat trapping began, the amount of information that remained unknown about this animal created a staggering learning curve for the trappers. They were forced to unravel an entirely new method of skinning and preparing their catch for market so as to retain its value. Plus, initially, steel traps and pelt stretchers were not made exclusively for muskrats, so early trappers had to experiment with these tools to determine the correct size. Finally, ignorance about the ability to maneuver through marsh terrain, nicknamed the “trembling ground,” led many trappers to setup along shorelines and check their gear using flat-bottomed boats called pirogues.⁶⁷

The high prices and ever increasing returns attracted additional trappers from across and outside the state to descend upon the marshes in the hope of staking their own claim to this newfound wealth. Prior to the 1922-23 trapping season, Carlton Pool, a reporter from *The Times Picayune*, declared that the Department of Conservation was anticipating as many as 20,000 to 35,000 people to acquire trapping licenses. While the most efficient trappers could expect to earn “over \$1000 a month,” the majority of trappers could only look forward to taking home “about \$750 a season.” Each year much of this money would go to purchasing or maintaining equipment like “boats, traps, rubber boots, and lumber for building shacks.”⁶⁸ While the season only lasted a little over three months, work began for the trapper weeks in advance. He would select a piece of land, transport equipment to the site, proceed to build his palmetto or wooden dwelling, and blaze trails through the marsh grass. Once those objectives were completed, the trapper

⁶⁶ “Trapping in Louisiana”

⁶⁷ O’Neil, *The Muskrat*, 46.

⁶⁸ Carlton F. Pool, “Louisiana Fur Animals One of State’s Assets,” *The Times-Picayune*, 3 December 1922, America’s Historical Newspaper Database

looked to preparing his gear. Old traps had to be lubricated, but often, most were rusted beyond repair and required replacement. Trappers purchased No. 2-0 steel traps with spring-triggered jaws that were smooth along the inside edge. Such jaws were necessary to prevent the severing of an occupant's leg and/or damaging its pelt. However, since they were shiny and would reflect light from the moon, new traps had to be dulled by leaving them out in the weather to create a thin layer of rust. When the season started, the traps were either submerged along shorelines or placed along known runs and covered with grass; most muskrat trappers chose to leave them unbaited.⁶⁹ As the years passed, the Department of Conservation created regulations that required individual trappers to set no more than 250 traps, check each trap daily, and ensure that each trap was at least twenty feet from a nest.⁷⁰

During the actual season, the quality of life in the marsh varied among the trappers. For the purpose of discussion, Carlton Pool, columnist for *The Times Picayune*, organized trappers into a series of unofficial classes: houseboat trappers, lugger or sailboat trappers, trappers with family homes near the harvest area, and trappers without access to transportation or housing. Obviously, those with some sort of water-borne vehicle had the advantage of mobility and could cover large tracts of land, but those with houseboats also had a decent place to sleep and store their catch. Since their wives and children often lived with them and could assist in preparing the harvested muskrats, trappers whose homes were located in the within the vicinity of their gear were perhaps the most comfortable throughout the season, whereas the poorest trappers eked out a living similar to that of a squatter, making camp in the middle of the marsh. Pool,

⁶⁹ "Trapping in Louisiana"

⁷⁰ Will Branan, "Muskrat vs. Mink," *Louisiana Conservation Review* (Winter 1937-38), 60, 63.

however, was quick to add that the relative differences between trappers' monetary situations did nothing to diminish the amount of effort a given trapper put into his work. A typical trapper's day was rough and began early in the morning, shooting ducks and checking traps from the previous night. From mid-day and throughout the afternoon, trappers completed daily chores like skinning, de-fleshing, and stretching pelts as well as plucking duck feathers from the morning shoot. Others spent their mornings concentrated on fur and afternoons on other pursuits like fishing. The diet of the majority of trappers was modest, consisting of a supply of bacon or salt pork, coffee, and any other meat that could be shot or trapped. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of trapping was the long period of time in which the individual trapper spent alone in the marsh, so as Pool suggested, pelt dealers who had any chance of gaining the trust of a trapper had to be willing to endure the same conditions and spend time getting to know them in their camps.⁷¹

By 1921, muskrat trapping became so well-organized and profitable that the Department of Conservation pushed the state legislature to add additional fees to protect the crop from exploitation and manipulation of price from corporate interests inside and outside the state. The license fee was reduced to \$1, but a two percent "severance tax" had to be paid in order to ship pelts directly out of state. Additionally, a fur buyers license of \$5 was created, entitling the bearer to "ship to points within the limits of the state," whereas a fur dealers license of \$25 permitted the bearer to "buy furs and ship them out of state." These new licenses had to be obtained from the local sheriff's office prior to the opening of a given season. Additionally, buyers and dealers had to obtain Department of Conservation tags to affix to their pelts to identify all transactions

⁷¹ "Trapping in Louisiana"

involving Louisiana fur. Pelts shipped within the state had tags printed in black, while out-of-state shipments were printed in red.⁷² According to a bulletin by the Department of Conservation, until the 1919-20 trapping season, accurate counts were recorded for the number of pelts taken, but “the collection of statistics was interrupted when raw fur dealers of New Orleans, who objected to the state’s fur severance tax, fought its collection in the courts,” appealing the decision all the way to the Supreme Court.⁷³ One particular case known as *Lacoste v. Louisiana Department of Conservation* was heard by the justices in October 1923, but the case ended with the Supreme Court affirming the decisions of both the Courts of Appeals and the trial court. “The court held that the legislation was a valid exertion of the police power of the state to conserve and protect wild life for common benefit.” The court believed the tax was not arbitrarily collected, but rather, “was imposed upon all skins...and no interference with interstate commerce resulted from the enforcement of the act.”⁷⁴ A “compromise of \$61,842.47” was achieved for settlement of the outstanding tax between fur dealers and the Department of Conservation, but “the specified figures to the number of fur animals taken was not obtained.”⁷⁵

As far as the Department of Conservation was concerned, licensing was a means to ensure quality control, and more importantly, it created additional revenue streams, which could be used to fund ongoing projects which were severely lacking like warden services. The state legislature was able to pass a variety of laws protecting Louisiana’s

⁷² “Trappers Can Ship Furs Out of State,” *The Times Picayune*, 19 Nov. 1921, America’s Historical Newspapers Database.

⁷³ Arthur, 54-55.

⁷⁴ *Lacoste Et Al. v. Department of Conservation of the State of Louisiana*, LEXIS 2820, No. 65 (Supreme Court of the United States 1924) <http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.uno.edu/us/lnacademic/> (accessed August 29, 2009).

⁷⁵ Arthur, 54-55.

fur-bearing animals as well as its other wildlife, but since the department was unable to provide an effective means of enforcing state regulations, criminals exploited the power vacuum and were allowed to prosper from poaching. In 1923, Edward Avery McIlhenny was acting superintendent of the State Game Farm located on his property at Avery Island and served the state “without compensation.” As quoted from the *Biennial Report of the Department of Conservation* from 1918:

The purpose of this farm is to restock the parishes of this state which have been depleted of certain species of game, to introduce other varieties of game into the state which, through experiments, have been shown will exist and thrive under our conditions, and to induce farmers to raise wild game in captivity...⁷⁶

Since he had been involved in the creation of four of the state’s first wildlife refuges and held a distinguished, unpaid position on behalf of the state, McIlhenny’s opinion held a great deal of weight among the officials at the Department of Conservation, and as a result, numerous letters flowed between the conservation department and his office at the Tabasco Company, concerning a wide range of wildlife issues.⁷⁷ In two of those communications authored by McIlhenny from 1923, the topic of sporadic warden service was addressed. At the end of the 1922-23 trapping season, on February 27th, McIlhenny wrote Conservation Commissioner Alexander, asking him to “please keep up for the months of March and April warden service on the State Game Preserves.” McIlhenny

⁷⁶ *Biennial Report*, 11.

