THE

TRAPPER'S GUIDE;

A

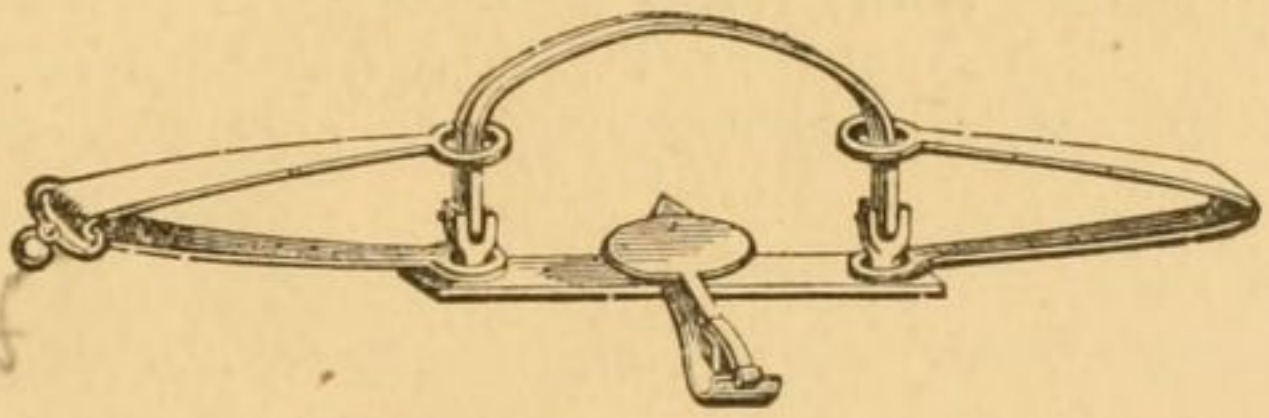
MANUAL OF INSTRUCTIONS

FOR

CAPTURING ALL KINDS OF FUR-BEARING ANIMALS, AND CURING THEIR SKINS; WITH OBSERVATIONS ON THE FUR-TRADE, HINTS ON LIFE IN THE WOODS, AND NARRATIVES OF TRAPPING AND HUNTING EXCURSIONS.

BY S. NEWHOUSE,

AND OTHER TRAPPERS AND SPORTSMEN



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III. CURING SKINS.

However successful a trapper may be in taking animals, he will not secure a full reward for his labor unless he knows how to take care of their skins, and prepare them for market in such a manner that they will command the highest prices. As skins that have been riddled with shot find little favor with fur-dealers, so skins that have been cut in stripping off, or that are encumbered with remnants of flesh, or that have passed into a state of incipient putrefaction before drying, or that have not been properly stretched, or that have been dried too fast, or that have been neglected and exposed after being cured, are very sure to be thrown out by the fur-inspector as second or third rate skins, deserving only poor prices. Great quantities of valuable furs, taken by boys and inexperienced trappers, are rendered almost worthless by bad treatment in some of the processes of preservation. I shall give such information on this part of the trapper's business as I have obtained, both from my own experience and from conversation with fur-dealers.

GENERAL RULES.

1. Be careful to visit your traps often enough, so that the skins will not have time to get tainted.

2. As soon as possible after an animal is dead and dry, attend to the skinning and curing.

3. Scrape off all superfluous flesh and fat, but be careful not to go so deep as to cut the fibre of the skin.

4. Never dry a skin by the fire or in the sun, but in a cool, shady place, sheltered from rain. If you use a barn door for a stretcher (as boys sometimes do), nail the skin on the *inside* of the door.

5. Never use "preparations" of any kind in curing skins, nor even wash them in water, but simply stretch and dry them as they are taken from the animal.

STRETCHING SKINS.

In drying skins, it is important that they should be stretched tight, like a strained drum-head. This can be done after a fashion by simply nailing them flat on a wide board or a barn door. But this method, besides being impracticable on the large scale in the woods (where most skins have to be cured), is objectionable because it exposes only one side of the pelt to the air. The stretchers that are generally approved and used by good trappers are of three kinds, adapted to the skins of different classes of animals. I shall call them the *board-stretcher*, the *bow-stretcher*, and the *hoop-stretcher*, and will describe them, indicating the different animals to which each is adapted.

Board-Stretcher.

THE BOARD-STRETCHER.

