

Memoirs of a Muskrat Trapper's Daughter

By Betty Arzt

My earliest memory of my father is of him returning to camp from running his trap lines with his rat bag full of the dead animals, tired, wet and hungry. Every year from November to February we went to our camp on the seashore with our boat loaded down with supplies. Every thing that we would need for the next three months had to be brought with us because the trip to the camp took a day and a night to get there. The place was called Mosquito bayou and it was the only place with land high and dry enough to build a camp on in the area, the rest was all swampy marsh land. There were five other camps here. The trappers each leased an area of the marshland from the State for trapping muskrats.

The weather had a lot to do with trapping muskrats. When a north-wester moved in it rained and was followed by snapping cold weather. This was the ideal condition for the trapper, because that's when the muskrats came out of their mounds to eat, play and mate. The trappers could then place their traps at the entrance to the mounds. The traps were double bladed, a small one at the center with sharp teeth to grip and a large blade to kill. They had chains attached with a circle at one end through which the trapper drove a stake to hold the trap in place. When the weather was warm the traps had to be set inside the mound tunnels, which was dangerous for the trapper because of snakes and because the traps were set to snap at a touch of the blades.

The trappers set out to tend to their traps each morning at dawn paddling their perouges, which are canoe shaped little boats with flat bottoms, used because the little bayous that ran through the marshes were very shallow. They wore strong rubber hip boots and vests made of canvas, knee length with deep pockets all around to hold the rats they caught. The snakes and alligators were dangerous especially the females that were nesting, so it was necessary to carry a rifle slung over their shoulders. They also carried a long sharp bladed pocket knife to kill any of the rats that survived the killing blades of the traps. All in all it was hard, heavy, dangerous work, but it was the best chance they had to earn a substantial amount of money in the three month season.

The women occupied themselves with house keeping, cooking, baking bread, roasting coffee beans and generally looking after their families. In our family we didn't have any

boys old enough to help our father to skin, mold and dry the furs, so it fell to me to help when he had a large catch. Usually he skinned the rats and I molded them and trimmed away any flesh remaining on the skins. He taught me how to skin them so that when he had a really large catch I could help with that also. Can you visualize a nine year old girl, her hands and arms smeared with blood and gore, doing such a thing? At the time I thought nothing of it, It was a way of life and we did what had to be done.

When the rats were molded and cleaned, they were hung out in the sun to dry on a rack which my father built. When the weather was cool and sunny the skins dried in one day. When it was warm and rainy, they had to be dried in a shed with heaters going and it took several days. Usually February in southern Louisiana is a rainy and muggy month, everything feels so damp and moldy that we look forward to cool, dry, sunny days. My father was a really gifted cook and when he couldn't go out to run his traps because of rainy weather, he made chocolate fudge and popcorn balls for us and told us great stories which we dearly loved, about princes and dragons and castles and such. No one could beat my mother at baking bread and she usually made it on such days, so inside our camp it was warm and cozy and smelled wonderful.

My parents brought staples and canned meat, sausages packed in oil, salted pork shoulders, canned vegetables and a tin of soda crackers for our meals. For fresh meat we fished, and the men hunted ducks, rabbits, and marsh hens. What we did not have was fresh fruit, eggs and milk. A few days before Christmas a boat came by loaded with fruit, eggs, milk, butter and coconuts, everything to make cakes and cookies. We could hear their bell ringing as they approached and everyone crowded along the shore waiting for them. We called it the store boat. To this day I can still remember the wonderful smell of the fresh apples.

My father brought home from the marsh a little bush with shiny bright green leaves and little red berries, which we set up and decorated with tinsel and strings of popcorn, and we thought that was the most beautiful Christmas tree in the whole world. On Christmas morning my little brother got a pocket knife, my sister and I got a new doll and a rubber ball, but the best gift was an apple, an orange and a banana.

On Thursday mornings the fur buyers came in their speed boats and the trappers brought out their skins and sold them to the highest bidder. The buyers sorted out the

skins and the large male skins brought the best price. The female and smaller skins were sold also but for much less. At the end of the season everything was packed into our boat, the camp was boarded up and we returned to town to resume our daily lives. At first the sounds of civilization seemed strange to me after three months out in the marsh. Then back to school to try to catch up with my class, which wasn't easy.

I'm sure that such a life would seem totally primitive to my children and especially to my grandchildren (and it was), but sometimes I feel sorry for them because they'll never have the chance to live that close to the earth or to experience such things first hand.

My Memoirs of the Great Depression Years

By Betty Arzt

In the year 1930 I was seven years old and not at all concerned about world or national affairs, therefore unaware that America was suffering a major depression that left millions of people out of work and starving. It was two years before it affected my family.

My father was a fisherman, he owned a fine shrimp trawling boat with full equipment and made a good living, but in nineteen thirty two the economy had gotten so bad that he could not afford to buy gas for his boat because he couldn't sell the shrimp he caught. Finally he had to put his boat in storage and find work where ever he could. He did yard work and painted houses and did whatever he could to support his family. Soon even that wasn't available because people couldn't afford to pay him.

Soon we were in desperate straights, along with a lot of other people. We moved into a small three room duplex that rented for five dollars a month. My mother supplied some food from her vegetable garden and picked green beans at commercial farms for twenty five cents a bushel. If she worked really hard she could earn a dollar and a half a day. My sister and I picked some beans, too, but could not endure the heat and hard work, but together we could earn a quarter. My dad went to work for a government project called the WPA which provided a dollar a day, working sun up to sun down, digging ditches and working on road repairs. Every day my mom made a large pot of coffee with two

enamel mugs, which my sister and I took out to where my dad was working, and the foreman paid us fifty cents for it and divided it amongst all of the workers. So working all together we managed not to starve. The government also provided some clothing and shoes help. They called the help, Family Relief. They operated a large warehouse where we could get fabric for clothing and canvas shoes that every one called tennis shoes. They had only one kind of fabric, called pin check gingham, in five colors, pink, blue, red, yellow and green. If you were wearing that fabric to school, the kids that were better off called you "poor folks" and made fun of you.

My mother was a great seamstress and she would take us to town and let us choose the dresses we liked, then she would examine them closely, and come home and copy them exactly by making a pattern out of newspaper. After fitting it to us she made beautiful dresses out of the pin check gingham fabric so that in spite of having to wear that damn fabric at least we were wearing the latest fashions. We could not afford fruit or meat, so at night we would slip into the commercial melon patch and take one of the watermelons. There were so many and we felt that they wouldn't miss one. We did this several times a week. My mother would normally not allow this, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

The town's chief of police lived in our neighborhood and one day some of his chickens got loose and one of them came into our yard. My mother decided that it would make a great and much needed meal. She made a loop out of twine, set this on the ground and put some corn kernels inside it and when the chicken came inside the noose, she pulled it tight and caught it by the legs. She quickly stopped it's squawking by wringing its neck. That night we had a great meal and some much needed meat. The next day the chief of police came around asking if anyone had seen his chicken. My mother, with a twinkle in her eyes, told him that if he was worried about his chickens he should keep them at home.

Slowly things began to get better and by 1935, people were going back to work, new companies were opening up and the whole economy was booming. My father got his boat back in the water and was soon earning a good living again. On the radio, people were singing, "Happy days are here again." In fact things were going so well that people thought that nothing so bad could ever happen to us again. Little did they suspect that the

ugly, dark clouds of a total world war was just over the horizon.

So much for happy days.

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