⁷⁷ In addition to his Bird City on Avery Island, McIlhenny facilitated the founding of the Ward-McIlhenny Wildlife Refuge (now the State Wildlife Refuge), Russell Sage Foundation-Marsh Island Wildlife Refuge, and Rockefeller Foundation Wildlife Refuge by utilizing his contacts with wealthy philanthropists, who donated land in Cameron, Vermillion, and Iberia Parishes to the State of Louisiana for these refuges.

discovered “that poachers intend going to Marsh Island and the State Game Preserves as soon as the wardens are withdrawn.”⁷⁸

Unfortunately, as McIlhenny’s letter from May 23rd addressed to Governor Parker showed, the state failed to give credence to his warning, and while he was out of the town for a couple of weeks, “a very considerable amount of poaching” had taken place on the state refuges. McIlhenny explained that due to rising water, muskrats in the area were forced to seek refuge on top of their nests, which made them easy targets for the hunters who shot them. He stated, “I am informed that certain fur buyers have purchased from three to five thousand fur bearing animals in the last two weeks.” Since he knew that the state was not sending out wardens, McIlhenny admitted to having personally placed four wardens on his payroll to inspect the state preserves once biweekly, but after this incident, he decided to put them “on full pay, with the expectation that should the State later be in funds for this service I will be repaid.” With exasperation, McIlhenny explained, “I can not afford to see the work that I have striven so hard to accomplish, go to pieces for want of warden service.” He continued by saying that the letter was meant to illustrate “the necessity of protection” and closed by lamenting the fact that there was no conservation law on the books to “prohibit the illegal buying of furs after the legal trapping season...closed.”⁷⁹

In the years to come, warden service was increased, leading to frequent arrests and convictions made on behalf of the Department of Conservation for poaching, but increasingly, as the value per acre of prime muskrat trapping land started to rise, trappers

⁷⁸ E. A. McIlhenny to M. L. Alexander, Commissioner of the Louisiana Department of Conservation, February 27, 1923, E. A. McIlhenny Collection, Avery Island, Louisiana.

⁷⁹ E. A. McIlhenny to John M. Parker, Governor of the State of Louisiana, May 23, 1923, E. A. McIlhenny Collection, Avery Island, Louisiana.

confronted obstacles in retaining access to their favorite trapping spots. Carlton Pool explained that drainage projects brought “large areas of marsh land into cultivation,” but more disturbing to trappers was the “posting of prairie lands by the owners to keep hunters and trappers off.”⁸⁰ According to a 1967 trapping guide, trappers in Louisiana often fought over the right to trap certain areas of the marsh, but perhaps the most dramatic expression of anger came during the “Trappers’ War.”⁸¹

The violence that occurred in November 1926 involved a specific community of trappers: the Isleños, who inhabited Delacroix Island in St. Bernard. Ever since their ancestors arrived in Louisiana in 1778 from the Canary Islands, the Isleños had developed an isolated settlement deep in the marsh based around their common Spanish culture. With miles of marsh and canals surrounding them, Isleños had gotten used to being able conduct bootleg operations and trapping on the property of others without any reprisal from the outside world. However, as had happened in other places, landowners began enforcing property rights as soon as they realized the value of the muskrats that inhabited their land. “Under the Swamp Act of 1850, the United States government gave delta marshes to the State of Louisiana, and in turn, sold or leased the seemingly worthless land to individuals for pennies an acre.” As time passes and land values remained low, numerous owners of the “useless” marshland defaulted on their taxes, and the state repossessed its claim on the property. Consequently, while the land remained a state asset, trappers were able to choose any segment of the marsh as the base from which to set their traps and asked no one for permission, but all of this changed in the 1920s when the legislature allowed former landowners “to reclaim their lands by simply paying

⁸⁰ “Trapping in Louisiana”

⁸¹ McCracken and Van Cleve, 28.

the back taxes.” If taxes remained outstanding, the state sold the land to the highest bidder, and many fur dealers were able to purchase large swaths of land from underneath the feet of the unsuspecting Isleños.⁸²

As land within the marsh reverted to previous owners or was sold to individuals from outside the area, the Isleños increasingly came to find “no trespassing signs” placed in their favorite stretches of muskrat marsh. In these situations, trappers were faced with the choice of signing leases with the new landowners or trapping illegally and facing criminal charges, but defiantly, the Isleños resisted making deals with those they deemed “outsiders.” Therefore, prized, muskrat-trapping grounds were leased to whoever could afford the lease, and landowners “hired armed guards to protect the outside trappers from the Isleños, who burned the outsiders’ cabins.” Considering themselves victims of injustice, trappers banded together to form the St. Bernard Trappers’ Association to fight for their right to trap, but unfortunately, the Isleños chose the local political boss, Judge Leander Perez, and his ally, Sheriff L. A. Meraux, to represent their interests. “Manipulating the legal and political system,” the pair “developed a land-grabbing scheme” to con their clients, and when the trappers discovered his plot, they attempted to fight Perez in court to no avail. If they wanted to trap legally, they “had no choice but to play by Perez’s rules.” The trappers remained defiant, and Perez began issuing warrants for the arrest of his political enemies. “The Isleños had their backs against the wall, and they armed themselves in anticipation of trouble.” The battle took place on November 16, 1926 when several hundred armed and angry trappers waited on top of the parish levees

⁸² Bryan M. Gowland, “The Delacroix Isleños and the Trapper’s War in St. Bernard Parish,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 44, no. 4 (Autumn, 2003), 411-441. JSTOR. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4233965> (accessed 6 August 2009).

for the arrival of an oyster lugger carrying a posse of Perez supporters. Gunfire broke out as the ship arrived; 11 people were wounded, and Samuel Gowland, a Perez loyalist, died. In retaliation, Meraux tried to arrest many of the trappers involved, but the outsider trappers feared for their lives and left their camps. After appealing for help from authorities across the state, including Governor Oramel Simpson, Perez and Meraux found themselves without allies. The Trappers' War came to an end on November 23 when the Perez family sold its trapping lands to Manuel Molero, who became administrator of the Acme Land Company, which sold or leased land to the Isleño trappers. Outstanding lawsuits were dropped, and the St. Bernard Trappers' Association was again allowed access to the muskrat marsh.⁸³

Despite the “victory” of the Isleños, the Trappers' War solidified the system of leasing as the preferred method for attaining trapping lands. As time passed, individual and corporate landowners attempted to bring stability to the lives of trappers by offering them a set amount for each skinned and dried pelt, but these entities were able to make additional money by supplying trappers with cabins and boats as well as delivering fresh supplies as much as several times a week. Often, these supplies were purchased on credit, and when the trapper redeemed his harvest, the debts would be settled out of the trapper's profits. The goal was to give trappers few reasons to leave the marsh during the annual harvest, and in this way, concentrate all of their efforts on the muskrats from a specific plot of land, increasing the overall yield.⁸⁴

As the Roaring Twenties drew to a close, the muskrat industry would face new challenges and opportunities. In 1927, as previously mentioned, the Great Mississippi

⁸³ Gowland, 411-444.

⁸⁴ McCracken and Van Cleve, 28.

