

TRIBUTE TO A FUR TRAPPER



By Leila Philip

The beavers were gone and I didn't know why. That is the long and short of how I came to meet and then get to know the late Herb Sobanski jr., a Connecticut fur trapper and woodsman who was a tireless advocate for preserving the legacy of the American fur trade. Herb was a person so dedicated to his family and community that to know him, even for the few years that I did, was inspiring.

Herb had been a member of the oldest CT state trapping association, CT Fur Trappers and the National Trapper's Association, and in 2015, helped found the CT Fur Harvesters, a new group focused on outreach and education. Herb's main

concern was to get younger people involved and his mantra was to show people the good that fur trappers did. His outreach included me, a writer and college professor who had contacted him to ask about beaver trapping. It was in part, Herb's welcoming me so generously into the trapping world that set me on a path to learn more about fur trapping and decide to write a book about beavers and the American fur trade. Born and raised in Connecticut, Herb had pictures of himself at age three sitting on a pile of muskrat caught by his father and grandfather. From them Herb learned to love the outdoors and by the time he was nine, he was setting his own

muskrat traps. He served as a volunteer beaver trapper for the state, taught trapper education courses and worked tirelessly to lobby for the continuance of fur trapping and to help educate legislators about the role fur trappers play in state wildlife management.

I met Herb because I had discovered the beavers who made a stunning beaver pond down the road from my house. Little did I know that within a few months I'd be out tromping through swamps with him. I wrote a short piece about following Herb on his trap line for *The Boston Globe*. When the article came out, I was flooded with emails – most saying they had a new appreciation for fur

trapping. A short excerpt of that piece is below.

At Herb's wake, listening to the many people who had gathered to remember him and share stories, I was struck by his importance to so many in the fur trapping community here in Connecticut and decided to write an article that might convey this. Here is what fellow trappers and colleagues said:

"Herb always was a great leader," said Eric Schupp, who worked with Herb to found the CT Fur Harvesters and served as Recording Secretary. "He knew the rules and regulations and where to find things, his entire focus was trapping. Herb thought about it all year. All he talked about was trapping or his family, his wife, and his kids." When Eric speaks of Herb and his impact on him and fellow trappers, it is clear that Herb inspired Eric and many others. "He had a passion for trapping like no other, the dedication he had to the organization was so deep," said Eric. "And he had this way of talking and approaching people... Herb was able to bring out the good in people. I wasn't in line to be a trapping instructor, but he encouraged me. He got me the paperwork, he really showed me I could do it."

Aili McKeen, a bow hunter who recently ran for district senate and has worked for years to lobby for conservation issues in the state, began to learn about trapping after working with Herb to help educate trappers and hunters about the legislative process. "Most outdoorsmen are

www.trappersworld.com

Sterling Grizz

- Super Strong Music Wire Spring • Drain Hole
- Mud Ejection Window System • ST500 Swivels
- TwistLoc Anchor • **Made in the U.S.A.**

Price
\$15.50/ea.
\$179.00/doz.



Shipping:
Under \$40: \$9.90; \$40 - \$100: \$14.90; Over \$100: \$22.90



Sterling Fur Company

11268 Frick Rd, Sterling, OH 44276
Ph: 330-939-3763



really independent," said Aili, "but Herb was just so open about all of it and so friendly and not protective of knowledge. His way rubbed off on a lot of people. Herb wanted everyone to understand about trapping. Not just so that people would know that trapping is not this evil thing, but to show that there is a tradition behind it and a purpose to using fur." Along with others, Aili is working to make sure Herb's legacy -- CT Fur Harvesters -- carries on and will serve as co-president.

Two other fur trappers on whom Herb had a big influence are Branden Bergeron and Nick Jennings, both of whom began trapping in their twenties and joined CT Fur Harvesters to learn more. "Herb was my biggest mentor as a trapper,"

said Branden, who is now busy introducing his three-year-old son to fur trapping. "I knew that I could call Herb with anything. He wasn't going to say 'what a dumb thing to do', he'd just help." Branden remembers Herb's leadership. "Herb's level of action on behalf of trapping was incredible. He was always looking up bills and letting us know what was coming down the pipeline. And... he was this calm presence. When he talked to you, it was always as if there was nothing else going on... he had this focus. And then you could see the love in his voice and in his eyes when he talked about his family."

