

Terrell County Memorial December, 2013  
Sanderson, Texas

# Museum News

## "When the panther move in... the deer move out."



Photo courtesy of CW (Bill) Smith

*This large mountain lion, or panther, was taken by trapper Bill Smith on Mount Livermore in Jeff Davis County in the late '20s. Typical of the big cats in Terrell County and the TransPecos, this monster weighed in at over 200 lbs. A government trapper, Smith frequently worked for ranchers in Terrell County, generally headquartering out of Marathon, Texas.*

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/TransPecos could not have survived. An article in the *El Paso Herald* for Dec. 18, 1911, reported that rancher J. R. Adde 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



*Johnny Ray Baker shows off a lion on the Casa Piedra Ranch, about 1957.*

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 con-

trol 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 actual-



Courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

*Part of a season of trapping on the Cinco de Mayo Ranch, with Robert Molloy, 1941.*

ity, 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 1900s-1910s 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 spec-

tator 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 TransPecos 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 TransPecos 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.

#### References

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# Government Trapper Catches Coyote Once Worth \$500

## Sheep Raisers Relieved When Bill Smith Takes Animal

*Special to Herald-Post*

FT. STOCKTON, Jan. 5. — Bill Smith of Ft. Stockton, veteran government trapper today held the honor of bringing down one of the smartest female coyotes that ever lived on the range.

On the ranch of Mrs. Alexander



Bill Smith and the smart coyote that he caught after a long hunt.

Mitchell in Terrell County, 37 miles from Sanderson, the crafty animal was caught in a steel trap in a pasture, after three months and 15 days had been devoted to efforts at catching her by Smith.

For the past four years pups of this coyote had been killed by trappers while depredations of their mother upon sheep continued unchecked. An almost uncanny cleverness led the animal to avoid all holes made by other animals. She never, apparently, used the same hole after making it once for herself, so that

she never was trapped near a hole.

At one time \$500 reward was offered for the creature, whose age was estimated at eight years when she was finally brought to ground. She was gentle and gave indications that she might at some time have been a pet, Smith said.

Ranches suffering from the thieving coyote were the Mitchell, Big Canyon, Prosser, Trotter, Dave Cunningham, Woodard, and Hood Mendel tracts. With the killing of the old-timer came relief to many ranchmen of the section.

Bill Smith (1881-1953) was a government trapper who worked in Terrell, Pecos, Brewster, Presidio and Jeff Davis Counties from about 1924 until 1949, when he retired from the U. S. Department of the Interior. Born at Brady, Texas, he came to the YE Mesa in the Big Bend in 1920 driving 700 head of sheep and goats to start a ranch. Predators soon put him out of business and gave him a new career. He spent the rest of his life working for area ranchers, trying to stem the tide of predators that threatened to put them out of business. Smith was the author's grandfather.