Valley Flood resulted in an intentional dynamiting of a levee in St. Bernard to relieve the strain on New Orleans levees. The flood lasted 108 days, and despite the efforts of the Department of Conservation and local trappers to build rafts for the “refugee’rats,” “an estimated one to two million muskrats” drowned or died of exposure. The department immediately “prohibited the sale and purchase of furs from the inundated areas, thereby protecting the animals from a frenzied early harvest,” but still, officials feared that the area around Delacroix Island, one of the most productive areas in the state, would take years to recover. Thousands of trappers and their families had to be relocated, and with the exception of the Molero’s Acme Land & Fur Company, none of the trappers were compensated for their losses in trapping revenue.⁸⁵ However, following the 1928-29 season, the Department of Conservation reported in their magazine the *Louisiana Conservation News* that the state had fared better than expected without the production from St. Bernard. The state muskrat totals for that year were 5,922,070 worth \$8,526,740.⁸⁶ While St. Bernard’s yields would never completely recover, within “two and one half-years,” trapping resumed, and during the 1929-30 season, 900,000 muskrats were caught.⁸⁷

In the months prior to the Great Stock Market Crash of 1929, the Department of Conservation looked for additional ways to market the muskrat. One article in the *Louisiana Conservation News* suggested alternative uses for the flesh of the muskrat because over the years, trappers had wasted “millions of pounds of muskrat meat that

⁸⁵ Gay M. Gomez, “Perspective, Power, and Priorities: New Orleans and the Mississippi River Flood of 1927,” *Transforming New Orleans Environs: Centuries of Change*, ed. Craig Colton (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 117-120

⁸⁶ “Commercial Value of 1928-29 Fur Crop Greatest Ever Harvested,” *Louisiana Conservation News* 4, no. 4 (July-Aug. 1929): 19-20.

⁸⁷ Gomez, “Perspective,” 119.

should have been utilized for some economic purpose.” The state proposed an experimental program where “marsh hare,” or muskrat meat, would be collected, frozen, and sold to several places where a market for the product already existed: Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C. The article claimed that in those areas, the muskrat was considered a “delicacy,” explaining that the flavor excelled over “rabbit and squirrel” and that its “feeding habits are cleaner than those of the chicken and the hog.” However, even if the meat was not used for human consumption, opportunity existed to use it for “chicken food, dog biscuits, and animal cakes.”⁸⁸ While there is no indication that the program ever left the experimental phase, the idea of creating additional uses for the muskrat flesh would be revived during World War II.

As the United States entered the Great Depression of the 1930s, creative marketing became necessary to ensure that the muskrat industry would survive. With nearly a quarter of all Americans out of work, luxury goods like fur coats were no longer a priority, but Louisiana would fare better than other fur producing areas during the troubled economic times. Since the state could always supply great numbers of raw pelts, muskrat fur was increasingly marketed as a cheaper alternative to more expensive furs. In the past, muskrat had been sold as “Hudson Seal,” an imaginary animal, but “in consequence of the truth in advertising campaigns initiated by newspapers and other periodicals,” manufacturers were forced to add “Seal-Dyed Muskrat” to sales tags underneath the existing alias. By the late 1920s, fashions had shifted away from the extremely rare seal, and new fur-bearers like mink became in vogue. As a result, a new muskrat product was introduced to the marketplace called “Southern Mink,” and this

⁸⁸ “Muskrat Meat Now Considered Great Delicacy in the North,” *Louisiana Conservation News* 4, no. 2 (March-April 1929), 8-9.

fabrication would also be followed by “dyed muskrat.” However, at the time, such marketing was probably beneficial because women knew exactly what they were purchasing.⁸⁹ A customer could buy a fur garment with the look and feel of a higher valued fur, but it was considerably less expensive. An article entitled “Muskrat vs. Mink” in the *Louisiana Conservation Review* from the winter of 1937-38 stated that a customer could get a muskrat coat for \$150 compared to a mink coat for \$1,200. The author was also quick to state that the difference in price “by no means reflects the difference in quality or popularity of the pelts.”⁹⁰

In December 1941, the United States entered World War II on the side of the Allies, and as a result, the federal government took control of the nation’s natural resources, including the fur industry. In 1942, the *Louisiana Conservationist* reported, “The Louisiana Department of Conservation has been placed on a war-time basis, and all activities have been directly geared to the war effort.”⁹¹ While the mood of the magazine’s articles in decidedly patriotic, one column called “Conservation and War” called upon those people “who are not permitted to join up with the armed forces” to stay “alert to head off any attempt to exploit our wildlife resources under the guise of national defense.”⁹² In terms of the fur industry, the department stated of Louisiana’s contribution, “Our fur resources will be heavily called upon since imports from China, Russia, and Australia that normally supply half of the \$250,000,000 annual fur

⁸⁹ “Muskrat Changes its Name from ‘Hudson Seal’ to ‘Southern Mink,’” *Louisiana Conservation News* 4, no. 2 (March-April 1929): 11.

⁹⁰ Will Branam, “Muskrat vs. Mink,” *Louisiana Conservation Review* (Winter 1937-38): 61.

⁹¹ Joseph L. McHugh, “Conservation Second Only to War as Vital Problem of American People: Conservation Dept. Placed on War Time Basis,” *Louisiana Conservationist* 1, no.1 (Dec. 1942): 4.

⁹² “Conservation and War,” *Louisiana Conservationist* 1, no.1 (Dec. 1942): 2.

requirement are now cut off.” Such materials were used by the Soviets during “the German offensive in last year’s [1941’s] sub-zero weather.”⁹³

In addition to the pelts themselves, the Department of Conservation endeavored to promote various uses for muskrat carcasses as a part of the war effort, creating new business opportunities with federal backing. In 1943, an announcement was made in the *Louisiana Conservationist* stating the following headline: “Louisiana Muskrat May Help Alleviate Nation’s Meat Shortage Problem.” The department had invited a food distributor based out of New York to Louisiana “to negotiate for the purchase of large quantities of muskrat meat to be shipped to eastern and middle western markets.”⁹⁴ On January 30, 1943, the Department of Conservation sent several dozen muskrat to Washington, D.C. where the House Restaurant cooked and served them to key figures like Vice-President Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture and Food Administrator Claude Wickard, and Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn. As a result of the event, the Louisiana muskrat received national attention, and the department reported that they had been receiving clippings about the muskrat from newspapers around the country for several weeks.⁹⁵ Plus, in order to give cooks ideas about how to prepare muskrat as food, the *Louisiana Conservationist* periodically printed and New Orleans radio stations sometimes featured recipes like the following: fried muskrat, braised marsh hare, smothered muskrat, pickled muskrat, muskrat pie, and muskrat with tomato sauce.⁹⁶

⁹³ McHugh, 4.

⁹⁴ “Louisiana Muskrat May Help Alleviate Nation’s Meat Shortage: Large Quantities Shipped to Market,” *Louisiana Conservationist* 1, no. 2 (Jan. 1943): 1, 5.

⁹⁵ “Dignitaries Give Louisiana Muskrat Approval at Washington Luncheon,” *Louisiana Conservationist* 1, no. 3 (Feb. 1943): 7.

⁹⁶ Dozier, Herbert L. “Suggested Muskrat Recipes.” *Louisiana Conservationist* 2, no. 2 (Jan. 1944), 4.

