

A Talk With Colton's Bill Smith

ROOTDRINKER: How did you get started in trapping?
Did you do this all your life?

BILL SMITH: You're kind of brought up in it. Myself, I was raised in the woods. I don't know if you know where the Feather Bed or the Flat Rock is, or the Little John Road up above South Colton—near the Fish and Game Club. That's where I was brought up.

My father ran a tote wagon and he took these people into the woods. Some were trappers and some were hunters. So I was kind of brought right up with that, you see. And that's how I got into the basket end of it—because the Indians used to come to our house and stay. You see, they were allowed to cut ash anywhere they wanted to back years ago—a few years ago. Wherever there was black ash they could come there and cut that ash because that was the government rule. They're the ones that got me onto basketmaking.

Being a trapper I used pack baskets all the time and I was finding the bottoms were going out of them. They just weren't holding up—the boughten baskets that you had to buy on the market. They weren't what I wanted. So, I said to my wife one day, "You know, I used to make these things when I was a kid." I was disgusted. I said, "I don't know why I can't do it." So I went out and I cut down an ash tree. I went to work and I made three or four baskets. People saw them and they wanted one and so on and so forth—and it grew. Now I just can't keep up with them. I just can't even begin to make the baskets ordered ahead of time.

We lived on a lot of wild meat and stuff. There was ten of us in the family—ten children, I should say. There was twelve all together. We lived off the land. I've heard my mother say lots of times that back when the depression was on they didn't even know that there was a depression 'cause they didn't live a bit different than they ever did..and your hunters that came up from the cities and everything—they were rich you know—they were still having problems in the city. But they still had enough money where they could afford to come hunting every year. They would remark. "My God, how do you do it?"—all these kids and there'd be probably ten or twelve extra people there all the time. There were always some hunters or some lumberjacks on their way in or out. My mother always had all kinds of stuff for them to eat and everything. Of course, they'd give her tips and pay her and that's how we lived, see? So I came by it sort of natural.

R: What kinds of things go into site selection, in terms of traps?

B: That comes with nature. You learn that foxes cross on hills, as a rule—or if there is sand. Anywhere there is sand. You can catch foxes and coyotes around sandy areas. Coons live in hardwoods and along brooks. Mink travel the brooks. Otters live in the water. They travel the streams. The beavers, of course, follow the streams. It's all part of nature. You really have to know quite a bit about nature to be a good trapper. You've got to know all your different tracks. You've got to know the animal in order to catch it, period. When you learn their habits and know just what they are going to do, you can catch 'em. You stop and think of the odds of all this country

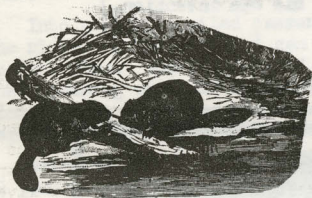
that there is and you've got to get this animal to put his foot on something very small. It's not as simple as it sounds. You've got to know something about what you are doing.

R: That would include things like knowing what the animal eats?

B: You've got to know what they eat...where they travel to. The coyotes and foxes travel. Now when they're mating they're in a different place than they would be when they're idle. In the summertime they den up in a different place than they would in the winter.

R: Do you return to the same places?

B: As a rule, yeah. When I'm trapping beaver or muskrat or fox or anything, I try to leave seed for the following year. I never try to clean anything out completely. You go around to these beaver ponds and you can just about tell how many beaver there are. If you're not sure and you're real careful in the wintertime, you can sneak up to the beaver house and give a real hard whap with a stick and then listen real fast right then, you'll hear just about how many jumps in the water. You've got an idea—if you hear three splashes, there might be four cause two could of jumped in together or something like that. But there's an average of three to five beaver in there. If you caught two or three out, it wouldn't hurt to give the ol' house another check. If you didn't hear but one or two splashes—why, quit.

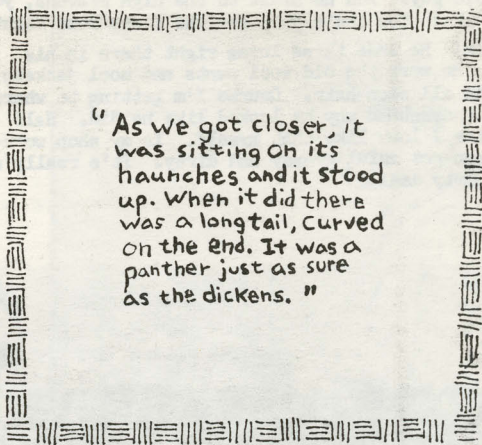


R: Do foxes like cleared areas?

