

Museum News: "When the panther move in...the deer move out."

By C. W. (Bill) Smith

There is no more controversial subject today than trapping. With the actions of PETA (*People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals*) and worse, the radical groups ELF (*Earth Liberation Front*) and ALF (*Animal Liberation Front*), much attention has been given to the "inhumane and cruel" treatment of animals, particularly their use in laboratory experimentation and in the animal fur trade.

No one wants to see cute, cuddly bunny rabbits receive injections of beauty products directly under the skin, but there is a legitimate use for animal experimentation in the medical field, where, ultimately, millions of lives might be saved by the testing of drugs and treatments on animal subjects.

The use of furs in the clothing industry can hardly be justified, especially with the quality of fake fur available, but, the use of trapping to manage predator populations is certainly justified, especially by those who make a living in the livestock industry.

Very few ranchers in Terrell County and the rest of the livestock world have a problem with the use of professional, licensed trappers to control the hordes of predators that see the ranchers' animals as a moving smorgasbord, free for the taking.

Early-day ranchers in Terrell County discovered this problem from the beginning. As soon as they began stocking their ranches, the predators attacked. Wolves, panthers, coyotes, bears, eagles and anything else that could bring down a lamb or kid (or adult animal) swooped down on the herds.

When this writer's grandfather, William Marion "Bill" Smith, came to the Big Bend in 1920, driving a herd of 700 sheep and goats, predators decimated his herd within the first year. The predators came in so fast and in such numbers that there was no way to stop them. The next year he and his two young sons drove the 200 head of remnants up to Marathon to put on stock cars and ship back to the bank in Eldorado. It took him ten years to pay off his note, but the predators that took his stock provided the way for him to pay it off as a trapper.

Without trappers, ranchers in the Big Bend/Trans Pecos could not have survived. An article in the *El Paso Herald* for Dec. 18, 1911, reported that rancher J. R. Addle in Terrell County had killed six large panthers on his spread in the previous months. He remarked that predators had "wrought great havoc" to sheepmen in that area, and that efforts were underway to bring them under control.

Big cats were not the only predators out there. In the early days, up until the 1920s, packs of gray wolves and red wolves roamed the area, taking their share of the bounty, along with coyotes, bobcats and other wild cats.

To control these predators, large "posses" of men staged impromptu wolf hunts to exterminate the animals or drive them from the area.

By about 1914, the first "wolf-proof" woven wire fences were erected in the Edwards Plateau, and the government was petitioned to set up a system of bounty hunters to eliminate the problem.

In 1916, the Predatory Animal Inspector reported that a force of 8 hunters in his charge removed 1,059 coyotes, 136 bobcats, 68 Texas red wolves, and 8 lobo (gray) wolves.

The predator problem was brought under control rather quickly. The gray wolves were completely removed and populations of red wolves decreased dramatically. Coyotes and smaller predators, however, remained a problem.

A curious quirk of nature led to the demise of the red wolf. Through a mechanism of genetics, the red wolf was almost bred out of existence.

It seems that coyotes and red wolves are close enough genetically to be able to interbreed and produce viable, fertile offspring. But, the coyote genes are stronger and suppress the red wolf genes, producing a "super" coyote in appearance, an animal larger and stronger than a "normal" coyote.

All predator populations decreased through the work of trappers in the 1940s, so that by the extreme 7-year drought period of the 1950s, wolf and coyote populations were thought to be virtually extinct in the Edwards Plateau.

With the end of the drought in 1958, however, coyote populations suddenly exploded in size. Almost overnight they once again became a serious issue for livestockmen.

A controversial method of predator control was the use of poisoned baits and devices. Strychnine and later, the



lethal Compound 1080 was used in baits and Lethal Dose Collars. But their use was banned in 1972 due to fears of accidental and secondary poisoning of non-target animals, mostly driven by anecdotal evidence. In actuality, of the two dozen human fatalities attributed to Compound 1080, half were due to actual suicide and the rest to gross negligence in handling.

Today, M-44 cyanide-based “gitter” devices are employed, but with limited success, and the fight goes on.

The use of aerial hunts, which began in the ‘40s and ‘50s for eagles and coyotes, is again being used with helicopters. With Steve Forest of Dryden and Phil Johnston of Kerrville flying Robinson R-22 and R-44 helicopters, and the late Gary Hutto and Wayne Sutton of Dryden literally riding “shotgun,” the program has been successful.

From a historical perspective, the contingent of government and free-lance trappers has been well represented.

A list of early-day trappers in Terrell County includes James McMahan, old-time trapper and frontiersman who roamed the canyons of the Rio Grande trapping beaver, C. B. Huckeba, who worked in the 1880s-90s, and German-born Julius Heusinger, who worked in the 1900-1910 period.

Heusinger figures in a mystery, unsolved to this day. In 1918, he set out from his cabin on the Pecos River to get supplies in Ozona. Somewhere on his return trip, he disappeared without a trace. His horse, hat and one shoe were the only things found of him.

Other trappers from those early days were Terrell Hunter, who was more a hobbyist-trapper, Frank Loden, who worked in Terrell County in 1927-38, and the very colorful and eccentric Bill Holcombe. It is said that people in the 1940s would go to the movies, more to watch the antics of fellow spectator Holcombe, who often carried on a continuous and lively monologue directed at the characters on the screen.

One of the noted trappers of that period was Montie Wallace, who in later years was foreman of the Downie Ranch after Mr. Downie passed away suddenly. His skills as a hunter and marksman were legendary. A friend and cohort was Henry Scruggs.

Another from that period was Bill Smith of Marathon, who worked for many Terrell County ranchers.

In the modern day, among the trappers working Terrell County and the Trans Pecos are Hoppy Turman and Billy Jackson of Fort Stockton, Bill Applegate of Marfa, Jesse Bolton of Dryden, Robert Rivera of Sanderson and the venerable Texas Trapper of the Year for 2010, James Stone of Sanderson. Included are Jill House of Sanderson and Lenia Bolton of Dryden, two on the short list of trapper ladies in the state. And this listing isn’t complete.

Controversial or not, ranches in Terrell County and the Trans Pecos could not have survived without systematic trapping and predator control. With predator numbers now actually increasing, predator control by trapping is a necessity to preserve our ranching way of life.