Nick Jennings considered Herb a "kind of second father." Above all, he remembers Herb's

Cumberland's Northwest Trappers Supply, Inc.

P.O. BOX 408, OWATONNA, MINNESOTA 55060

Phone: (507) 451-7607

E-mail: trapper@nwtrappers.com

Internet: www.nwtrappers.com

Fax: (507) 451-5869

**Over 40 Years of Service to
the Trap and Fur Industry.**

Cumberland's Northwest Trappers Supply is your one-stop trapping supply headquarters, featuring one of the largest inventories in the U.S. We are factory direct distributors on all brands of traps and equipment which allows us to offer competitive prices. Give us a try. Our fast, friendly service will keep you coming back. If you get in the area, visit our store, we encourage walk-in sales. Call or email for store hours.



Request one of our
free catalogs today!
You can order it by
phone, on-line, or mail.

Check out our new and improved
web-site. It is safe, secure, and easy
to use. www.nwtrappers.com

ability to lead and get things done. "We'd have an idea for something in the group and be talking about it and by the time we had a plan for what to do, Herb had already gotten it done! He was like that, he was very goal-oriented. People saw that and wanted to follow." Asked about a favorite memory, Nick answered, "I have so many memories, I can't even

begin. I could call him day or night. When I got my first skunk I called him and he said come on over. It was dark by the time I got to his fur shack. Herb had a CO2 chamber and we put the skunk in. When it was out I put it in a bag in the back of the truck and we were sitting there talking when suddenly the bag began thumping around. I looked at Herb, but

he just calmly took care of the skunk and we went on talking. Herb was like that, calm, but he could just handle any situation."

When he wasn't on his trapline or with his family (or in later years, fishing with his brother), Herb was working as a data configuration manager for Aetna, (now CVS). His co-worker, Lisa Harley, who worked alongside Herb for over thirty years remembers Herb's huge work ethic. "He was so devoted and detail-oriented and passionate about getting it right. I loved working with him. We could be working until 11:30 at night but he wouldn't quit until it was done right." When I asked what his impact on her was, she answered immediately, "Herb's humanity. He showed me that people have fur trapping wrong. He wanted to shake things up and to let people know about fur trapping because it is a dying art, he was very concerned that if kids didn't get into trapping, it would be gone. And then I think of his loyalty - to his friends and his love for his family."

There are too many people

• • • • •
Missing an issue of Trapper's World in your collection?

• We have almost all of the back issues in stock and ready to ship for \$5
• each postpaid. Some issues are in very limited supply, so don't wait to
• order!

• **Contact:**

• **Trapper's World**

• **PO Box 96**

• **Galloway, OH 43119**

• **(614) 878-6011**

• **www.trappersworld.com**

WWW.TRAPPERSWORLD.COM

Our new website has launched!
Subscribe, buy back issues, read writers tips, view
our advertising information, news, and more!

Also, be sure to "like" us on Facebook! We post news,
deadlines, pictures, and other events. A great way to
keep in touch in between issues!

in the trapping community who remember Herb to include them all here, but everyone used a list of the same words to describe Herb: integrity, focus, loyalty; a man who loved his family above all and could be "stubborn as heck" but was guided by principles that included a deep sense of caring for the larger community – which for Herb included the woods and wildlife. When asked about Herb, his brother Dave remembered with a laugh that it was his older brother's attempt at broiling muskrats when they were kids which put him off to trapping and eating muskrat for good, but then added seriously, "Herb was a passionate woodsman, he was concerned about wildlife conservation and he loved being in the outdoors...trapping, he called it his 'church.' But Herb also spent a lot of time helping others. He was always serious and could talk about tough subjects. He had strong convictions. I miss that. I miss that every day."

At his wake, we saw Herb one last time, in woodsman's clothing, with his CT Fur

Harvesters cap. Nearby was his favorite wicker trappers pack and a few of his last beaver pelts. May your plews be prime and your boots stay dry, he liked to say at the door of his fur shack when I was heading out after watching him trap or skin beaver. Then he'd laugh. He loved that old mountain man saying of farewell.

In Memory of Herb Sobanski, jr. 1961 – 2019. The following is from The Boston Globe (first published May 5, 2017) titled On The Trapline.