Two other muskrat carcass byproducts announced by the Department of Conservation as possible revenue streams for trappers during World War II were the collection of both animal fat and musk glands. As a means of controlling waste, the department proposed the collection of this fat from the muskrat carcass after the War Production Board announced that animal fat could be rendered to produce the glycerin needed to make high explosives. Conservation Commissioner Joseph McHugh estimated that over a million pounds of raw fats were discarded every year, and Louisiana trappers had the opportunity to collect two and one-half cents a pound, totaling about \$25,000. Sportsman's Clubs were offered by the department as potential collection depots.⁹⁷ Finally, the two musk glands collected from muskrat carcasses were purchased by perfume manufacturers. The musk perfume was meant to be marketed as a substitute for a Chinese product, which "was scarce now due to limited shipping facilities." The department estimated that trappers could reap "\$20,000 in additional revenue" over the course of a season.⁹⁸

In an attempt to stave off inflation, as ordered by President Roosevelt, the Office of Price Administration (OPA) enacted a price ceiling in 1942, dictating the amount that the state or an individual trapper could receive per pelt. The OPA decided that the maximum price would be set at the highest value individually received in March 1942. By 1943, the Department of Conservation was worried about how the price ceiling would affect the willingness of trappers to sell their harvest, but the OPA was worried about the effects that would be created by changing the ceiling in the middle of an ongoing

⁹⁷ "Fats From Fur Animals Valuable," *Louisiana Conservationist*, 1, no. 2 (Jan. 1943), 5.

⁹⁸ "Louisiana Muskrat May Help," 5.

trapping season.⁹⁹ A series of documents found in the E. A. McIlhenny Collection on Avery Island sheds additional light onto this situation. In December 1943, Conservation Commissioner Joseph McHugh sent two Western Union telegrams to Washington, D.C. The first, dated December 14th, was sent to all seven Louisiana Congressmen and the state's two Senators, alerting them to the "standstill" faced by "ten thousand trappers and their families" and requesting that they "contact proper authorities and insist that muskrat prices" be changed.¹⁰⁰ The second, dated December 29th, was sent directly to Chester Bowles, Director of the Office of Price Administration. McHugh explained the urgency needed in "increasing price ceiling for this years catch and also to equalize local situation where much higher prices are being paid behalf the industry and to protect the fiscal policy of this state I recommend a ceiling price of two dollars average be granted."¹⁰¹

On January 6, 1944, Edward Avery McIlhenny wrote a letter to Commissioner McHugh in which he stated his indignation over the OPA's rigid price ceiling. McIlhenny's primary complaint was that the trappers on his lands did not have a fur sale in March 1942, so the OPA rules stated that their price be set at the highest level in February 1942, which was \$1.20. McIlhenny explained that "fur buyers from New York, Chicago, St. Louis, New Orleans, and elsewhere are now offering \$1.80 per skin for No. 1 rats." He apparently made a sale at the higher price for his trappers and was contacted by the OPA for being in violation of the price ceiling, demanding that his future sales be conducted at \$1.20. He called this price "ruinous" for his trappers and stated his belief

⁹⁹ "Muskrat Prices Remain Frozen Despite Protests," *Louisiana Conservationist* 2, no. 2 (Jan. 1944): 1, 7.

¹⁰⁰ Joseph L. McHugh, Commissioner of the Louisiana Department of Conservation, to U. S. Senators John Overton and Allen Ellender; U. S. Congressmen F. Edward Hebert, Paul Maloney, James Domangeaux, Henry Larcade, Overton Brooks, Leonard Allen, and Charles McKinsey, 14 December 1943, E. A. McIlhenny Collection, Avery Island, Louisiana.

¹⁰¹ Joseph L. McHugh, Commissioner of the Louisiana Department of Conservation, to Chester A. Bowles, Director of the Office of Price Administration, 29 December 1943, E. A. McIlhenny Collection, Avery Island, Louisiana.

that a fair ceiling would be \$2.00 for a No.1 and \$1.90 for a No.2. As a result of the hostile price environment, he advised his “fifty to sixty” trappers that they should “not sell their muskrat skins at the low price of \$1.20 each” and offered to hold them for the trappers until “this matter is adjusted.”¹⁰² In a letter dated January 14, 1944, Armand Daspit, Director of the Fur and Wildlife Refuge Division, wrote McIlhenny to ensure him that the Department of Conservation had done everything in its power to rectify the situation. Daspit sent him the copies of the West Union telegrams as proof of their resolve, and told McIlhenny that the Congressmen and Senators gave similar replies: “that the 1942 ceilings should be observed until such time as a new ceiling is established.”¹⁰³

Collapse of a Rodent Dynasty

By the end of 1945-46 trapping season, the future of the muskrat fur industry in Louisiana looked promising. World War II had reached its dramatic conclusion with the atomic bombing and surrender of Japan, U.S. troops were beginning to return home after four years abroad, and even though the rebuilding process was just beginning, Louisiana trappers anticipated the slow reopening of the foreign fur markets. During this first season following the war, despite the fact that the wartime Office of Price Administration in Washington, D.C. continued to maintain fixed prices on raw pelts, Louisiana’s muskrat industry recorded its greatest returns: 8,337,411 muskrats worth \$12,506,116.50; a total fur harvest worth \$15,553,185.¹⁰⁴ For the next two trapping seasons, the value of the

¹⁰² Edward Avery McIlhenny to Joseph L. McHugh, Commissioner of the Louisiana Department of Conservation, 6 January 1944, E. A. McIlhenny Collection, Avery Island, Louisiana.

¹⁰³ Armand P. Daspit, Director of the Fur and Wildlife Refuge Division, to Edward Avery McIlhenny, 14 January 1944, E. A. McIlhenny Collection, Avery Island, Louisiana.

¹⁰⁴ Lyle S. St. Amant, *Louisiana Wildlife Inventory and Management Plan*. Pittman-Robertson Section, Fish and Game Division, Louisiana Wild Life and Fisheries Commission (New Orleans: 1959), 308.

total fur harvests remained in an elevated state: the 1946-47 season reached \$9,214,782.90, while the 1947-48 season boasted \$11,315,990.30.¹⁰⁵ Yet, despite having three above average seasons in a row, the large monetary returns hid an unsettling fact that would soon turn the fur industry on its head: the muskrat crop was beginning to shrink.

From the late 1940s until the mid-1970s, the Louisiana muskrat population slipped slowly into a state of severe decline from which it never fully recovered. No longer were trappers going to bring in the record numbers of raw muskrat pelts that had become so typical and expected over the years. Indeed, by the early 1960s, trappers were barely able to obtain 500,000 muskrat pelts in any given season.¹⁰⁶ At first, many trappers believed that the muskrat population had reached its inevitable, cyclical peak with the 1945-46 season, and therefore, the species was entering its customary period of decline and renewal. Despite diminishing returns, many trappers stayed devoted to their craft because the price per pelt remained fairly high. Unfortunately, when prospects failed to improve after several years and the price per pelt began falling, trappers were faced with a difficult choice: hang on for better times by concentrating on other furs, or leave trapping behind in favor of more stable forms of employment.

With their livelihood seemingly in flux, the state tried to reassure trappers that the decline of the region's key fur-bearing species was normal, and more importantly, temporary. Officials for the Louisiana Department of Wild Life and Fisheries used their publication the *Louisiana Conservationist* to rationalize the situation for anxious trappers.

¹⁰⁵ Ted O'Neil, *The Muskrat*, 134.

Mel Washburn, "Evolution of the Trapping Industry," *Louisiana Conservationist*, 4, no. 1 & 2 (Sept.-Oct. 1951): 8.

¹⁰⁶ Ted O'Neil, "Louisiana's Fur Industry Today," *Louisiana Conservationist*, 15, no. 1-2 (Jan.-Feb. 1963), 5.