B: Yeah, meadows, old meadows. They follow hedge-rows a lot. Anywhere there are mice, there's fox. Field mice—they love field mice. You can go out into a field at night and just squeak your lips every little while. You keep watch—in an hour or so you'll see a fox.

R: There have been a lot of stories about panthers recently. Do you think there's any truth in them?

B: I saw one the summer before last. I work in the summertime at the Higley Flow State Park and we have a beaver pond down in back. We had to fix the dam up there. Beavers were running over and we made the dam bigger. Everyday, I kept seeing this huge big cat track. I thought it was a real big bobcat. I was coming home one night, just before dark. We came over this little rise in the road where there's this quite long stretch. I thought there was a coyote sitting in the road down there. I said to the guy with me, "There's a coyote down there." As we got closer, it was sitting on its haunches and it stood up. When it did there was a long tail, curved on the end. It was a panther just as sure as the dickens. It went into the side of the road. We stopped, but couldn't see it. It was gone. I'm sure, it absolutely was.



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My father died at 87, three years ago. He could remember when he was a boy that there were quite a few panthers here. There a story about Hepburn up in Colton, when Colton was first settled, that he killed a panther right in Colton. 'Course it wasn't Colton then—was just a bunch of trees.

R: You mentioned a trapper that lived over by Flackville. What was he like?

B: E.J. Dailey. He was a very easy-going old guy. He was a trapper's friend. He was just a real very nice old man. If you wanted to know anything, he'd help you with it—if he liked you. If he didn't like you he wouldn't give you the time of day. Like any old-timer. They're all like that, most of them.

He sold traps. Like I say, he's the one that got these lures going in the first place. He had this real good trappers' supply business going. I, for one, would go over there—course you'd be broke—and you'd go in and you'd be looking at the traps and stuff. You'd say, "Well, I'd like one of these and one of these," and E.J. would say, "Why don't you take a dozen. You can't catch nuthin' in one trap." He'd say, "You'll pay me. I know you'll pay me. Trappers are honest people," he'd say. So you'd get a dozen traps and two or three bottles of lure—God knows what else, anything that you really needed. You'd get the necessities. And E.J. would say, "Now, you want to remember this, because I'll forget it. I've got so much business here that I can't remember all this stuff." So you go through the whole trapping season and at the end of the season the fur buyer'd come to Dailey's and you'd go over there with your fur. Back then there weren't too many fur buyers. You had to stand in line for six, seven hours at a time—sometimes with all your fur by the time you got in there. Well then you'd get your pay, and of course you got paid in cash. Then you'd go out and pay E.J. what you owed him. You'd start to tell him what you owed him and then he'd finish it. He'd say, "...yeah and you got two bottles of lure, and this 'n' that," and it had been two months gone by and that old devil had remembered everything you'd got! I used to get the biggest kick out of that.

I just thought the world of him. Everybody that knew him really just loved him. He was just a

nice old guy. And he smelt to the high heavens, you know. Ha! You could just see the fumes come right off him! He made these lures right there in his shop. He wore the old wool pants and wool jackets. He'd be all coon hair. Course I'm getting to where I can understand why he looked like he did. Half the time I look like that myself. In my shop working, you get awful greasy and dirty. It's really a very dirty deal.



Pictured - The Smith Homestead. Bill's father leans on a favorite cow. The autos belong to hunters who have already been toted back into the woods.

Old Dailey, E.J. Dailey, he was probably one of the best trappers around in this part of the country. He was, I think. He claims he was and I really think he was the beginner of these lures. They used to have a lot of different concoctions that they made up of different things—rotten eggs, limberger cheese, and all kinds of things that stunk. Dailey came up with the idea of using the animal glands themselves to attract other animals. It turned out to be the thing. So now there's all kinds of different styles of making these lures. Each trapper has his own little jar of 'goodies' that he makes up.

R: Did you study under him or spend a lot of time talking with him?

B: Well, he actually is responsible for learning me how to trap fox. He didn't actually show me, but through talking with him, and my own experience, I picked up my fox and coyote. I got a lot of lure ideas from him. Tried 'em and they worked. I trapped muskrats for a long time before I knew E.J., but you're classified as a trapper when you can start catching coyote and foxes. Pretty near anyone can catch muskrats.

[Bill Smith lives on Higley Road in the town of Colton, New York. He makes pack baskets, traps, buys furs, and sells trapping supplies (including lures of his own invention.)]