"Want to see a beaver lodge up close?" Herb Sobanski is grinning like a boy scout, knee deep in the freezing swamp water. "Sure," I say and move toward him eagerly, too eagerly in fact and I almost lose my balance. Each step in my rubber hip waders feels like I am walking on balloons. The cold water surrounds my legs, then my thighs. I walk forward slowly. "Hey, would you look at that!" Herb says suddenly, and points delightedly to where an intricate birds' nest filled with red berries hangs from a nearby branch.

"This is why I love this, I always see somethin'" He forges ahead. Soon we are about ten feet from a beaver lodge, a huge mound of sticks and mud that juts up from the surface of the water. I have never been so close to a beaver lodge before and I stand in awe of its size and complexity. But where I see the mystery of raw nature, even here, 30 minutes from downtown Hartford, Herb sees the problem that the state called him in to resolve. The beaver that built this lodge here have flooded the woods so badly that their extensive pond threatens to pollute the local water supply with what is popularly called "beaver fever," giardia.

"There's fresh mud on top so you know its active," says Herb, studying the lodge intently, "and look, there's the feed pile." He points to a stretch of water to the right of the lodge where branches and even large limbs rise up through the surface. Sun glints through the trees. Herb nods appreciatively and we admire the feed pile in silence,

"They'll eat that all winter. Swim over and take a branch back to the lodge," says Herb. "Open up a beaver's stomach, nothing inside but sawdust." He points again, "Look, there's an osprey nest! Isn't this beautiful. I love it back here."

Soon we are traversing the narrow dams that the beavers have built through the swamp. All along the banks we see trees half gnawed, or gnawed down completely. It's incredible the amount of beaver construction here; the swamp now spreading out in a series of ponds that look like woodland rice paddies. Beavers need open water to thrive. Fat and cumbersome on land, they are magnificent swimmers.

"There you go," says Herb pointing to a pine tree half gnawed through, but still standing. "Interesting, they usually don't like pine, too sticky. Careful here, it gets deep." Before I know it, Herb has waded forward and his up to his chest in the half-frozen water and then checks a half-submerged island of swamp grasses. "I think a

muskrat might have set off my trap," he explains as he examines the water and pokes at it with his trapper pole. "Nope, it's okay." He wades back.

"Unless my eyes aren't good," Herb says and points to where I can just make his next set and indeed one of the guide poles leans over at angle. "I think there's something in that set."

A yearling he says quietly, his tone serious now as he works to free the animal. "pelt won't be worth much, but its good eating. This would be a good one for you to try." He throws the beaver onto the bank where it lands with a thump, then he resets this trap, submerging it back down in the water with his bare hands. "We got a guy who is going to make us beaver sausage." He explains. Herb swears beaver tastes good, especially as beaver chili.

I'm not listening. I'm looking at the beaver. I can't imagine eating beaver chili. For Herb, the beaver is an animal to be harvested. He'll even use the tail to make coyote bait. To me the beaver is a wild animal and it makes me uncomfortable to

think of it having to be managed or in wildlife management lingo, "harvested."

Two days later I'm in Herb's fur shack watching him skin the beaver. He expertly slices the meat from the hide. I find it hard not to flinch. To me a beaver is a token of the wild, like those animal tracks I'll find by the creek. A wildness I want to think is still out there. But being with Herb has blurred the lines. One can make the case that Herb, like other trappers who utilize every part of the animal they catch, are the ultimate locavores.

Herb throws the pelt over his shoulder to take it upstairs to stretch and as he walks away I ask him the big question - why trap? He answers easily. "Not everyone can kill; it's not for everyone, but I respect the animal. If we didn't manage the populations, there would be so much disease and starvation, people don't realize. "Why do I trap? Not for the money, I have lots of other ways to lose money," he laughs, then grows serious. "Even if fur prices are down I'll still trap. I love it out there. Its spiritual... it's my church."

I think of Herb's respect for the animals he is trapping and how he'll use every part of the beaver he has killed. I think of the bullet hole decals on his truck, his motorcycle and the many signs promoting guns in his fur shack and how this trapper, demonized by animal rights groups, is a keen naturalist.

-Leila

Thinking about advertising in Trapper's World magazine? View our media kit online at

www.trappersworld.com or Contact

Tera Roach for prices and details.

trappersworld@hotmail.com

Display ads start at as little as \$25.00.