Beginning in 1949, articles in the magazine explained that the natural peak that the muskrat population experienced about every ten years had been met with severe drought during the summer months. According to department biologists, prolonged drought created dire consequences for the semi-aquatic muskrats by interfering with their basic drives as a species: eating, breeding, and maintenance of their homes. As pools of fresh or slightly brackish water in the marsh began to dry up, the parched earth made it difficult for muskrats to obtain the roots of the three-cornered grass that the species coveted for food and building materials, and consequently, the animals started to migrate in search of a more suitable environment. Adults increasingly became malnourished due to lack of food, and in their distressed state, the desire to mate was suppressed. If mature muskrat pairs managed to produce young, the kits were generally born sickly, and frequently, died. The situation became even worse as the muskrats were forced to forgo cleaning their dens due to lack of freshwater. The combination of little rain and consistent heat increased the salinity of the remaining water supply, and therefore, the muskrats were unable to properly cleanse their homes of wastes that had built up over time. As conditions in their dens deteriorated, skin diseases and internal parasites took their toll on the muskrat population, and when caught during the regular trapping season, the animals were found to have matted and damaged coats, causing them to receive poorer grades and a lower purchase price for the trapper. Yet, the tone of the Department of Wild Life and Fisheries in these articles remained confident. Once the weather improved, the remaining muskrats would be able to again bring stability and prosperity back to the marsh.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Armand P. Daspit, "Trappers Pile Up Big Tale of Woe," *Louisiana Conservationist*, 1, no. 7 (March 1949), 16.

Despite their outwardly optimistic outlook, the Department of Wild Life and Fisheries seemed to realize early on that this particular production cycle was unfolding differently than in the past, and while the protracted drought appeared to be the most probable explanation for the muskrat industry's low crop yields, department officials could not rule out additional causes. The increase in the raccoon population was another reason offered by the department in a *Louisiana Conservationist* article by Director of the Fur and Refuge Division Armand Daspit. He explained that the price per pelt for each raccoon taken had fallen considerably by the late 1940s, fetching nearly "one tenth that of an ordinary muskrat." Also, due to the size and weight of the raccoons, trappers could only bring in a few animals at a time to be skinned, and since so much time and effort went into securing these large hides, trappers could no longer justify the expense necessary to keep this fur-bearer profitable. Consequently, the raccoon population was left untapped and allowed to grow in numbers. Being enterprising and opportunistic animals, foraging raccoons saw trapped muskrats as an easy target for a meal, and on any given night, Daspit estimated that "20 to 30 rats caught" along a line of traps were consumed by these bandits. The losses from the traps were only compounded by raids carried out on muskrat dens. Not only were the contents of the dens scattered and mature muskrats forced to flee, but the raccoons often ate the vulnerable kits that were found within the nests. Daspit stated that the casualties associated with these raccoon attacks amounted to millions in lost revenue for trappers.¹⁰⁸

In addition to the effects of the ongoing drought and losses associated with raccoon attacks, the Department of Wild Life and Fisheries provided one last intriguing possibility for the muskrat's decline through its discussion of the growing sulphur, oil,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 16.

and gas industries in Louisiana. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, crews from various exploration companies had descended into the marsh in order to survey the terrain, test drill at designated sites, and install the necessary components needed to exploit the state's geologic resources. However, by granting mineral and energy interests nearly unrestricted access the marsh, the state unwittingly caused great damage to the ecosystem in which the muskrats thrived. Marsh buggies that were used to reach remote areas for surveying and testing as well as the network of ditches and canals that were dug to allow barge transport of heavy equipment to various work sites scarred the landscape and created outlets for saltwater to creep into muskrat habitat.¹⁰⁹ The construction of levees along the Mississippi and Atchafalaya Rivers for flood protection probably made the situation worse. Since levees denied these rivers the ability to overflow their banks, people felt more secure about living on the floodplain itself and proceeded to drain large portions of the marsh for farmland and human settlement, creating suburbs for cities like New Orleans. Yet, more importantly, the yearly supply of sediment, nutrients, and freshwater needed to flush saltwater out the remaining marshes had ceased. As the salinity of a given area changed, the vegetation that the marsh was able to sustain was forced to adapt, so the three-cornered grass favored by the muskrats would eventually be replaced by more salt-tolerant grasses or killed off completely. Meanwhile, the channels opened up by exploration crews would widen as a result of muskrat digging, tidal erosion, and storm surge, and after several years had passed, open water would exist where previously freshwater marsh had stood.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Mel Washburn, "Plan Fur Industry Comeback," *Louisiana Conservationist*, 5, no. 3 (Nov.-Dec. 1952), 12.

¹¹⁰ Angelo William Palmisano, *Louisiana's Fur Industry* (Baton Rouge: 1971), 8-9, 11-13, 16.

Whatever ultimately caused the muskrat population to drop, which was probably a combination of the state's explanations, the damage done to trappers was readily becoming apparent. The increasing scarcity of the muskrat was only one part of a growing problem. While the summers continued to be dry, the winter trapping seasons were frequently impacted by above normal precipitation. The overly moist conditions impeded trappers' efforts to check their traps regularly, and in turn, they were unable to efficiently collect their share of the muskrats in a given area. Then, when trappers went to sell their wares, they found that they were receiving dramatically reduced prices. With the war over, Europe was again heavily exporting fur to the United States, flooding an already saturated market.¹¹¹ And since the government was no longer controlling the price of fur, trappers were forced to take whatever price they could get. In many cases, the price received did not cover the trapper's expenses, and as the years passed, fewer muskrat trappers decided to take the risk. In a *Louisiana Conservationist* article entitled "The Trapper Calls It A Bad Day," Mel Washburn, Director of the Education and Publicity Division for the Department of Wild Life and Fisheries, declared that the number of trappers had fallen from "the normal 12,000 to 15,000" to "no more than 7,000 to 8,000" during the 1950-51 season.¹¹² Some of the younger trappers were lured away by the promise of steady paychecks offered by oil and natural gas extraction companies, but for those left behind in the marsh, state officials touted what they believed would be a new source of wealth for the fur industry: a recent immigrant called the coypu, or nutria.

Knowing the destructive capability of the nutria, many Louisiana citizens today wonder why anyone ever took an interest in the animal. Yet, the same question was

¹¹¹ Daspit, "Trappers Pile," 16.

¹¹² Mel Washburn, "The Trapper Calls It A Bad Day," *Louisiana Conservationist*, 3, no. 6 (Feb. 1951), 12.

asked in reference to the muskrat at the time of its rise at the turn of the century. Like the muskrat, a market for nutria fur already existed in international circles, and since it was a considerably more robust specimen than the muskrat, the nutria's larger surface area provided manufacturers with more options in terms of use. Consequently, nutria pelts automatically received higher asking prices than muskrats. Another attractive quality of the nutria was the climate from which it came. In deciding whether to transplant a non-native species for the purpose of propagation, some assurance that it will survive is required. Hailing from Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay in South America, the nutria was already accustomed to the subtropical climate of Louisiana. Plus, there was a striking resemblance that existed between the nutria and the muskrat's physical features and behavior. From a promotional standpoint, the fact that the nutria's diet and ability to breed rapidly was nearly identical to the smaller rodent that trappers had been capturing for half century would have been reassuring. The Department of Wild Life and Fisheries hoped that the pair would be able to coexist in the same ecological niche, and since no one could conceive of a time when furs would not be marketable, state officials believed that trapping would be able to contain their combined numbers. However, there was a significant warning sign associated with the nutria that was known, but overlooked. While the muskrat stuck close to its den unless in distress, the nutria was a known to roam throughout its range.