This contrivance is made in the following manner: Prepare a board of bass-wood or other light material, two feet three inches long, three inches and a half wide at one end, and two inches and an eighth at the other, and three eighths of an inch thick. Chamfer it from the centre to the sides almost to an edge. Round and chamfer the small end about an inch up on the sides. Split this board through the centre with a knife or saw. Finally, prepare a wedge of the same length and thickness, one inch wide at the large end, and tapering to three eighths of an inch at the small end, to be driven between the halves of the board. This is a stretcher suitable for a mink or a marten. Two larger sizes, with similar proportions, are required for the larger animals. The largest size, suitable for the full-grown otter or wolf, should be five feet and a half long, seven inches wide at the large end when fully spread by the wedge, and six inches at the small end. An intermediate size is required for the fisher, raccoon, fox, and some other animals, the proportions of which can be easily figured out.

These stretchers require that the skin of the animal should not be ripped through the belly, but should be stripped off whole. This is done in the following manner: Commence with the knife at the hind-feet, and slit down to the vent. Cut around the vent, and strip the skin from the bone of the tail with the help of the thumb-nail or a split stick. Make no other slits in the skin, except in the case of the otter, whose tail requires to be split, spread, and tacked on to the board. Peel the skin from the body by drawing it over itself, leaving the fur-side inward. In this condition the skin should be drawn on to the split board (with the back on one side and the belly on the other) to its utmost length, and fastened with tacks or by notches cut in the edge of the board, and then the wedge should be driven between the two halves. Finally, make all fast by a tack at the root of the tail, and another on the opposite side. The skin is then stretched to its utmost capacity, as a boot-leg is stretched by the shoemaker's "tree," and it may be hung away in the proper place, by a hole in one end of the stretcher, and left to dry.

A modification of this kind of stretcher, often used in curing the skins of the muskrat and other small animals, is a simple board, without split or wedge, three sixteenths of an inch thick, twenty inches long, six inches wide at the large end, and tapering to five and a half inches at six inches from the small end, chamfered and rounded as in the other cases.



Muskrat-Stretcher.

The animal should be skinned as before directed, and the skin drawn tightly on to the board, and fastened with about four tacks. Sets of these boards, sufficient for a muskrat campaign, can easily be made and transported. They are very light and take up but little room in packing, thirty-two of them making but six inches in thickness.

THE BOW-STRETCHER.

The most common way of treating the muskrat is to cut off its feet with a hatchet; and rip with a knife from between the two teeth in the lower jaw, down the belly, about two inches below where the fore-legs come out. Then the skin is started by cutting around the lips, eyes, and ears, and is stripped over the body, with the fur-side inward. Finally a stick of birch, water-beech, iron-wood, hickory, or elm, an inch in diameter at the butt, and three feet and a half long, is bent into the shape of an ox-bow and shoved into the skin, which is drawn tight, and fastened by splitting down a sliver in the bow, and drawing the skin of the lip into it.

This method is too common to be easily abolished, and is tolerable when circumstances make it necessary; but the former method of stretching by a tapering board, in the case of muskrats as well as other small animals, is much the best. Skins treated in that way keep their proper shape, and pack better than those stretched on bows, and in the long run boards are more economical than bows, as a set of them can be used many times, and will last several years; whereas bows are seldom used more than once, being generally broken in taking out.

THE HOOP-STRETCHER.

The skins of large animals, such as the beaver and the bear, are best dried by spreading them, at full size, in a hoop. For this purpose, a stick of hickory or other flexible wood should be cut, long enough to entirely surround the skin when bent. (If a single stick long enough is not at hand, two smaller ones can be spliced together.) The ends should be brought around, lapped, and tied with a string or a withe of bark. The skin should be taken from the animal by ripping from the lower front teeth to the vent, and peeling around the lips, eyes, and ears, but without ripping up the legs. It should then be placed inside the hoop and fastened at opposite sides, with twine or bark, till all loose parts are taken up, and the whole stretched so that it is nearly round and as tight as a drum-

head. When it is dry it may be taken from the hoop, and is ready for packing and transportation.

This is the proper method of treating the skin of the deer. Some prefer it for the wolf and raccoon. In many cases the trapper may take his choice between the hoop and the board method. One or the other of these methods will be found satisfactory for curing all kinds of skins.

Fur manufacturers and dealers now, in 1887, demand,

1. That the *bow stretcher* be *always* used for Muskrats. Skin from the nose, and make the rumps *square*, not round or pointed.

2. That Ermine, Fisher, Fox, Marten, Mink, Opossum, Otter and Skunk, *must be cased*, that is, *not* cut open, and be stretched on *board stretchers*.

3. That Badger, Bear, Beaver, Racoon, Wolf and Wolverine, must be *open*, that is, cut open along the belly from tail to head, and stretched, somewhat oblong, to the fullest extent of the skin. The *hoop stretcher* should be used only for Beaver.