Once one generally understands what officials saw as potentially beneficial about the nutria, the next logical step is to trace how the species actually came to reside in Louisiana, but it is difficult to discern the facts about nutria from romanticized fiction that surrounds their entrance to the state. In the eyes of many, one man bears

responsibility for the importation, breeding, and escape of nutria into the marsh: Edward Avery McIlhenny. However, many of the stories surrounding McIlhenny are fabrications. He did not import nutria directly from Argentina, nor was he the first to raise them in the state. Additionally, his nutria did not escape as a result of a hurricane, but rather, were intentionally released. In 2000, historian Shane Bernard tackled these and other myths about McIlhenny's involvement in the nutria business for an article in *Louisiana History*.¹¹³

In "M'Sieu Ned's Rat? Reconsidering the Origin of Nutria in Louisiana," Bernard stated that McIlhenny's first serious discussion concerning nutria occurred as a part of one of these communications in 1930. In a letter dated October 16th, Armand Daspit, Director of the Fur and Wild Life Division, told McIlhenny, "I am very much interested in introducing nutria into this country and think that if we could get several pairs and put them on our hunting grounds at the mouth of the Mississippi River that they would do well."¹¹⁴ After having reviewed information that Daspit had gathered from Paul Redington, Chief of the Bureau of Biological Survey in Washington, D.C., McIlhenny explained to the director that "sometime ago" he had gathered "quite a lot of data on this subject," and if the state were to import nutria, they should be "inclosed by a fence, as they are great wanderers."¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Shane Bernard is historian and curator to the McIlhenny Company and Avery Island, Inc. and administrator for the E. A. McIlhenny Collection at Avery Island on behalf of the McIlhenny Simmons family.

Shane K Bernard, "M'Sieu Ned's Rat? Reconsidering the Origin of Nutria in Louisiana: The E. A. McIlhenny Collection, Avery Island, Louisiana," *Louisiana History*, 43 (2000), 281-293.

¹¹⁴ Armand P. Daspit, Department of Conservation, to Edward Avery McIlhenny, October 16, 1930, E. A. McIlhenny Collection, Avery Island, Louisiana.

¹¹⁵ Edward Avery McIlhenny to Armand P. Daspit, Department of Conservation, October 18, 1930, E. A. McIlhenny Collection, Avery Island, Louisiana.

Recently discovered documents from the E. A. McIlhenny Collection on Avery Island show that McIlhenny was involved in another set of serious discussions in 1926, four years earlier. In one of those letters, William Grant, a New Orleans lawyer, contacted John Dymond, President of the Delta Duck Club, about the possibility of importing nutria from South America for \$150.00 per pair. Grant thought “that if 5 or 6 pairs could be obtained...they would help thin out the alligator grass and restore to fur production sections now worthless and barren.” He believed that the club could expect nutria pelts to receive a price of “\$3.50 to \$7.00,” and potentially, the club could sell excess “breeding stock to other land owners.”¹¹⁶ Upon reading Grant’s letter, Dymond contacted Stanley Arthur, then Director of the Fur and Wild Life Division of the Department of Conservation. Arthur said, “Personally, I am very much interested in this animal.” While he thought Grant’s estimate of \$150.00 per pair was a little bit extreme, Arthur explained, “I strongly advise to make the experiment. Proper permit will be given you from this office and I doubt if the U.S. Department of Agriculture would or could interfere.”¹¹⁷

Among this series of communications from the E. A. McIlhenny Collection was an unsigned, carbon copy of a letter dated October 29, 1926. In the message, the writer acknowledged that Dymond had given him a copy of the previous discussion with Arthur. Given his status as superintendent of the State Game Farm and advisor to the Department of Conservation as well as his possession of the entire series of letters, one can reasonably assume that McIlhenny would have been made privy to this ongoing

¹¹⁶ William B. Grant to John Dymond, President of Delta Duck Club, October 16, 1926, E. A. McIlhenny Collection, Avery Island, Louisiana.

¹¹⁷ Stanley C. Arthur to John Dymond, President of Delta Duck Club, October 23, 1926, E. A. McIlhenny Collection, Avery Island, Louisiana.

conversation and would have been prompted to respond. Presuming that McIlhenny was indeed the author, in the letter in question, he attempted to address Arthur's price concerns and suggested a number of people from whom nutria might be obtained, including from "Hagenback, the great wild animal man from Amsterdam, Holland." He also declared, "I believe that conditions in Louisiana are ideal for raising Coypu. They are much more valuable than muskrats, are prolific, and if once started will increase rapidly." Then, in closing, he explained, "Several years ago, I wrote the Bureau of Animal Industry, Biological Survey Department at Washington and they replied that they were studying the advisability of bringing Coypu to this country."¹¹⁸

Independently, Grant and Dymond contacted the Bureau of Biological Survey for any additional information that they may have possessed about the nutria. On November 17, 1926, Grant received a cordial reply to his letter from Acting Bureau Chief W. C. Henderson. Henderson warned of the risk associated with introducing species and suggested that Grant "confine the coypu rats to a large enclosure or liberate them in a limited area." He went on to say that if the Louisiana conservation authorities had no objection, then, Grant should be advised of a "15% ad valorem duty on the importation of these animals into the United States."¹¹⁹ Dymond, on the other hand, received a reply from the Bureau Chief E. W. Nelson on December 14, 1926. Nelson appeared more skeptical about the prospect of importing nutria into Louisiana, citing the damage done by "the rabbit in Australia" and "the muskrat in Eastern Europe." Nelson explicitly

¹¹⁸ Edward Avery McIlhenny? To Stanly C. Arthur, Department of Conservation, October 29, 1926, E. A. McIlhenny Collection, Avery Island, Louisiana.

¹¹⁹ W. C. Henderson, Acting Chief of the Bureau of Biological Survey, to William B. Grant, November 17, 1926, E. A. McIlhenny Collection, Avery Island, Louisiana.

stated, “I am inclined to believe that if these fur bearers are liberated there for experimental purposes they might become pests.”¹²⁰

While there has been no additional evidence recovered to indicate that either the 1926 or 1930 sets of letters resulted in actual importation of nutria, the contents of these communications suggest that McIlhenny was involved in active conversation with the state concerning the subject for up to twelve years prior to the establishment of his own farm on Avery Island in 1938 and may have conducted his own independent research concerning the animal prior to 1926. To all outward appearances, the Department of Conservation and the Delta Duck Club appear to have taken the warnings from Biological Survey and McIlhenny seriously and did not immediately pursue nutria as an option; however, they were not the only parties interested in obtaining nutria. Shane Bernard described two other farms that were in existence in Louisiana prior to McIlhenny’s well-documented farm. The first known farm was established in 1933 in Abita Springs by Henry Conrad Brote and his wife Susan. In an article entitled “Nutria Tales: The Rat’s out of the Bag” from 2002, *The Times Picayune* writer Martha Carr provided additional evidence in support of Bernard’s findings. At the time, Carr did not go into much detail about what she found other than to state the following: “Brote was a merchant marine officer who imported 18 nutria from South America in 1933, according to his personal cargo logs, now housed at the Earl K. Long Library at the University of New Orleans.”¹²¹ The cargo logs in question were from the ninth voyage of the S.S. Del Norte dated June 8-August 30, 1933. Although the exact point of origin remains

¹²⁰ E. W. Nelson, Chief of Bureau of Biological Survey, to John Dymond, President of Delta Duck Club, December 14, 1926, E. A. McIlhenny Collection, Avery Island, Louisiana.

¹²¹ Martha Carr, “Nutria Tales: The Rats out of the Bag-Tabasco Mogul Didn’t Bring Rodents Here,” *The Times Picayune*, 29 September 2002.

unknown, Chief Mate Brote indicated that there were “3 Cages 18 Live Nutria” listed “On Deck” as the ship headed northbound to New Orleans.¹²² In a later entry from the twelfth voyage of the S.S. Del Norte, which sailed from February 12-May 9, 1934, Brote submitted a formal change of address to the Bureau of Navigation, moving from 1019 Fern Street in New Orleans to P.O. Box # 162 in Abita Springs, Louisiana.¹²³ Neither of these records conclusively proves that the animals aboard the S.S. Del Norte were Brote’s personal possessions, but they do set up patterns of access as well as the appropriate time and place. According to a letter that Bernard discovered from Susan Brote to McIlhenny, Henry Brote had attempted to raise “the animals for four years.” However, he was unable to make a profit with his farm, so he sold a number of his nutria before releasing the remaining stock, “several months” prior to McIlhenny’s nutria acquisition.¹²⁴

The other farm known to be operating in Louisiana was in St. Bernard Parish. According to documents traced by Shane Bernard, McIlhenny purchased his nutria through an intermediary named A. Bernstein, who conducted the transaction on behalf of the unnamed owner of this farm. In 1938, McIlhenny was recorded as paying \$100.00 for twenty animals, consisting of fourteen adults and six kits.¹²⁵ McIlhenny placed his purchases in a pen located in his Jungle Gardens on Avery Island, but he quickly realized that they were hard to contain. After an early escape attempt, McIlhenny recovered all but one of the original nutria, and he learned to reinforce his pens with wire because the nutria would dig under or eat through plain wooden slats. With his enclosure problems

¹²² “Cargo Loaded Northbound,” S. S. Del Norte, Voyage 9, June 8 – August 30, 1933, Henry Conrad Brote Collection, Acc. No. 195, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, Louisiana.

¹²³ “From: Lieut. Comdr. Henry Conrad Brote, D-M, USNR,” S.S. Del Norte, Voyage 12, February 12 – May 9, 1934, Henry Conrad Brote Collection, Acc. No. 195, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, Louisiana.

¹²⁴ Shane K. Bernard, “M’sieu Ned’s Rat,” 287.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 287.

resolved, McIlhenny found that his twenty nutria rapidly reproduced into somewhere between five hundred and one thousand individuals. Finding it hard to keep up with their healthy appetites, McIlhenny began selling his nutria to fur farmers around the country.¹²⁶ During his investigation, Bernard revealed that in June 1940, McIlhenny released twenty-one nutria into the marsh surrounding Avery Island; however, this event occurred before the supposed Hurricane of 1940 in which McIlhenny's nutria were said to have escaped. By 1945, McIlhenny, who deemed his experiment a success, admitted to having "liberated" his remaining stock.¹²⁷

It was not long after the original release in 1940 that trappers began reporting instances of nutria finding their way into muskrat traps. During the record 1945-46 trapping season, while the muskrat was achieving its highest returns, another celebrated segment of the harvest was the trapping of 8,784 nutria.¹²⁸ Prior to that peak season, the number of nutria trapped had only measured in the hundreds, and as a result of the nutria's new found success, the State Legislature enacted Act 197 of 1946. This law gave the Department of Wild Life and Fisheries the authority to officially protect the nutria by giving it the same trapping season as the muskrat (December 1st-February 15th) and placing a ten cent severance tax on each pelt taken.¹²⁹ During the first season in which the nutria was an official fur bearer for the State of Louisiana, the harvest showed nearly double the number of nutria caught from the previous season: 18,015 worth \$54,045.¹³⁰ Nutria totals continued to increase with every season until finally overtaking the muskrat

¹²⁶ Ibid, 288-89.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 290-91.

¹²⁸ "Last Year's Fur Crop Was Record!: Progress Report of Fur and Refuge Division Submitted by Director," *Louisiana Game, Fur and Fish*, 4, no. 10 (Sept. 1946), 5.

¹²⁹ "Nutria Added to List of Fur Bearers; Severance Tax Increased On Mink and Alligators in New Act," *Louisiana Game, Fur and Fish*, 4, no. 8 (July 1946), 8.

¹³⁰ Armand P. Daspit, "Development of Nutria in Few Years Since It's Introduction in Louisiana Has Been Virtually Phenomenal," *Louisiana Game, Fur and Fish*, 6, no. 1 (Dec. 1947), 4.

during the early 1960s with over a million pelts, whereas the returns from the 1960-61 season revealed that the muskrat harvest had fallen to just 632,558.¹³¹ Unlike the muskrat, articles in the *Louisiana Conservationist* suggested that the nutria was not nearly as susceptible to the drought conditions that existed in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Being larger than the muskrat, the nutria was also better equipped to defend itself against attacks from the soaring raccoon population. Finally, nutria had an advantage over the muskrat in that when the need arose, they were more than willing to search for a new home. The Department of Wild Life and Fisheries actually aided the nutria in venturing to new areas of the state. Since nutria trapping began, all of the animals were caught in Southwest or South Central Louisiana, but in 1950, according to Armand Daspit, two hundred were placed near the Mississippi River Delta at the Pass A'Loutre Wild Life Refuge to start a new colony in Southeast Louisiana.¹³²

While the available evidence does not seem to indicate that the existence of the nutria in Louisiana directly caused the muskrat population to decline, the void that was created as the muskrat began to vanish was almost immediately filled with growing populations of nutria. The state was quick to defend the nutria despite the fact that trappers were beginning to blame them for the decline in the number of muskrats. In 1956, an article by F. J. Webert in the *Louisiana Conservationist* stated that “a great many trappers have embittered feelings toward the nutria principally because it requires an entirely different method of handling than they are accustomed to.” Plus, it was still unclear at that point “whether the nutria will become highly valued fur-bearing animal or

¹³¹ O'Neil, “Louisiana’s Fur Industry Today,” 5.

¹³² Armand P. Daspit, “Migrating’ Nutria,” *Louisiana Conservationist*, 2, no. 5 (Jan. 1950), 7-8.

a great nuisance.”¹³³ In 1949, state biologist Ted O’Neil stated in his book *The Muskrat in Louisiana Coastal Marshes* that nutria “show no danger sign of competition with the muskrat. Nutria and ’rats get along together perfectly even in crowded cages.”¹³⁴ Yet, by 1968, O’Neil, as then Director of the Fur and Wild Life Division, was forced to admit that his earlier assessment had been wrong and that the nutria had been harmful to the remaining muskrat population. Similar to the problems associated with raccoons, O’Neil explained that nutria “found muskrat nests to his liking and a place of resting out of the water without having to build his own make shift nest.” He continued by saying, “the nutria so disturbed the muskrat that the young litters were left behind and new nests constructed, only to be taken over by nutria again.”¹³⁵

Conclusion

In the years since the nutria assumed control of the Louisiana fur industry during the 1960s, the muskrat has returned to the same marginalized state in which it dwelled prior to the destruction of the alligator; unfortunately, by the late 1980s, nutria trapping was also beginning to come to an end. As demand for fur products dried up internationally and trappers left the marsh, the nutria was allowed to consume marsh grasses unmolested, creating eat-outs throughout their range. While the nutria itself has shown an innate ability to rebound in the wake of the numerous tropical cyclones that pass through Louisiana, the state’s wetland areas have not shown themselves to be as resilient. Storm surges drummed up by intense hurricanes and tropical storms erode the

¹³³ F. J. Webert, “Hurricane Damage to Fur Industry,” *Louisiana Conservationist*, 8, no. 12 (Nov. 1956), 10-13, 20-21.

¹³⁴ O’Neil, *The Muskrat*, 140.

¹³⁵ Ted O’Neil, “From Eight Million Muskrats: The Fur Industry in Retrospect,” *Louisiana Conservationist*, 20, no. 9 & 10 (Sept.-Oct. 1968), 9-14.

coastline of the state, creating open water out of former marsh, but when exposed to an area frequented by nutria, the effects of the storm surge are enhanced without the roots of grasses that to hold marsh soil together. Today, the nutria has become such a nuisance that the state enacted a \$5 bounty on each tail collected in order to motivate trappers to control population, but a September 2009 article posed an interesting question: “Can nutria fur make a fashionable comeback?” According to the article, “of the 334,038 nutria harvested during the latest season [2008-2009],...only 11 percent of hunters used them for meat or fur,” and “the rest, 89 percent, were left to rot in the marsh.” In an effort to combat the waste created by the bounty program, which is roughly “314,591 nutria pelts,” a New Orleans artist and writer Cree McCree received a grant from Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program to create a line of nutria-based clothing and jewelry products called Righteous Fur. While society has questioned the ethics in taking the furs of certain animals in recent years, McCree argued that nutria were already being killed as a pest, so there was no reason why the State of Louisiana should not attempt to promote nutria products as a means of defending its wetlands and reenergizing the economic potential of the bygone fur industry. This is not the first time that entities within the state have tried get citizens interested in the potential of nutria. As with the muskrat before it, the nutria was heavily promoted as meat in the 1990s, but people were unable to get passed the “ick factor” of eating a rodent.¹³⁶ Consequently, any such effort to reignite interest in nutria may have a long road to acceptance, but the reality of this article brings this thesis full circle.

¹³⁶ Nikki Buskey, “Can Nutria Make a Fashionable Comeback?” *Houma Courier*, 21 September 2009.

The reign of the muskrat over the Louisiana fur industry created a variety of winners and losers over the years. The decision to concentrate on the muskrat relieved the strain on farmers whose crops and levees were terrorized by the roaming rodents and provided trappers with a means of retaining their livelihood as the alligator became increasingly rare. Businesses which supported the fur trade like equipment retailers and shipping companies profited heavily from continued trapping efforts as did the fur buyers and dealers. These intermediaries kept Louisiana pelts relevant in the various fur markets, working tirelessly to cultivate and maintain solid relationships with their trappers and manufacturing partners. Yet, trappers usually lost ground in conflicts involving state conservation authorities and landowners. These entities attempted to regulate the activities of the trappers through conservation laws and property claims, and while trappers initially resisted these mechanisms of control, eventually, they submitted to the demands placed upon them in order to reap the rewards of trapping. However, the state had the most to gain and lose with regard to the muskrat. Obviously, the state benefited from the economic chain created by the sale of pelts, and by association, the conservation department obtained a source of revenue from the taxes they collected. In order to foster additional business opportunities, conservation officials encouraged trappers to make the most out of the carcass of the animal, requesting that they collect not only the pelt, but also, the meat, fat, and musk glands (with varying degrees of success). Nevertheless, by hedging its bets on a relatively unknown animal from South America, the state caused the collapse of its primary fur source, angered trappers by forcing them to learn new methods of fur cultivation, and opened the door to the current problems associated with the nutria.

The story of the Louisiana muskrat is more important than a mere chronicle of the rise and fall of a single regional industry. Louisiana harvested so many muskrat pelts that fur markets at home and abroad were forced to take notice, and even though the muskrat never attained high-value status in terms of finished products, its versatility in usage allowed the muskrat to both masquerade under aliases as more desired furs and fill a niche as a cheaper alternative to what had previously been available. Thousands of people across the globe, connected directly or indirectly with the fur industry, came to depend upon the consistent harvesting capability of Louisiana, and these expectations manifested themselves in the environmental decision-making of trappers and state conservation officials. The ultimate goal was to ensure that the fur markets purchasing the pelts had an adequate supply available to them, and perhaps, since the commodity that muskrat represented became more valuable than the animal itself, those responsible for the promotion of the nutria could overlook the potential hazards involved in its propagation. For them, an argument could be made that even if the nutria experiment failed to increase the overall yield of the state, at least one of the animals, nutria or muskrat, would emerge to satisfy the needs of the trade. Nutria advocates were unable to predict the economic changes that would eventually bring about an end to trapping or the subsequent coastal erosion that future nutria colonies would cause. These officials believed they were acting in the best interest of the fur industry, but like others before and since, they misjudged the social, political, and economic reverberations that filter throughout a society when a single species appears upon or disappears from the ecological landscape. Therefore, the story of the Louisiana muskrat should provide a cautionary tale; during the mid-twentieth century, few would have imagined that

consumer appetite for relatively inexpensive fur products coupled with the state's desire to meet market demand might one day contribute markedly to the land loss which made the storm surge drummed up by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 so devastating.



Figure 1. Alligator hunter in South Louisiana, early 1900s.
Source: State Library of Louisiana.



Figure 2. Muskrat holes in Harahan Levee in Jefferson Parish Louisiana in 1908. Source: State Library of Louisiana.



Figure 3. Muskrat trappers with trap lines in Louisiana in the 1930s.
Source: State Library of Louisiana.



Figure 4. Spanish trapper checking up on the trap which he set in the muskrat "run." In the marshland near Delacroix Island, Louisiana.
Source: Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection from the Library of Congress, photo by Marion Walcott Post, 1941.



Figure 5. Spanish trapper's wife with skins of muskrats her husband just brought home to their marsh camp. Delacroix Island, St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana. Source: Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection from the Library of Congress, photo by Marion Walcott Post, 1941.



Figure 6. Spanish trapper hanging muskrats up to dry their fur before skinning. Stretching and drying the pelt follows this. His camp is in the marshes nearby. Delacroix Island, St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana. Source: Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection from the Library of Congress, photo by Marion Walcott Post, 1941.



Figure 7. French trapper skinning his muskrats before hanging them up to dry in front of his marsh camp. Delacroix Island, St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana. Source: Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection from the Library of Congress, photo by Marion Walcott Post, 1941.



Figure 8. Putting the muskrat pelts through a wringer after they have been skinned. Then they are hung up to dry, turned inside out, put on a stretcher and further dried. By a Spanish trapper's camp in the marshes near Delacroix Island, Louisiana. Source: Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection from the Library of Congress, photo by Marion Walcott Post, 1941.



Figure 9. Muskrat skins hanging up to dry by Spanish trapper's home in the marshes. He then takes the furs to the island to sell. Delacroix Island, St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana. Source: Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection from the Library of Congress, photo by Marion Walcott Post, 1941.



State Library of Louisiana (<http://www.state.lib.la.us>)

Figure 10. Trappers hut in St. Bernard Parish, 1940. Source: State Library of Louisiana.



Figure 11. Houseboat and bateau on bayou in Louisiana in the 1920s.
Source: State Library of Louisiana.



Figure 12. Spanish trappers putting the muskrat skins on wire stretchers before hanging them up to dry in back of their marsh camp. Delacroix Island, St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana. Source: Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection from the Library of Congress, photo by Marion Walcott Post, 1941.



Figure 13. Spanish trapper hanging the muskrat skins up to dry after first drying the inside fur and putting them on wire stretchers in front of their marsh camp. Delacroix Island, St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana.

Source: Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection from the Library of Congress, photo by Marion Walcott Post, 1941.



Figure 14. Grading muskrats while fur buyers and Spanish trappers look on during auction sale on porch of community store in Saint Bernard, Louisiana. Source: Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection from the Library of Congress, photo by Marion Walcott Post, 1941.



Figure 15. Rita Mae Gegenheimer, of Gretna, (Miss New Orleans 1937) is modeling a coat made of muskrat fur. Source: Jefferson Yearly Review of 1939 from Jefferson Historical Society of Louisiana.



Figure 16. Nutria Eat-Out (1970s). Source: America's Wetland Resource Center, photographer "Unknown."

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